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*Where there are no Footprints  
An Ethnography of Contemporary Art in Kolkata*

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# *Where there are no Footprints*

An Ethnography of Contemporary Art in Kolkata

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# 1. Introduction

Long before Plato, there were two disturbing things about the statue: that it might not have been fashioned by human hand, and that it might be only a copy. These two extremes came together in the Palladium. When the Achaeans began their siege of Troy, the Trojans immediately decided to make an identical copy of the Palladium. Thus, if the Greeks managed to steal it, Troy would not fall. Odysseus and Diomedes did break into Athena's temple and ran off with the Palladium. But, as with every audacious exploit, there are a host of different versions. Was it the real Palladium? Or did they steal two, one real and one false? Or were there, as some suggested, any number of Palladiums, the real one being the smallest?<sup>1</sup>

## *1.1 In search for the new*

This thesis is about the creation of new works of art, about works that invite us to see the world anew. Yet, confronted with a new work of art, a doubt sets in. Wasn't this made before? Can we be sure that it's not a copy? The doubt of novelty and originality has always troubled the visual arts, and was particularly pronounced in Kolkata. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century the city, then known as Calcutta, saw the emergence of variety of new works of art that defied

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<sup>1</sup> *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*. Roberto Calasso (1993, 229). Translated by Tim Parks. Originally published in Italy as *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia* (1988).

artistic conventions as well as the colonial societal order. However, as soon as these works arrived on the scene, prompting new ways of looking at the world, they were condemned by some as fraud or belated repetitions of European modern art. Such convictions of belatedness were blind to Kolkata's dynamic history of art and haven been successfully debunked (Guha-Thakurta 1992; Mitter 2007), but with the emergence of 'contemporary art' the dilemma of novelty and originality emerges yet again. Kolkata, the erstwhile capital of the British Raj, the birthplace of modern Indian art and the cauldron of colonial resistance and national independence, seemed to me an evident place to address the question of 'the contemporary' in the visual arts. Yet I was told that not much is happening in Kolkata, while others expressed it more strongly: "Kolkata is a dead city". And indeed, compared to Delhi, Mumbai or Bangalore, you have to look a bit harder for 'contemporary art' in Kolkata; there are galleries, but most of them exhibit 'modern art', mainly paintings and sculptures. Yet, getting to know the city a bit better, I gradually came across new initiatives presented as site-specific art, community art, performance art, or installation art; art practices that are usually seen as belonging to the sphere of 'contemporary art'. Is Kolkata catching up with the contemporary art world?

As many have pointed out, the notion of catching up, to 'the West' or to 'the global city', is problematic on both ethical and epistemological grounds (Bhabha 1994; Chakrabarty 2000). It creates the false assumption that modern phenomena, such as 'modern art', originated in one place, 'the West'; other places can only follow and repeat such phenomena in belated and somewhat derivative forms. This cultural logic of origins and repetitions makes a split between a before and after, between 'tradition' and 'modernity', it measures entangled geographies by the yardstick of linear and epochal time, and denies the contemporaneity of those that 'fall behind' (Koselleck 1979; Fabian 1983; Ferguson 1999; Dube 2011; Pels 2015;). The break made by modern time creates a double asymmetry; it makes a break in the regular passage of time, and it distributes this break geopolitically into designated areas of winners and losers, into those who are facing the future, and others who still have to catch up. This temporal straitjacket proves to be persistent and seems to cling to the notion of 'contemporary art' as well. What is 'contemporary art' outside its claim of being 'contemporary'? Are artworks 'contemporary' in and of themselves or is it everything around them that presents artworks as 'contemporary'?

The word '*contemporary*' in relation to 'art' seems foremost to indicate a claim of being on the forefront of things, to be ahead of time. The term 'contemporary' placed in front of 'art' is not just a descriptive term of a range of material practices - indicated with labels such as 'installation', 'performance', or 'multimedia' - nor does it simply indicate a timespan of the 'present-day'. Rather, it is a performative term used within a particular social field; from here on I will therefore write *contemporary* in Italics to distinguish it from 'the present' and to



emphasize its performative aspect. Instead of treating *contemporary* art as an established category of art, a box into which some artworks fit and others won't, I will treat *contemporary* art as something - both a practice and an idea - that takes shape within a particular social context. This social context might be dispersed, fragmented, and beyond a specific locality, but this does not dictate an outside 'global' perspective. Entering a specific social field – the field of *contemporary* art in Kolkata - I adopted the terms from that field. I paid attention to the way terms such as 'contemporary', 'installation', or 'performance' were used in Kolkata, both in formal writing and in everyday speech, instead of superimposing a fixed 'outside' definition of such terms; an inside or 'emic' approach instead of an outside 'etic' approach.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, I regarded people who say they are *contemporary* artists, as *contemporary* artists. Players within the Kolkata field of art, such as artists, curators, and critics, did occasionally contest such claims of artists and artworks being truly 'contemporary', usually in oblique ways, but this only indicates that *contemporary* art is a contested term and is no reason for reverting to a more categorical definition. Yet I will not altogether ignore categorical 'etic' definitions. Even if, for an anthropologist, it is sensible to take an emic point of view, people in the field of art, myself included, have the incorrigible tendency to do the contrary: to isolate them, treat them as bounded and ideal categories, and to make a universal distinction between 'art' and 'craft', or between 'traditional', 'modern' and 'contemporary' art. Even though bounded categories and static dichotomies are always up for dispute, as abstractions they play an important role in

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<sup>2</sup> The emic/etic distinction in cultural anthropology derived from linguistic anthropology (coined from 'phonemic' and 'phonetic') and was especially popular in American anthropology in the 1960s and 1970s. The distinction involves two contrasting methods of analysis. An emic approach treats social behaviour as embedded within the context of a culture, it focuses on cultural elements – such as words, actions, things, and kinship roles - and traces the ways these cultural elements relate to each other within a cultural context. An etic model explains a culture based on concepts and principles – judged appropriate by a community of scientific observers - outside that culture (Harris 1976, 331-334). This inside-outside distinction raises some concerns. Can there be an outside universal model that is not cultural-specific? Isn't the observer's supposedly objective etic model simply his or her own emic model? Lévi-Strauss saw the practical benefits of the distinction, but argued that the true nature of reality is emic; an emic approach therefore brings us closer to it; the etic level is an artifact, a design superimposed on reality (Levi-Strauss 1985, 115-117; see also Pike 1967, 38). Moreover, Lévi-Strauss argued that a too sharp contrast between 'inside' indigenous systems of knowledge and 'outside' analytical apparatus of the observer, risks treating indigenous knowledge systems as subjective, as if cultural-specific knowledge is not based on objective principles. Another, yet related, concern is the conflation of 'emic' and 'indigenous.' The emic approach is sometimes wrongly regarded as the study of concepts that are indigenous to a particular culture. The concept 'contemporary' would be omitted from such an analysis, as it is a transcultural concept, and not 'indigenous' to, for example, Bengali culture. An emic approach should instead allow for an analysis of the way certain cultural elements – whatever their origin - are related to each other within a specific cultural context, without binding them to that specific cultural context only. What is more, the casual conflation of 'emic' and 'indigenous' ignores the role of the observer; emic concepts are chosen by the ethnographer and are not themselves 'the indigenous model'. As Barnard writes in his useful summary of the emic/etic distinction: "Analysis, even emic analysis, is the job of the observer" (Barnard 2010, 222). Keeping such concerns in mind, I hold that the emic-etic distinction remains a useful tool to distinguish different epistemological perspectives, if only to emphasize that an anthropologist's specialty is her training in an emic approach rather than the construction and superimposition of an etic model.

the field of art; ignoring or deconstructing such conventional categories does not make them go away.<sup>3</sup> Cultural convention might be illusionary, but, as Roy Wagner's writes, it is "an illusion with teeth in it" (Wagner 1975, 40).

The artistic claim of being *contemporary* is not only a verbal claim, but is also expressed by the surroundings of the artworks and by the artworks themselves. Deviating from conventional forms can suggest a physical break with the past and can be perceived as new and different by a public used to certain kind of forms. The past from which *contemporary* artists attempt to distance themselves seems to be mostly a modern past. But this immediately creates a paradox, because the wish to break with the modern past is decisively modern. The modern avant-garde operated on a logic of breaking with the past, a repetitive striving for artistic novelty and originality. By labelling a particular branch of art as *contemporary* the practitioners of this field therefore seem to reiterate the split character of modernity, dividing the world yet again in the traditional versus the modern: some artworks are *contemporary*, others are not. Whether *contemporary* art is indeed a continuation of the modern avant-garde is a question I will address below, but first I will say something about the modern avantgarde and its warped temporal logic.

In *The Great Image Has No Form* (2009) François Jullien compares European art history to Chinese art history: "The history of European art, and of its painting in particular, can be read in an epic mode. It presents itself as a series of experiments in which each new arrival in the arena tries to push the limits of the discipline further" (Jullien 2009, 15). Similarly, Bourdieu has described the field of modern art as a realm of "permanent revolution" (Bourdieu 1992) and already in 1954 in *The Demon of Progress in the Arts* the British writer and painter Wyndham Lewis lamented the compulsion of artistic breaks with the past (see also Poggioli 1968; Bürger 1974; Paz 1974; Subramanyan 1978; Krauss 1986; Doorman 2003). These writers described or hinted at a contradiction within the modern project that has become ever more salient: the call for renewal, the repetitive attempts to break with tradition, has become traditional itself.

What do these artistic breaks look like? There are various avant-garde movements with diverse objectives and philosophies, far too numerous to summarize here. I will merely suggest one possible classification of four different kinds of modern breaks: a 'future', 'past', 'primitivist', and 'blind' avantgarde. There were avant-garde artists who attempted to break with tradition by looking into the future. They, typically called the futurists, looked out for a utopian future founded on technological and societal progress, a future that would liberate society from the weight of its past. This imagined future was not seen as the outcome of a gradual development;

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<sup>3</sup> I will elaborate on dynamic between art as an abstract term and as something material, embedded in an environment, in chapter two.

its arrival required a radical and resolute break with all that has come before. Other avant-garde artists attempted to break with consensus and tradition by looking into an imagined past. This past could be a primordial past, before and beyond the trajectory of history, or a more recent past within recorded history, a past that is tangible yet still imagined. Whether primordial or historical, for these artists the past presented a golden age, an age untainted by modern corruption, a past to which they could perhaps return. Then there was a 'primitivist' avantgarde, consisting of artists who searched for inspiration by engaging with 'the primitive' other on 'the edges of civilization'. Instead of another time they looked for another place, a present elsewhere. They were interested in the unspoiled 'primitive' mind of children, got inspired by the art of small-scale indigenous communities, adopted folk motifs, travelled to a romanticized Orient, or rummaged in the urban peripheries - always in search for the other untainted by the whims of modern time, an imagined other as an alternative to the civilized modern self. And then there were avant-garde artists without a clear direction, a 'blind' avant-garde without a utopian view of another past, future, or place; they wanted to get rid of the status quo, depart from what has been, without envisioning a new style, a new art, or a better society. With their destructive-creative acts they tried to open up possibilities, without pointing into a certain direction.

An analytical categorization can be a useful tool for navigating the multiplicity of the avant-garde, but this crude classification between a 'past', 'future', 'primitivist', and 'blind' avantgarde is merely one among many possible classifications. What is more, a strict division should be avoided as a single work often belongs to more than one category. Whatever classification is made, the avant-garde consists of a wide variety of ideals and practices. Yet, despite this variety, these movements do seem to have a common principle: whatever avant-garde artists looked for, they looked for something new, for something other. Various communities of artists, in various corners of the world, were engaged in various art practices, but they all attempted to make artworks that are radically different, works that are original and new. The first step to achieve this novelty was to make a break. This break might involve a straightforward rejection of particular artworks, of particular styles and conventions of art, but it might also involve a rejection of the processes that imbue artworks with meaning, a criticism of the institutions that select, collect, circulate, interpret, and preserve artworks, a rejection of the studio, the art fair, the museum, or the discipline of art history.

These modern artistic breaks often contained a wider criticism of society. Artist did make explicit calls for societal change, directly addressing societal issues such gender or class inequality. But artists implicitly rejected the status quo as well. By rejecting former art styles, artists also rejected what these former styles stood for. And by rejecting institutions of art, such

as the museum or the art fair, artists rejected the societal beliefs and conventions embodied by these institutes. Breaking out of art frames does not only concern the artistic freedom from former generations, from art styles and conventions that are regarded as stale and out of date, nor does it merely express a desire to be part of *'the contemporary'*. As I will argue in chapter 2, artworks that are selected, displayed, interpreted, circulated, collected and preserved become part of a "canonical order" (Rappaport 1999), a cultural order that sustains and reproduces prevailing societal orders. To radically break away – radical in its etymological meaning 'forming the root' - from established art forms, can therefore also be a way to propose radical changes within society, or at least a way to address perceived societal wrongs. By breaking away from certain conventions and styles, from the institutions that select, classify, and preserve art, a virgin uncharted field for the creation of something new emerges. The artistic breaks are new beginnings, moments in which societal orders, such as the temporal orders of linear time, the division between nature and culture, or between work and leisure, the ascribed roles of men and women, or the divisions between the home and the world, are reshuffled and kept in suspension, providing an opportunity to think the world anew.

Does this modernist logic of the break continue in the practices of *contemporary* art? Sometimes the term 'avant-garde' is seen as an outdated category, as something that once was. Richard Schechner argues that the term avant-garde in today's art no longer serves a useful purpose for the various activities of current art. He prefers to use it as a historical term that can refer to a period of innovation in art extending roughly from the end of the nineteenth century to the mid-1970s. After so many years of artistic innovation, we have entered an age in which art is "recorded, replayed, ritualized and recycled." (Schechner 1993, 19).<sup>4</sup> The use of the term 'avant-garde' for art that is innovative, for that art that is on the cutting edge, has decreased and has partly made way for other terms - most prominent among them *'contemporary'*. Is *contemporary* art simply a new word for the same breakaways instigated by the modern avantgarde, or has something changed with the advent of *contemporary* art? Does this young, uncertain, yet widely distributed set of practices decisively steer away from the project of modern art? Is it the beginning of a new era? Or is that what we call *contemporary* art merely an

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<sup>4</sup>"A Rubicon has been crossed", Schechner writes. "The limitless horizons of expectations that marked the modern epoch and called into existence endless newness have been transformed into a global hothouse, a closed environment. I do not agree with Baudrillard that everything is a simulation. But neither do we live in a world of infinite possibilities or originalities. A long neomedieval period has begun. Or, if one is looking for historical analogies, perhaps neo-Hellenistic is more precise. A certain kind of Euro-American cultural style is being extended, imposed, willingly received (the reactions differ) by many peoples in all parts of the world. Exactly what shape this style will take, what its dominant modes of thought will be, are not yet clear. But it will be a conservative age intellectually and artistically. That does not mean reactionary or without compassion. Nor is the kind of conservatism I am talking about incompatible with democratic socialism. It is a conservatism based on the need to save, recycle, use resources parsimoniously. It is founded on the availability of various in-depth "archives" of many different prior experiences, artworks, ideas, feelings, and texts." (Schechner 1993, 19)

in-between phase, an amorphous prelude to a new range of artistic practices yet to take shape? Do *contemporary* artworks, like modern artworks, aim for something radically new and thereby simply continue the modern tradition of breaking with tradition, of creating ever-new frontiers? Or did *contemporary* artworks, somewhere in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, herald a postmodern age of repetitions and combinations – of works that are mere offshoots of the same stem? Perhaps the newness of *contemporary* art is that it doesn't produce anything new? But if it doesn't produce anything new, what then does it do? And, did the modern avant-garde constitute a real break with the past to begin with? Or did the novelty of the avantgarde consist merely of taking a stance against the past, a posturing, without truly establishing the break that it promised? Can we, by extending Bruno Latour's writings on modernity to the field of modern art, hypothesize that in its quest for purity, for radical separations, the project of modern art has paradoxically increased the proliferation of hybrids? Has modern art ever been truly modern?<sup>5</sup>

These were the somewhat muddled questions I had during my fieldwork; questions that I tried to ask within the circumscribed yet far from insulated local context of *contemporary* art in Kolkata. Are the various artworks in Kolkata that are presented as *contemporary* the latest – belated? - incarnations of a meandering yet nonetheless linear history of art, or are they local variations of a nascent global *contemporary* art process that has finally liberated itself from the western-centric modern straitjacket of linear epochal time? Do the artworks I have encountered continue to create novelty by radically breaking away from former traditions, or do the artists in Kolkata find different perhaps more subtle ways to think the world anew?

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<sup>5</sup> In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour argues that modernity consists of two entirely different practices: “The first set of practices, by ‘translation’, creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture. The second, by ‘purification’, creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other” (Latour 1993 [1991], 10). Latour argued that modernity mixes up the categories of nature and culture all the time, but does not acknowledge such hybrid collectives. And, ignoring them has helped those hybrids to flourish, “those who think the most about hybrids circumscribe them as much as possible, whereas those who choose to ignore them by insulating them from any dangerous consequences develop them to the utmost” (Ibid. 41).

## 1.2 Looking for contemporary art in Kolkata

Both Kolkata and the *contemporary* art scene were new sites of research for me.<sup>6</sup> Over a period of 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork I have looked at the various ways in which artists in Kolkata produce, or attempt to produce, something new. By visiting exhibitions, museums and galleries, I slowly got to know artists, other art players, and the important art sites of Kolkata.<sup>7</sup> My main informants were artists, but quite a few artists are teachers and curators as well, and I broadened my perspective to the wider field of art by visiting art schools, talking with teachers and students, and interviewing museum directors and gallery owners. To get a good understanding of an institution such as an art school, it would have been beneficial to enrol as an art student for a while. But I decided not to as it would have shifted my attention away from my main focus: art exhibitions. From just visiting exhibitions, I started to follow the preparations of exhibitions as well, and got the opportunity to participate in some exhibitions - sometimes by writing exhibition texts, press releases, or catalogue essays, sometimes by helping with a variety of practical and organizational matters, and once by making a short film that was shown at an exhibition. Such participatory work gave me the opportunity to talk with artists, curators, critics, and the visiting public, and to trail the art making process, from initial idea to materialization, from exhibition to interpretation and preservation.

Research in the field of *contemporary* art would benefit from a transnational “multi-sited ethnography” (Marcus 1995; Hannerz 2003), one that follows the artworks, publics, artists and other players in the field along the key nodes of the *contemporary* art world; from studios, to art fairs and auction houses, from galleries, to biennales, museums and collectors’ homes. This research, however, is geographically confined to Kolkata. Apart from one visit to Zurich to see a performance by a Kolkata artist, I did not follow a transnational, or even national, multi-sited itinerary. I spent most of my fieldwork in Kolkata, with occasional visits to Santiniketan, a university town a three-hour train ride from Kolkata, known for its famous art school established by Rabindranath Tagore. I have visited several art sites outside Kolkata, such as the Kochi Biennial and exhibitions in Delhi and Mumbai, but merely to get an idea of the national *contemporary* art scene, not to incorporate these sites into the field of research. This focus on Kolkata did however not lead to a representative account of *contemporary* art practices in Kolkata. Although I provide an overview of the Kolkata art scene in chapter 3, I will not discuss all art projects that took place during the fieldwork period. I will describe some important art sites in

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<sup>6</sup> For my MA research (Leiden University) I conducted ethnographic research on museums of ethnography in the Northeast of India, in Assam and Meghalaya.

<sup>7</sup> I often got to know about one group of artists through another group; I met the performance artists of *Performers Independent* through artist and teacher Sanchayan Ghosh, and I met Bhabatosh Sutar who runs the artist village Chander Haat, through an exhibition of KHOJ Kolkata.

the city only in passing, and there are some prominent artists that I have not interviewed. The ethnographic chapters (chapter 3 to chapter 6) feature ethnographic and sometimes historical descriptions of various institutes of art in Kolkata. Yet these descriptions do not provide a bird eye's view of the entire field of *contemporary* art in Kolkata, but rather serve as passageways to the main questions of artistic novelty. This has partly to do with the practical timings of fieldwork; my fieldwork period ran from 2013 to 2017, consisting of one long fieldwork period of 10 months in 2014 and several shorter visits of 2 to 3 months in the winter and spring, a period in which many art exhibitions, but not all, are prepared and take place. What is more, as various exhibitions were held simultaneously, I often chose to focus on one exhibition, while ignoring another. But, most importantly, my objective was not to provide an all-inclusive description of Kolkata's field of art, but instead to focus on a selection of artists and exhibitions so that I could zoom in on the intricacies of the art process.

I will describe the ways artists find new forms of art, create new spaces with their art, explore new or sometimes forgotten media, and form new collectives. To be a *contemporary* artist in Kolkata involves a 'breaking out'; artists want to break with artistic frames and conventions such as the painting frame, the white cube, or the proscenium. These breaks make way for a variety of new art practices, but this does not confine my research to a particular type of medium; many *contemporary* artists who, for example, make installations, make canvas paintings as well. Nevertheless, there is an impulse to move away from the artistic styles and conventions of former generations, to move away from the practices taught at Art College. The terms that are most often used by Kolkata *contemporary* artists for these new art practices are "conceptual", "site-specific", "multi-media", "performance", "installation", and "community" art, without being translated into Bengali. By using such international art terms, the artists might seem, at first sight, to follow in the footsteps of 'international' or 'Western' *contemporary* art. Yet, I will argue that these artistic formal, spatial and temporal explorations carry with them a variety of motives and implications that are specific to the context of Kolkata. The city is not just a backdrop for the arts but plays an important role in the realization of new art practices.

Most of the Kolkata artists I met are not connected to the (inter)national art scene; they do not travel much, and there are only a few artists who are represented by a gallery that regularly sends press releases to an international or intercity audience. Simply put, the national and international *contemporary* art scenes have insiders and outsiders and most artists in Kolkata are on the outside. Yet, Kolkata's *contemporary* art scene is not simply a local phenomenon that is detached, isolated, and unrelated to what happens elsewhere. Although artists from Kolkata are only marginally connected to the national and international *contemporary* art scene, they are related to it precisely by the felt absence of it. Globalization is not just about the transgression

of boundaries, the various flows of objects, people, concepts and images that make the world smaller, but also concerns the creation of new boundaries and peripheries and the affirmation of existing ones (Appadurai 1996; Clifford 1997; Inda and Rosaldo 2002; Freitag and Von Oppen 2010). What is more, globalization involves the asymmetrical tensions that are created by these uneven flows. The opportunities for Kolkata artists to cross boundaries and become part of national and international *contemporary* art field might be lacking, a lack that is inextricably entangled with Kolkata's relative marginal position among India's large cities, but the global imaginaries holding out promises of a better tomorrow cross boundaries with unprecedented ease. Such uneven and turbulent flows create tensions between aspirations and realities, tensions that are not due to a lack of globalization, but are the product of globalization itself (Chatterjee 2004; Brosius and Wenzlhuemer 2011). Locally situated national and global imaginaries, conveyed through a variety of media but perhaps most prolifically through circulating images, promise another life; a life perhaps unrestricted by caste, class, gender, religion and region, or simply a middleclass life that provides some relief from the everyday drudgery of a crowded and polluted city. Yet, simultaneously these imaginaries of a future elsewhere, towering above the city's inhabitants on enormous vinyl billboards, accentuate the lack and repetitive delays, the unfulfilled promises, of a narrative of progress.

Rather than portraying the Kolkata *contemporary* art scene as relatively marginal, I will focus on the tensions between ambitions and limitations. This involves a description of Kolkata's *contemporary* art infrastructure and, especially, the *perceived* lack of it. *Contemporary* artists discuss many of the social and material conditions for the *contemporary* arts in Kolkata as limited: a lack of funding or opportunity to sell work, a lack of art writing, and a lack of art institutions that can support artists. Kolkata's *contemporary* art practices can be seen as strategies, with varying degrees of certainty, to circumvent, oppose, or cope with the limitations experienced by the artists. The perceived limitations are not just confinements, but translate into new art practices and artist formations as well. An important argument throughout the thesis is that not just despite such limitations creativity holds its ground, but that new art emerges in conjunction with these limitations. In each fieldwork chapter, I will describe the ways artists make new art despite and in conjunction with these limitations.

Coupling questions of artistic novelty with global imaginaries and aspirations, inevitably led this writing to venture outside the field of *contemporary* art, which makes up only a small part of the wider cultural field of Kolkata. What is the relationship between the field of *contemporary* art and other artistic fields in the city, such as literature, poetry, film, theater, music, or between *contemporary* art and other cultural fields, such as the immensely popular festival Durga puja? Such questions will not lead to a comprehensive cultural analysis of Kolkata - the focus will be



on *contemporary* art - but, even if *contemporary* art has a particular dynamic with its own conventions, values, and tastes, it cannot be completely isolated from a broader cultural dynamic. Rather than unfolding the entire cultural infrastructure of Kolkata, I will explore a broader dynamic between cultural practices and societal change, through the window of *contemporary* art.

Besides discussing *contemporary* art in relation to a wider cultural field, I will embed the ethnographic findings within the urban environment of Kolkata. This involves a description of Kolkata as a tangible place with its own particular socio-economic, ecological and cultural dynamic, but it also involves an understanding of the various ways in which the city is imagined. In chapter 3, for example, I will discuss the ways aspirations and ideals of a ‘modern’ and ‘global’ city are embodied by the ‘smooth’ surfaces of the city, such as glass facades and AC (Air Condition) environments. As Gyan Prakash writes: “The brick and mortar do not exist apart from representations, nor are our ideas without material consequences or take shape outside the hard city of maps, statistics, and architecture. The city is both the actual physical environment and the space we experience in novels, films, poetry, architectural design, political government, and ideology” (Prakash 2008, 7). Inspired by authors such as Kaviraj (1997), Chakrabarty (2002), Fernandez (2004), Prakash (2008), and Srivastava (2014), I will try to weave together the physical and the political, the tangible and the imaginary.

At the beginning of my fieldwork period – before analyzing artistic novelty from a theoretical point of view, and before looking more closely at the social landscape of Kolkata – it became clear to me that *contemporary* artworks in Kolkata, in one way or another, comment on, react to, and resonate with the city. By taking side-steps into the wider urban sphere, this idea became more palpable. *Contemporary* art practices in Kolkata are not merely actions to be understood within a national or international field of *contemporary* art, they are also, and perhaps foremost, about social change in Kolkata. The works I encountered sensitively express, or directly address, a broad spectrum of societal changes: they challenge the status quo in the social spheres of kinship, class, caste, or gender; they express the changing relationships and frictions between the city and the village, between Kolkata and India, or between Bengalis and non-Bengalis; or they condemn the urban disparity and environmental degradation of the city’s margins. And often an artwork bundles a variety of such societal frictions, leaving it to the observer to either untangle the various threads, or be immersed by the work’s multiplicity.

Although I will describe art practices as ways to cope and engage with a variety of societal issues, I do not intend to give a comprehensive summary of all the motivations that ‘lie behind’ artistic productions; to sum up the wide variety of incentives for making art in Kolkata would not just be a Herculean task, it would also risk treating ideas and ambitions of artists as prior to their

artworks. With a strong emphasis on societal change this writing might risk repeating a ‘Durkheimian fallacy’<sup>8</sup>, an analysis that sees all cultural expression as a function of societal processes, thereby ignoring the specificity of artworks, their physical presence in the world. Artworks do not simply materialize certain ideas, as Daniel Miller writes: “our humanity is not prior to what it creates” (Miller 2005, 10). It is evident, perhaps a truism, that *contemporary* artworks and practices are related to social change; to make a new work of art is as a way to reflect on social change and the frictions that accompany such changes. But do *contemporary* art practices merely reflect and comment on these changes, accompany them, so that people can cope with them, or do they also instigate and catalyze societal change? And, can *contemporary* art also be part of a larger cultural dynamic that resists change, that upholds the status quo? As we have seen above, the renewal of the modern avant-garde has a repetitive dimension as well; *contemporary* art might not only be an institute of social change, but one of social stability as well.

As John Beattie writes, anthropologists have distinguished between two kinds of events of social change. On the one hand there are moments of change which work to uphold existing social structures, such as the conflicts which arise in many states when a king dies. Although such conflicts can throw a society into extended periods of uncertainty, they are nevertheless expected; they are periodic rebellions that form an essential feature of the stability of the political system. On the other hand, there can be disturbances that instigate a more radical change in the fabric of the social system itself, a conflict that alters the institutions of a society. When a kingship is for example replaced by a popular dictatorship, or some form of democracy, we speak of a revolution rather than a rebellion (Beattie 1966, 244-245). What kind of change is supported or instigated by *contemporary* artistic renewal? Are artistic breaks with the past mere repetitious rebellions that eventually uphold the status quo, or do they accompany and catalyse revolutionary change? Is *contemporary* art an institute of change that competes with other more conservative institutes, or does it in itself encompass both conservative as well as progressive tendencies? Whatever the answers to these questions, the doubt of novelty seems persistent. Only by looking more closely at the doubt of novelty itself can we begin to answer these questions - or at least rephrase them.

I will approach the predicament of originality and novelty in two ways. Firstly, in chapter 2 *The Ritual of Contemporary Art*, I will unfold a ritual theory of artistic renewal, a theory that will be tested in the subsequent ethnographic chapters. I will argue that *contemporary* art, when taking

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<sup>8</sup> In *The Elementary Form of Religious Life* (1912), Emile Durkheim argued that religious practices are expressions of society at large. His work – and many ‘social-functionalist’ works thereafter in both French and British anthropology – approaches ritual as a practice that binds the individual to society and holds the fabric of society together. Even if Durkheim focused more on societal stability rather than societal change, his influence still looms large, also in this writing. See also chapter 2.

the entire field into account – that is, all the practices relating to its creation, distribution, consumption, interpretation, classification and conservation - constitutes a ritual pattern. This ritual pattern is not unique to *contemporary* art; it can be found in a wide variety of rituals. Although such rituals, documented in various ethnographies, might at first sight seem incomparably different from *contemporary* art practices, I will argue that they follow the same pattern. Building on the writings of Mauss (1891), Van Gennep (1909), Douglas (1966), Turner (1967, 1969), Tambiah (1968), Bateson (1972), Keesing (1978), Munn (1986), Bloch (1992), Rappaport (1999), and Valeri (2017), among others, I will show that artistic novelty is not simply a product of spontaneous artistic creativity, but an aspect of the wider ritual dynamic of *contemporary* art. Instead of focusing merely on artistic novelty and its many siblings, such as creativity, originality, innovation, and intervention, I will first focus on practices of exhibition, classification, interpretation, circulation and preservation. These practices together turn artworks into objects of knowledge; they turn new, unknown and ambiguous forms of expression into works that *stand for something*; they embed the artworks into regimes of value and finally turn some of them, the chosen ones, into the bearers of society's classifications, beliefs, and conventions. The production of artistic novelty can be seen as an attempt to reject and reverse this process, to make art that does not mean anything, that does not stand for something else. A new artwork is a new beginning and it seems obvious that practices such as interpretation, classification and preservation come *only after* the creative act of making a new work of art. In this thesis, however, I will turn this logic around and place these practices *before* the creative act as well. I will thus unfold a cyclical theory of art in which the creation of a new work of art can be seen both as the endpoint of a long and complicated ritual process, as well as the beginning of a new ritual cycle.

Secondly, I will apply this ritual theory of artistic renewal – a hypothesis – to a specific cultural context: the field of *contemporary* art in Kolkata. In each fieldwork chapter (chapters 3 to 6) I will focus on an artist or an art group and discuss three distinct moments in their practices: first, I will discuss the moments in which artists feel constrained and consider various limitations, frames and conventions; second, I discuss the moments in which artists attempt to break free from such perceived constraints, the various artistic efforts to create new beginnings. Here lies the bulk of my ethnographic material; and third, I will discuss moments in which such new artworks are selected, interpreted, framed, circulated, preserved, turned into 'objects of art', and start to lose their novelty. When, yet again, a doubt sets in, haven't we seen this before? In chapter 3 *Hollow Times* I will discuss works by the art group *KHOJ Kolkata*. The emphasis in this chapter lies on the spatial practices by which the group sidesteps the gallery and its economy to find new places and exhibit new forms of art. This move away from the gallery is not merely a move against artistic conventions, but has led to particular engagements with the city and its

past. In chapter 4 *Reversed Perspectives* I ‘return’ to the gallery and look more closely at the material practices and strategies of one exhibition by Sanchayan Ghosh. Instead of moving out of the gallery space, Sanchayan returns to it to reflect on the gallery space, and place making itself. Although this (or any) exhibition cannot simply be reduced to one particular issue, Sanchayan’s artwork nevertheless has a main target, which he approaches from multiple angles: the predicament of representation. Rather than breaking out of a frame, the exhibition can be seen as a meditation on the frame itself. In chapter 5 *A Messy Festival* I will write about the art group *Performers Independent* (PI) and their *Kolkata International Performance Art Festival* (KIPAF). *A Messy Festival* focuses on a variety of strategies by which the artists of PI attempt to circumvent the professionalization of art practices. Although PI’s performances could be defined as site-specific, PI’s engagement with sites differs from the way *KHOJ Kolkata* engages with sites; whereas the artists of *KHOJ Kolkata* study the historical, social and political dimensions of a site and make their works in accordance with these dimensions, the performances of PI seem to take place in a site without unfolding a site’s multi-layered histories. Yet, this relative neglect of the site’s cultural complexity is substituted by a heightened emphasis on community; by ‘being together’ and calibrating their bodily movements with their surroundings, the performers of PI strive to find a new language of performance art. In chapter 6 *Vital Matter* I will write about the ‘artist village’ Chander Haat. Like the artists described in the other chapters, the artists of Chander Haat explore a variety of new media such as installation art and site-specific art. But, instead of focusing on the breaks with artistic convention, I will focus in this chapter on the way artists make new beginnings by engaging with a variety of ‘vital’ materials. Slashing, denting and burning the surfaces of their artworks, often using natural materials such as wood clay and bamboo, the artists of Chander Haat, most of whom are migrants from Bangladesh, create artworks that not only reflect on the tensions of migration, progress and urban upwards mobility, but make them tangible as well. In the last chapter (7) *Pots, Seeds, Snakes and Crows* I look at the confluences between *contemporary* art practices and Bengal’s storytelling traditions such as the story of the snake goddess Manasa, through the work of Mallika Das Sutar, a member of Chander Haat. I will focus on the role of containers as narrative elements that express ambiguity and indicate change. By elaborating on such elements Mallika continues such storytelling traditions, yet her works do not attempt to salvage a particular tradition. Her works resonate with the current changing social landscape of Bengal and Kolkata, and address the frictions that accompany such changes in the fields of gender, class, caste, and the environment. Finally, in the conclusion, I will discuss to what extent the various art practices discussed support the initial ritual theory of artistic renewal set out in chapter 2. Can there be a ritual theory of *contemporary* art, or should all art practices be firmly grounded in a local environment?

These two lines of inquiry - the ritual dynamic of *contemporary* art and the way this dynamic is expressed and embedded within a specific cultural context - come together in the discipline of ‘the anthropology of art’. Only after discussing the theoretical and practical concerns of the anthropology of art, with a focus on *contemporary* art, I will be able to move to the central questions of artistic novelty and social change. In the remainder of this introduction, I will outline in four sections what I believe to be the main unresolved questions, pitfalls and challenges of the anthropology of art. In ‘*The captivating pull of the artwork*’ (1.3) I will discuss the anthropology of art’s atypical and narrow ethnographic engagement with *contemporary* art; an engagement that tends to neglect various aspects of the broader social field of *contemporary* art. In ‘*The flight from meaning*’ (1.4) I will consider the split within the anthropology of art between, on the one hand, a perspective that sees artworks as carriers of meaning, and on the other hand, a perspective that sees artworks as expressive and affective ‘things’ or ‘agents’. In ‘*The social life of artworks and artists*’ (1.5) I will shortly discuss theories concerning “the social life of things” (Appadurai 1986) – the ways objects traverse different regimes of value - and focus on the theoretical and methodological difficulties when applying such theories to the movements of *contemporary* artworks. And in ‘*Melanesian metaphors*’ (1.6) I will discuss the work of two main figures in the anthropology of art, Pierre Bourdieu and Alfred Gell. Through the lens of Nancy Munn’s ethnographic writings on the movements of canoes in the Trobriand archipelago (Munn 1977; 1986), I will discuss Gell’s concept of distributed personhood and Bourdieu’s theory of the field of art. Although the discussions below will not address all questions central to the anthropology of art, they will, hopefully, provide a firm foothold for moving towards a ritual theory of *contemporary* art in the following chapter.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Readers who are more interested in the analysis of *contemporary* art in Kolkata could skip this section, as well as the next chapter, and continue reading from chapter 3 onwards. Chapter 2.9 gives an overview of the main argument.

### 1.3 *The captivating pull of the artwork*

“The worst thing about the ‘anthropology of art’”, Alfred Gell wrote in 1996, “is the way in which it has inherited a reactionary definition of art, so that it more or less has to concern itself with objects that would have been classified as ‘art’ or, more likely, ‘craft’ at the beginning of this century, but has little or nothing to do with the kinds of objects that are characteristically circulated as ‘art’ in the late 20th century” (Gell 1996, 35). In *Art and Agency* (1998) Gell unfolded an anthropological theory that could include all the visual arts, including *contemporary* art - from New Guinean Asmat shields to the works by the French-American artist Marcel Duchamp. Next to Gell’s pioneering work, several studies emerged that criticized the universal claim and Eurocentric bias of aesthetics, scrutinized the academic, museological and commercial divides between ‘high art’, ‘fine art’ or ‘modern art’, on one side, and ‘artefact’, ‘craft’, or ‘traditional art’ on the other, and started to address the colonial and post-colonial predicaments of cultural representation (Clifford 1988; Coote and Shelton 1992; Marcus and Myers 1995). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, artists from (post)colonial urban centres were caught in-between these categories, neither fully modern nor traditional, and had to carve out a place for themselves to cope with and address the asymmetric cultural representation and visual regimes of colonial modernity (Mitter 2007, Jay and Ramaswamy 2014). Anthropologists of art and art historians became more vocal in their criticism of such categories, but also had to shift their focus towards different kinds of art, otherwise their studies would continue to reproduce the dichotomy between ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’.

This concern for the entanglement of art and colonial modernity was picked up by artists as well. In *The artist as ethnographer* (1995) Hal Foster noticed a growing artistic interest in subjects of identity and representation, what he referred to as “the ethnographic turn”, and highlighted the proximities between artists and anthropologists; they found each other in their shared concern for the representation of ‘the Other’. Later publications, such as Coles (2000), Schneider and Wright (2005), and Sansi (2015) moved beyond these shared interests of cultural representation and started to explore the methodological proximities between ethnographic fieldwork and *contemporary* art. Instead of reflecting on the asymmetries of cultural representation, these writings focus on art practices that actively engage with ‘the other’, art practices that are grounded in social interaction, such as community art, site-specific art, and performance art. Such art practices, described as “relational aesthetics” (Bourriaud 1998), “art as social space” (Möntmann 2002), as “dialogical art” (Kester 2004), or as “participatory art” (Bishop 2012), not only interact with various communities but strive to create new communities

as well.<sup>10</sup> As Fiona Siegenthaler writes, rather than criticising representation within the museum these practices create interactions that are not so much situated in social space but produce social space (Siegenthaler 2013, 7-8).

Some *contemporary* artists started to behave more like ethnographers, participating, interpreting and reflecting on social situations, but also anthropologists of art started to behave more like artists or curators. As Eugenia Kisin and Fred Myers write, various anthropological engagements with *contemporary* art became “an experimental process (...) that resembles curatorial practice” (Kisin and Myers 2019). This coming together of artistic and ethnographic practice created situations where the work of the ethnographer and that of the artist can’t be clearly separated any longer. In this experimental process anthropologists of art deliberately, sometimes accidentally, sometimes reluctantly, entangled their ethnographic practices with *contemporary* art practices to such a degree that it became difficult to untangle again. My first reaction to this entanglement is conservative. I am doubtful of an anthropology of art that abandons the traditional interaction between fieldwork and analysis (which will be argued below) and I am doubtful of the social claims made by ‘relational art’. Calling new practices of art ‘relational’ or ‘art as social space’ might suggest that other visual art practices, such as sculptures or paintings, are not part of a ‘social space’, are not ‘relational’. However, as Claire Bishop writes: “what artist *isn't* socially engaged?” (Bishop 2012, 2). I do not deny the difference between these art forms, nor do I join Bishop in her criticism of ‘relational’ art forms; I merely want to take a methodological position that considers artworks, whether they are labelled *modern* or *contemporary*, as being part a wider social field of art - what Pierre Bourdieu called “the field of cultural production” (Bourdieu 1993).

The focus on the “borderzones between art and anthropology” (Schneider and Wright 2005) has prompted various collaborative projects that reinvigorated the anthropology of art, yet a collaborative engagement with *contemporary* art is not the same as an anthropological analysis of the field of *contemporary* art. *Contemporary* art practices that avoid art institutions, such as the studio, the museum, the gallery, or the art fair, practices that attempt to counter a modernist art tradition by breaking with the hallowed autonomy of the artist and the artwork, and practices that seek for an engagement with and the creation of various new communities, are nevertheless part of a wider field of cultural production. Engaged and ‘relational’ as participatory art projects might be, they make up only a fragment of the wider social field; they

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<sup>10</sup> The works referred to have in common that they deal with various forms of ‘participatory art’, but they have very different takes on these *contemporary* art practices. See Grant H. Kester’s *The One and The Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (2011) for a thorough analysis of the various theoretical approaches to these practices.

are performative acts that can only be understood, from an anthropological perspective, by seeing them as part of a wider cultural process.

It is this wider cultural process that risks to be neglected by anthropologists. Captivated by new works of art, anthropologists of art risk approaching the topic differently from the way anthropologists usually study cultural practices, that is, by looking at the cultural dynamic and social relations of a community through immersive periods of fieldwork. With all the emphasis on community and participation, the anthropological engagement with *contemporary* art demonstrates a paradoxical neglect of the wider range of practices that make up and sustain the field of *contemporary* art. As Karen Zitzewitz writes, these collaborative strands in the anthropology of art tend to ignore other art-world actors (Zitzewitz 2022; see also Ciotti 2020). The call for an ethnographic investigation of the wider field of *contemporary* art is not new and was already emphasized by the authors of *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (Marcus and Myers 1995), and much interesting work has been done in recent years.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the anthropology of art remains a relative minor field of inquiry, especially taking the recent booming of international *contemporary* art sites, such as art biennials and art fairs, into account (Zitzewitz and Ciotti 2022).

In this thesis I have attempted to circumvent the captivating pull of the artwork, yet in some respects I have perhaps failed to do so.<sup>12</sup> Along with all the other participants in the field, such as curators, artists, visitors and dealers of art, anthropologists of art select, describe, interpret and praise those works that they find interesting. Doing so they become part of the field of *contemporary* art and blur the difference between being a participant-observer *of* ritual and a participant *in* ritual. Consequently, anthropologists are too close to *contemporary* art to properly study it, unable to see the wood for the trees. I have not been immune to this collaborative entanglement. I have encountered, and still encounter - during fieldwork, during the writing process, and the period thereafter - a similar pull to *contemporary* art practices and found it at times difficult to take a step back and observe the broader field. My critical approach to the anthropology of art is therefore also a self-critique. Rather than merely criticizing it, I will attempt to clarify what constitutes this entanglement.

An important reason for the irregular ethnographic relation with *contemporary* art - a reason that is easily ignored and will therefore be given much space here - is the anthropologist's familiarity with the everyday practices and principles of the artworld; to make, collect, exhibit, and

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<sup>11</sup> Some important exceptions, writings that focus on the larger field of art, are: Velthuis 2005; Winegar 2006; Geismar 2013; Ciotti 2014; Fillitz 2014; Fillitz and Van der Grijp 2018; Kompatsiaris 2017; Zitzewitz 2017, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> See for example the conclusion of chapter 7.



preserve works of art seems like a natural thing to do, it is taken for granted. This applies to me as well. Even if I wasn't raised in an artistic family, I nevertheless grew up with art. From my early childhood I made drawings that my parents hung on the wall, I was taken to museums on school trips, and almost all the homes that I have visited had paintings or pictures of paintings hanging on the wall. This early exposure to the idea and practice of art is, I presume, widely shared among anthropologists. Although *Contemporary* art can be an unknown and somewhat eccentric phenomenon for many anthropologists, the structure of the wider art scene – its production, consumption, circulation and conservation – form a widespread cultural convention that is easily taken for granted. That there is something we call 'art', its mere presence, is commonplace.

For an anthropologist, this position of familiarity is far from ideal. Anthropologists do fieldwork, they travel to unfamiliar places, try to get in touch with unknown communities, and arrive as outsiders, even if the community lives right around the corner. By observing their everyday practices and participating in them – a method known as 'participant observation' – anthropologists slowly move from an outside point of view to an inside point of view. Participant observation entails a learning that puts the anthropologist in a "position of weakness" (Bloch 2017, 38), a position in which the anthropologist is like a child, has to learn the language, has to get acquainted with certain techniques and practices, has to become familiar with social conventions, and has to get a rough idea of the various fields of knowledge of a culture.<sup>13</sup> The anthropologist can of course not learn all, but should at least have an understanding of those things which for the members of the community being studied are taken for granted. Doing so, the anthropologist acquires a practical and bodily knowledge, a feel for things that goes beyond questionnaires. There can be a big difference between what people say they do, and what they actually do, and there are many aspects of a culture that are not expressed in words, that are implicit. Through participant observation anthropologists get an idea not only of what is said, but also of that which is left unsaid, they can estimate the gap between what people say and what people do, understand better how a community senses the world. Only through long term participation, rather than listening to explicit statements, can the anthropologist intuit what life in other places is like 'from the inside' (Ibid. 37). It is a process of slowly becoming familiar, not one of being familiar.

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<sup>13</sup> The term 'culture' is a central term within cultural anthropology and has a complex history. I follow the Boasian tradition (after Franz Boas and his students), where culture is seen as a sociological term for learned human behavior (Benedict 1943, 9-10). For an oversight see A.L. Kroeber, and C. Kluckhohn: *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (1952). And G. Stocking. *Franz Boas and the Culture Concept in Historical Perspective* (1968b).

This classical description of ethnographic fieldwork, based on a sharp difference between being an ‘outsider’ and an ‘insider’, has been challenged. Anthropologists have included various fields that are much closer to home. Due to shortened travel time and changes in technological communication, the field that was once far away is perhaps merely a bus ride away, or can be revisited easily via videocall. Ethnographic fieldwork does not have to be the immersive and elongated period that it once was - or as the discipline of anthropology likes to remember it.<sup>14</sup> What is more, an emphasis on collaboration with the community being studied, not just in the anthropology of art, but in the entire discipline of anthropology, has challenged the image of the anthropologist as an outsider, the ‘lone ethnographer’ who enters the field to collect data and exits the field to write an ethnography catered for an academic public (Rosaldo 1989).

The ethnographic field has never been the static and bounded entity that anthropologists sometimes imagined it to be, but ‘the field’ has surely become more porous, fragmented, and multi-sited (Marcus 1995; Hannerz 2003). Not just despite but because of these changes anthropologists should hold on to their initial position as outsiders. In her essay on “the revolutionary potential of participant observation” Alpa Shah defends the practice of working “with people who you feel at first sufficiently alienated from.”: “It has nothing to do with exoticism or cultural relativism (the stereotypes that are sometimes lazily attributed to anthropologists) but it marks the very basis of our ability to contribute new insights.” (Shah 2017, 51). The “dialectical relationship between intimacy and estrangement” is not just a way to understand other communities, but holds the potential for challenging one’s own presumptions about the world (Ibid.). The practice of fieldwork and ethnography constitutes an oscillating movement, from the outside to the inside, from the inside to the outside, and back again. This going back and forth between intimacy and estrangement - entering the field as an outsider, slowly becoming an insider by means of closely observing a community and participating with them over a long period of time, distancing oneself again through the practice

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<sup>14</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, widely considered as one of the ‘founding fathers’ of modern anthropology, pioneered ethnographic fieldwork by departing from the interpretive ‘armchair’ method of earlier anthropologists and spending time in the field, with the community. His famous ethnography *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) set the tone for later generations of anthropologists, not just for its cultural analysis, but especially for its method of ethnographic fieldwork, where the anthropologist “should dance on the edge of a paradox by simultaneously becoming ‘one of the people’ and remaining an academic” (Rosaldo 1989, 180). George Stocking describes Malinowski’s work as “mythopoeic”, as a “mythic charter” that created an ideal image of ethnographic fieldwork for generations to come (Stocking 1983, 110). Malinowski’s now famous sentence in which he describes his first experience setting foot on the Trobriand Islands – “Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village while the launch . . . which has brought you sails away out of sight . . .” (Malinowski 1922, 4) – this sentence, together with an equally famous photograph of Malinowski sitting in his tent among ‘the natives’, provided a heroic image of the lone fieldworker, a fieldworker who is isolated from his or her own culture, who is immersed in the local life of another culture. Even if fieldwork has always been ‘messier’, with a more complicated dynamic between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ in which anthropologists are inevitably entangled, the mythic image of the lone ethnographer remains, to this day.

of writing an ethnography, making a film, or any other kind of representation, embedding it within an academic framework, re-entering the field, sharing the ethnographic work, and reflecting on these interactions – is a long and knotty process that unwinds in unexpected ways (see for example Mosse 2004, Parry 2012). But the first step - to enter the field as an outsider - is key.

Yet anthropologists of *contemporary* art come to the field as partial insiders, as semi-experts. What is more, the art community recognizes the anthropologist as a semi-expert, as an academic who must know something about art. This makes it difficult to ask the naïf yet essential questions that anthropologists usually ask. If I make an appointment with a curator and ask her why she collects and preserves artworks, instead of throwing them away after the exhibition, I might have difficulties getting a second appointment. Preservation is taken for granted; discussions revolve around how to best preserve works, not why we should preserve them in the first place. It is much easier to ask such questions as an outsider, as somebody who can - and who is allowed - to ask those questions to which the answers might seem plain and evident for those on the inside, questions that to them might seem nonsensical. To become outsiders again, anthropologists of art have to unlearn what they think they know; they have to cultivate “a deliberate alienation from the world under study in order to understand it as it cannot understand itself.” (Hastrup 2004, 468; quoted in Shah 2017, 51). And besides their own unlearning, anthropologists of art have to convince the participants in the field of art of their inexperience as well. By taking part in the making, exhibiting, or preserving of art, anthropologists of art can show that they are novices, relative beginners who don’t know what’s what; they can show that they have many things to learn, and that they want to learn them. In this way they can occupy a ‘position of weakness’ where naïf questions are accepted and where a cultural field can be learned ‘from the inside’.

Another possible reason why the ethnographic analysis of *contemporary* art differs from the ethnography of other social fields lies in the cosmopolitan attraction of this particular social field. The promise of perpetual travel to a wide variety of places, the enjoyment of intellectual exchanges with interesting people from various countries, and for some participants (surely not all) the lure of profits or fame, make *contemporary* art a field that many would like to belong to. Not just artists and curators, but cultural commentators as well, including anthropologists, might be drawn in by this enticing artworld that can give its participants a general feeling to be on the forefront of things. But more than mere cosmopolitan allure and mobility, the field of *contemporary* art holds out a promise that cuts deeper. It holds out a promise, or at least a potential, of societal change, of radical difference from the status quo. Although *contemporary* art is regarded as being part of *contemporary* society, it simultaneously holds out a promise of ‘radical

alterity', an alternative to society as it is, to its current conventions, corruptions, and fixed ways of thinking. This does not just involve a political critique of society; it entails alternative ways of looking at the world and relating to the world. *Contemporary* art manifests, or hints at, a different understanding of the world - an alternative epistemology - and a different way of being in the world - an alternative ontology. In the second chapter I will look more closely at this production of difference in the field of *contemporary* art, and throughout the thesis I will look at the various ways art practices in Kolkata create difference, but for now I will only reflect on the ethnographic consequence of an assumed *radical* difference of *contemporary* art.

The view of *contemporary* art as something radically different is remarkably similar to the way some anthropologists have analyzed 'other cultures' as radically different. Artists, curators, and other players in the field of *contemporary* art look for radical difference, the same way in which some anthropologists have looked and still look for radical difference in faraway cultures. Whether or not such 'faraway cultures' present something radical different from 'Western' ways of thinking and being in the world is topic of intensive debates.<sup>15</sup> But, real or imagined, these alternative epistemologies and ontologies are enticing enough to pull the ethnographer in. To be drawn in by that which is different is an important first step, but at some point, the ethnographer has to step out of it again, "swim back to the shore" as Shah writes.

We may remain swimming with the people we are studying, refusing to or unable to come back to the shore, thinking that it is enough to simply present their constructive imagination as "radical alterity," without challenging ourselves to think about what implications our experiences with them have for the general questions of what it means to be human and to have social relations anywhere in the world. There is of course nothing wrong with presenting cultural critique as radical alterity. But it is politically and theoretically limited and may result in us simply producing a collection of pretty butterflies, for other people to collate, theorize, and act on; rendering what we do as not much more than laboratory specimens for other disciplines and their theoretical suppositions. (Shah 2017, 54).

The anthropological imagination of radical difference creates a risk of 'going native and staying native' (Ibid.). Captivated by alternative cosmologies, by different ways of thinking, anthropologists risk neglecting broader questions concerning the relationship between 'us' and 'them', between observer and observed. Presenting works of *contemporary* art as radically different creates a similar problem. To write about works of art as instances of radical difference, to collect them as 'pretty butterflies', is to neglect the wider field of art, including the relationship between observer and observed. The social dynamic of the field of art is much closer to the

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<sup>15</sup> See for example David Graeber: "Radical alterity is just another way of saying 'reality': A reply to eduardo Viveiros de Castro." *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 5 (2): 1-41 (2015).

everyday life world of the anthropologist in comparison to many of the cultures that have been studied by anthropologists. But due to this familiarity, not just despite of it, anthropologists tend to neglect the field of art, take it for granted, and instead zoom in on the works of art as something radically ‘other’, something ungraspable. Captivated by works of art, anthropologists risk presenting artworks as unfathomable expressions in and of themselves, rather than works that are shaped by and acquire meaning within a particular social context. I therefore suggest a zooming out, a step back from the work of art, bringing in view all that surrounds it.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, is there not a risk that a holistic anthropology – one that takes the wider social context as the principal field of analysis, whereby classical fields of ethnographic enquiry, such as kinship, class, subsistence, worship, or gender, are all taken into account – reduces artworks to mere representations of societal phenomena? Here we stumble on perhaps the most stubborn dilemma within the anthropology of art. Are artworks material expressions that to some extent elude analysis, things that arouse the senses yet evade comprehension, evoking feelings that can’t be put into words? Or are artworks carriers of meaning, symbols that can tell us something of the society in which they are made and circulated? In the next section I will turn to this dilemma, a dilemma that – when we substitute artworks for rituals or cultural practice – haunts the wider discipline of anthropology.

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<sup>16</sup> For a description of the particular methodological choices and concerns related to this research see *Stepping into the field* (3.1)

#### 1.4 *The flight from meaning*

Although the anthropology of art is a relatively minor subfield within cultural anthropology, it has a rich history that is entangled with and runs parallel to the wider discipline of anthropology.<sup>17</sup> The anthropology of art followed the wider theoretical currents within the discipline of anthropology such as social Darwinism, structural-functionalism, structuralism, and symbolic anthropology. Early accounts by Tylor (1871, 1878), Frazer (1890) and Pitt Rivers (1906) which regarded non-western art as primitive and placed it on an evolutionary scale, have been criticized and made way for an approach that avoided the loaded and Eurocentric term of ‘art’ altogether (Morphy and Perkins 2006, 4-5). The anthropological study of art subsequently kept a distance from the Eurocentric concept of aesthetics and looked at the ways objects function as a set of symbols that express and sustain a social community, an approach often referred to as the symbolic or interpretative approach. Although the criticism of aesthetics was a necessary move to free non-western material culture from western Eurocentric narratives of civilization, the consequence was a focus on the cultural context and a neglect of the objects themselves. And besides the neglect of the affective qualities of artworks the anthropology of art was, as Kaur and Dave-Mukherjee point out, too much focused on artworks as part of holistic cultures instead of the more ‘contaminated’ artistic developments one encounters when looking at art today (Kaur and Dave-Mukherji 2015, 7).

In his book *Art and Agency* (1998) Gell addressed the problem of aesthetics as well and denied the cross-cultural use of aesthetics because of its Western bias resulting in the ideological divide between ‘Western art’ and ‘non-Western artifacts’. But, instead of avoiding aesthetics altogether Gell broadened the concept of aesthetics towards a mediation of technology of which the European aesthetic experience was just one possible outcome. Instead of displacing aesthetics with words like visual communication or mediation, Gell introduces the concept of “abduction”, a cognitive operation through which the artwork affects the mind of the recipient, whom Gell calls the “patient” (Gell 1998 14-15).<sup>18</sup> Art objects mediate a technology to achieve different emotional as well as intellectual ends, they have agency. This might be to induce an

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<sup>17</sup> For a helpful overview of the anthropology of art see H. Morphy and M. Perkins: *The Anthropology of Art: a Reader* (2006) and M. Svašek: *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production* (2007).

<sup>18</sup> Abduction is a term introduced by the philosopher Charles Sander Peirce as a third way to interpret a sign next to deduction and induction; abduction is the process of forming tentative hypotheses and therefore is a logical operation that provides less certainty than deduction and induction yet forms the basis for them (See C.S Peirce *Collected Papers*, ed. C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, and A. Burks, 1931–1958: 5.172). Abduction has become an important term within semiotics but is used in different ways (See for example Bellucci 2018). For Gell, abduction provided a concept to undermine the importance of symbolic communication in art: “Abduction, though a semiotic concept (...) is useful in that it functions to set bounds to linguistic semiosis proper, so that we cease to be tempted to apply linguistic models where they do not apply, while remaining free to posit inferences of a non-linguistic kind” (Gell 1998, 15).

appreciation of beauty, but it might also be a technique to impress or to instill fear. Whichever emotion is concerned, artworks entrap the beholder into a relationship with the artwork and the artist, an “agent/patient” relationship (Ibid. 22). With his focus on agency Gell moved away from the interpretative approach and criticised it for treating objects as linguistic signs, as arbitrary repositories of meaning, and for denying their affective material properties.

In place of symbolic communication, I place all the emphasis on agency, intention, causation, result, and transformation. I view art as a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it. The ‘action’-centered approach to art is inherently more anthropological than the alternative semiotic approach because it is preoccupied with the practical mediatory role of art objects in the social process, rather than with the interpretation of objects ‘as if’ they were texts (Gell 1998, 6).

Gell’s approach can be placed against the background of a wider criticism of representation and his criticism of symbolic anthropology was not new. A crucial text for anthropology is Pierre Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977). Bourdieu, who is commonly considered to be a sociologist but did ethnographic fieldwork as well, criticized anthropology for analysing people’s day-to-day practice into a set of representations and introduced the concept of ‘habitus’ to overcome the mind-body distinction and focus on socialization, the embodiment of social experience (see 1.6). Ethnographic knowledge became less a system of symbols to be interpreted by the anthropologist and made way for an increased interest in contextualization of ethnographic knowledge and reflexivity instead of grand theory. Perhaps the most definitive attack within anthropology on the clear-cut boundary between the anthropologist as interpreter of knowledge and the ‘native subject’ has been the edited volume *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) already laid the ground for a postcolonial scrutiny on the pivotal role academic knowledge production played in creating power asymmetries between ‘the West’ and ‘the East’; the authors of *Writing Culture* applied this criticism to anthropology and argued that anthropologists should scrutinize their methods of research and writing and make ethnographic knowledge production visible in a more reflexive ethnographic analysis.

These discussions within anthropology resonated with a similar critique of representation in the humanities and the social sciences. In both cultural anthropology and art history the deconstruction of representational practices, the critical scrutiny of their knowledge system, fall under the wider umbrella of postmodernism. Key to the art historical deconstruction of the clearly framed field of art is Derrida, who with *The Truth in Painting* (1978) showed that the ‘inside’ of any work, that which rest within the frame, is constituted by that which is ‘outside’, such as frames, signatures, archives, verbal discourse, etc. Following Derrida, a critical

deconstructive tradition started blooming in the humanities; an effort, often referred to as post-modernist, that undermined the modern project of creating separate spheres of cognition and cultural domains such as ‘art’ or ‘literature’. ‘The artwork’, ‘the artist’, or ‘the author’, seemingly self-assured on their elevated pedestals, were all of a sudden wobbling on their heels. Within art history this led to a sharpened focus on the social and material conditions of ‘the artwork’ (Melville 1990; Duro 1996) and prompted a critical scrutiny of Euro/American-centric civilizational frameworks of the arts (Elkins 2007; Belting, Birken, Buddensieg and Weibel 2011; Juneja 2011; Jay and Ramaswamy 2014; Kaur and Dave-Mukherji 2015).

In conjunction with the critical scrutiny within both anthropology and art history an interdisciplinary field of visual and material culture studies emerged that fostered new methodologies and epistemologies for understanding images and objects, tracing the social lives of objects (Appadurai 1986), focusing on the “materiality” of objects (Miller 2005), and asking “what pictures want” instead of what they mean (Mitchell 2005). The wider discipline of visual and material culture studies took the object’s physical properties central, its materiality; what it is made of, how it affects people, and the ways it takes part in wider human and non-human networks, or infrastructures, resulting into a potential academic scrutiny of every-thing, from the materiality of money (Maurer 2005) to the social life of cassette players (Larkin 2008) or the economies of Indian calendar art (Jain 2007).<sup>19</sup>

Alongside these critical changes within the humanities and social sciences artists made similar moves, often earlier than academics; by criticizing the institutes that represented them, undermining art historical discourses, including ‘the everyday’ and blurring the boundaries between ‘high art’ and ‘low art’, artists created new forms of art that subsequently fell into the searchlight of academics. Together, artists and academics aimed their arrows at practices of representation, institutional practices that circumscribe works of art and denote what a work is about, what it represents, rather than allowing for its mere presence. Bringing artists and academics together, the postmodernist critique of representation highlighted an epistemological gap between artistic material practice and academic verbal interpretation; the representation of a work of art, academics realized, is something entirely different from the work of art itself. This realization of the incongruity between the represented and the present, between word and act, was surely not a new invention of thought, but it was dormant. Now awoken, this critique led to attempts to curtail or channel the writing about art. An early example is Susan Sontag’s essay *Against Interpretation*, where she writes: “To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world - in order to set up a shadow world of ‘meanings’” (Sontag 1966). Sontag does not argue for an

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<sup>19</sup> For a theoretical oversight of the developments within material and visual culture studies see for example (Mirzoeff 2002); (Miller 2005); (Tilley, Keane, Kuchler, Rowlands, Spyer 2006); (Jay and Ramaswamy 2014).



absolute silence, but does argue for a restriction of content analysis in favor of formal analysis and formal description: “The best criticism, and it is uncommon, is of this sort that dissolves considerations of content into those of form (...) Equally valuable would be acts of criticism which would supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art” (Ibid.).

There is indeed an epistemological gap between material objects or physical acts and language, but this gap cannot be circumvented by limiting art description as Sontag writes to “the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it” (Ibid.). As Erwin Panofsky wrote, any description is already an interpretation: “[A]ny description will— even before it opens—already have had to renegotiate the purely formal elements of depiction into symbols of something depicted. By doing so, a description, whatever path it takes, develops from the purely formal sphere into the realm of meaning” (Panofsky 2012 [1932]: 469). Clifford Geertz, who is often considered to be one of the main flag-bearers of symbolic anthropology, writes that interpretations of art are inevitable:

Art is notoriously hard to talk about. It seems, even when made of words in the literary arts, all the more so when made of pigment, sound, stone or whatever in the non-literary ones, to exist in a world of its own, beyond the reach of discourse. It not only is hard to talk about it; it seems unnecessary to do so. It speaks, as we say, for itself: a poem must not mean but be; if you have to ask what jazz is you are never going to get to know (...) After art talk "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," seems like very attractive doctrine.

But of course hardly anyone, save the truly indifferent, is thus silent, artists included. On the contrary, the perception of something important in either particular works or in the arts generally moves people to talk (and write) about them incessantly. Something that meaningful to us cannot be left just to sit there bathed in pure significance, and so we describe, analyse, compare, judge, classify; we erect theories about creativity, form, perception; we characterize art as a language, a structure, a system, an act, a symbol, a pattern of feeling; we reach for scientific metaphors, spiritual ones, technological ones, political ones; and if all else fails, we string dark sayings together and hope someone else will elucidate them for us. The surface bootlessness of talking about art seems matched by a depth necessity to talk about it endlessly (Geertz 1976: 1473-1474).

Geertz points out a paradox: we stress that artworks cannot be interpreted yet we constantly talk and write about artworks, thereby embedding them into an interpretative context. The idea that some part of an artwork cannot be put into words, that something gets lost in translation is shared among artists and art lovers alike; as the dancer Isadora Duncan reportedly said: “If I

could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it”.<sup>20</sup> Yet people write about artworks constantly. Before an academic writes about an artwork, the work has already been talked about by the artists themselves, has been given a title, or has been discussed by a critic. It seems therefore odd to ignore the artwork’s ‘meaning’, its verbal baggage, layered and contested as it might be.

Instead of avoiding the interpretative approach completely, it might help to look at the ways artworks are translated into words, to look at the tension between the nonverbal character of art works and the varied attempts to translate them into words. When do artworks become embedded in an interpretative context and how are interpretations of art established, contested or negated? This does not require a return towards the anthropological or art historical exegesis of cultural meaning, a return to the academic excavation of hidden clues of which only the academic interpreter is aware. But it does require attention to the ways communities create interpretative contexts, or the fact that they don’t, and to the ways individuals within these communities navigate and challenge such interpretative contexts – for anthropologists are not the only ones who struggle with the predicament of materiality and meaning.

The choice between a focus on interpretation and representation on the one hand and materiality, agency, or expression on the other, when observing a cultural situation, is a false dilemma. As I will argue in the next chapter, ritual processes alleviate or at least work through the tension between these two poles. I do not argue that artworks *are* symbols, carriers of meaning that are to be decoded. Nor will I argue that artworks are mere acts of expression that defy meaning. I will argue instead that the wider field of *contemporary* art comprises a ritual dynamic that at certain moments creates situations of expression, and at other moments creates situations of interpretation. As I will show in chapter 2, this ritual dynamic is cyclical; *contemporary* art orchestrates a cyclical oscillation between presence and representation. The first step towards this argument is looking at the temporal dimension of this cycle. Instead of asking, ‘what does an artwork mean?’ or inversely stating that ‘artworks don’t mean anything’, I am interested in asking ‘when does an artwork mean?’ and, ‘when doesn’t an artwork mean?’

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<sup>20</sup> Gregory Bateson: *Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art* (1972, 137-139).

### 1.5 *The social life of artworks*

This question leads to a description of the artwork's lifespan. Arjun Appadurai's edited volume *The Social Life of Things* (1986) drew attention to the social lives of objects. The collected essays focus not so much on the material instability of objects, on the way objects age, but on the way the value and meaning of objects change with their movements in space and time. Appadurai's introduction and Igor Kopytoff's following essay *The cultural biography of things*, are now classic accounts on the way objects traverse different regimes of value, especially regarding processes of commoditization and de-commoditization, and have inspired a series of new studies looking at the processes that create, preserve and circulate objects as well as the processes that stop them in their tracks.<sup>21</sup> In Janet Hoskins' words: "Who makes it? In what conditions? From what materials? For what purpose? What are the recognized stages of development? How does it move from hand to hand? What other contexts and uses can it have?" (Hoskins 2006, 75). Even if an object looks the same at different stages, which is often the case with artworks, it can prompt a variety of interpretations and interactions depending on where the object takes place.<sup>22</sup>

If we look at the social lives of *contemporary* artworks, look at their entire lifecycles, it becomes apparent that they are not distinctly bounded objects with stable meanings, but undergo a range of transformations as they travel across different stages. This movement could be sketched, very roughly and generally, as follows: An artist or group of artists makes an artwork, in a studio or other site. Subsequently the artwork moves towards an exhibition site where it is seen by a public. And when the place of making and exhibition are the same, as is often the case with so-called site-specific art, the public is invited to come to this alternative site. Then the work, part of the work, or traces of the work, potentially move towards other exhibition sites, fairs, auction houses, or private dealers, where the work can be exchanged multiple times. And finally, the artwork might be bought by a private collector or a museum, or is (temporarily) given by a private collector to a museum, where it becomes part of a collection and is preserved for posterity. During this process the work of the work accumulates value. Although prizes can

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<sup>21</sup> See for example Nicholas Thomas' *Entangled Objects* (1991), concerning the life histories of collected colonial objects or Christopher B. Steiner's *African Art in Transit* (1994), which looks at the trade in African Art. One of the reasons that *The Social Life of Things* has had such a large impact both in anthropology and in other fields in the social sciences and humanities is that, as Christopher Steiner writes "it coincided with a broader disciplinary change in practice and theory – one that redirected the unit of analysis from the 'local' to the 'supralocal' or 'global' and from single-site field research to multisited ethnography that aims at tracking persons and things through their various movements in space and time" (Steiner 2001, 209).

<sup>22</sup> An important elaboration of *The Social Life of Things* was *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture* (Myers ed. 2001), which focused on the contradictions among objects' shifting meanings for different constituencies.

fluctuate and artworks can be discredited, the movement of an artwork has one direction, once it is sold to a gallery it cannot go back to the artist.<sup>23</sup> The artwork undergoes a process of commoditization during and after the exhibition; it becomes a commodity that can be exchanged and can accumulate value through exchange. And finally, when an artwork ends up in its final resting place - in a private or public collection, perhaps becoming part of a museum's permanent exhibition - the artwork is de de-commoditized, taken out of exchange. This last stage, which usually but not necessarily occurs only after a long process of exchange, is not a complete de-commoditization; the artwork can obtain a monetary value again, often a much higher one, and re-emerge on the market. But counterintuitively, the fact that prizes are so high in this last stage points out that it is an object that is beyond monetary value, a very high cultural value that can be only translated into an exorbitant monetary value (Kopytoff 1986).

Next to an increase in market value, artworks also accumulate a range of other values; not only are they caught up in commodity flows, but become for example embedded in national narratives and legal structures. These transformations are spatial, but also temporal; as an artwork moves along its various stages it has a higher probability of become older and in its final stage - preserved, classified, canonized, and enshrined by a museum - it becomes legally and materially protected heritage. At each stage the artwork can mean many different things to different people, but overall, the further an artwork moves along the subsequent stages of studio, exhibition, market, and private or public collection, the richer, but possibly also narrower, its interpretations become. The artwork becomes a depository of meaning, an entry point for a range of societal, historical, and philosophical questions, but it also becomes increasingly framed as the marker of a particular period, style, or artistic personality. The artwork can become so well-known that visitors, paying the work a visit, know something *about* it before *seeing* it.

Before submitting this highly generalized account of artworks' movements to a more thorough anthropological analysis in chapter 2, I will here shortly address four theoretical and methodological challenges for creating a biographical theory of *contemporary* art, and will especially pay attention to the fourth one in *Melanesian Metaphors* (1.6). First, there is a methodological challenge in following an art object along its various stages as it moves from hand to hand. To know both artists, curators, and critics, but also dealers, investors, collectors, museum curators, and insurance experts - in short, the entire spectrum of art players - and to get access to the travelling artwork at its various stages, seems, without becoming yourself a key player, nearly impossible. What is more, artworks often take a persons' life time or longer to travel along all stages. Tracing the artworks' paths is therefore often a puzzle to be solved in

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<sup>23</sup> The artwork can be on loan and move from a private owner to museum and return again to the private owner, but it usually does not go back to a gallery or dealer, and rarely returns to the artist. Cases in which artists bought back their artworks probably do exist, but should be seen as exceptions.

reverse by art historians, and cannot be overseen within the timeframe of ethnographic fieldwork.

Second, artworks cannot be regarded simply as singular physical objects. Objects always physically change when they move from hand to hand, and especially *contemporary* artworks, such as installations, performance-based work, or video projections cannot be seen as clearly demarcated singular objects, the way for example paintings or sculptures can. Not only do *contemporary* artworks navigate different regimes of value; while traversing different interpretative contexts they can physically change as well, sometimes in unpredictable ways. Below a fictional yet plausible example of such a fragmented biography:<sup>24</sup>

An artist makes an artwork in his studio consisting of some bamboo rods, rags of second-hand clothes, and a bronze casting of a head that he made several years ago in his student years, which has ever since occupied a corner of his studio. After drawing some sketches on paper, he gathers the materials from a variety of places, assembles the work, and shows it at an open studio exhibition. A friend of him, a curator, likes the work and it is decided the artwork will be part of an exhibition in a public place in the city. He moves the artwork in parts, re-assembles it, and adds some material to make it larger so that it fits better in the environment and is not dwarfed by the six-story buildings surrounding the park. After a successful show attracting many visitors, rainfall, and some minor vandalism, the artist thinks the artwork has lost its vibrancy and decides to dismantle it, also because he has no space to keep it. He keeps the bronze casting that he places back in the same corner of his studio and starts to work on other things. Eight months later a gallery owner stumbles on an art blog showing three photos of the artwork from different angles in close-ups, and one photo from a distance with the park's surroundings. She decides to contact the artist and soon after they agree to make it part of a group exhibition scheduled for next month. With the help of two friends (he doesn't have much time) the artist starts to make the work again, directly in the gallery space, but as the exhibition space allotted to him is small, they have to make the work slightly smaller than the first studio version. The artist shows the sketches he made in preparation of the work to the gallery owner, she likes them and asks the artist to make some more and make them a bit more elaborate. These drawings, which are now more than sketches, are hung on the wall to give the work a wider distribution in the gallery - so that it won't be one sculpture and four empty walls. Photos of the exhibition printed in the gallery's catalogue, showing both the sculpture and the drawings, catch the attention of a collector who buys two drawings; one he keeps stored, the other he hangs on a wall in his home that is filled with other works. The artist re-sells the bamboo and throws away the rags of cloth, some other drawings are

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<sup>24</sup> I have chosen to give a fictional account. If I had chosen a real example, it would be necessary to provide more contextual information concerning the city, the gallery, the artist and more. This would situate my argument geographically, whereas my goal here and in the next chapter is to unfold a hypothesis of the ritual process of *contemporary* art that can be tested for different locations.

kept in the gallery's storage room, and he takes the bronze head back to his studio where he puts it in the corner.

Such messy metamorphoses make it difficult to follow 'the biography' of *contemporary* artworks. It is unclear what belongs to 'the artwork' and what doesn't. Are the photos and the texts that circulate with the artworks, yet in different ways, part of the artwork as well? And what about the artist travelling along with the artwork, installing and performing the work differently at each venue? The inattention to the artwork's surroundings risks not only a neglect of the artworks' material surroundings, whether they are the frame of the painting or the frame of an exhibition space, but also and perhaps especially risks a disregard of the people within the artworks' surroundings.

This brings us to the third challenge. As Christopher Steiner argues, we have to be careful not to forget that it is humans who endow the objects with meaning and not give too much credit to the objects themselves: "Yet in their zeal to explore the social identity of material culture, many authors have attributed too much power to the 'things' themselves, and in doing so have diminished the significance of human agency and the role of individuals and systems that construct and imbue material goods with value, significance, and meaning" (Steiner 2001, 210).<sup>25</sup> As Michael Lambek points out, value is generated in human activity: "Value circulates through human activity and it rapidly evaporates in the absence of such activity" (Lambek 2013, 50). Going beyond a Marxian focus on labor, Lambek focuses on other forms of activity, such as speech acts (Austin 1962) that generate value (Lambek 2013). Translated to the field of *contemporary* art, this perspective focuses our attention not only on the making of artworks, but also to what people do at various stages to increase, or decrease, the artworks' value.

Fourth, instead of merely following 'the artwork', an anthropological analysis of art should aim to understand the wider field that encompasses it, the infrastructure through which works of art and their fragments are circulated (Simone 2004; Larkin 2008; Spyer and Steedly 2013; Zitzewitz 2017). This lies in extension to the point made above concerning the attention to what people do with objects, but it places emphasis on the material and personal relations that make such actions possible. In the *Predicament of Culture* James Clifford had already convincingly argued that concepts of "art" and "culture" are rooted in distinct institutions and that more attention should go to the way objects travel between these institutions. Clifford traced the way objects become either 'artifacts' or 'artworks' depending on the systems of classifications in which they are placed, their institutional contexts, such as the museum of ethnology or the

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<sup>25</sup> Steiner does not direct this criticism to the original essay by Kopytoff who, as Steiner writes "was quite clear that he was dealing with the way in which the meanings of things were constructed *by people*" (Steiner 2001, 210; see Kopytoff 1986, 83).

modern art museum. These institutional contexts are not sealed-off frameworks but rather allow “traffic” between them (Clifford 1988, 224).<sup>26</sup> Clifford’s model concerns the permeability and hierarchical asymmetry of two value systems, but it does not focus on the internal dynamic of value creation within individual spheres of art. Although the hierarchical and institutionalized distinction between ‘art’ and ‘artefact’ will be discussed at various moments in this thesis, I will focus in the remainder of this chapter on this fourth challenge, the internal dynamic of the field of ‘art’.

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<sup>26</sup>Clifford’s analysis contrasts with the essay *Artifact and Art* (1988) in which Arthur Danto writes that the distinction between an artifact and an artwork is not only made by the institution, but lies in an essential difference of the objects themselves: “An artifact is shaped by its function, but the shape of an artwork is given by its content” (Danto 1988: 31). Alfred Gell criticized Danto’s “over-idealized distinction between ‘functional’ and ‘meaningful’ artworks”. Gell associates such a distinction with a too Western-focused idea of art as an autonomous realm based on Hegel’s philosophy of art. See *Vogel’s Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps* (1996).

## 1.6 Melanesian metaphors

The movement of artworks seems to have a linear direction; although an artwork's movement can be erratic and fragmented, an artwork typically and ideally moves from a studio to one or multiple exhibition sites, then it might be sold, perhaps it goes from hand to hand for a while, from dealer to collector, but eventually comes to a standstill when it becomes part of a museum or private collection. Yet this process seems to start over again with the birth of a new work of art, a work that subsequently sets out a similar trajectory. The dynamic of *contemporary* art is thus not simply a linear structure in which artworks move from stage to stage, from artist to museum, accumulating value in the process. What is more, even though a work of art might travel to sites that are far removed from its place of origin and during its travels accumulate value and become incorporated into an institutional context from which they can't return, yet the artwork usually retains a connection with its maker, the artist. The clearest example of this is the artist's signature, but also without a signature, art lovers either know or want to know who made the artwork. Although the artist at some point loses control of the artwork's movements, the artwork continues to carry the artist's name. Next to the changes that occur when artworks move along different stages, an anthropology of *contemporary* art should provide a perspective on the lasting connection between the artwork in its initial stage, when it is being made, and the artwork in its 'end' stage, when it is incorporated within a collection. What seems to me to be the largest challenge for an anthropological analysis of *contemporary* art is to understand the internal coherence of the entire field, the way the different stages of the wider process relate to each other.

In *Art and Agency* Alfred Gell has shed light on this lasting relation between artwork and artist. First, as I have pointed out above, Gell looks at artworks as 'agents' that can entrap the beholder into a relationship. But, especially in chapter 7 *The Distributed Person* and chapter 9 *The Extended Mind* Gell moves towards a theory of objects as extensions of personhood, distributing a person's mind externally in a network of social relations.<sup>27</sup> Artworks themselves are not agents, according to Gell, but "secondary agents" that have an effect because of their position in a network of social relationships (Gell 1998, 17; see also Layton 2003, 451). Agency, for Gell, is thus not simply the agency of the object, but the agency of the maker that works through the object; objects, or collections of objects, are not agents in themselves, but act as extensions, as "secondary agents". This is an important difference from analyses that imbue the object itself

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Layton distinguishes these two strands in his critical assessment of *Art and Agency*. Though critical of Gell's theory of agency, Layton is in agreement with his theory on art as extended personhood and points out that these two strands can be regarded independently from each other (Layton 2003, 458).



with agency and comes closer to older anthropological concepts of homeopathic and contagious magic.<sup>28</sup> A person, Gell argues, consists of a spread of biographical events and memories of events, a dispersion of “material objects, traces, and leavings”, that may last long after a person’s biological death: “The idea of personhood being spread around in time and space is a component of innumerable cultural institutions and practices. Ancestral shrines, tombs, memorials, ossuaries, sacred, etc. all have to do with the extension of personhood beyond the confines of biological life via indexes distributed in the milieu” (Gell 1998, 222-223).<sup>29</sup>

Even if his conception of ‘consciousness’ and ‘personhood’ is, as Gell admits himself “vague and abstruse” (Ibid.), his notion of artworks acting on behalf of their makers in a social network is an important argument in the anthropological understanding of art, an argument that leans heavily on ethnographic work from Melanesia. Gell, who started his career as an anthropologist of Melanesia (Gell 1975), elaborated with the notion of extended personhood on ethnographies of Melanesian exchange systems by Malinowski (1922, 1935) Uberoi (1962), Leach and Leach (1983), Munn (1986), Weiner (1988) Strathern (1988, 1992), and Wagner (1991), among others.<sup>30</sup> Especially Strathern’s notion of the partible or distributed person, Wagner’s similar notion of the fractal person, and Munn’s analysis of spatiotemporal

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<sup>28</sup> Homeopathic magic, also called imitative magic, is based upon analogy or perceptions of similarity. Contagious magic, on the other hand, is based on the assumption that things that have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance. An example is the practice of working on clippings from a person’s hair or nails in order to change the person’s condition. Magic used to be an important term of inquiry, but after Malinowski’s ethnography on Trobriand magic (1935) and Evans-Pritchard ethnography of the Azande (1937), anthropologists started to avoid the term ‘magic’. By using the term ‘magic’ anthropologists would risk to continue the modernist myth that reinvents magic, as to distinguish itself from it; they would risk to continue the claim made by Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1890) that the ‘magical thinking’ of non-western people is irrational – see Meyer and Pels 2003 for a deconstruction of this myth and the current relevance of the term ‘magic’. When the term magic was used, the symbolic aspects of magic were often stressed. John Beattie, for example, argued that magic operates symbolically, it is “the expression of a desire in symbolic terms” (Beattie 1964, 205). But, according to Gell, the operational logic of magic does not work only through analogy or metonymy, rather, it works on physical fragments of the victim’s distributed personhood: “The kind of leverage which one obtains over a person or thing by having access to their image is comparable, or really identical, to the leverage which can be obtained by having access to some physical part of them” (Gell 1998, 105; see also Layton 2003, 456).

<sup>29</sup> Next to the semiotic term of “abduction” Gell uses the distinction between indexical, iconic, and symbolic sign processes proposed by Charles Sander Peirce. Icons work by ‘likeness’, they resemble or imitate that what they refer to. An index is a sign that has an actual causal connection with and is affected by the signified. Icons differ from indices as they are not a product or part of the signified, they merely resemble the signified. The third category of signs comprises symbols. A Peircian symbol is a sign that has an arbitrary and conventional link with what is signified, it is an indirect form of reference disconnected from formal (iconic) or physical (indexical) reference. Gell argues that we should treat artworks more as indices, as part of the artist. See 2.3 for a more detailed discussion on sign relationships. See *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. by C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, and A. Burks (1931–1958).

<sup>30</sup> Gell elaborates on many cases from Melanesian scholarship, but he broadened his ethnographic field by following his wife Simeran Gell, also an anthropologist, to her fieldwork among the Muria Gonds of Andhra Pradesh, India, and wrote especially on tribal markets. For a broader contextualization of Gell’s work see Alan Macfarlane’s insightful obituary of Alfred Gell (2003).

transformations, played important roles in Gell's theory of distributed personhood.<sup>31</sup> Personhood, in the Melanesian ethnographic context, is not a bounded entity but is fractal and distributed across time and space. A fractal person, as Roy Wagner's writes "is never a unit standing in relation to an aggregate, or an aggregate standing in relation to a unit, but always an entity with relationship integrally implied" (Wagner 1991, 163 in Gell 1998, 140). Personhood in Melanesia concerns "an enchainment of people as indeed persons would be seen to 'bud' out of one another in a speeded-up cinematic depiction of human life" (ibid.). And Wagner contrasts personhood in Melanesia, where people exist as "being 'carried' as part of another", with the Western opposition between individual and society (Gell 1998, 140). Gell elaborates on Melanesian notions of personhood and discusses a wide range of objects from both Melanesia and elsewhere - from Marquesan art, to Gawan canoes, Rurutu carvings from the Austral Islands, the images of the idol of Jagannath in Puri, to a class of holy statues from the Middle Ages called '*vierges ouvrantes*' and much more - and describes these visual artworks as extensions of personhood. Dazzling the reader with various examples Gell detaches notions of 'spatiotemporal transformation', and 'distributed', 'fractal', or 'partible personhood' from their ethnographic contexts and applies them to a wider realm of art forms including European modern artworks. Gell is not only interested in maze designs found in a variety of cultures (see Gell 1998, 86-95), with *Art and Agency* he has created a maze himself, full of fascinating pathways, entrapping the reader in his dense yet elegant prose.

In *Art and Agency*'s last chapter *The Extended Mind* Gell writes about the artist's oeuvre, taking Duchamp's oeuvre as example, as a temporal extension of an artist. Any artist of renown, Gell writes, is represented by numerous works that are disseminated in various collections, but can be reassembled for retrospective exhibitions or published in overview catalogues. Although Gell focuses on the temporal aspect, he argues that the artist is both spatially and temporally dispersed through his oeuvre, and after the artist's death the oeuvre constitutes an independent "chunk of space-time" (Gell 1998, 232). The artist's oeuvre, Gell writes, is "artistic consciousness

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<sup>31</sup> Melanesian fieldwork on exchange systems, most notably Marilyn Strathern's *Gender of the Gift* (1988), elaborated on Marcel Mauss's essay *The Gift* (1924). Mauss argued that parties to a relationship of gift exchange are obligated to give gifts, receive them, and repay them. In such gift-relationships the given object carries the identity of the giver. As Mauss wrote: "If one gives things and returns them, it is because one is giving and returning 'respects' - we still say 'courtesies'. Yet it is also because by giving one is giving *oneself*; and if one gives *oneself*, it is because one 'owes' *oneself* - one's person and one's goods - to others" (Mauss 1924 [2002], 59). The 'spirit of the gift', a concept Mauss takes from the Maori concept *hau*, subsequently demands a return of another gift to its owner (Ibid. 14-16). This idea of gift exchange has been elaborated on in the so-called relational approach by Melanesian scholars who have argued that persons and objects are not independent entities involved in exchange, but instead acquire their identities from the relationships in which they are transacted (See J. G. Carrier 'Exchange' in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* 2010, 273).

(...) writ large and rendered public and accessible” (Ibid. 236). This is not only because a collection of individual objects represents, stands in, for the artist. Gell shows how artworks indexically refer to each other; any artwork is both a ‘preparation’, even if not intended as a preparatory study, for later works and a ‘recapitulation’ of previous works (Ibid. 234). By discussing Husserl’s concept of “internal time-consciousness”<sup>32</sup> Gell argues that artworks’ double referral to both previous works and future works equals the way we cognitively experience time: “the temporal structure of index-to-index relations in the artist’s *oeuvre* externalizes or objectifies the same type of relations as exist between the artist’s internal states of mind as a being endowed with consciousness” (Ibid. 236)<sup>33</sup>. Gell sees an “isomorphy of structure” between internal cognitive processes and external spatio-temporal structures of distributed objects. The *oeuvre* is thus seen as an externalized map of the mind: “(...) as a distributed object, Duchamp’s consciousness, the very flux of his being as an agent, is not just ‘accessible to us’ but has assumed this form. Duchamp has simply *turned into* this object, and now rattles around the world, in innumerable forms, as these detached person-parts, or idols, or skins, or cherished valuables” (Ibid. 250).

Gell’s thoughts are stimulating and purposefully provocative, yet he goes too far here and misses an essential point, besides the more straightforward point that artworks do not behave, or rattle, the same way as artists do.<sup>34</sup> Gell draws a direct line between artwork and artist, between an *oeuvre* and the artist’s consciousness, or between a community and their joint works, and does not look at the multiple ways artworks form relations with other things in the world. I find it tempting to be persuaded by Gell’s labyrinthine excursions and his innovative juxtaposition of works of art from both ethnographic contexts and a context of modern art, but there is a crucial flaw in his work: Gell neglects the wider ritual context. Gell does not pay much attention to the surrounding of the object and the context of viewing. He does not, for example, talk about the difference between the physical artworks made by Duchamp and their photographic depictions framed by texts in an *oeuvre* catalog. As Howard Morphy writes with respect to Gell’s analysis of Hindu idol worship: “it brackets off or takes for granted all that is outside the immediate context of viewing, the belief system of the viewer, Hindu iconology, socialization into viewing and so on. It also brackets off – almost provides shutters to – all other aspects of the form of the

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<sup>32</sup> See Findlay, J. N. (1975) *Husserl’s analysis of the inner time-consciousness*. The monist, 3-20.

<sup>33</sup> Gell writes that this model cannot be applied to all artists: “The model I have been advancing best applies to artists whose *oeuvre* embodies a high degree of conscious self-reference and coherent development. I am far from claiming that the model just advanced would be particularly useful in all art-historical contexts” (Gell 1998, 242).

<sup>34</sup> As Howard Morphy writes, what human beings think an object is capable of doing needs to be separated from that which it is actually does. People may ascribe agency to inanimate objects, treat them as persons, but as an anthropological theory of what kind of things objects are it is problematic (Morphy 2009, 6).

object and the context of viewing” (Morphy 2009, 7).

Writings that apply Gell’s theories to the field of *contemporary* art exhibit a similar neglect of context. In his book *Art, Anthropology and the Gift* (2015) Roger Sansi elaborates on Gell’s theory of extended personhood and applies it to *contemporary* art forms such as community and performance art. Sansi discusses, for example, the exhibited piles of candy by González-Torres, which were also taken as an example of ‘relational aesthetics’ by Nicolas Bourriard (1998, 38, 49-59). The variously shaped piles of candy, exhibited in multiple venues, consist of individually wrapped candies that are equal in weight to a person he loved. One work, “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*), weighed 79kg, the weight of his partner when he was healthy. Viewers of the work are free to take a piece of candy, thereby slowly diminishing the weight of the pile. González-Torres let the artwork’s owner, the gallery or the museum, decide whether the sculpture would disappear over the course of an exhibition or be replenished. These sculptural pieces, as Sansi writes, “were made as ‘portraits’ of people he loved and who had died (including his partner, and his father).” (Sansi 2015, 9).

This work is often read as a reflection on death, and more specifically in relation to AIDS; both González-Torres and his partner died of AIDS. But together with what his work represents, the very process they enact seems to be central to the “portraits”—the process by which they are constantly being deconstructed and reconstructed back to their original weight in an endless act of gift-giving. (Sansi 2015, 9).

In similar ways to the agonistic gifts of the Potlatch and the Kula, artists as givers distribute their person and produce objects of inalienable value. The relational aesthetics of González-Torres is a quite clear example of that. His work takes the form of a gift—such as in the piles of candy that are constantly being shared with the public. But these gifts don’t end in the event of the giving: the piles of candy are constantly being refilled by the personnel of the museums where they are shown. They are artworks that belong to the museum, “inalienable possessions,” that reproduce the fame of the artist, his “distributed person.” (...) [I]t is not so important that the participants feel indebted to the artist as much as that the art event has a wider repercussion: that it gives the artist recognition, and fame, in the art world; that the artist’s name is in the minds and words of other people, like the Kula travelers (Sansi 2015, 101-102).

Can such a comparison between González-Torres’ work and the so-called ‘non-western’ exchange systems, such as the Melanesian *kula* or the Northwest American *potlatch*, be made? I will focus on *kula*, shells that are traded in an inter-island exchange system in the Massim region, off the east coast of Papua New Guinea. This exchange system, commonly referred to by anthropologists as the *kula* ring, is one of the most famous ethnographic sites of inquiry since Bronisław Malinowski’s study of it in his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). Sansi refers to

Gell's concept of "distributed personhood" (on which I will elaborate below) and Annette Weiner's concept of "inalienable possessions". Weiner, who conducted ethnographic fieldwork on the *kula* exchange system on the Trobriand islands of Melanesia, coined this term to refer to objects that are "inalienable" as they, unlike commodities, "are kept by their owners from one generation to the next within the closed context of family, descent group, or dynasty" (Weiner 1992, 7). Preserved and canonized *contemporary* artworks can indeed be said to be inalienable as well; when they become heritage they will not easily return to the market as an alienable commodity. But this is not to say that the ritual acts and objects circulated within the field of *contemporary* art are similar to those circulated in an exchange system such as the *kula*. Nor does it mean that artists distribute their personhood in similar ways as the participants of the *kula* trade do. Both "gifts" Sansi refers to play an entirely different part within their respective cultural contexts. Whereas the circulation of *kula* objects reaffirms the hierarchical structure of the island societies of the Massim region (Damon 1980, Weiner 1992),<sup>35</sup> González-Torres' 'gift of candy' goes against society's status quo; it challenges expectations of what art can be and challenges the monetary value of art in society. The giving away of candy in a museum exhibition should be seen as an act that is part of the field of *contemporary* art. It is an act that breaks with established conventions of the field of *contemporary* art. By breaking the taboo of food sharing in the museum and by undermining the value of artworks by giving it away, González-Torres acted both within and against the frames of *contemporary* art. It is a criticism, a challenge of the museological order, which resonates with the artist's criticism of certain taboos in society.

*Contemporary* artworks are part of a ritual process, but this does not mean that *contemporary* artworks can be explained within the parameters of other ritual systems. The focus on singular artworks, in this example a series of works by González-Torres, and the subsequent comparison with a Melanesian exchange system creates confusion, leading Sansi to conclude that the work by González-Torres is "deep down, about the fame, the reputation of the artist" (Sansi 2015, 90). Although the pursuit of fame can indeed be an aspect of *contemporary* art, I doubt that his personal fame is the core essence of what González-Torres has made. Sansi lifts terms such as Weiner's "inalienable possessions" and Nancy Munn's concept of "fame" (see below) from their ethnographic contexts and applies them too easily and too loosely to *contemporary* artists and artworks.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Weiner points out the close relationship between success in the *kula* trade and political leadership: "(...) throughout the *kula* districts, those few players who become truly celebrated in *kula* are political leaders within their own villages. *Kula* provides them with an arena to win over others who are not related by kinship, defining their authority through a wider network of political relationships that are all ranked (Weiner 1992, 133). On Muyuw Island, for example, Damon notes that the two men of importance in local affairs control 50 percent of the shells coming into Muyuw (Damon 1980, 275).

<sup>36</sup> Sansi sees *contemporary* art, especially community art practices referred to as "relational art", as a breeding ground for a potential alternative reciprocal gift economy: "Relational artworks as gifts would be free, spontaneous, personal, and disinterested events, in opposition to commodification and mass

As Émile Durkheim wrote, the comparative method can only be fruitful if it is applied to a limited number of societies, so that each of them can be studied with adequate precision: “When we undertake to encompass all sorts of societies and civilizations, we cannot know any with the requisite competence; when we put together facts from everywhere to compare them, we are forced to take them indiscriminately, having neither the means nor, for that matter, the time to treat them critically” (Durkheim 1912 [1995], 92). A juxtaposition of *kula* and *contemporary* art, without a detailed comparison, risks creating an ‘aura of affinity’. This affinity is based on imagined Otherness; it pares the imagined or exaggerated radical alterity of so called non-western or pre-modern cultures with a wished-for radical alterity of *contemporary* art practice, thereby neglecting important aspects of the wider social field of both practices. Anthropology’s historical and ongoing commitment to focus on ‘traditional’ cultures creates a too static view of the past, filtering out elements that are not ‘traditional’, such as Christianity, cash crops, schools, or state politics (Keesing 2021, 159). Narrowly focusing on practices such *kula* or *potlatch*, and comparing them with *modern* or *contemporary* art, regenerates this imagined Otherness. Neither Gell nor Sansi explicitly emphasise the Otherness of the ethnographic practices they refer to, yet they do not give much attention to the social, political and historical context of these practices and thereby continue an ahistorical picture of ‘the other’, frozen in the eternal pre-modern.<sup>37</sup>

This is not to say that a comparison between such practices will be unfruitful. It is certainly interesting to compare *contemporary* art with other ritual practices and the writings of Gell and Sansi in his footsteps, are groundbreaking for making such comparisons. But such a

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consumption” (Sansi 2016, 426). This potential resembles the potential Malinowski saw in the *kula*. Malinowski, as Keesing writes, “sent his Trobriand *kula* participants and magicians off to do battle with *Homo oeconomicus* and other imagined universal humans of his day” (Keesing 2012, 140). Whether the *kula* trade can indeed inspire alternatives to modern economic conventions is beyond the ranch of this writing (see for example Graeber 2001, Lambek 2013). But I am doubtful of such potential with regard to *contemporary* art. Even if ‘relational art’ cannot be bought and circulated as easily as paintings, they do not escape marketization; on the contrary, as Claire Bishop writes, new practices of community art are often at the forefront of market innovation (Bishop 2012). Writings that express an interest in *contemporary* art practices as laboratories for new ideas of exchange are surely justified, but presenting such practices as radically different and aligning them with cultural practices seemingly cut-off from the modern world, is a continuation of the modern disjuncture between the past and the present, the west and the non-west.

<sup>37</sup> As Roger Keesing writes in his essay *New Lessons from Old Shells*, the *kula* constitutes one of anthropology’s most compelling, influential and enduring images of Otherness (Keesing 2021, 139). Yet *kula*, as Malinowski encountered it, was merely a moment in the process of political and economic change at the time of European penetration and colonial pacification of the Massim (Ibid. 153). Moreover, what Malinowski saw on the Trobriand islands was not just a historical snippet of a centuries old Melanesian practice; it was a culture practice that was essentially shaped by European presence. Later ethnohistorical and archaeological research has shown that the *kula* trade system is not a pre-modern institution, but could only find its form, as we now know it, after colonial pacification (Macintyre 1983a). Before colonial intrusion, warfare in the Massim region was widespread, yet barely mentioned in the early ethnographies. But the Pax Britannica created a new political environment where a peaceful interaction and exchange over a wide area could flourish (Ibid. 165-67). Whereas Malinowski saw the *kula* as a substitute for warfare and headhunting, as a cause for the absence of war, later research has shown that the peaceful *kula* should rather be seen as an outcome of the colonial abolishment of war (Keesing 2021, 148).

comparative approach will only hold ground when there is room for a substantial analysis of the encompassing social field - of both ritual practices. To avoid hasty ethnographic affinities, and to see whether the comparison between the two fields is productive, I will elaborate in some detail on the *kula* exchange system through the lens of Nancy Munn's ethnography on Gawa, an island that takes part in the *kula* trade and is located southeast of the Trobriand archipelago where Malinowski conducted his fieldwork.<sup>38</sup> Munn's study has contributed not only to a better understanding of the *kula* trade, but also to theories of value production in general (see Graeber 2001; Lambek 2013), and has enriched my understanding of Kolkata's *contemporary* art strategies to get their artworks 'out there'. I will go into some details of her ethnography, not only to give an impression of the *kula* ring - which might be unnecessary for anthropologists but helpful for those readers who are not trained in anthropology - but also because Munn does something Gell and Sansi do not. Munn's notions of "spatiotemporal transformation" and "fame" are similar to Gell's notion of extended personhood, but Munn grounds her findings in the lived environment of Gawan society and unfolds the concept of fame as something that is more than the reputation of big *kula* traders, but concerns Gawa society as a whole.

Nancy Munn started her fieldwork on Gawa in 1973, which resulted in the ethnography *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society* (1986). Gawa is a small island, part of the Marshall Bennett Islands, situated in the Massim region of southeast Papua New Guinea.<sup>39</sup> The Massim region is well known for generations of anthropology students due to Bronisław Malinowski's pioneering ethnography *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) among the Trobriand islanders. Especially Malinowski's analysis of the *kula* (a Trobriand word) has become not only an exemplary instance of ethnographic fieldwork that parted from 'armchair' anthropology, but remains a rich source for the study of value production through exchange. What was for that time also remarkable was the ethnography's regional focus. The *kula*, as Malinowski saw it from the perspective of the Trobriand islands, was a regional system of islands, shaped in a ring, whose inhabitants spoke different languages and had different cultural traditions. Many anthropologists since Malinowski have corrected and enriched the understanding of the intricate *kula* exchange system from different perspectives (see for example Uberoi 1962; Damon 1980, 1990; Leach and Leach 1983; Campbell 1983; Macintyre 1983; Munn 1986; and Weiner 1976, 1988). As Weiner states, "From recent research in the Massim, we know that *kula* is an exchange system of such complex magnitude that Malinowski never fully comprehended the intricacies of the way the shells move around the islands and the meanings associated with their exchange" (Weiner 1988, 140-141).

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<sup>38</sup> The description below should therefore not be seen as a representation of the current situation of the *kula* trade, nor as a historical overview of *kula* in the entire region; it merely gives an idea of the *kula* from the perspective of Gawa island in the 1970s and 1980s.

<sup>39</sup> In 1975 Gawa had, as Munn notes, about 445 inhabitants (Munn 1977, 39).

*Kula* is, at its most basic, an exchange of an armshell, decorated with cowrie pendants, beads and string, with an equally valued necklace, decorated with gold-lipped oyster shells and other trinkets (Weiner 1988, 139). The value of these shells is so intense, Weiner states, “that men travel for weeks or months, often under difficult sailing conditions, to another island, where they camp on the beach until finally, using all their powers and magic, they ‘turn the minds’ of their *kula* partners to release the prized shells” (Ibid.). *Kula* men individually compete with each other to acquire trading partners spread out over the islands of the Massim region. The trading partners constitute a “path” (*keda*) along which particular shells are passed from one partner to another (Ibid. 141). The armshells move in a counterclockwise direction, from the upper viewpoint of a map, whereas the necklaces move along the same paths, but in clockwise direction. A man from Gawa who participates in the *kula* ring sails with empty hands in southeastern direction to receive an armshell from a partner of a neighboring island, such as Muyuw. Six months or a year later the voyages are reversed and the man from Muyuw who hosted his Gawan partner now travels as a guest to Gawa to receive a necklace. For one shell to travel from the beginning of its path to the same island takes a minimum of two to five years, often longer (Ibid. 142). In this way, throughout the islands of the Massim region, a circular inter-island exchange is established, the *kula* ring. As Weiner writes about the voyages of *kula* men: “Returning home, their waiting kin profess to hear thunder roar and feel the ground shake – nature’s witness to the success of the voyage and the spreading fame of the men” (Ibid. 139).

Munn has elaborated on the concept of fame from the perspective of Gawa. Fame on Gawa, Munn states, is the social circulation of the self in the form of one’s name (Munn 1986, 103). Each member of the Gawan community is identified by a distinctive name and this name is seen as a carrier of the unique identity of the individual (Ibid. 106). In the context of overseas relationships Gawans distinguish the knowledge of person’s name from the knowledge of a person’s face; when a *kula* man is widely known there are places where people did not see his face, but do know his name. A *kula* man’s name travels with the shells and reaches places where he himself does not go. A person’s name thus travels apart from his body and takes on its own motion, traveling through the minds and speech of others. A young man, who has just started with *kula* trading, is usually not widely known and his name does not travel beyond the man’s direct trading partners. But when a man of great *kula* fame dies, his name is widely spoken in many places, and his death will affect a large number of transactions and *kula* paths (Ibid. 108).

Among shells there is a similar division. The armshells and necklaces are valued according to size, fineness of its polishing, and colour, but it is the history of their circulation that gives shells



the highest possible value: a famous name.<sup>40</sup> The *kula* ring is not a completely closed system and some valuables are traded with neighboring cultures, which requires the making of new *kula* objects to enter the exchange system. Yet these newly made objects have a relative low value and are likened to irresponsible youths, whose ties rarely endure. The names of such unknown shells don't circulate apart from their own material circulation. At the other end of the spectrum are famous shells, which are likened to wise men. These shells are usually old, or at least regarded as old, and they are widely known in the Massim region; their unique names travel beyond their physical circulation and have maximized their fame (Munn 1986, 108). A *kula* man's fame is created through the circulation of his name in relation to the most valued shells that he has obtained (Weiner 1988, 143). The fame of shells and *kula* men are thus mutually constituted; a man gains renown through the association of his name with particular shells, and shells gain value from their association with particular men (Ibid. 144). Famous *kula* men trade in famous *kula* shells.

The *kula* trade, however, is just one aspect of Munn's ethnography; a key argument in Munn's analysis is that entire Gawan society, not just the *kula* trade, has to be understood within the larger inter-island world of the Massim region. The Gawan practices Munn elaborates on, such as gardening, food consumption, marriage, the *kula* trade, and witchcraft, are defined by relational movements between an internal domain and an external domain, a distinction often modeled on the distinction between the land and the sea. Perhaps the best starting point to understand this inside-outside / land-sea relationship is to focus on Gawan canoes. In her essay *The Spatiotemporal Transformations of Gawa Canoes* (1977) Munn focuses on the production and distribution of seafaring canoes (*waga*). Canoes form an important link in the *kula* trade and can therefore in general be considered as important, but as Gawa is one of the islands for the production and export of canoes in the area, canoes are key in Gawan society. Munn provides a description of the entire ritual context of Gawan canoes, what she terms "the total fabrication cycle" (Munn 1977, 39), focusing not only on the circulated objects, but also on the strategies by which they are made to circulate and on the environment through which they circulate. Munn argues that to understand the significance of canoes for Gawa society we have to understand its total fabrication cycle, which begins with cutting down the right tree and can end with the circulation of *kula* valuables.

In the first stage of the fabrication cycle the canoe is part of an inner island exchange for marriage rituals. Raw food from the wife's kin (taro, yam, and pig) is given to husband and wife,

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<sup>40</sup> A new, large, finely polished necklace maybe highly ranked, but its value and fame are established through the history of its circulation. However, the value of a low value armshell or necklace that is not known can be increased, Munn writes, by polishing it and adding decor so that it appears attractive to a trading partner (Munn 1977, 46).

who then redistribute it among the husband's kin. The husband's kin subsequently gift a canoe to the wife's kin. If the wife's kin have a male member to be married with a woman (from another group), they can pass the canoe along to the wife's kin, again for exchange of raw food. The canoe thus travels from family to family, but more specifically, it travels from the male maker of the canoe to the male distributor of food. This giver of food, obtaining the canoe, can decide to take the canoe overseas, to other islands, where it can be traded with various other goods. At this stage a canoe might enter the *kula*, because a good canoe can also be traded for an armshell that circulates within the *kula* ring. This armshell can subsequently be traded for a necklace, and again be traded for another armshell, and so forth. Each new armshell or necklace that the giver of the canoe receives is called the *kitomu* of the canoe. The *kitomu* is each time a different object, but is always connected to the owner. The owner has absolute proprietary rights of the *kitomu* and can do with it whatever he wants. He can use it as a marriage gift or even sell it to Europeans, Munn writes, but usually the *kitomu* is sent on a *kula* path (*keda*) where it (ideally) perpetually reproduces itself and, as Munn points out, can increase in value, "as if it were capital" (Ibid. 45). The canoe has thus been transformed into a more permanent object that can return to Gawa, a shell that connects the owner with the *kula* ring, with which he can make a name in the wider island society. As Munn writes "(...) the canoe that has disappeared southward has been converted into an object that ideally can both travel away from Gawa forever, and - as a permanent possession - always return home" (Ibid. 46).

Munn regards objects, such as canoes or body decoration,<sup>41</sup> not merely as symbolic representations of fame, but pays attention to the sensuous qualities of objects. Borrowing Peirce's concept of qualisign, she moves the focus away from objects as such, such as canoes, and looks at the qualities of objects.<sup>42</sup> The idea of a qualisign, as Webb Keane puts it, is that significance is borne by certain qualities beyond their particular manifestation (Keane 2003, 414). Munn points out that a variety of different objects and practices on Gawa share certain qualities; most prominent among these qualities for Gawans are the contrasting qualities of lightness and heaviness, slowness, and speed, light and darkness, and upward and downward movement. These qualities apply to entirely different objects or actions; giving food, for example, makes one light, but also canoes should be light. The consumption of food and gardens, on the other hand, are considered heavy. It is the movement between qualisigns, for example from heaviness to lightness, that constitutes Gawan's actions in their control of spacetime.

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<sup>41</sup> *Kula* valuables are often worn on the body. Like Trobrianders (Malinowski 1922, 87), Gawans wear the shells and necklaces on certain public ceremonial occasions (Munn 1977, 46). They are beautifying adornments from the external island world and emphasize the fame of the owners. The name of famous *kula* men thus extends beyond the physical body, but refers back to it.

<sup>42</sup> See C.S. Peirce (1955, 101). *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. New York: Dover.

Gawa is divided into different spatial zones by the Gawans: the hamlets on top of the island, the bush area between the inhabited top and the cliffs, the beaches, and the sea. Furthermore, they make a distinction between the land as a whole and the sea in terms of motion and weight. Land is stable and heavy whereas the sea, or water, is associated with lightness, slipperiness, and speed. Seafaring canoes, made on the land from trees that grow on the land, yet destined for sea, take on a mediatory role between the land and the sea. The canoes are owned by the builder and his matrilineal clan and the names of canoes are usually taken from the names given to plots of clan land, thereby connecting the clan, the land and the canoes (Munn 1977, 41-42). The canoe is not a static symbol between land and sea, but rather enables a transformation from land to sea. The canoe's transformation is expressed by a myth that tells the story of a woman who had been cooking for the men building the canoe. Continually cooking she grew tired of her work and came to see how the men's work was progressing. There she saw that instead of hollowing out a tree, the men were hollowing out the soil. Seeing this she said (according to one version) "that's no canoe, it won't sail on the sea." Going to the bush, she smeared one tree with blood from her genitals, and smeared another tree with her white discharge (*naw*, a term denoting both semen and female discharge). The reddened tree would provide the red wood for the canoe's body, and the whitened tree came to provide the white wood for the outrigger float. According to one informant, giving his interpretation of the myth to Munn, the woman could instruct the men because she had recently given birth. As Munn writes: "Canoes, he felt, are productive like women: on the one hand, they carry people, on the other, when traded, they return goods to the builder who distributes them to his matrikin." (Munn 1977, 42). The canoe's movement, from the land to the sea and back again in the form of a traded object (*kitomu*), is thus mediated, Munn argues, by the sexual-reproductive powers of women. The woman teaches the men that canoes must be detachable from the clan land; staining the trees with her creative substance, she fosters the reproductive potential of the canoe, so that it yields multiple returns.

Gawans want their canoes light and quick, yet they are made out of materials drawn from the 'heavy' land and have to be made 'light'. The tree is made light by hollowing it out, but before doing that, the tree should be emptied of certain tree dwelling spirits, otherwise the canoe might crack. After the canoe is hollowed out and roughly carved, it is brought from the wooded cliffs to the beach below. The beach for Gawans is an intermediate and ambiguous zone; it is the place where visitors from overseas are welcomed, but also the entry point for evil and sickness. The conversion of the still rough piece of wood – still associated with the heavy land - into a seafaring canoe, has to happen in this in-between place that belongs neither fully to the land nor the sea. A canoe is like a sandcrab some Gawans told Munn, because it "goes into the sea,

washes and then returns to its house on the beach” (Ibid. 41).

To continue the process of ‘making it light’ the canoe has to be washed, carved, painted, adorned, and spoken to. The “cosmetic process”, as Munn calls it, is to give “delineation and light”, and a movement towards “the outside” (Ibid. 47). This is done in various ways: different parts of the canoe are given names of human body parts, thereby anthropomorphizing the canoe and transforming it from inanimate material to human animation; the ends of the canoe are carved into the shape of a pigeon, fast-flying birds which are able to sight land from sea; on the vertical prow board usually a crane is carved, a bird which is associated by the Gawans with the beach and opposed to the gardens; and moons with a star inside are painted on the horizontal prow boards and denote the canoe’s eyes. The standard representational elements are associated with the sky, and the mediation between sea and land. But on the body of the canoe, on the part that will be underwater, fishes are painted, which are regarded as symbolically opposed to the ‘heavy’ produce of gardens. Furthermore, the painters should not eat on the day of painting, otherwise they “darken” the canoe boards; the paintings should be “bright” and express a vital beauty, while eating makes the body heavy and slow. The paintings are done by young men, who give the canoe a surface that “extends beyond itself”, but to complete the canoe’s transformation a senior man gives it speed through verbal spells and decorates the canoe with “moving appendages” such as red hibiscus flowers and pandanus streamers. It is the interior knowledge of senior men, “stored inside the body”, which is needed to give the canoe motion: “The *interiorized* knowledge gives the prowboards their *exteriorized, mobile* attachments” (Ibid. 50).

The canoe forms a link between on the one hand the “inter-island” order, centered around internal marriage exchanges, and on the other hand the “intra-island” region of which Gawa is part. It functions as an intermediary between Gawa society and an outer inter-island society “through a transformation outward along the dimension of motion” (Ibid. 45). The Kula trade, from the perspective of Gawa, is an externalizing practice, whereby ‘heavy’ products from the land - garden crops, pigs, and wood for canoes - are transformed into ‘light’ movements that extend beyond Gawa island. Munn calls this movement from internal to external a spatiotemporal transformation. This spatiotemporal transformation also implies a social extension, from ‘self’ to ‘other’. Extension is a capacity, Munn states, to develop spatiotemporal relations that go beyond the self towards an external other (Munn 1986, 11). This does not only apply to the individual *kula* trader, but to Gawa society as a whole. The community asserts its internal viability through the positive evaluation by external others (Ibid. 6); when a Kula trader brings back an important shell to Gawa, this reflects back on the trader’s kin and the entire Gawan society, on the fame of Gawa in the inter-island world (Ibid. 45). A canoe is thus not simply, or deep down, a vehicle to acquire individual fame; it has to be seen as part of a range

of ritual and embodied practices by which Gawans make sense of and co-create the world in which they live.

The spatiotemporal transformations are expressed in actions and embodied by objects, food, bodies and the land. Munn's concept of spatiotemporal transformation does not just concern actions and objects within particular spatial and temporal parameters; rather, the ritual activities of Gawans "*construct* different formations of spacetime" (Munn 1986, 10). The lived world, Munn argues, is not just a particular spatial and temporal arena of action, but is constructed by action (Ibid. 8). The resulting spatial and temporal axes can be distinguished theoretically, but are in reality impossible to separate. The transformation from food to canoe to *kula* shell is spatial – from the land to the sea to the Massim region - but at the same time temporal: raw food items, such as yams that are storable for several months, are transformed into canoes, that have a longer lifespan, which are subsequently transformed into shells that last again longer than canoes. But it is especially names, potentially lasting much longer than a man's lifetime, which manifest the ultimate spatiotemporal extension.

Much more could be said about the Gawa and the *kula* trade, involving for example food transmission, mortuary rites, and witchcraft (see Munn 1986). But it becomes clear that, despite interesting parallels, the fields of *kula* and *contemporary* art are very different and that a direct comparison between *kula* objects and works of *contemporary* art will be skewed. Perhaps the biggest difference is the fact that the value of the canoe, as *kitomu*, can move from object to object; this seems unthinkable in *contemporary* art.<sup>43</sup> Yet, this does not discredit the idea of *contemporary* art as extended mind or spatiotemporal transformation. As a hypothesis it could be further investigated when it includes three main features of Munn's work: (1) an attention to material qualities that extends beyond art objects towards a wider sensual environment; (2) an approach that traces the various ways in which works of art are situated within the spatiotemporal frames of a society; and (3) an approach that not only places art practices within the spatiotemporal frames of a society, but regards them as constitutive of these frames as well. With these points in mind, I will return to the field of *modern* and *contemporary* art and discuss Pierre Bourdieu's work on the field of cultural production.

One of the most important authors for understanding the internal dynamic of art production is

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<sup>43</sup> Perhaps, something in this direction could (theoretically) be accomplished when artists, when they have made a new work [A], could trade this work for another work of art [B], instead of money. This artwork [B] could then be traded with another work [B2], and yet another, etc. [Bx], so that the artist can make a name within the art market and assure returns of even more valuable [B] works of art. The initial work of art [A], would be used and after some time deteriorate and thrown away. And important [B] works would be known not by who made them, but who trades in them. Museums, galleries, and art fairs, as we know them, would cease to exist.

Pierre Bourdieu. In a range of publications – most notably *The Love of Art* with Alain Darbel (1969), *Distinction* (1986), *The Rules of Art* (1992), and *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) - Bourdieu analyzes the creation of value of the work of art by looking at the entire “field of cultural production” of art. Although Bourdieu wrote about the field of European *modern* art, I found his methods and concepts, on which I will write below, nevertheless crucial for an anthropological understanding of *contemporary* art practices that go beyond the European context. As I have argued above, Gell’s theory on extended personhood is incomplete because it does not include the wider institutional and ritual context of art and zooms in on the artist and the artwork. In contrast to Gell, Bourdieu led the attention away from the artist-artwork alliance, loosened its bonds, and focused on the wider field of cultural production. Bourdieu explored the constructed value of art and situated it neither in the artwork nor in the creative impulse of the artist, but in the broader artistic field. Instead of tracing the value of the work of art to the individual creator Bourdieu wanted to understand what it is that creates the ‘creator’:

What makes the work of art a work of art and not a mundane thing or a simple utensil? What makes an artist an artist and not a craftsman or a Sunday painter? What makes a urinal or a wine rack that is exhibited in a museum a work of art? Is it the fact that they are signed by Duchamp, a recognized artist (recognized first and foremost as an artist) and not by a wine merchant or a plumber? If the answer is yes, then isn’t this simply a matter of replacing the work-of-art-as-fetish with the ‘fetish of the name of the master’? Who, in other words, created the ‘creator’ as a recognized and known producer of fetishes? (Bourdieu 1993, 258).

The contrast between Bourdieu’s and Gell’s analysis of an artist like Duchamp is exemplary. Whereas Gell describes Duchamp’s oeuvre as an ‘externalized map’ of his personal consciousness, Bourdieu dryly dissects Duchamp’s work as a product of an artistic field. Duchamp, Bourdieu points out, was born into a family of artists; his grandfather was a painter and engraver, his older brother and his oldest sister were both painters, and another brother was a Cubist sculptor. He moved in the artistic field “like a fish in the water” (Bourdieu 1992, 246); he grew up surrounded not only by artists, but also by critics, dealers and art buyers and could therefore “like the chess-player he is” think several moves ahead (Bourdieu 1993, 61). As Jeremy Lane writes, Duchamp inherited “a peculiarly developed artistic habitus, a detailed, almost intuitive understanding of the artistic field, of its history and competing positions, as well as the investment in the stakes of the field (...)” (Lane 2005, 37-38).

Bourdieu’s notion of the artistic field is foregrounded in his earlier work in which he unfolded a novel theory and method for social analysis. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972) and *The Logic of Practice* (1980) Bourdieu rejects what he terms “subjectivism” and “objectivism” and writes that of “all the oppositions that artificially divide social science, the most fundamental,

and the most ruinous, is the one set up between subjectivism and objectivism” (1980, 26).<sup>44</sup> Bourdieu attempted to transcend this false dichotomy by introducing the concept of *habitus*. *Habitus* could account for individual agency, which an objectivist approach such as structuralism had excluded from social analysis, without simply reverting to individual experience or consciousness. With *habitus* Bourdieu attempted to find an alternative to terms such as ‘subject’ or ‘consciousness’, terms that sustain the duality between body and mind, and focus instead on the individual embodiment of social experience.<sup>45</sup> The *habitus*, sometimes described as a ‘feel for the game’, ‘practical sense’ or ‘second sense’ is neither subjectivist nor objectivist. It inclines individuals to act and react in a certain manner, yet this behavior is not always calculated and therefore retains a degree of unpredictability (Johnson [Bourdieu] 1993, 5). It outlines the development of a set of ‘dispositions’ that generate and organize practice and perceptions by means of a learning process that begins in early childhood. This socialization or ‘inculcation’ is not simply a matter of formal instruction but is embedded in a wide range of practices that begin in the family. Considering the artistic field, it therefore matters whether an artist, such as Duchamp, is exposed to art from an early age.

Bourdieu’s *habitus* and Gell’s *distributed mind* are, as Gell points out as well, similar; they both outline what Bourdieu calls the “objectivity of the subjective” (1980).<sup>46</sup> Yet there is a fundamental difference, which can at least partially be traced back to a different reading of the work of Marcel Mauss. Gell equates his theory on extended personhood with Mauss’s exchange theory of the gift (1924) as well as with his theory of magic (1950): “Given that prestations or ‘gifts’ are treated in Maussian exchange theory as (extensions of) persons, then there is obviously scope for seeing art objects as ‘persons’ in the same way” (Gell 1998, 9). And magic, according

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<sup>44</sup> Subjectivism, according to Bourdieu, represents a form of knowledge about the social world based on the “lived experience” of individuals (Bourdieu 1980,26). Within the field of art or literature subjectivism leads, as Randal Johnson writes in his introduction to *The Field of Cultural Production*, to an emphasis on the individual artist or writer, and treats artworks as the products of solitary genius; a romantic idealism of the artist as ‘creator’ that neglects the historical conditions in which artworks are produced and received (Johnson [Bourdieu] 1993, 3-4). “Objectivism”, on the other hand, sets out to establish objective regularities such as structures, laws, or systems of relationships; bracketing individual experience it focuses instead on the objective conditions that structure human consciousness (Bourdieu 1980, 26). An objectivist analysis within the field of art tends to describe art as an expression of the social and historical background of an artist, or as part of a system of symbolic relations within a structure. Biographical interpretations focusing on the artist, or structuralist analyses that relate artworks only to other artworks are not incorrect, but incomplete; whereas subjectivism ignores the social ground that shapes consciousness, objectivism ignores the way social reality is shaped by the way individuals act in the world with a certain amount of unpredictability.

<sup>45</sup> Marcel Mauss introduced the term *habitus* and focused on bodily techniques. See *Techniques of the Body* (1973 [1935], 73). Bourdieu’s *habitus* should be seen as an elaboration, rather than a reiteration, of Mauss’s *habitus*.

<sup>46</sup> Gell refers to the *habitus* as “the sedimented residue of past social interaction which structures ongoing interaction”. It is not, Gell continues, “a transcription of common-sense mentalism or ‘folk-psychology’, but is precisely a notion of mind externalized in routine, practices, that is, the prevailing ‘form of life’” (Gell 1998, 127).

to Gell, is a practice that concerns distributed personhood and can therefore be aligned with art.<sup>47</sup> Magic, Gell writes, is possible because “intentions cause events to happen in the vicinity of agents” (Ibid. 101). Although he writes that magic does not operate with a causal relation in the scientific sense, thereby arguing against James Frazer who in *The Golden Bough* presented magic as a mistaken science and part of an earlier stage in the evolution of culture (Frazer 1890), he retains the notion of ‘cause’ and puts the emphasis on the agent, often referred to as the sorcerer, who causes things to happen. Yet, as Bourdieu has rightly pointed out, Mauss moved from the instruments used by the sorcerer to the sorcerer himself (a step that Gell takes as well), but then moved to the belief held by the sorcerer’s followers. Mauss discovered little by little, Bourdieu writes, that to understand magic one has to “confront the entire social universe in whose midst magic evolves and is practiced” (Bourdieu 1993, 258-259).<sup>48</sup> Instead of looking for the ultimate cause of art’s value, what Bourdieu terms “the infinite regress in search of the primary cause” (Ibid.), Bourdieu advocates a Maussian second move and invites us to look at the entire social universe in which art operates.

Bourdieu is careful not to draw a direct line between the artwork or the artist and society. To counter such a “short circuit effect” (Ibid. 181), Bourdieu developed the concept of the field of art as a ‘social universe’ with its own laws of functioning. The artistic field is dependent on other fields, such as the educational or political field, but has acquired relative autonomy and can therefore be defined as a field in and of itself. With the increasing autonomy of the artistic field, an artwork becomes an act within a field of possibilities.<sup>49</sup> Changes in other fields do influence the artistic field, but only through “refraction” (Ibid. 182); the structure of the artistic field refracts external determinants in terms of its own logic. The degree of autonomy of a particular field, Johnson writes in his introduction to *The Field of Cultural Production*, is measured by its ability to refract external demands into its own logic (Ibid. 14).

This field of artistic production does not only concern the material production, but also the symbolic production, that is, the production of value of the work. The work of art, according to Bourdieu, only exists as such by virtue of the collective belief that knows and acknowledges

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<sup>47</sup> See note 28.

<sup>48</sup> Towards the end of *A General Theory of Magic* Marcel Mauss writes that the practice of magic must at least be supported by two persons, the magician performing the rite and the individual who believes in it (Mauss 1950, 153). The belief in the efficacy of magical power is contained in the concept of *mana*, a concept Mauss takes from a Melanesian context, which outlines the power of magic and is considered both a quality, a substance, and a force (Ibid. 134-135). Everything hinges on the collective belief in *mana*, which is irreducible to any logical analysis. It is the obscure idea of *mana*, which Mauss renders as almost untranslatable in abstract terms, that “provides believers in magic with clear, rational and, occasionally, scientific support” (Ibid. 151-156). Although the practice of magic is different from art practice – art is usually not made to intentionally harm or heal people – the concept of ‘Art’, on which I will elaborate in chapter 2, seems to fulfil a similar function in the field of art as ‘*mana*’ in the field of magic.

<sup>49</sup> Bourdieu grounds the agent’s action expressed in the *habitus* within a *field* of objective social relations, a structured “space of possibles” (Bourdieu 1993, 30).



it as a work of art. All the players in the field share the “belief and value of the game and its stakes” (Bourdieu 1992, 272-273). Playing and investing in “the game” continuously generates the belief in the value of art. The belief in art is both the condition for the functioning of this game as well as the product of the game; the player is both created by the game and creates it (Ibid. 228). This circle of belief, what Bourdieu terms the *illusio*, is made possible through an accord between the objective positions of the artistic field and the cultured dispositions of the *habitus*. The cultured dispositions induce interest and participation in the game, whereas the field constitutes the possibilities to learn to play the game, to acquire the competence to participate, to get a feel for the game. The experience of the work of art as being immediately endowed with meaning and value comes from this tacit interplay between the field and the habitus: “(...) when the eye is the product of the field to which it relates, then everything appears to be immediately endowed with meaning and value” (Ibid. 289).

A sociological study of art thus has to take into account “everything which helps to constitute the work as such, not least the discourses of direct or disguised celebration which are among the social conditions of production of the work of art *qua* object of belief” (Ibid. 35). It has to include a wide variety of art players - critics, publishers, and gallery directors, but also teachers and family, “the whole set of agents whose combined efforts produce consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the work of art as such” (Ibid. 37). Bourdieu does not argue that the value of art is created by the institutional infrastructure of art; the value of the work of art comes neither from the artist, nor the object, nor the curator, critic, nor the museum or the school – it comes from the interactions within the field.<sup>50</sup> Bourdieu’s comprehensive writing on the artistic field asks for a broad research perspective. The value of art is neither to be found in the work itself, nor in the relationship between the works, nor in the social context of the artist, but he does not condemn such approaches; what we have to do, Bourdieu writes, is do all these things at the same time (Bourdieu 1990, 147).

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<sup>50</sup> According to Gell, Bourdieu is mainly concerned with the institutional characteristics of art, and labels him a sociologist in accordance with a “division of labour” between anthropology and sociology: “anthropology is more concerned with the immediate context of social interactions and their ‘personal’ dimensions”, whereas sociology is more preoccupied with institutions (Gell 1998, 8). Although Bourdieu is indeed famous for his critical analysis of institutes such as schools and museums and the way they legitimate and maintain class differences (See especially *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* 1979 [1984]), his multiple writings on social practice cannot be simply reduced to an institutional analysis. In fact, Bourdieu criticizes Arthur Danto’s essay *The Artworld* (1964) for being too narrowly “sociological” (Bourdieu 1992, 287). Danto, according to Bourdieu, looks for the distinction between works of art and ordinary objects in the institution that makes that division between art and non-art, but overlooks the historical and sociological analysis of the genesis and structure of the institution by the artistic field. An institution, for Bourdieu is not simply the physical infrastructure of art through which art is collected, preserved and distributed, but has “a twofold existence, in things and in minds. In things, it exists in the form of an artistic field, a relatively autonomous social universe which is the result of a slow process of emergence. In minds, it exists in the form of dispositions which invent themselves through the very movement of self-invention of the field to which they are adjusted” (Ibid. 289).

Even though this seems to me near impossible to work out in practice, Bourdieu did provide a map for navigating artistic fields. Although we might not visit all the places on the map, at least we know they are there. I have introduced Bourdieu's notion of the artistic field and thereby criticized Gell for drawing a too direct line, a 'short circuit', between artist and artwork, resulting in the neglect of the wider field of art. However, Gell's notions of distributed personhood and extended mind, describing the bond between artists, their artworks, and those who are touched by them, remains fundamental for this thesis. A downside of Bourdieu's analysis is the relative neglect of the works themselves. In *The Field of Cultural Production* and *The Rules of Art* Bourdieu writes interchangeably about literature and visual artworks and does not give much attention to physical qualities, the materiality, of artworks. By disregarding the artworks Bourdieu also misses out on the direction of the field and does not trace the way the production of value occurs in a series of consecutive steps, as Munn did for the fabrication cycle of the Gawan canoe. What is more, Bourdieu's analysis is grounded in European and especially French context of *modern* art and literature and can therefore not be simply applied to *contemporary* art beyond Europe. In the following chapter I aim to merge the different perspectives discussed above and present a hypothesis that includes the affective qualities of artworks as well as the field surrounding the artworks. I will move towards an analysis of *contemporary* art that critically incorporates both insights of Gell and Bourdieu but also moves away from their analyses in favor of an anthropological theory of ritual transformation and ambiguity based on the works of Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner, Stanley Tambiah, Roy Rappaport, Mary Douglas, Maurice Bloch, Roger Keesing, Valerio Valeri and others. This ritual analysis will show that artistic novelty is not simply a product of artistic creativity, but an aspect of the wider ritual dynamic of *contemporary* art.

## *Tenali Rama's Art*

Once the king wanted paintings on his palace walls, so he commissioned a painter to cover his walls with pictures. The pictures were much admired, but Tenali Rama had questions. Standing before a body drawn in profile, he asked naively, "Where is the other side? Where are the other parts?" The king laughed and replied, "Don't you know that you must imagine them?" "Oh, that's how paintings are done! I understand now," said Tenali Rama.

A few months later, Tenali Rama came to the king and said, "I've been practicing the art of painting night and day for months. I'd love to paint some things on your walls."

The king said, "Wonderful! Why don't you get rid of the old faded paintings and paint new pictures?"

Tenali Rama whitewashed over the old paintings and did new ones of his own in their place. He drew a leg here, an eye there, a finger in another place. He covered the walls with many such body parts, and then invited the king to view his handiwork. The king was both surprised and dismayed by these dismembered limbs on his walls and asked, "What have you done here? Where are the pictures?"

Tenali Rama said, "In paintings, you have to imagine the rest. You haven't yet seen my masterpiece." Then he led him to a blank wall with a few strokes of green on it.

"What's this?" asked the king, somewhat exasperated.

"That's a cow eating grass."

"But where is the cow?" asked the king.

"After eating grass, the cow went home to its shed," said Tenali Rama.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> A.K. Ramanujan heard this story when he was a child and collected it in his *Folktales from India* (1991). Tenali Rama was a jester at the court of Krishnadevaraya, king of Vijayanagara in South India in the sixteenth century (Ramanujan 1991, 56).

## 2. A Ritual Theory of Contemporary Art

An anthropological perspective on *contemporary* art goes beyond a focus on ‘the artist’ or ‘the artwork’ and includes the practices surrounding the artwork, while not forgetting the artwork itself; it involves the entire set of practices implicated in the making, distribution, and reception of art (Becker 1982). When the anthropology of art describes merely one particular site - whether it is the market, the museum, the studio, the exhibition, or the artwork itself - and does not take the entire “field of cultural production” (Bourdieu 1993) into account, the anthropological analysis of art will remain incomplete. As I have argued in the introduction, an understanding of the wider field of art is a necessary first step, but it should be accompanied by a sense of direction. Artworks are not just embedded within a field of art; they have direction, they move from one place to another within a field of art. And while artworks move, they are transformed in the process, even if they appear the same; the field of *contemporary* art facilitates and guides a range of “spatiotemporal transformations” (Munn 1977). These transformations are not merely, as Gell (1999) argued, ‘extensions’ of the artist, but outline, as I will argue in this chapter, an intricate “rite of passage” (Van Gennep 1909).

At first sight, artworks seem to outline a linear passage: they move from the studio, to a gallery, to an art fair, and perhaps to a museum. But disregarding such particular sites (as many *contemporary* artists do), the wished-for trajectory of artworks can be more generally described as a process starting with the creation of a new work of art, followed by its display, its interpretation, selection and circulation, and finally the valorization and potential preservation of the work (or images of the work). But I will argue that such a linear description is not enough and that the ritual process can be better described as cyclical. To work towards a cyclical model of *contemporary* art I will lean on literature by Becker (1982), Alpers (1988), Bourdieu (1993, 1996) Duncan (1995), Groys (2008), Bishop (2012), Saaze (2013) and others, who have written insightfully about the institutional aspects and wider dynamics of *modern* or *contemporary* art. But in addition to publications that deal directly with these fields of art, I will discuss anthropological literature on ritual and submit *contemporary* art to a ritual analysis grounded in the works of Mauss (1891), Van Gennep (1909), Douglas (1966), Turner (1967), Bateson (1972), Keesing (2012), Munn (1986), Bloch (1992), Gell (1998), Rappaport (1999), Valeri (2017), and others. By

treating the making of an artwork as a ritual act and by approaching the entire field of *contemporary* art as a ritual process, I will hopefully convince the reader that *contemporary* art is not just ‘like’ ritual, but that it is ritual.

I will look at particular sites, practices, and stages of the field of *contemporary* art from a ritual perspective. In *On the Threshold* (2.1) I will look at some characteristics of the art exhibition; in *Ritual words* (2.2) I will zoom in on the ritual language of art texts, such as press releases and wall texts; in *The separation from the here and now* (2.3) I will discuss the transformation artworks undergo when they are selected, interpreted, collected and preserved; in *Towards a canonical order* (2.4) I will look at the ritual dynamic of the art museum and the way it creates and sustains a ritual order; in *Creating the conditions to create* (2.5) I will look at the disruption of this ritual order by means of criticism and the creation of an empty place to create art anew; in *Lost in the Forest of Symbols* (2.6) I discuss the making of new works of art and the creation of various kinds of ambiguity; in *The Night of Brahma* (2.7) I move from the creation of ambiguity towards a striving for the total absence of meaning; and in *Bite! Bite! Bite!* (2.8) will discuss the way new works of art manifest a return to the vital and everyday aspects of life. In the *Conclusion* (2.9) I will capture this ritual analysis within a model – a hypothesis – that will be tested in subsequent chapters by applying it to the specific case study of *contemporary* art in Kolkata.

By the end of this chapter various sites and practices of the ritual process will have been discussed, yet it is far from a complete analysis; many institutes, such as art fairs, biennials, or art schools, are left untouched or mentioned only in passing. What is perhaps more important than describing all aspects of the wider field, is to understand the relation between the different ritual practices, sites and stages within a larger whole, what Victor Turner called “the ritual process” (Turner 1969) and Arnold Van Gennep termed “ceremonial wholes” (1909, 191). As Van Gennep wrote in his classic essay *Rites of Passage*: “Our interest lies not in the particular rites but in their essential significance and their relative positions within ceremonial wholes – that is, their order” (Ibid.). Roy Rappaport used the term “liturgical order” to move beyond an analysis of individual rituals to sequences that make up cycles and series of rituals: “sequences of rituals that lead their participants around the circles of the seasons, along the straight paths that depart from birth and arrive at death, through the alternations of war and peace, or along the dream tracks crossing Australian deserts” (Rappaport 1999, 36). In a similar vein I want to explore how the various ritual practices of *contemporary* art are part of a larger ritual whole. Sometimes I will state the obvious, at least for those acquainted with the phenomenon of *contemporary* art. But without discussing those practices and sites that are often taken for granted, an anthropological analysis would not be complete. I will try to describe this ritual process from an outside perspective, comprehensible for those who have never heard of *contemporary* art. By approaching *contemporary* art as an anthropologist would approach any unknown ritual, I hope

to unfold a different perspective, also for those readers who think about art on a daily basis. I will not discuss the historical development of *contemporary* art, nor will I focus on its geographical situation, and I will barely refer to particular works or artists; my goal in this chapter is to understand the overall dynamic of the ritual process of *contemporary* art.

## 2.1 *On the Threshold*

With the exception of public sculptures that are rooted to a place, the first exhibition of a *contemporary* artwork is usually temporary - a week, a month, a weekend, or only a few hours - and as such the art exhibition differs from the more permanent museum display.<sup>52</sup> I will distinguish these different types of exhibitions and refer to the temporary exhibition as 'art exhibition' and the museum exhibition as 'museum display'. Although the art exhibition is traditionally associated with the gallery, *contemporary* artworks are exhibited at a wide range of places. An exhibition is not defined by a pre-established format and I consider sites that diverge from the more conventional art venues as exhibitions as well.<sup>53</sup> The *contemporary* art exhibition has, despite its various forms and continuous modifications, some general characteristics. First, the art exhibition involves a public. Even though the dividing line between the making of the artwork and its exhibition can be unclear, and even though publics can be very diverse and difficult to define, there will be a moment when the work is shown to a group of people. Whether it is an object, image, act, text, smell or sound or a combination thereof, and whether the work is situated in a park, on a street crossing, or in a forest - when an artist *exhibits*, literally to hold out (*exhibere*), the artist aims for the work to be perceived by a public. Usually this involves an art public who purposefully comes to experience, in person, one or several artworks. But people might also involuntarily stumble upon something that is less clearly recognizable as a work of art, or encounter art at a place where they do not expect it. Not everyone might recognize it as art, but it is nevertheless intended as art. *Contemporary* art is such a versatile set of practices that one can always find an exception. As I will discuss in more detail below, the making of *contemporary* art consists of repetitive attempts to break away from its own conventions, including the necessity of a public. One could, for example, argue that there are a few cases in which an

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<sup>52</sup> An art exhibition in a gallery often takes one to three months, whereas the timespan of exhibitions taking place outside the gallery vary strongly and can be very short, one day, or shorter, and are often referred to as art events or art festivals.

<sup>53</sup> During my fieldwork, for example, exhibitions were held in old manors, riverfronts, schools, on street corners, in parks, and, still abundantly, in galleries.

artist made an artwork in a far-flung place and subsequently destroyed it without showing it to anybody. Nobody else has seen the artwork, but it is still considered as *contemporary* art. Yet, instead of the absence of a public, I would argue that in such cases the artwork is not simply ‘the artwork in a far-flung place’, but the artwork is ‘the verbal account of the artwork and its destruction in a far-flung place’. As verbal act it reaches a public. What if the artist had remained silent? Would it still be a *contemporary* artwork?

A second characteristic of the art exhibition is that it usually concerns a collection of artworks. Art exhibitions often display a collection of multiple artworks selected and arranged by one or several curators. However, unlike *modern* art exhibitions that typically display various separate works of art such as paintings and sculptures by one or multiple artists, *contemporary* art exhibitions might show only one work, made by one or multiple artists, that takes up the entire exhibition space – a kind of work often termed ‘installation’. And, whereas *modern* art exhibitions typically display works of art that remain stable throughout the duration of the exhibition, *contemporary* art exhibitions might show works that physically change, so that the work is physically different for every visitor.<sup>54</sup> By, for example, incorporating living entities, animals, plants, or humans in the artwork, the artist adds a temporal dimension to the work. Especially since the advent of ‘performance art’ the line between an art object and an art act have blurred.<sup>55</sup> An art exhibition is therefore no longer necessarily a collection of relatively unchanging objects of art, but can be a dynamic assembly of practices framed as art.

A third and related characteristic of the art exhibition is that there is a relationship between the exhibited artworks that is not random. The relations between exhibited artworks can vary strongly; artists can be selected from a specific region, works can be selected that address a specific cause or concern - such as global warming or gender inequality - and works can be selected that aim to express a particular idea or resonate with an abstract or poetic title that captures a range of philosophical, social and political themes. Sometimes artworks are selected that were made previously, but it is also common that artists are invited to provide work for an

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<sup>54</sup> Yet there is no clear definition to distinguish between *modern* and *contemporary* art exhibitions as *contemporary* art exhibitions continue to exhibit collections of paintings or sculptures. The adjective *contemporary* can be seen as label that identifies a historical shift in the way artworks are made and exhibited, but, as I have argued in the introduction, it is also a performative term to accentuate novelty without specifying a particular type of art; there is no rule to the varied use of the term *contemporary*.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Performance’ is a label used as an adjective or noun for certain artworks within *contemporary* art discourse, but it is a tricky term from an anthropological perspective, as all cultural action can be considered performative, including art works that remain relatively stable. The preservation of artworks, for example, can be seen as a performance of relative changelessness. I will therefore make a clear distinction between ‘performance’ as a category of *contemporary* art, and ‘performative’ as a more widely applicable term for cultural action. See Austin (1962) for an analysis of performative speech acts, and Schechner (2002) for a comprehensive overview of the various interpretations of ‘performance’ and ‘performative’. I will elaborate on performance art in chapter 5.

art exhibition and therefore start their work with a particular theme in mind. The selection, thematic choice, and the arrangement of the works for the exhibition usually fall under the responsibility of the art curator – not to be confused with the museum curator who, next to the acquisition and arrangement of works, is concerned with the preservation and restoration of artworks as well. There are separate training institutes for *contemporary* art curatorship, and many curators are specialized professionals who combine their work with art criticism or have other roles in the field of art production, but the role of curator is not determined and can be taken up by artists themselves as well.

The fourth characteristic concerns the establishment of a spatial and temporal frame. The *contemporary* art exhibition comes in many forms, but wherever it takes place and regardless of its duration and dynamic, the site is, or temporarily becomes, a place set apart from the everyday. The gallery does this very clearly; often without windows, it wards off the sounds, smells, and views from its surroundings. But also exhibitions held outside the gallery often take place at locations that stand out, historically, socially, and geographically. Exhibition sites make a distinction between inside and outside by architectural design and/or by a particular location they have in a given environment. Next to a spatial frame the exhibition establishes a temporal frame as well; the exhibition has a limited duration, but perhaps more significant is the time spent visiting an exhibition and the way this time differs from other activities. When a spatial distinction is not made, which is rare, an art exhibition still accomplishes a distinction with the everyday by changing the experience of time. The art exhibition temporarily changes a place into someplace else, prompting different ways of walking, seeing, conversing and thinking. I will elaborate below on the spatiotemporal separation of the art exhibition, because it ties together the other three characteristics; the formation of a public, the assembly of several artworks, and the creation of a relation between the works is made possible by some sort of encapsulation, a space and time where people and things are bound together.

The relative separation from the outside world is not only a characteristic of the art exhibition, but of ritual practices in general. Ritual creates both a place and time that is extra-ordinary. “A ritual provides a frame”, Mary Douglas writes, “The marked off time or place alerts a special kind of expectancy, just as the oft-repeated ‘Once upon a time’ creates a mood receptive to fantastic tales” (Douglas 1966, 63). Although rituals might take place in ordinary, every-day places, they always create a different temporality, what Roy Rappaport calls a “time out of time” (1999, 216).<sup>56</sup> This does not mean that the ritual is a-temporal, but it does mean that the

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<sup>56</sup> Rappaport’s emphasis on ritual’s temporality contrasts with Eliade’s emphasis on spatial difference. In *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1957) Eliade argues that the sacred is experienced most fundamentally in spatial terms and emphasizes the importance of the creation of a center, “the earth’s navel”, or “axis mundi”, in religious experience (Eliade 1957, 36-47) Rappaport acknowledges Eliade’s



rhythms of time work differently. Ritual creates, as Victor Turner stated, a “moment in and out of time” (Turner 1969, 96). Whether a ritual take minutes, hours, months, or years, the intervals of ritual are long enough to experience being in them; time does not pass as in mundane time, and the states of both individual and social consciousness are altered (Rappaport 1999, 217). To participate in a ritual therefore involves a passage, a transition from one state to another. This passage has been described as a binary movement between ritual time and ordinary time, or between ‘the sacred’ and ‘the profane’. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) Émile Durkheim presented the sacred and profane as mutually exclusive and universal categories, albeit with different outcomes across cultures. In addition to elaborating on a universal dichotomy between the sacred and the profane,<sup>57</sup> anthropology started to zoom in on the intricate dynamics of ritual processes, and identified a three-part ritual structure, rather than a binary movement between sacred and profane.

In *The Rites of Passage* (1908) Arnold van Gennep explored the dynamics of rites of passage, such as initiation, marriage and funeral rites, and distinguished three distinctive ritual moments of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation. In this chapter I will discuss all three moments, yet for now I will focus on the transition phase. This phase of transition is also referred to as liminal. The concept ‘liminal’ derives from the Latin *limen*, threshold, and was made into a key term for ritual studies by Victor Turner, who elaborated on Van Gennep’s work and enriched it with his own fieldwork material. According to Turner almost all rituals are, in a way, rites of passage; rituals that celebrate birth, initiation, marriage, death, seasonal changes all involve some kind of passage and they all include a liminal phase involving transitional qualities that are “betwixt and between”, preceded by an initial phase of “separation” and followed by a third phase of “reaggregation” or “reincorporation” (Turner 1967, 94-96). The liminal is, as Turner writes, a state that is “neither here nor there” (Turner 1969, 95), an ambiguous condition that might be considered, as Mary Douglas has pointed out, as dangerous or polluting (Douglas 1966). During the liminal phase the status of the participant (the novice), undergoing the rite of passage, is ambiguous; the normal rules of society are absent or reversed, so that, for example, men act as women and elders as youth. The novice of an initiation ritual is, as Turner has shown in various works (1967; 1969; 1982) in a state of ‘no-longer and not-yet’ with respect to the social categories of society’s everyday classifications; he or she is in a state of ‘neither-nor’ rather than mundane society’s ‘either-or’ (Rappaport 1999, 219).

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thesis on the ritual re-founding of the world, the eternal return, but argues that Eliade has overemphasized the importance of space and the center in the creation of the sacred (Rappaport 1999, 209-210).

<sup>57</sup> See for example Hubert, H. and Mauss, M. *Sacrifice: its nature and function* (1898) and Mircea Eliade *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1957).

Can *contemporary* art be analyzed in a similar way? The word 'liminal' is frequently and often imprecisely used in writings about *contemporary* art. It is a word used in press releases and art reviews, without reference to the anthropological meaning of the term. The idea of liminality has also been associated with art museums. In *Civilizing Rituals* (1995), a thorough account on ritual aspects of museums, Carol Duncan shows that people wrote about the liminality of the museum, albeit using different words. Louvre curator Germain Bazin described the art museum in *The Museum Age* (1967, 7) as "a temple where Time seems suspended", and in *The Ideal Museum* (1954, 29) Kenneth Clark wrote: "For a moment there is a clearing in the jungle: we pass on refreshed, with our capacity for life increased and with some memory of the sky (Duncan 1995, 11-13). Duncan describes the museum as a space where "individuals can step back from the practical concerns and social relations of everyday life and look at themselves and their world – or at some aspect of it - with different thoughts and feelings" (Ibid. 11). This resonates strongly with Turner's notion of liminality, yet, as Duncan argues, Turner's analysis of the term developed out of non-western ethnographic data and cannot be neatly superimposed onto Western ideas of art experience (Ibid.).

Turner himself argued that despite strong affinities between the experiences induced in rites of passage and those induced by theatres, cinemas, galleries or museums, the latter cultural sites cannot be regarded as liminal; they only resemble rituals traditionally described by anthropologists, but do not fall under the ritual structure of rites of passage (Turner 1982, 20-60). Turner introduced the term "liminoid" (1982) to cope with the difference between art experiences and rites of passage; a term that is vague, as it indicates only what it is not, yet resembles. Turner did not look into the practices that precede and follow the art exhibition, but looked only at one stage of the ritual process – the moment when the work of art is shown to a public - and thereby overlooked the larger ritual structure, in contrast to his comprehensive analysis of ritual process in Zambia among the Ndembu (see 2.6). As I have argued in the introduction, by focusing only on one site, whether it is the art exhibition, the artwork, the studio, the market, or the museum, the phenomenon of *contemporary* art cannot be anthropologically understood. The distinction between liminal and liminoid was taken up and developed by Richard Schechner in his theoretical and experimental search for the similarities and differences between various forms of theatre and ritual practice. Schechner makes a distinction between transformations (transitions by Van Gennep and Turner) and transportations; liminal rituals such as initiation rituals are transformative, permanently changing who people are, whereas liminoid rituals, such as modern theatre, are transportations that effect only a temporary change. In a transportation, Schechner writes, "one enters into the

experience, is ‘moved’ or ‘touched’ (apt metaphors), and is then dropped off about where she or he entered” (Schechner 2013, 72).<sup>58</sup>

I am indebted to Duncan’s analysis of museums as ritual sites, Turner’s insights of the ‘limonoid’ character of *modern* cultural practices, and Schechner’s distinction between transformations and transportations, yet I will take a different position; instead of arguing that *contemporary* art is ‘almost but not quite’ like ritual, I will argue that the entire ritual process of *contemporary* art follows the same general pattern as the rites of passage described by Van Gennep and Turner. This is a position that requires a change of perspective. One of the difficulties of seeing *contemporary* art as a rite of passage is in determining what kind of passage is made. When focusing on the experience of the art visitor we can indeed describe this experience as a temporary transportation and not as the transformative liminal experience of the novice stepping into adulthood. Yet, when we focus on the passage of artworks instead of individuals, a similar ritual structure of separation, transition, and reintegration seems to emerge. Like Gawan canoes *contemporary* artworks make a passage, they do not just move from one place to another, but undergo a change, a spatiotemporal transformation. This transformation requires a moment and place in which the object is neither here nor there, a liminal stage that opens up the possibility for change. For Gawan canoes the beach marks the preparative ground for transformation, where the canoe is made *light* for its journey outwards and its subsequent potential transformation into a *kula* valuable (see 1.6). For artworks it is foremost the studio and the exhibition site, as I will argue below, where this transformation is accomplished, where a separation with the everyday is made and where both the artwork and artist take on a ‘in-between’ character.

But can concepts such as liminality and transition/transformation be applied to objects, people, and places alike?<sup>59</sup> A distinction has to be made between the ‘liminal’ (or ‘liminoid’) experience

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<sup>58</sup> Schechner is careful not to align this distinction too neatly with the divide between theatre and ritual, and instead uses the distinction as an analytical tool to better understand a wide variety of performances (Schechner and Turner 1985, 117-150). Schechner’s writings and performance experiments, in various parts of the world, are evocative and full of rich insights and I will refer to his work at various instances, especially in chapter 5. But I do not always agree with Schechner’s theoretical analysis of ritual, especially when he divides ritual into three different branches of social ritual, religious ritual, and aesthetic ritual (Schechner 1993, 229); all rituals are social, all are aesthetic, and they all create an order that transcends the here and now, a faculty of ritual I will elaborate on below. There are surely large differences between various kinds of rituals, but I can’t see how they can be divided into three groups.

<sup>59</sup> Although the human is central as subject who makes a passage in initiation rituals there are other rituals of passage in which things or animals take the position of humans. Especially in rituals that are commonly placed under the header ‘rituals of sacrifice’, where an animal or other living entity stands in for the human in its passage. An identification is made between the one who sacrifices and the victim, so that the victim becomes a substitute for the sacrificer. Yet the categorization of different rituals such as initiation rituals and rituals of sacrifice is problematic; they are, as Maurice Bloch argues, academically imposed labels rather than categories that hold ground when considering the ethnographic materials (Bloch 1992). It is important to understand in each specific case what the relation is between humans and

of a visitor, the 'liminal' state of making art, the artist as a 'liminal' figure, on the margins of society, the artwork as an ambiguous 'liminal' object, or the art site as a 'liminal' space. Even if we accept Gell's argument that artworks are extensions or substitutes of artists and conclude that it is actually the artists who make a passage, we still need to determine why artworks are used as 'vehicles' and what kind of transformation or passage is accomplished. It is not enough to describe art sites, objects, or artists as liminal, as in-between; it has to be followed up and preceded by an analysis of the practices by which sites, works, and artists become liminal and come out of it; it requires a scrutiny of all three stages of separation, transition and reincorporation.

Below I will begin with the separation and liminal character of the *contemporary* art exhibition by focusing on the ritual use of language. The production of critical and historical discourse about the work of art is not merely a commentary on the work of art but forms part of the conditions of its production. As Bourdieu writes: "Every critical affirmation contains, on the one hand, a recognition of the value of the work which occasions it, which is thus designated as a worthy object of legitimate discourse (...) and on the other hand an affirmation of its own legitimacy" (Bourdieu 1993, 36). Writing about an artwork one does not only affirm (or reject) the value of a that particular work, but also affirms there is something called art worthy writing about. There are various other ways to understand the exhibition; one can look at the design of the exhibition place, at the arrangement of different artworks, at the narrative structure of the exhibition, or at the relation between the exhibition space and the wider environment. Another way could be to focus on the public; who are the ritual participants, how do they behave, and what is the relation between the visitors and the organizers? Yet another mostly taken for granted and therefore ignored practice is the transformation of objects into images by means of photography; what do these photos depict, in what way do they represent the artworks, and what happens with these photos? And, one could look more closely at the artworks themselves, an approach that the sociology of art has largely overlooked, as Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Becker and Faulkner argue and rectify in *Art From Start to Finish* (2006). An ethnographic description of an exhibition would ideally look at all these aspects and throughout the thesis I will discuss various perspectives, but here, for lack of space, I will focus on the ritual use of language in art exhibitions.

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their surrounding world, before creating a general theory of 'substitution'. See for example Bloch's comparison between Dinka and Buid sacrifice (Bloch 1992, 24-45).

## 2.2 *Ritual words*

A *contemporary* art exhibition usually comes with a press release, information hand-outs, text panels at the entrance, labels, artist statements, exhibition catalogues, and posters, written or otherwise selected by the curator and the artist and distributed by the exhibition organizers. Next to the written words, during the opening there are spoken words, by for example, one of the artists, by the curator, or the gallery owner. What to these written and spoken words do?<sup>60</sup> Exhibition texts might seem superfluous, merely additions for those who want to learn more about a particular artist, artwork, or art in general; sometimes only glanced at or fully ignored, especially by the more seasoned ritual participants. Such ‘secondary’ exhibition language is treated as something that accompanies artworks without affecting them. But words are an essential part of the *contemporary* art ritual. As Edmund Leach said about ritual: “... it is not the case that words are one thing and the rite another. The uttering of words itself is a ritual” (1966, 407).

Ian Geraghty refers to the assortment of exhibition texts as the “circumtextual frame” (Geraghty 2008). Whereas many art frames, such as the frame of the painting, or the architectural frame of the gallery, have been criticized, altered, or abandoned, the exhibition texts remained, and stepped in, as an interpretative frame, Geraghty argues. These texts can be considered frames, but they are “rambling, amorphous, and evolving” in nature and, different from static frames; the circumtextual frame “actively hunts out its audience via databases, mail-outs and other distributive networks” (Ibi. 124). Furthermore, these texts, many of them circulating online, are not controlled by one party and Geraghty points out the subtle struggles for control of the texts between artists, curators and gallery owners (Ibid.).

Notwithstanding this fluidity, *contemporary* art texts convey a uniformity of style. Alix Rule and David Levine have coined the term *International Art English* (IAE) for a specific type of language that is used when writing about *contemporary* art. Rule and Levine have analysed IAE by focusing on E-Flux, a *contemporary* art magazine that they call “the crucible of IAE”.<sup>61</sup> Although this type of language can be found across the field of *contemporary* art, it is mostly used just before, during and right after the *contemporary* art exhibition, and it is especially found in press releases

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<sup>60</sup> In the sections below I will talk about other writings as well, such as art criticism, but here I will focus on the words present at the art exhibition.

<sup>61</sup> Rule and Levine consider e-flux as the art world’s flagship digital institution and, when it comes to communication about contemporary art, Rule and Levine considers e-flux as its most powerful instrument and metonym. By using Sketch Engine, “a concordance generator developed by Lexical Computing”, entering every e-flux announcement published since 1999, they have examined the stylistic tendencies of IAE, including concordances, syntactical behaviour, and word usage over time. Source: [https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international\\_art\\_english](https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international_art_english).

distributed online. “This language has everything to do with English, but is emphatically not English”, Alix and Levine state. “It is largely an export of the Anglophone world and can thank the global dominance of English for its current reach. But what really matters (...) is the pointed distance from English that it has always cultivated (...). How did we end up writing in way that sounds like inexpertly translated French?”<sup>62</sup> Part of the answer Rule and Levine give is that it comes from a translation of French and, to a lesser extent, German. Rule and Levine trace IAE’s origin to the academic art journal *October*, which started to translate and introduce French poststructuralist texts of authors like Barthes, Baudrillard and Derrida to an English-speaking audience.<sup>63</sup> These translated texts did not only have an enormous impact on the interpretation and evaluation of art but also changed the language of art writing itself, with its “particular lexical tics” in which visual becomes visuality, and global becomes globality.<sup>64</sup> Rule and Levine do not see the language of *October* itself as IAE, but *October’s* deliberate and unintentional choices of translation were mimicked without providing the academic rigour of *October*.

IAE has now become commonplace in art magazines, artists’ statements, exhibition guides, grant proposals, and wall texts and is not limited to highbrow art magazines such as E-flux. And, due to its flexible grammatical style, a proper knowledge of English may not be necessary any longer when writing about *contemporary* art, Rule and Levine argue.<sup>65</sup> But apart from tracing its origin and distribution and pointing out its quirks, Rule and Levine criticize IAE for its hierarchical underpinnings:

Such language asked more than to be understood, it demanded to be recognized. Based on so many idiosyncrasies of translation, the language that art writing developed during the October era was alienating in large part because it was legitimately alien. It alienated the English reader as such, but it distanced you less the more of it you could find familiar. Those who could recognize the standard feints were literate. Those comfortable with the more esoteric contortions likely had prolonged contact with French in translation or, at least, theory that could pass for having been translated. So art writing distinguished readers. And it allowed some writers to sound more authoritative than others.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Source: [https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international\\_art\\_english](https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international_art_english).

<sup>63</sup> *October* is a peer-reviewed journal for art critique founded in 1976 by Rosalind Krauss and Anette Michelson in New York.

<sup>64</sup> Many of IAE’s “particular lexical tics”, Rule and Levine argue, derive from French, such as the suffixes -ion, -ity, -ality, and -ization; IAE transforms adjectives into nouns. And the use of definite and articles such as ‘the political, ‘the space of absence,’ ‘the void’, derive from a particular translation of French. But French is not the only source of IAE’s peculiar use of language. Rule and Levine also point out the importance of the Frankfurt School on the *October* generation that can be seen words like production, negation, totality, and dialectics.

<sup>65</sup> This might result, as Rule and Levine carefully predict, in an implosion of IAE, which subsequently might lead to a return to proper highbrow English by the art magazines that once distinguished themselves with IAE.

<sup>66</sup> Source: [https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international\\_art\\_english](https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international_art_english).

Rule and Levine's criticism on IAE's impenetrable jargon as a veiled arbiter of class distinction resonates with the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In *Distinction, A Social Critique of Judgment and Taste* (1986) Bourdieu analysed the correspondence between cultural consumption, such as visiting museums and theatres, and class differences in France, and coined the concept "cultural capital" to address these differences. Cultural capital does not simply involve factual knowledge of a particular cultural field, but concerns the habituated knowledge of how to behave, often inculcated from an early age; a form of know-how and dispositions Bourdieu has termed *habitus* (see 1.6). Anybody with a love of art is welcome to visit an art exhibition. Yet, as Bourdieu has argued, most prominently in *Distinction* (1986) and in *The Love of Art* with Alan Darbel (1991), the educated middle class is much more likely to belong to such publics. Art galleries are usually open to the public without entrance fee, and therefore do not practically ward off the lower income classes, but people without the right amount of cultural capital largely stay away from such places. As Bourdieu writes: "Museums could bear the inscription: Entry for art lovers only. But there clearly is no need for such a sign, it all goes without saying" (1993, 258). From childhood the educated middle class is acquainted with art practices resulting in a competence and confidence to participate in the consumption of art. By ignoring and obscuring the ways this habituated behaviour depends on one's social background, class divisions are maintained.

Bourdieu's method consists of quantitative analyses tracing the correspondence between cultural consumption and social class and does not provide a detailed ethnographic analysis of habituated behaviour of the art exhibition. Broadly speaking, the habituated knowledge of how to behave at an art exhibition revolves around unwritten rules such as walking around slowly, perhaps with the hands folded on the back, and usually not in the pockets. Visitors move back and forth when in front of an artwork, but not too long as to not disturb other visitors. Visitors are quiet and when in company only whisper, they do not eat and drink, and, perhaps most important of all, they do not come too close to the objects on display. These rules are sometimes written down as museum regulations on signs at the entrance of a gallery, but usually they are part of the bodily habituated knowledge of the ritual participants.

Part of this *habitus* of the art exhibition concerns the familiarity with art texts, which is not the same as the comprehension of art texts. As Roger Keesing has pointed out, it is only necessary for a minority to understand the deeper layers of a ritual for it to work (Keesing 2012). The cultural competence of ritual participants requires solely that one is able to participate in the right way: "If you use the right object in the right way, perform the prescribed acts in the right sequence, laugh, weep, or run away when you are supposed to, then you are a culturally competent ritual participant" (Keesing 2012, 422). There is not a test of understanding. This

applies for art exhibitions as much as it does for Kwaio ritual that Keesing studied on Malaita, Solomon Islands. IAE's peculiar use of syntax and words is not a unique phenomenon and can be compared with many other rituals that use a language that is in some way different from ordinary speech; Latin liturgy, verbal spells from Melanesia, and IAE, although deriving from entirely different ritual settings, have in common that they present a language composed in a style distinct from ordinary language.

In *Coral gardens and their magic, vol. 2* Bronisław Malinowski elaborated on the “coefficient of weirdness” of magical speech and opposed it to the “coefficient of intelligibility” of ordinary speech (Malinowski 1965b, 218-231). As Stanley Tambiah writes in *The Magical Power of Words* (1968), ritual language often consists of archaic language and uses esoteric words that are barely comprehensible or seem to have no meaning (Tambiah 1968, 182; see also Vansina 1965). By means of prosodic rhythms, meaningless words, archaic grammatical forms, condensed structures, and mythological and metaphoric references, ritual speech sets itself apart from an instrumental language that intends to be comprehensible. Tambiah focused on the way ritual speech, a term he prefers to Malinowski's “magical speech”, foremost creates a participatory environment. Instead of retaining a belief in some kind of mystical power to change the world through ‘magic’, Malinowski and Tambiah were interested in the effect ritual speech can have on the participants of the ritual. One could object that Gawans, for example, ‘believe’ in their verbal spells to make their canoes ‘light’ (see 1.6), and that terms such as ‘verbal magic’ do not apply to the art exhibition. But I agree with Tambiah, who doesn't see any essential difference between so-called ‘modern’ or ‘traditional’ societies in their use of ritual language. As Tambiah writes elsewhere, “(...) how is it that many of us ‘moderns’ are prepared to accept Madison Avenue advertising labeled as ‘selling costs’ as an essential component of rational economics and of the rational theory of the firm, and not grant a similar compliment to Trobriand *kula* magic?” (Tambiah 1990, 80).

In accordance with Tambiah's take on ritual speech, the peculiar language used in *contemporary* art exhibitions creates a participatory environment that some recognize and others feel estranged from. Yet the use of imprecise ambiguous language involves more than that, as Rule and Levine later observe as well.<sup>67</sup> *Contemporary* artworks should mean something, but this meaning, as I have already pointed out above and will elaborate on below (1.4 and 2.6), should not be too clear-cut. The exhibition texts seem to explain what the artwork is about, yet at the same time they confuse the artwork's meaning. Instead of elucidating the artworks with ‘an explanation’, the texts often leave the artworks open for interpretation, for multiple readings.

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<sup>67</sup> In a later interview Rule points out that art writing has to deal with art's “contradictions, ambiguities, unstable and multiple meanings.” Source: The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jan/27/users-guide-international-art-english>.



Such ritual language can be seen as a way to cope with the epistemological gap between material culture and language, with the inability of language to fully capture art. I will elaborate below on the diverging signifying properties of physical objects versus language (see 2.3), but for now I merely want to state that there is a difference between the meaningfulness of an artwork and the described meaning of an artwork, what it is about. For an artwork to be meaningful, it should be full of meaning, overflow with meaning, as I will show in more detail below. When an artwork is however pinpointed to a specific meaning, when the work signifies something particular, it risks losing this abundance of meaning. The ritual texts of art exhibitions uphold and foster this distinction between meaningfulness and meaning. The use of vague, abstract, ambiguous or almost esoteric language is used to maintain a tension between, on the one hand, a declaration of meaningfulness and, on the other hand, an aversion for straightforward explicit meaning.

Aside from fostering a particular ritual community, and negotiating the tension between meaningfulness and meaning, there is a third aspect of ritual language. As Rappaport has written, ritual words are not simply a poor substitute for ritual acts and objects. The weirdness of art texts is not only a way to cope with the epistemological gap between the physical and the verbal. The physical and the verbal indeed signify in different ways, but this difference is used within ritual; the relationship between them within a ritual context is complementary (Rappaport 1999, 152). This becomes apparent in the way IAE texts add an abstract idea of foreignness to exhibited works of art. Especially in those places where English is not the first language, IAE is immediately associated with an outside world.<sup>68</sup> But IAE is not specifically addressed to an English, North American or 'Western' public, but rather caters to a broad international art public, consisting of people who are mobile, accustomed to international or at least inter-city travel, and who are often bi- or tri-lingual. Yet IAE is more than an international art language; by using a range of spatial terms IAE connects the artworks towards a more abstract 'outside'. With spatial terms such as "aporia", "transversal", "space", "global", "local", "parallelism", "void", often combined with prefixes such as "para-", "proto-", "post-", "trans-", and "hyper-" IAE creates an otherworldly language that suggests an undefined future elsewhere.<sup>69</sup> What is more, next to being both 'international' and 'otherworldly', exhibition

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<sup>68</sup> The various ways ideas of 'local', 'global' and 'foreignness' are expressed depends on particular social contexts. Kolkata, as I will elaborate on in the following chapters, has a particular relation with English, it's history expresses particular imaginations of the village and the city, and Kolkata has a rich history of cultural expressions that have shaped the idea of the home and the world that are particular to Kolkata and cannot be simply translated with more general divisions of tradition and modernity or the local and the global. The circulation of IAE has different effects in different places and should be analyzed in conjunction with other forms of art language that deviate from IAE.

<sup>69</sup> Especially 'space' is an important word in IAE and can refer too much more than merely geographical space. Spatial and nonspatial space are interchangeable in IAE, Rule and Levine point out. Source: <https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/>

often highlight the ‘local origin’ of the artist as well. Yet, such references to a specific place are often accompanied by an implied move away from this local origin.

Combining these spatial dimensions exhibition texts present a three-point map consisting of (1) a local origin, (2) an international art scene, and (3) an undefined future elsewhere. This three-point map has a spatial direction; it sets out an itinerary from the place where the artwork is made to a variety of ‘international’ cosmopolitan sites in various cities, mainly across the ‘developed’ part of the world. But the map is temporal as well, in two ways. First, it places an artwork within the temporal category of the *contemporary*, thereby putting the artwork on the cutting edge of progressive time (see 1.1). By associating the artwork with places that are ‘more *contemporary*’, the artworks become more *contemporary*. And second, during the (potential) spatial movement across important sites of the artworld, such as fairs, biennials, prominent galleries, and museums, an artwork accumulates value, has a bigger chance of being preserved, and therefore undergoes a temporal transformation that places it both within historical time, as well as outside of time, in a perpetuating eternal time – a temporal dynamic I will elaborate on below. The constructed map thus opens up possible transformations that are simultaneously spatial and temporal.<sup>70</sup> By placing physical and still place-bound works of art within a spatiotemporal elsewhere, both international and abstract, beyond the here and now, exhibition texts set the scene for the potential spatiotemporal transformation of the artworks. Quoting Wittgenstein Tambiah argues that “an intention is embedded in its situation, in human customs and institutions (1953: 108, in Tambiah 1968, 200). Elaborating on Malinowski’s ethnography on the *kula* ring, Tambiah points out that the use of ritual speech gives shape to intentions, it can be “a blue-print and a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Ibid. 200). The ‘ritual magic’ of exhibition texts expresses the intentions of the people involved in *contemporary* art, those who want to get the works ‘out there’; it constitutes a spatiotemporal map, a blue-print, for artworks to move. Similar to the Gawan verbal spells that give speed and motion to their canoes (see 1.6), press releases, text-boards, catalogue essays and the like, place artworks in a border zone, on a threshold, ready to travel.

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<sup>70</sup> These spatial and temporal dimensions can be distinguished theoretically, but are in reality difficult to separate. As Munn writes in *The Cultural Anthropology of Time: a Critical Essay* (1992): “In a lived world, spatial and temporal dimensions cannot be disentangled, and the two commingle in various ways” (Munn 1992, 94) (see 1.6).

### 2.3 *The separation from the here and now*

Exhibition texts can highlight the ambiguity of an artwork, as I have argued above, yet a wide range of art texts, such as academic art historical publications, auction catalogues, or critical reviews, do not just highlight an artwork's ambiguity, but interpret, judge, analyze, compare, and classify. Artworks that at first lack clear meaning, that are ambiguous, are talked and written about and thereby placed within a variety of interpretative contexts. These contexts might highlight the personal biography of an artist, point out an artwork's a social and political relevance, emphasize a national or regional identity, compare and contrast the artwork to other works of art, or express a range of ideas changing works of art into philosophical, scientific, spiritual, or technological metaphors. As I have written in *the persistence of meaning* (1.3), even 'pure' formal descriptions of a work enter into the sphere of meaning (Panofsky 2012 (1932), 469). Described, judged, analyzed, compared and classified into a set of comparable categories, artworks become part of certain styles, schools, part of a national history, or part of a general narrative of civilizational progress.

The verbal interpretation of artworks is however only one aspect of a wider process by which works of art are placed within interpretative contexts. Works are physically contextualized as well; they are selected, framed, physically collected and preserved. In this section I will turn to the period after the first exhibition. Although this stage consists of various practices, such as interpretation, classification, collection and preservation, spread out over a variety of institutions, such as museums, journalistic art criticism, or art history departments, I will take them together as the stage where artworks are embedded within an interpretative order. Instead of the verbal practices that I chose to focus on for the *contemporary* art exhibition, I will focus on the collection and preservation of artworks. Doing so I will make a jump from an artwork's first exhibition to its incorporation in a museum, thereby disregarding an important in-between phase as well as various uncertainties of the artwork's wished-for trajectory. After the first exhibition, artworks are often re-exhibited in various temporary exhibitions, they might be sold at art fairs, become part of private collections, or simply await their turn in the studio of the artist - that is, they can have long, intricate and sometimes unpredictable biographies before they are selected by a museum to become part of their permanent collection. And, many artworks do not end up in a permanent collection at all. Yet, while many artworks are not collected, archived, and preserved, the artwork's potential incorporation into a permanent collection still forms the culmination of an artwork's spatiotemporal transformation, and as potential it gives direction to the process of *contemporary* art and shapes the ambitions of its participants.

Is such an emphasis collection and preservation not something of the *modern* past? Many *contemporary* artists say they do not care for the preservation of their work and deliberately thwart conservational efforts by giving their work a fleeting quality. By using, for example, ephemeral organic materials in their works, or by incorporating technology in their works, such as video projectors, that will become obsolete in some years, *contemporary* artists create works of art that are difficult to collect and preserve (Saaze 2013, 63-72). Many *contemporary* artists describe their works as processes rather than objects, they have presented themselves as collaborators and producers of art “situations” that contrast with the singular, finite, portable and commodifiable objects of art (Bishop 2012, 2). Art movements throughout the twentieth century such as action painting, dada, fluxus, minimalism, performance and conceptual art emphasized art as a process and attempted to dethrone the autonomous and object-oriented character of art (Saaze 2013, 17). *Contemporary* art forms, indicated by terms such as installation art, relational art, community art, or site-specific art, can be seen as an elaboration of this complicated history and continue to counter, in various ways, the idea of the singular work of art.

However, despite the various attempts that frustrate collection and preservation efforts, works that at one moment refused to stand still, defied any attempt to be held, nevertheless crystallize into singular artworks detached from their environment, works that can be collected, or at least archived, and preserved for posterity (See Saaze 2013). To turn an artwork from a process into an object, to slow it down as it were, work has to be done. Preservation is surely an important aspect but before and alongside physically preserving a work, a range of practices are at play that frame artworks as singular objects and highlight singular authorship. I have mentioned art texts, but one can look at a wide variety of infrastructural processes, such as legal requirements and transport practicalities for shipping artworks, which turn unstable artworks into collectibles. And then there are some everyday taken for granted practices; simply by circulating the name of the artist and the title of the artwork, both the artist and the artwork become *circumscribed* categories - a subject who has acted and an object that has been created. Artworks presented as processes become single art objects in the way we talk about them and frame them. Another of these everyday practices that are easily overlooked is the making of photographs of artworks. As I will show in more detail in chapter 4, photos can frame relatively fragmented, spread out, and process-based artworks into singular works of art. Photos capture a range of physical materials and practices into a picture, they lift the artworks up and unground them from their surroundings. As photos the artworks can now circulate beyond their place of installation and be made visible to those who have not seen the exhibition. Of course, these photos are not the ‘real thing’, they are ‘mere’ representations. But as representations, they do have an effect on

the way we see the artwork; they help to create a frame that isolates a work of art from its environment, separates it from the here and now so that it can become part of something else.

As with Gawan canoes, there is not one defining moment in which this separation of the work of art from the here and now occurs, there is not one threshold to cross. An important moment is the move from the site of making, such as the studio, to one or more exhibition sites, a movement that many artworks will make.<sup>71</sup> Another crucial moment is when an artwork becomes part of a permanent collection, a movement made by a smaller group of works, the lucky ones. Although private collections can have a long life spanning many generations, potentially longer than museums, it is the art museum that presents itself as the everlasting repository for art.<sup>72</sup> As Boris Groys writes, when an object is brought into a museum, the object's life expectancy changes and it is set apart from a large part of material culture that has a much shorter lifespan (Groys 2008). Although 'to curate' seemingly entails a passive process, it is an active process instigating change. To understand preservation as an active practice it helps to adjust the senses to those practices that surround the seemingly unchanged object. A bodily and materially sensitivity to the performance of preservation leads the eyes from the object at display to for example the glass box containing the object, which not only protects the object, but frames the object; the glass case not only protects, but also expresses the need for protection, thereby suggesting that the object has value. Preserving objects has never been simply a technical practice of warding an object from decay, Groys argues. Different uses of light, whether it is a white and bright art gallery or dimly lighted ethnographic museum, are more than technical preservation choices and are intimately connected to the way we see these objects.<sup>73</sup> Whether it is the use of light, the curator's white glove, or the glass display box, preservation and presentation are intimately linked. Instead of neutral spaces that merely protect the work on display, museums accomplish what Groys calls "a non-perceptible change" in the artwork (Groys 2008, 35). When the curator changes the life expectancy of an object by situating it in a protected space and thereby dislodging it from ordinary, finite reality, he or she changes the object without, in a way, changing anything as the object still looks the same (Ibid. 36).

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<sup>71</sup> The transformation from processes to artwork already starts when an artist decides the work is finished. As Becker, Kirschenblatt-Gimblett and Faulkner point out, even if the moment when an artwork is finished is arbitrary, even if an artwork constantly changes, there is usually an agreement by art players that there is a moment when a work is finished and that subsequent changes are not crucial, "[for art players] a changed painting is still the "same painting" and they can buy it, sell it, show it, pass it on – as long as everyone agrees that it *is* the same" (Becker et al. 2006, 9).

<sup>72</sup> There is however not always a clear boundary between a private collection and a museum; private collections can turn into museums and museums usually have artworks on loan from private collectors.

<sup>73</sup> In *An Anthropology of Luminosity: The Agency of Light*, Bille and Sørensen (2007) argue for more attention to light as a mediating factor that forms social relations. See also Ingold (2000, 265). In chapter 4.7 I elaborate on the use of light in relation to cultural representation in ethnographic museums.

The museum does not just preserve singular works of art from decay, but accomplishes a spatiotemporal transformation by separating objects spatially from everyday life, separating them temporally from the everyday lifespans of the physical world, and presenting them together as a collected whole. The museum, Kirschenblatt-Gimblett writes, “takes the world apart at its joints, collects the pieces, and holds them in suspension. Identified, classified, and arranged, objects withdrawn from the world and released into the museum are held in a space of infinite recombination. A refuge for things and people (...) the museum puts people and things into a relationship quite unlike anything encountered in the world outside” (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 2004a, 1). Similar to art exhibitions, museums make a separation between inside and outside; there are usually not many windows, light is often artificial or comes from a semi-closed ceiling construction that does not allow the visitor to look outside. As Brian O’Doherty writes:

A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically, or carpeted so you pad soundlessly, resting the feet while the eyes have at the wall [sic]. The art is free, as the saying used to go, ‘to take on its own life.’ (...) In this context a standing ashtray becomes almost a sacred object, just like the firehose in a modern museum looks not like a firehose but an esthetic conundrum. (O’Doherty 1999 [1976], 15)

These spatial separations facilitate the creation of a different temporal order. When taking into account the entire range of museums from natural history museums to the *contemporary* art museum, the museum’s orders can vary considerably. Yet, despite such diversity museums typically share the presentation of a linear temporal order. Tony Bennett calls this the narrative machinery of the museum. The museum, Bennett writes, brings within the same space a number of different times together and arranges them in the form of a path that can be walked in the course of an afternoon (Bennett 1995, 186). The various types of museums, such as the natural history museum, the archeology museum, the museum of ethnology, the museum of art, the *modern* art museum, and recently, the museum of *contemporary* art, express a linear trajectory that can be aligned with the advent of evolutionary thought and the ideology of progress; the “backtelling structure”, in which museums trace back the unfolding of time from the formation of the earth to the evolution of man and the advent of modern civilization. Each museum type is like a chapter within a longer story, Bennett writes, pressing towards an end point where a new chapter can commence (Ibid. 181).<sup>74</sup> More than a history lesson, the

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<sup>74</sup> The installment of a linear sequence in collections in the 19<sup>th</sup> century overtook earlier classifications such as the encyclopedic collections of the 18<sup>th</sup> century or the more haphazard organization of cabinets of curiosities. Museums started to specialize, became aligned with the advent of scientific disciplines, and

museum's evolutionary architectural narratives invite what Bennett calls a "mind-body technology", an environment that aims to educate and discipline the modern citizen to behave 'civil', to become a citizen in a public place, and places the modern individual physically into a narrative of progress inviting him to take part in civilization's advance (Ibid. 189).

Rituals, as already described above, take place in a different time. Ritual time, often referred to as "time out of time", "sacred time", or "extra-ordinary time", is of a different order than the intervals of "ordinary" or "periodic" time (Rappaport 1999, 216). Rituals do not abolish time however, but establish a different temporal order. The museum's sequential order, should not be seen as merely a representation of the notion of linear or progressive time; they are an architectural actualization of it, leading the visitor from one room to the other. Although visitors are usually allowed to wander about, the sequence of rooms and floors together with the textual aides and audio tours, direct the visitor to follow a narrative sequence of progressive time. Carol Duncan describes the way such linear narratives unfold in modern art museums as a succession of formally distinct styles; even if the history of *modern* art is fragmented and without any clear consensus about what to include, and despite the criticism on such narratives within the universities, the central narrative of twentieth-century art has been remarkably fixed (Duncan 1995, 102-103).<sup>75</sup>

When works of art become part of a collection they are separated from the here and now; placed out of ordinary time their life-expectancy changes and they are embedded within a spatial order that transcends their place of origin. Although the spatial and temporal aspects can be separated analytically, in practice they align to co-produce both real and imagined narratives that concern, for example, modernity, the nation state, natural history, an ethnic community, a city, or the universe in its entirety.<sup>76</sup> But, instead of looking more closely at what kind of orders are produced by the museum or related institutes, I will focus on the way such orders come about; how do artworks become entangled within narratives that seem to transcend them? And can they escape such narratives?

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focused on particular time periods, leading to a range of museums such as the natural history museum, the archeology museum, the museum of ethnology, the museum of art, the *modern* art museum, and most recently, the museum of *contemporary* art.

<sup>75</sup> The history of *modern* art is told in classrooms and textbooks, but it is actualized in the pathways of museums as well. Duncan describes the way the beginning of *modern* art can be physically found in the MoMA. When Duncan published her book in 1995 the permanent exhibition of *modern* art on the fifth floor opened with Cezanne's *the bather*, which presents an adolescent man mid-step in a watery landscape, and greets the visitor at the threshold of the permanent collection. Before entering the visitor encountered Rodin's sculpture *Saint John the Baptist* "who points to him from just outside the entrance" (Duncan 1995, 104). Recently the permanent display of MoMA has changed and opens on the fifth floor with sculptures by Brancusi. Source: Artnews: October 10, 2019.

<sup>76</sup> See for example: C. Duncan and A. Wallach (1980) *The Universal Survey Museum*. Or A. E. Coombes (1988) *Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural identities*.

## 2.4 Towards a canonical order

In *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999) Roy Rappaport points out an obvious, often unmentioned, but nonetheless crucial aspect of rituals: rituals create an order that might help to maintain some degree of orderliness in society by sustaining a variety of shared assumptions of the world. As no society can create orderly social life by coercion alone, it is important that there is widespread acceptance of what are taken to be the unquestionable assumptions in a society (Rappaport 1999, 309). The order of societies, like the order of anything, has a tendency to degenerate into disorder. It is therefore necessary for a society, Rappaport writes, to actively reassert at least some conventions and protect them from the variations and vagaries of day-to-day behaviour. Rituals are an attempt to keep societal conventions from dissolving “into error, nonsense, ambiguity, vagueness, hypocrisy and meaninglessness”, they do not just remind people of a certain order, they actively create and preserve conventions in defiance of practices that threaten to dissolve them (Ibid. 129-130). But rituals are not just instruments with which ritual specialists, such as priests, shamans, or curators, impose a societal order on the members of a community. As Rappaport argues throughout his work, a societal order is not something that exists outside of ritual to be instrumentalized by ritual, it emerges from the ritual process itself. This is an intricate and partially veiled process - the ritual process is not meant to be fully intelligible for those that participate in it. To make ritual dynamics intelligible, to uncover its layers, therefore requires a bit of digging.

Applying Rappaport insights to museums, we can say that art museums do not just impose a societal order on works of art, but that such orders emerge from the wider process of selecting, collecting, preserving, exhibiting and interpreting works of art. Before unfolding the ritual structure of the museum, I will look (very broadly) at what happens when artworks are selected and collected. The first acquisition of a work of art is often spontaneous, but there comes a moment when the gathered works are viewed by their owner as a collection. When a collection of artworks is formed, as Susan Pearce argues, intentional selection, acquisition and disposal come to the fore (Pearce 1994, 159). The collecting of artworks might continue in a seemingly unorganized way, but by being separated from their previous environment, gathered together in one place, new relationships between the objects are formed. As Michael Jackson writes in *The Work of Art: Rethinking the Elementary Forms of Religious Life* artworks are ‘re-membered’ (Jackson 2016, 80). This act of ‘re-membering’ gives artworks a symbolic aspect; the word symbol derives from ancient Greek *symbolon* from *syn* ‘together’ and *bállō* ‘put’ or ‘throw’. Simply said, when artworks are *thrown together* within a place set aside from the everyday, they become symbols.



But the concept of symbol is slippery and has been used differently by various authors. I will use the definition given by the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Charles Sander Peirce, who made a distinction between indexical, iconic, and symbolic sign processes. Icons work by likeness, they resemble or imitate that what they refer to, such as portraits, diagrams, or onomatopoeia. An index is a sign that has an actual causal connection with and is affected by the signified. Smoke, for example, can be an index of fire, a weathervane an index of wind direction. Icons differ from indices as they are not a product or part of the signified, they merely resemble the signified. The third category of signs comprises symbols. A Peircean symbol is a sign that has an arbitrary and conventional link with what is signified. Symbols are an indirect form of reference disconnected from formal (iconic) or physical (indexical) reference. Symbols work through habit and repetition; through repetition a sign is conventionalized and detaches itself from the signified. Symbolic signs have therefore to be acquired through learning. Although there are many exceptions, such as the indexical ‘this’ or the iconic ‘splash’, human language works largely through symbolic communication; most words are symbols and do not have an iconic or indexical relation with what they refer to – the word ‘chair’ could just as well refer to something else entirely.

As Terrence Deacon points out, symbolic reference is often viewed negatively with respect to the other forms of sign relationships. Because symbols are conventional and arbitrary, symbolic reference might be seen as merely unmediated correspondence, detached from reality. This negative definition of arbitrary mapping gives the misleading impression that symbolic processes are simple (Deacon 2006 34; 2011, 394). However, the very fact that symbols are detached from resemblance (icon) and physical correlation (index) gives it a whole new range of signifying possibilities; that what is symbolically signified does not have to be there but can be spatially and temporally separated from the signifier. Due to their indirectness symbols permit a distance from the here and now. The emergence of human language, which relies for a large part on symbolic communication, has provided humans a way to escape the solid actualities of the here and now to discover other realms such as the possible, the plausible, the desirable, and the valuable (Rappaport 1999, 8-9; see also Austin 1962). Next to the ability to signify something that is not there, the disconnection of symbolic communication allows for the combination of symbols within large semantic networks. Symbols do not only arbitrarily stand in for something else; they refer to each other in a network of symbols. Deacon calls this the symbol-symbol indexicality (Deacon 2011, 401).<sup>77</sup> Such semantic networks operate in

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<sup>77</sup> Deacon, among others, argues that in human language a one-to-one code-like mapping is only characteristic of names: “If a language consisted only of one-to-one correspondence relationships, it would consist entirely of something analogous to proper nouns. This could never produce anything other than lists. So clearly something is missing in this simplified account” (Deacon 2011, 395). A symbolic system is mediated by a system of indexical relation, which “refer holistically to a system of relations in

collections of artworks as well. Like other systems that partly depend on symbolic communication, such as human language, artworks in a collection do not only refer individually to the outside world but refer to each other as well. The signifying process in which artworks refer to each other can at some point overshadow the artworks' iconic and or indexical references. A painting's iconic resemblance to a particular landscape, for example, becomes less prominent for the trained eye than its relative position in an art historical context.

In my childhood I used to look at an abstract painting in the living room, painted by my father's cousin as part of his final degree exhibition at the art academy. After his graduation he asked my father which painting he likes best and gave it as a present. The painting was hung in the living room, before I was born, and became part of my everyday surroundings growing up. I remember looking at it, searching for familiar shapes among its various colors, like the children's game of finding shapes in the clouds. In the painting I saw – and still see – a snowy mountain, a man in an overall, and a white-bearded rodent with a hat. When I see the painting now, which is still in the living room of my parental home, but in a different house, it is difficult to let go of these iconic resemblances that I found years ago. I would not play this shape-searching game any longer with similar paintings, but with this particular painting I cannot 'unsee' them. Yet, next to these resemblances, I can now place the painting within a tradition of Dutch abstract painting and endow it with cultural and historical significance. Seen from this angle, the painting is part of a collection of Dutch, and more broadly, European post-war abstract painting. The painting symbolically stands for an episode of European history, but also for a particular history of painting in Brabant, a province of the Netherlands with a rich history of painting. Since some years something else happens when I visit my parents and look at the painting again. Not only do I see the painting with its familiar shapes, but other images come up of my childhood; I can 'see' my old parental home, the old brown sofa that is gone now, the wooden floor, the garden, the small opening in the hedge, and the streets where I played with friends. The painting has become a memory device of things and people that are no longer there, or out of reach.

The triad of index-icon-symbol, as I have presented it above, is only a first step in describing the potential complexities of sign relationships. The three categories of Peirce, as Floyd Merrell clarifies, have to be considered as tendencies, conditions of becoming rather than static signs (Merrell 2005, 32).<sup>78</sup> Different sign relationships can occur simultaneously or in a sequence of

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the world" (Ibid. 401). What makes the interpretation of symbols difficult, Deacon argues, is not to learn the arbitrary relations between sign vehicle and signified. The difficulty lies in acquiring the interpretative competence to understand the possible vast amount of combinatory relations between symbols (Deacon 2006, 36).

<sup>78</sup> As Deacon points out as well, a collection of signs can generate sign-relationships of a different order. An easy example Deacon gives is the 'smiley face' :- ) created by punctuation marks. It consists of arbitrary

interpretative phases in the same sign-vehicle. This counts for artworks as well; they are sign-vehicles that can communicate as icons, indices and symbols simultaneously and in multiple ways; the painting in the example above is an index of the painter, as Gell would argue (see 1.6), but it has also become an index of my personal childhood memories and seeing it brings me back to another time and place; the painting is not a symbol for my childhood, it is a physical fragment of it. Yet it is also a symbol as it stands (from my perspective) for a wider tradition of Dutch abstract expressionism. And lastly, it remains, perhaps unwillingly, an icon that resembles a variety of forms that I saw in the painting when looking at it for the first time. This small anecdote shows that every work of art, or any object that is part of the human world, is open to intricate pathways of the sign and the signified, pathways that depend on the particular relation between the artwork, its surrounding, and the beholder.

However, this does not mean there is not a general pattern to be found within the ritual process of art. Even if, as sketched above, personal contexts can change the way art is perceived considerably, there is nevertheless a movement towards a symbolic sign relationship. Even though as a child I played with iconic resemblances, now that I have been habituated to the field of *modern* and *contemporary* art, I ‘know’ that this was the ‘wrong’ way of looking at the painting. Or, to be more precise, I have inculcated a way of seeing that belongs to a particular ritual dynamic of *modern* and *contemporary* art. This ritual dynamic describes a movement towards symbolic signification. When an artwork becomes part of a collection, the artwork is partially separated from the here and now of indexical and iconic reference; as a work of art is embedded within a narrative that transcends the physical presence of the work, it becomes ‘more symbolic’. It is important to note, however, that this shift towards symbolic signification is only partial; as the anecdote demonstrates, an artwork does not lose its iconic and indexical forms of signification. Artworks never become pure symbols; they rely on a combination of messages.

This combination of messages is not just a characteristic of artworks, but of ritual in general. Rappaport writes that there are two types of messages in ritual: “the canonical” (also referred to as the formal or symbolic) and the self-referential (also referred to as the physical or substantial) (Rappaport 1999, 54-58). The canonical represents the general, enduring, or eternal aspects of ritual; they are presented as “invariant”, as changeless. Canonical orders are spiritual, conceptual or abstract in nature and need symbols, arbitrary sign vehicles, for their

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conventionalized signs, and can be considered symbols, yet in this combination they become iconic, resembling a face. Instead of calling sign vehicles either symbols, icons, or indices it is better to refer the sign-relations they constitute at a certain point in time and place (Deacon 2011, 398-399). As Deacon writes, Peirce’s semiotic theory was never entirely completed, but it was sufficiently developed to provide distinctions that can help resolve the problem of sign relationships; Peirce’s taxonomy “differentiates many aspects of representational relationships that have since become confused” (Deacon 2011, 396). See also Peirce, C. S. (1992) *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1, (ed.) N. Houser and C. Kloesel.

construction. The self-referential message of ritual, on the other hand, refers to the here and now; it concerns the immediate, the particular, and the vital aspects of ritual and is based on indexical and iconic signification (Ibid.) Instead of either taking a symbolic approach, or concentrating on the self-referential iconic and indexical elements of ritual, Rappaport analyses the ways the canonical and self-referential aspects of ritual are combined, and asks why they are combined.

This has to do with the untrustworthiness of symbolic signification. Due to their relation by convention, symbols permit a distance from the here and now. This freedom of sign from signified, the aspect of human language that sets it apart from nonhuman semiosis, did not just open up many possibilities in the range of communication across time and space; it introduced the possibility of the lie, and subsequently the truth, as well. Due to the absence of that which is signified, the reliability of a symbolic sign is uncertain; every statement by symbols can therefore be questioned and is open to alternative interpretations. Although deception is surely part of animal behaviour, the advent of human language, which accomplished a separation from the here and now, made lying for the first time possible (Ibid. 11). Human communication, human society in general, is therefore always plagued by a doubt of credibility.<sup>79</sup> How to uphold some kind of societal common ground amidst this uncertainty? In no society does everyone have the same life experiences and each person is likely to extrapolate somewhat unique sets of generalizations from his or her unique experiences. It is therefore difficult for any society to establish conventions and insure an orderly social life on the ground of ordinary experience alone (Ibid. 307). Rappaport writes that ritual helps to establish and maintain societal conventions by producing a canonical order that transcends the untrustworthiness of everyday communication. By making the questionable unquestionable, ritual orders form a way to cope with societal uncertainty. Rappaport describes rituals as orders in all four senses of the word: rituals are orders in the literal sense as they keep “in order” a variety of elements; they both express and maintain an order, such as “the moral order” or “the economic order” or “the natural order” that contrasts with disorder. Second, rituals are orders in the sense that they are hierarchical, consisting of different orders, ranks. Third, they are orders as they contain a sequence of acts and utterances that occur in a certain order. And lastly, they are orders as they dictate or at least direct the behaviour of the ritual participants both inside and outside the ritual (Rappaport 1999, 169).

But why should members of a society except the canonical order of ritual? A canonical order depends on symbols, yet as I have argued above, symbolic messages are untrustworthy. Why should a canonical order, that which represents the general, enduring, or eternal aspects of

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<sup>79</sup> See also Maurice Bloch *In and out of each other's bodies* (1913, 49-51).

ritual, be accepted? According to Rappaport, ritual orders are made unquestionable in four diverse yet interrelated ways: (1) by presenting a unified whole, (2) by giving the semblance of changelessness, (3) by substantiating canonical orders with acts, utterances or materials that cannot be denied in their presence, and (4) by inducing an experience in which a canonical order becomes elevated to a sacred eternal order. I will discuss these four ways of creating unquestionable ritual orders by focusing on the ritual dynamic of the art museum.<sup>80</sup>

(1) *Presenting a unified whole.* Above I have discussed the way museums place works of art within a linear narrative, thereby creating a sequential linear temporal order. But rituals do not only express a sequential temporal order; they also express an idea of spatial and temporal unity. Rather than events ensuing one after another, everything happens all at once, or revolves in cycles. Rituals thus express two orders of time: a temporal sequence and an idea of eternity (Rappaport 1999, 233-234). An idea of eternity can be ritually accomplished by placing things together within a unified whole and setting them apart from ordinary time, from the fleeting and fragmented experience of everyday life. Rappaport discusses this fundamental aspect of rituals with the term *Logos*, a notion coined by Heraclitus and elaborated on by Heidegger (Heidegger 1959, 127-128; see also Kleinknecht 1967). Rappaport defines *Logos*, following Heidegger, as the binding together of all things that are (Rappaport 1999, 346-347); it is an enumeration, a listing, or narrating of things that aims at completeness, at wholeness, at not concealing or forgetting anything. The museum is a very clear example of a ritual that embodies the idea of *Logos*. As Kirschenblatt-Gimblett writes: “The ideal museum was a Noah’s Ark, with a complete set of specimens providing the entire DNA needed to regenerate the world in its entirety, or a Temple of Solomon, imagined as a miniature world, a complete archive of knowledge, and a treasure house” (2004a, 1). The *Logos* of the museum is not only expressed in the collection of objects brought together under one roof, but also by the roof itself; the architecture of the museum binds objects that originate from different places and different times into a single *Logos*.

The sequential spatiotemporal order, which describes a line, and the all-embracing *Logos*, which describes a circle, can be considered as fundamentally different. Yet rituals not only distinguish

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<sup>80</sup> I should note that this involves a very general description of art museums. A more elaborate account on the specific workings of the ritual dynamic in museums would require detailed descriptions of case studies of specific museums in their environments. Even if museum displays show close resemblances the world over, the various publics might see and interpret such displays in various ways. Not only do art museums vary; two physically similar museums can involve very different relations with the environment and consequently emphasize different rules for museum behavior. In South Asia, for example, the relationships between visitors and ‘the museum’ prompt different ways of visiting and seeing compared to the museum in Europe. See for example Gyan Prakash (2014) *Museums Matter* and Saloni Mathur and Kavita Sing (2015) *No touching, no spitting, no praying: the Museum in South Asia*.

these orders, they combine them as well. Museums in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, when they became public institutes rather than private collections, were in need of a distinctive architecture of their own; they were often built with a domed rotunda usually enriched with three or four projecting wings, the galleries. The domed rotunda and the galleries had different functions; whereas the galleries were dedicated to particular arts, the domed rotunda acquired the character a temple (Fabianski 1990, 107). The galleries create a sequence of artworks, a linear temporal order that divides the collection into various periods and styles. Individual works are lifted upon a higher plane of symbolic significance; they become carriers of history or the nation. Yet this spatiotemporal order can be questioned; why is this region of the nation or that period of history not represented? This does not usually involve a rejection of the linear direction of time as such, but involves a critique of omission – *something is missing*. The domed rotunda with an oculus opening up to the sky ameliorates this incompleteness; it binds the linear and questionable spatiotemporal order to an eternal order of completeness, of truth. The questionable linear narrative of the museum is made unquestionable by incorporating it within a unified whole. An especially effective spatial integration of the museum's two orders is the spiral staircase, which embodies both the linear and circular, creating an architecture where visitors can both walk through history and be part of a unified whole.

(2) *The semblance of eternity*. Besides the expression of a unified whole, the acceptance of a canonical order relies on the presentation of ritual as if it has always been there, or at least for a long time. More than only indicating a relation with historical time, it is the impression of changelessness that counts, as Rappaport argues (1999, 343). Even when a ritual is relatively new, such as the museum, it can still appear ancient. Using elements such as rotundas or columns, and materials such as marble, museums mimic the architecture of ancient Greek and Roman temples and give an impression of antiquity. The ostensible changelessness of a museum can be expressed by architectural references to an undefined antiquity, but can also be expressed through a 'materiality of antiquity'. Museums of art history express the wear of time by using materials such as natural unpainted stone; the partially eroded walls of the museum do not just contain things of the past but express the past itself. Yet, museums can also use materials that do not show any sign of time at all, as expressed by the smooth surfaces of the concrete and glass façades of *modern* or *contemporary* art museums; both material 'skins' create a mythical time, one pointing to a distant undefined past, another to an undefined future, where the everyday rhythms of time are temporarily forgotten.

(3) *substantiating canonical orders*. As I have written above, Rappaport distinguishes two types of messages in ritual: the canonical and the self-referential. The canonical is based on symbolic signification and represents the general, enduring, or eternal aspects of ritual, what Rappaport

terms the “invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances” (1999, 29). The self-referential, on the other hand, represents the immediate, the particular, and the vital aspects of ritual, and is based on iconic and indexical signification. According to Rappaport, it is the combination of the canonical and the self-referential that make up the strength of ritual and sets it apart from ordinary language; combining these two types of messages in ritual ameliorates the problem of falsehood intrinsic in human language (Ibid. 15). Ritual communication is thus not simply another way of saying the same thing; it is not merely presenting a message that could be just as well communicated through language. Because the canonical order is built on uncertain ground, it needs a relation to the here and now to become credible, to become stable. Symbolic messages obtain more credibility, Rappaport argues, when they are substantiated, otherwise they might be discounted as mere words (Ibid. 56). Words by themselves can be untrustworthy; we need to accompany them, bind them, by our physical presence, by shaking hands, by eye-contact, by sharing food, or by giving a ring. Potentially hollow words are given substance. Performative acts, physical objects and substances make undeniably real what canonical orders communicate.

How does this work in the ritual of art? When artworks become detached from their place of making and become part of a canonical order, separated from the here and now, they operate as Peircian symbolic signs, as signs that signify by convention and take part in a system of signs that transcends the individual sign. Artworks have turned into things that are about something, they refer to something that is beyond themselves. As such artworks become similar to language, and as such they have introduced an element of uncertainty, of potential falsehood. But artworks do not lose their indexical properties and Gell was right do see artworks as indices (yet wrong in ignoring their symbolic signification). Artworks come to signify symbolically *in addition* to their iconic and indexical forms of reference. Artworks refer to something else, but they are also self-referential; they have an undeniable and irreducible physical presence in the here and now. Artworks are ‘from there’, yet they are ‘right here’; they are ‘of the past’ or point ‘towards the future’, yet they are present ‘right now’.

The museum orchestrates this double character of art; it combines the canonical with the self-referential. Museums on the one hand use artworks to build up a story that goes beyond the specific works themselves, but on the other hand, they secure this canonical message by embodying this message with physical works. The canonical orders of the museum - communicated by explanatory texts in the exhibition rooms, the guided tours, the arrangement of the collection and the architecture of the building - are not just exemplified or filled in by the artworks on display, they are substantiated by them. Museums substantiate their narratives to make them trustworthy. Canonical messages are made palpable both by the works on display

and the bodily participation of the ritual participants. A visitor can disagree with some messages of the museum, or simply not be very interested. But, by physically participating in a ritual, by visiting the museum, by walking the linear narrative of the museum, and by closing-in on the works of art, one accepts, at least to some extent, the message of the museum; visitors accept the symbolic and language-like message of the museum exactly because this message is not just based on language. The museum, despite various deconstructions of museum narratives by academics and artists alike, is such a robust ritual institute because it substantiates the canonical order that it presents.<sup>81</sup> However, as anybody who ever got lost in a large museum knows, this is only part of the story. The canonical order produced and maintained by museums, among other institutes of collection and selection, *are* questionable. Not only are they questioned by parties outside the museum, the art museum itself creates an environment that facilitates a potential negation of its own narrative, which brings us to the fourth way in which rituals confirm their canonical orders.

(4) *Creating a sacred order.* Canonical orders are made unquestionable by (1) physically demonstrating completeness, by (2) giving an iconic semblance of changelessness, and by (3) substantiating symbolic messages with self-referential acts and objects. Yet, paradoxically, a canonical order can also be made unquestionable by rejecting it. The fourth way of making the questionable unquestionable stands out, as it both defies and confirms the canonical order. Canonical orders of ritual can be challenged by what appears to be anti-orders. As Rappaport writes: “(...) liturgical orders may include not only canons of order but their antitheses as well” (Rappaport 1999, 381). But why would rituals allow for the potential disavowal of their own symbolic messages? Rappaport argues that the abandonment of canonical orders leads to a higher order, an ultimate or absolute order of eternal truth that transcends time and can be referred to as “the sacred” (Ibid. 277-304). The move towards the sacred is both a negation of the canonical order as well as an affirmation of it. Because the sacred is eternally true it is unquestionable and can as such make the questionable unquestionable; the sacred order

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<sup>81</sup> That being said, although the museum is a central ritual institute for creating and sustaining a canonical order, there are other ways in which artworks are placed and secured within systems of meaning. If *contemporary* artworks do not end up in a museum, perhaps due to their fleeting and fragmented character, or simply because they are not collected by a museum, they can still be documented, archived, photographed, in short, selected and collected, and made part of canonical order. The movement of an artwork into a canonical order is, for example, also accomplished in art history textbooks, which create similar narratives based on a selection and collection of described and photographed artworks. And, of course, these canonical collections are inextricably related to each other. However, compared to other types of collections, the museum has a particular advantage when it comes to the consolidation of the canonical; besides its ability to haul a large public, it creates an embodied experience where the ritual participant is confronted with the physical presence, the here and now, of the artwork. Art history books can present a unified whole as well, especially in books that attempt to represent the entire history of art, but they do not create an embodied experience with the here and now. Although photographs present an indexical relation with the artwork, this is not the same as experiencing the artwork ‘for real’.



sanctifies the canonical order (Ibid. 313).<sup>82</sup> This move away from a canonical order into a higher order and the subsequent sanctification of the canonical order by this higher order, is a fundamental dynamic of many rituals, including the ritual of *modern* and *contemporary* art. I will therefore give ample space to this fourth ritual aspect, before turning to the next stage - the making of new works of art.

The museum can reject and transcend its canonical orders in two ways. One involves the presentation of a selected group of artworks beyond the sequential logic of the museum. These works, usually referred to as ‘masterpieces’, are special. The masterpiece, as Philip Fisher writes, is “the quintessential complete and finished object” (Fisher 1991, 174). Masterpieces usually get more space on a wall, might get a wall all to themselves, or even an entire room. This is not just because they are seen as masterpieces; by giving them more space they physically interrupt the spatiotemporal sequences and patterns of the exhibited artworks; they are separated from groups of works that belong to a certain style and they suspend the sequential order of historically arranged works. They *become* masterpieces by being separated from the museums’ taxonomies. Designated masterpieces escape the canonical orders of collected artworks and aim for a higher order of Art. In Tony Bennett’s words: a masterpiece is “a self-subsistent singularity existing outside the orders of time” (Bennett 1995, 44). Yet, every period has its masters and every master made one or more masterpieces. The history of art is often presented as a historical sequence of ‘masterpieces’, often referred to as ‘the canon’.<sup>83</sup> By presenting such a canon the wider discourse of art reincorporates masterpieces within a canonical order; it makes masterpieces into the pinnacles of the canonical order, the *chefs-d’oeuvre*. The presentation of a selected group of works as masterpieces that go beyond the canonical order, is not enough to guarantee an escape from the canonical order.

The other way in which the art museum provides a space to go beyond its own canonical order, involves the freedom given to the visitor (the ritual participant) to ignore the museum’s

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<sup>82</sup> Rappaport’s work, as Keith Hart writes, can be seen an extension of Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms*. Yet, in contrast to Durkheim, who saw religion as an attempt to bridge the gap between the known and the unknown and accordingly made a distinction between the profane and the sacred, Rappaport describes the sacred as a product of ritual itself rather than a means to reach it (Hart in Rappaport 1999, xv-xvii). Whereas Bourdieu designates the sacred in art as a product of a wider field of cultural production, Rappaport analyses the sacred more precisely as a product of ritual, rather than a field of human interaction grounded in the *habitus*. Rappaport nonetheless acknowledges the importance of learned behaviour and the way it creates unquestionableness, but discusses it with reference to Bateson’s earlier work on “deutero-learning”, or “second-order learning”, rather than Bourdieu’s similar concept of *habitus* (Rappaport 1999, 304-312). See Bateson, G. (1951) *Conventions of communication: Where validity depends upon belief*, in J. Ruesch and G. Bateson, *Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry*. New York: Norton.

<sup>83</sup> Rappaport’s notion of the canonical is not the same as the notion of the literary or art historical canon. A cultural canon refers to the highpoints of a specific field, a collection of ‘masterpieces’ or ‘classics’. Rappaport writes about rituals in general, not about museums or art; the term “canonical” applies to all ritual processes (1999).

directions, its labels, text panels and audio tours; the art museum usually gives the visitor the opportunity to experience the artworks by him or herself. It is likely that a visitor stands still in front of a designated masterpiece, but the visitor has the freedom to wander about, to focus on works that are not presented as masterpieces. Whether texts or audio tours place the artwork within a certain style, narrate the biography of the artist, or place the artwork within a social and political context, the visitor might choose (or be habituated to ignore) all of this and merely look at and experience the art on display. As Bourdieu and Darbel write in *The Love of Art*, it is often the experienced visitor who ignores the textual information provided by the museum (1969 [1991], 53). And, besides ignoring textual and verbal information, the visitor can ignore the suggested direction of the museum, its architectural paths and the museums' direction aids (ibid.). Bourdieu and Darbel quote a visitor:

I think it's pointless to want to impose a fixed direction to a museum visit. Personally, I like being free, alone in my choice and inspiration. Without wishing to go too far, I'd compare a visit to a museum to a journey, a journey Montaigne-style, going along the by-roads wherever the wind takes me, enjoying the present moment, away from the crowds, without a guidebook, dreaming of the past. (Student, Louviers) (Ibid. 53-54).

This freedom to wander relates to the difference between the museum's designated masterpieces and what Hans Belting calls "the invisible masterpiece" (Belting 2001). Inspired by Honoré de Balzac's novel *Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu* (The Unknown Masterpiece) (1831), Belting trails the avant-garde quest for that which cannot be expressed. Less concerned with established masterpieces, Belting looks into the modern invention of the unattainable ideal of art, an ideal that could only be reached in the absolute masterpiece. An absolute masterpiece, Belting writes, "was not an *excellent* work, it was an *impossible* one" (Belting 2001, 12). The absolute masterpiece concerns an *idea of Art* that is immaterial, beyond physical manifestation; although specific works can come close to the *idea of Art*, they remain imperfect manifestations of it, prompting the beholder to continue the quest.

I will not attempt to define the *idea of Art* and conveniently bypass the philosophies of Kant, Hegel, or Schopenhauer. Instead, I would like to focus on the ritual transition towards it. I have already described the first ritual transition; when artworks are placed within a system of meaning they come to signify symbolically, in addition to their indexical and iconic forms of reference. The move towards an absolute *idea of Art* concerns a second transition; artworks that act as symbols within a wider system of symbols, works that have meaning and are about something, are lifted on to a higher order beyond meaning. This second move is not just accomplished in art, but is a general dynamic of ritual. In ritual, this higher order is a level that erases all boundaries and eludes cognition. As Seligman and Weller, quoting Ernst Cassirer,

write: “The more its metaphysical unity as a ‘thing in itself’ is asserted the more it evades all possibility of knowledge until at last it is relegated entirely to the sphere of the unknowable and becomes merely an X” (Seligman and Weller 2012, 31; Cassirer 1965, 76). The *idea of Art* is such a higher ritual order; it points to something that cannot be fully described, can’t even be represented by the most highly regarded masterpieces – it can only be felt. Rappaport argues that the experience of a higher order in ritual, an experience of unity and ‘oneness’, cannot be put into words. This higher order of ritual can’t be described by words, but it can be indicated by words. Rappaport terms such verbal expressions “ultimate sacred postulates” (1999, 264-265). Examples of such ultimate sacred postulates are *La ilaha illa Allah* (there is no God but God), or *Shema Yisreal adoshem eloheinu, adoshem echad* (Here O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One). Ultimate sacred postulates do not, like symbols, refer to something else; they only refer to themselves. They are, Rappaport writes, devoid of material terms, “not fully of this world” they can be regarded as “eternal verities” (Rappaport 1999, 265). Devoid of any content they cannot be falsified. Rappaport points out that certainly not all rituals that concern a higher order of meaning use ultimate sacred postulates. And in the ritual of *modern* and *contemporary* art there are no clear creeds or declarations that repetitively invoked in the ritual itself. However, phrases like ‘Art is life’, or ‘l’Art pour l’Art’, or the capitalization of art into ‘Art’ do resemble ultimate sacred postulates. The moment when people exclaim, ‘Ah, this is Art!’ they indicate an experience that goes beyond explanation, an unknowable X that can only be signposted by the word ‘Art’ itself.

The visitor who does away with the guidebook and wants to be inspired by ‘Art’, makes the encounter with a work of art “the occasion of a descent of grace (*charisma*)” (Bourdieu and Darbel 1969, 54). Bourdieu and Darbel described this inspired search for Art as a belief, a “charismatic ideology” that provides the privileged “with the most ‘indisputable’ justification for their cultural privilege, while making them forget that the perception of the work of art is necessarily informed and therefore learnt” (Ibid.). The museum creates a distinction between those who can and those cannot ‘see’, those who have not inculcated what Bourdieu calls the “pure gaze”, and thus betrays its democratic pretence as an institute for all (Bourdieu 1993, 236-237). Bourdieu and Darbel describe the belief of ‘Art’, as a product emerging from the entire field of cultural production and focus on the way this belief in Art naturalizes class distinctions. Yet the authors do not describe how the visitor’s “descent of grace” is accomplished within ritual. By reducing the experience of Art as a function of class distinction, they neglect the ritual operations of the museum and the wider art system.

Again, Rappaport’s writings on ritual provide insights that can be applied to the elevated experience of the museum visitor. Rappaport writes that the higher order in ritual is grounded

in experience; ritual participants undergo an extra-ordinary experience, a change of consciousness with respect to the rationality that prevails during daily life. Rappaport calls this experience, following Rudolph Otto (1923), “numinous”. Numinous experience, Rappaport writes, is a state of mind where “parts of the psyche ordinarily out of touch with each other may be united, or better, in light of ritual’s recurrent nature, reunited” (Rappaport 1999, 220). Discursive reason may not disappear entirely, but makes partly way for an emotional experience that is sometimes described by participants as ‘mystical’ or as an experience of ‘being’ (Ibid. 71). This reunion of self may furthermore “reach out from the reunited individual to embrace other members of the congregation, or even the cosmos as a whole” so that “the boundary between individuals and their surroundings, especially others participating in ritual with them, may seem to dissolve” (Ibid. 220). Turner called this state “*communitas*”, the moment when ritual participants negate the social structure, with all its divisions and hierarchies, and come together as a community (Turner 1969, 96). This state can be accomplished through ritual elements such as the use of drugs, music, dance, sensory overload, sensory deprivation, or the alternation between overload and deprivation (Rappaport 1999, 257).<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, the site of the ritual plays a role as well: difficult to access, located in high places, or in the depths of caves, rituals often create a separation from the daily world that requires a crossing; the crossing of the boundary between ‘the everyday world’ and the ritual site is a “marked act”, Rappaport writes, “not always open to all and often requiring some sort of formal gesture or posture” (Ibid. 147). The marked difference of the ritual site from the everyday does not only accomplish a ‘time out of time’, as described above, but can also help to induce a numinous experience in the ritual participants.

How does the art museum create or facilitate such a numinous experience? Many museums have imposing monumental structures with large staircases and high ceilings that make the visitor small in comparison. Some museums are so big that the visitor can see only part of it and can easily get lost in the museum’s corridors. But, more specifically than just overwhelming the visitor, the museum, especially the art museum, alternates between sense deprivation and sense overload. As the anthropology of the senses has shown, we never sense just with one sense; it is the combination of hearing, smelling, seeing, touching, balance and heat perception that make up an amalgamated sense experience that cannot be neatly divided into separate sense perceptions (see for example Howes 1991; Feld and Brenneis 2004; Howes and Classen 2014). Yet the art museum gives dominance to the perception of sight. Although *contemporary* art has opened up to the other senses, with works that cannot just be seen but can be heard, touched,

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<sup>84</sup> There are certainly more ritual elements that can accomplish a state of numinous experience, but it does not make much sense to try and make a comprehensive list; every ritual uses a combination of sensory stimuli that should always be related to and contrasted with the different spheres of social life outside ritual participation.

or smelled as well, visual perception remains the dominant mode of sensing in the art museum. Not only is there much to see, the museum actively suppresses the other senses. A generally accepted rule is silence; one can only whisper, or at least not raise one's voice, and when visitors talk too loudly, or talk over the phone, they might be reprimanded by a museum guard. This silence can form a stark contrast with the typical urban everyday surroundings of the museum, especially when the museum is situated in a dense and noisy city centre. Next to a deprivation of sound there is a deprivation of smell and taste; although a bottle of water might be accepted, the consumption of food and drinks within the exhibition rooms are generally forbidden. Another important sense deprivation is the prohibition of touch; the works on display are usually protected by ropes, glass, sensors, cameras, and guards walking around or sitting in a corner of the room. These security measures can be seen as simply ways of protecting valuables, but they are also reminders of a generally accepted prohibition of touching works of art. Whereas the experienced museumgoer, hands folded behind the back, does not need such reminders, the inexperienced visitors, such as children, are taught to follow the rules of the museum. And finally, the art museum tones down visual information outside the artworks; especially *modern* and *contemporary* art museums, with their whitewashed walls, sober interiors, and a type of filtered light that does not allow for a play of light and shadows, create a subdued visual environment in which the works of art visually stand out. All these deprivations of sound, smell, taste, touch, and vision are in stark contrast with the expressive works on display. With this limitation of the senses, the ritual participant is taken out of the everyday world of multi-sensorial experience and brought to a focused (mostly) visual relation with the work on display; the participant can forget the world and experience the work of Art.

Yet art museums, including *modern* and *contemporary* art museums, do not just facilitate numinous encounters with works of art. The museum is also a depository of knowledge; with audio tours, guidebooks, wall texts, screenings of artist documentaries, and with a museum shop where the visitor can buy catalogues, artbooks, calendars and other paraphernalia, the museum informs and educates the visitor. Stephen Greenblatt describes this contrast within the museum - as a place of learning and a place of elevated experience - as one between resonance and wonder. Resonance is a mode of museum communication that conveys a body of knowledge to the visitor; a resonant museum display is about something, about a certain place or a certain time, about an individual artist, or about the political context of a displayed object. With wonder Greenblatt refers to a mode of display in which objects can "stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention (Greenblatt 1991, 42). There is a tendency, Tony Bennett observes, to see museums of art as belonging to the latter form of display and other museums, such as museums of antiquity, ethnology, and natural history, as resonant display forms (Bennett 1995,44). But, as Bennett argues, the modern art

museum is as much dominated by what Philip Fisher calls “the technology of the series” (Fisher 1991).<sup>85</sup> And, other types of museums, such as the museum of ethnology, can lean more towards a mode of display of wonder than resonance, as can be seen for example in the *Musée du quai Branly* in Paris.

Greenblatt’s description of wonder, the “sense of uniqueness” and “exalted attention” in the museum, can be equated with Rappaport’s “numinous experience”, whereas Greenblatt’s description of resonance can be placed within Rappaport’s wider analysis of ritual canonical orders. Yet there is an important difference; Greenblatt locates the “sense of uniqueness” within the display of wonder, instead of seeing it as a product of the difference between these two modes of display. Rappaport, on the other hand, argues that numinous experience does not flow down from a higher order to the ritual participant, but rather emerges when a canonical order is left behind; a transition which cannot be represented by the ritual participant, but can only be experienced or signposted by ultimate sacred postulates. When applying Rappaport’s theory of ritual orders to the art museum, it follows that the higher order of Art does not reside within masterpieces, nor is merely induced by various ritual strategies of sense deprivation and overload. Instead, it is the result of a movement from one type of ritual message to another; from a message based on symbolic meaning, a message that is about something, towards a message that defies comprehension (I will further elaborate on this transition in 2.6). It is the integration and friction of both forms of display within a museum that creates the possibility for the ritual participant to transcend the museum’s canonical orders - either by accepting the masterpieces designated by the museum or by going against the museum’s suggestions - and move into a higher order that is grounded in numinous experience.

Going beyond the canonical order is however not an outright refutation of it; the canonical order of the museum is strengthened rather than weakened by this move. As I have argued above, the canonical order of ritual is based on symbol communication, and can therefore be questioned. But a numinous experience is undoubtedly real and therefore unquestionable. By means of proximity the unquestionable can have an affirming effect on the questionable - it sanctifies the questionable. Ritual sanctification is a complex phenomenon that takes on many different forms (See Rappaport 1999, 313-343), but it is usually accomplished by proximity; placing the hand on the bible when under oath sanctifies the words that otherwise might be mere words. By placing the work of Art close to canonical messages - communicated by wall texts or audio tours or particular arrangement of artworks - its sanctity can touch the messages that might otherwise be mere words. An extra-ordinary encounter with a work of art is a moment, or can consist of a chain of numinous moments; the visitor wanders from work to

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<sup>85</sup> See for example Carol Duncan’s analysis of the Museum of Modern Art, New York (Duncan 1995).

work, like the student from Louviers, *along the by-roads wherever the winds take me*. Yet, after this elevated museum experience, the visitor returns to the canonical order of the museum; the experienced museum visitor first looks at the work, then directs the gaze towards the information sign besides it, or decides to buy the exhibition catalogue. From a wonderful or numinous experience, the visitor goes back to resonant form of learning. But now the canonical messages are placed in a different light. Specific interpretations of artworks can surely still be questioned, but it becomes more difficult to imagine that the entire ritual is false, that all is based on a lie. Ritual rules, such as the prohibition to touch, implicit spatiotemporal cosmologies, such as a linear historical order, and implicitly communicated values, such as individual liberty – together making up a canonical order - are more easily accepted when they are grounded in an elevated experience that is undeniably real and canopied by an *idea of Art* that is absolute and eternal. By making the canonical order unquestionable the art museum thus ameliorates the untrustworthiness of its symbolic messages.

The museum, with its thick walls of stone, is a central institute in the wider ritual process of art and therefore an important field of enquiry. But what about the art itself? The move away from the canonical order is not only established in the art museum, but is also accomplished by the making of a new work of art, as I will argue below. When artists feel that established works of art do not express the *idea of Art*, or feel that the *idea of Art* is only expressed by works of art of another time and not by the artworks of today, they will attempt to make something that defies (what they perceive as) conventional art, in order to reach a higher order of Art. The creation of something new that defies the canonical order is often preceded by an effort to criticize particular artistic styles and conventions, and by an attempt to undermine the institutions and practices that endow artworks with meaning. This artistic defiance of institutionalized artworks has a similar ritual function as the abandonment of canonical orders in the museum. Like the visitor who ignores the museum's guidelines in search for a genuine encounter with art, or the curator who elevates the designated 'masterpieces' above and beyond the museum's taxonomies, the artist attempts to go beyond canonical orders that are situated in time and space, beyond works that have a circumscribed meaning.

## 2.5 *Creating the conditions to create*

Artworks that have been framed, photographed, interpreted, circulated, purchased, collected, classified, and preserved, have become carriers of meaning; they have become stable bearers of a ritual narrative, a canonical order that is, on the one hand, based on symbolic messages that transcend the here and now of works of art, yet on the other hand, needs physical works to secure such messages, make them steadfast. Such circumscribed works of art have become part of a canonical order that presents and holds together a range of shared assumptions about the world, as well as shared values and conventions of how one should behave in this world, thereby ameliorating the precariousness of everyday life. I did not go into the contents of such shared values and assumptions (this will be discussed in the ethnographic chapters) and looked instead at what happens when artworks are re-membered as responsible members of society. Whatever such circumscribed artworks are about, they have become *about something*, they act like symbols that refer to something beyond themselves. Tangled up with society's classifications, these artworks have become 'heavy'. To make something new requires 'emptying' art of meaning, to make it 'light' again. This involves not so much a rejection of the various interpretations of existing artworks; it entails a rejection of art's interpretative faculty as such, its symbolic character. The making of a new work of *contemporary* art therefore goes along with and is often preceded by some form of criticism.<sup>86</sup>

This criticism can come in many forms. Not yet sure what they will make artists might first articulate what they don't want to make. Before making a new work of art, artists often verbally criticize and distance themselves from established 'traditions'. Doing so, they not only refute established 'traditions', but mark certain works or styles as 'traditional', as backward, out of joint with time, and subsequently produce a split between the 'traditional' and 'the contemporary'. Criticism can be explicit and directed; manifestos can distinctly point out what is wrong with art and aim their arrows at particular styles and conventions, or even particular artworks. But criticism can also be a less pointed, conveying a less articulate yet nonetheless strong sentiment that something is not right. Frequently, criticism is not so much directed at particular artworks or styles but at the institutions that frame, preserve, display and circulate them. Institutional criticism can focus on the museum, the studio, the gallery, the art school,

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<sup>86</sup> I distinguish the word criticism from critique. By criticism I indicate a negative judgment of former art styles, conventions, and institutions, typically expressed by the avant-garde artist. Critique, on the other hand, typically practiced by the art critic, can involve both positive and negative judgments and belongs to the selection, circulation, and interpretation of artworks; it plays a role in their incorporation of artworks within a canonical order. Critique is thus a ritual action that belong to the artwork's separation from the here and now, whereas criticism is a ritual action that occurs at a later stage of the ritual cycle, after the establishment of a canonical order.



the art fair, the biennial or the wider art 'system'; artworks can be seen as victims of the institutional art system, rather than perpetrators themselves.

Criticizing the institutional framework of art is easier said than done. Although institutional criticism is nowadays widespread, it was (and still is) difficult to criticise institutes that are presented as mere neutral sites. Institutes of *Modern* and *Contemporary* art seem to embody the modern aversion to religious ritual. However, as Mary Douglas has shown in *Purity and Danger* (1966) and *Natural Symbols* (1970), the anti-ritual culture of 'western' modernity is full of ritual situations, very few of which take place in so-called religious contexts. The practices of *contemporary* art often take place in environments that seem neutral; just simple rooms containing works of art. As Thomas McEvilley writes, "gallery and museum settings are designed to eliminate the sense of embeddedness in a socio-economic world" (McEvilley 2005, 94). Especially since art galleries were painted white, their entanglements with the social, economic, historical and political world have been concealed. Furthermore, next to their ostentatious neutrality, *modern* and *contemporary* art spaces seem devoid of ritual procedures. Of course, looking a bit closer, there are various ritual elements to be discerned, as shown throughout this chapter. But the ritual of *contemporary* art hides its ritual character, which makes it more difficult to expose.

Another difficulty encountered by artists who want to change, counter or avoid particular institutionalized ways of making art, concerns the gap between verbal criticism and tangible change. Verbally disclosing and exposing the (perceived) conventional character of the museum, the gallery or other sites of *contemporary* art, does not automatically result into new open spaces for making new art. Works of art are not only caught up in institutional interests or dogmas, but are also embedded in a range of habituated practices. Despite or perhaps because conventions are usually not dictated as a set of rules, they can form a strong set of constraints that are difficult to break through or circumvent. Conventions, as Howard Becker argues, play strong constraints on the artist because they do not exist in isolation; conventions are embodied in art writing, training, in the entire infrastructures of art making. An artist who wants to introduce a small change therefore may be pulled into a variety of other changes (Becker 1982, 32). As Becker elaborates, conventions also make art possible; because of conventions, decisions can be made quickly and artists have more time for the actual artwork (Ibid). Conventions involve not merely the popularity or unpopularity of certain styles; they also revolve around practical and material conditions of making and selling. Conventions, as Becker writes, "suggest the appropriate dimensions of a work, the proper length of a performance, the proper size and shape of a painting or sculpture. Conventions regulate the relations between

artists and audience, specifying the rights and obligations of both” (Ibid. 1982, 29-30; see also Baxandall 1972).

But criticism might involve more than a rejection of art institutes and institutionalized forms of art; it is often directed at society at large. As I have argued above, the canonical order of *contemporary* art expresses and reproduces a societal order. Criticising the artworks and institutions that embody the canonical order therefore implies a criticism on society itself. This can be a very effective way of criticizing (parts of) society. One can off course become politically active and engage with a variety of societal issues, but there is always a risk of getting entangled in the confusion of everyday politics, of having to wade through the treacle of bureaucratic procedures, or of simply being stopped by a repressive regime. Another way to address societal wrongs is to change societal discourse. Society is understood through and represented by abstract terms, such as ‘gender’, ‘capitalism’, ‘class’, ‘nationalism’, ‘colonialism’ or ‘climate change’. These abstract terms stand in for a variety of intricate societal practices and processes; by ignoring, banning, changing, or redefining such terms one can address societal issues and set the stage for political change. However, altering societal discourse by means of language carries the risk of getting caught up in semantic discussions, of remaining in the sphere of language, hovering helplessly above the deep-rooted problems one wants to solve. An alternative way to address perceived societal wrongs is to criticize something tangible; buildings, flags, statues, or works of art, can represent or metonymically stand in for (parts of) society, and form tangible targets. Artworks, certain styles of art, or institutes of art, can be seen as instruments of class distinction, gender inequality, asymmetric (post)colonial relationships, or as mere empty vehicles for capital investment. What is more, artworks can more generally be seen as representatives of the status quo, or otherwise, as representatives of revolutionary tendencies in society; in both instances, as symbols of all that is perceived to be wrong with society. As concrete symbols, artworks can bundle a range of societal issues and become comprehensible and accessible targets for those who want to address these issues. By criticizing or sometimes physically attacking works of art through acts of iconoclasm, the perceived maladies of society are addressed in a way that everyone understands.

Next to the verbal criticism, avoidance, or iconoclastic attacks on existing works of art and their institutions, artists also incorporate their criticism in newly made works of art. Artists do not have to make their criticism verbally explicit; they make new works and in the process of making, they can break with former conventional ways of making, undermine institutional frames, and address societal maladies. The criticisms of particular artworks or conventions, of art institutes, and of society, are often difficult to untangle in practice. By, for example, making artworks that undermine the physical stability of the artwork, such as performance-based works,

or works made of perishable materials, artists might aim to change the way art is made, but maybe also attempt to evade institutional processes of commodification and museum preservation, and might simultaneously aim to criticize a product-oriented consumption society.

But besides such entangled criticisms, something else occurs when an artist makes a new work of art. Artists and academics alike continuously criticize conventional art forms – ‘this has been done before’ – and the deceptive neutrality of art institutions is exposed so often that repeating it seems redundant. What is usually forgotten, however, is that criticism is not only a negative appraisal of conventions of making, of art institutions, or of society, but an act that accomplishes a revival of the *idea of Art* as well. By verbally criticizing the canonical order of art, or by making an artwork that is radically different from conventional works of art, an artist seems to imply that established works of art do not express the *idea of Art*; doing so artists not only acknowledge but also re-create and liberate the *idea of Art*. With the belief in the *idea of Art* revived, artists are ready to make a new work of art. In *The separation from the here and now* (2.3) and *Towards a canonical order* (2.4) I have described the way *contemporary* artworks are separated from their place of origin and become part and parcel of both canonical orders and a higher order of Art. This process by which works of art gather a variety of meanings, and (possibly) transcend those meanings, without losing their meaningfulness, can be summarized as the canonization and sacralization of art. Yet, the relationship between the sacralization of existing works of art and the making of a new work of art remains unresolved.

Before zooming in on the artwork itself I will shortly discuss the art studio. Creating something new is not only a matter of gathering materials and combining them to make a new work of art; creating something new involves the creation of the right conditions to create. As discussed above, the art gallery and the museum are places zoned off from everyday life. But the place of making art, typically associated with the studio, accomplishes a separation from the everyday as well. Svetlana Alpers has argued that from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, European artists began to treat the studio as a basic instrument of their art: For some, it was not simply the site *where* they worked, but a condition of working” (Alpers 2010, 146). In the studio the artist can create, but perhaps more importantly, in the studio the artist can start from scratch. The studio became a place where things, brought inside the studio, could be experienced anew by the painter; it became a retreat, a place of withdrawal where the artist can look at things with a different light.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> The studio literally brought in a different light. Alpers marks out the emergence of Dutch 17<sup>th</sup> century still life paintings where objects on the tables are usually lit from the painter’s left. The objects on the table are related to each other by reflections of neighbouring objects and there is usually a goblet or vase

The studio is not shut off from the rest of society and functions as a social site for education, exchange of ideas, and collective work, yet artists consider it and use it as a private space.<sup>88</sup> As Alpers writes: “The studio may, on occasion, have been teeming with people. But what is represented as the studio experience is a solitary’s view” (Ibid. 128). The emergence of the studio coincided with the emergence of art as a separate domain and with the identification of the individual artist as a creative self. The studio fostered a different way of seeing in which art became an instrument for exploring visual experience itself, without being constrained by representational conventions.<sup>89</sup> Pictorial ambiguity was in itself not new, but with the studio a place was created, where “the individual’s experience of the world can be staged as if it were at its beginning” (Ibid. 135). As Alper writes: “Curious though it seems, the person has withdrawn from the world for the purpose of attending better to it” (Ibid. 129).

However, the studio as a zoned-off neutral space excluded so much of the world that it created a sense of isolation. As a result, artists did not only invite others in, but started leaving the studio as well.<sup>90</sup> Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century European painters, for example, started to free themselves from the studio to make paintings outside in the ‘real world’. Artists always went outside with sketchbooks, but until the 19<sup>th</sup> century artists finished their landscape paintings in the studio. But painters started to accept the inconvenience of working outside, with the changing weather and light (Alpers 2010, 141). Nowadays, the place of making and the exhibition site are sometimes difficult to separate; the studio has partially made way for a variety of *contemporary* art practices in which the artwork is installed and performed ‘in situ’, rather than made in the studio and transported to the exhibition site. Both sociological analyses and artistic practices have deconstructed the idea of the artist studio as an isolated place for the individual ‘genius’ artist. Yet, despite such deconstructions, art institutes like the studio, the gallery and the museum

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that reflects the windowpanes of an unseen window (Alpers 2012, 132-133). See also *Rembrandt’s Enterprise: The Studio and the Market* (Alpers 1988).

<sup>88</sup> Even if the artist does not invite anyone in, a work is generally made to travel outside the studio to reach a public. As Alpers has point out, Dutch 17<sup>th</sup> century paintings often showed the painter sharing his space with students, assistants, or a serving maid (Alpers 1988). And as Daniel Buren in his essay *The Function of the Studio* pointed out, the studio is also a boutique, a place for production, storage and distribution, a “kind of commercial depot” (Buren 2010, 157).

<sup>89</sup> The studio marks the demise of history painting that depicted religious, mythological, and historical, text related allegories (Alpers 2012, 138). Alpers distinguishes two paths of initial studio engagement: One, she exemplifies by the paintings of Johannes Vermeer, who turned to objects and people in a domestic situation in his workplace. The other direction, exemplified by Rembrandt and Caravaggio, was one in which the themes of history painting were brought inside the studio (Ibid. 139, 142).

<sup>90</sup> Focusing on Cezanne’s work Alpers traces another shift with respect to the studio; from a light-box making images of things, to an escape into ‘the outside’, the studio started to include more than is actually before the artist’s eyes (Ibid. 143). By including things that are not there, art became a matter of the mind, Alpers writes (Ibid.).

continue to flourish. The studio as the ideal place for creation is an undoubtedly romantic notion yet has proved persistent.<sup>91</sup>

Whether artworks are made within a studio, at an exhibition site, or at any other place, a new place of making art can provide a new perspective onto the world. The choice of place is not so much a question of being either 'inside' or 'outside' the studio, but concerns an active artistic positioning; it is about moving inwards or outwards, not being inside or outside. Both the move towards the studio and the move out of the studio were artistic actions that undermined artistic conventions, prompted different ways of seeing, and opened the way for the creation of something new; actions that depended on the particular artistic field and the wider social environment of the artist. The movement in and out of 'the studio' can be seen as a way of thinking about the dynamic relation between 'inside' and 'outside', rather than a choice for either 'the inside' or 'the outside'. Instead of a demarcated site, the place of making can be seen as an instrument, a tool with which artist can regulate their retreat from the world and their return back to it. Although the place of making, the relative inward and outward movements, can be a precondition and instrument for make something new, it is not enough to guarantee the novelty of the artwork. From the place of making the artwork I now move towards the artwork itself.

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<sup>91</sup> What is more, when artist did reject the studio as the place of individual genius and started workshops or 'factories' that emphasized multiple authorship, they did not fully get rid of artistic authorship. As Michelle Grabner writes: "The creative master remained intact, as did the studio, despite being dislocated or inhabited by others" (Grabner 2010, 4). There have been criticisms of the studio as the undomestic domain of male authorship, yet the studio has, despite its transformations from ateliers to factories, remained intact and keeps on nurturing the idea of the individual genius artist (Ibid. 2).

## 2.6 *Lost in the Forest of Symbols*

The canonical order and the ritual mechanisms that support this order can be directly criticized, but the canonical order can also be undermined by the creation of something that can't be interpreted, something that defies comprehension and thus disrupts the symbolic faculty of the canonical order. One way in which artists challenge and go beyond the canonical order is through a direct criticism of it, as I have shown above. Another way is to make a new work of art that is perceived as ambiguous, something that cannot be caught within artistic or societal classifications and resists interpretation. There are many things in life that are ambiguous, but the artwork takes place within a context that is presented as meaningful. By presenting something as art, by framing it and placing it in a ritual setting that prescribes a set of rules – do not touch, no raised voices, no consumption – the work stands out from the everyday and proclaims significance. Meaningful yet without clear meaning a new work of art creates a tension that moves the beholder to search for meaning.

In *On not understanding symbols: Toward an anthropology of incomprehension* (2012) Roger Keesing sheds light on the layers of understanding in rituals. Like Gell, Keesing criticizes a view of culture as a system of symbols and focuses on the nonverbal nature of rituals. Keesing argued that anthropologists have had a too intellectualist approach, overlooked some mundane realities of the ritual process, and particularly criticized the implicit assumption that participants of ritual have equal access to the meaning of ritual and that rituals work because they evoke shared understandings.<sup>92</sup> There are many rituals in which a priestly class or a group of elders denies ritual access to, for example, uninitiated children, the other gender, or lower classes. But this denial of access, by means of strategies of secrecy or outright bans, is not the main point Keesing is making; even without such ritual protections, when rituals are open for everyone to attend, incomprehension remains a central aspect of ritual.<sup>93</sup>

Keesing's argument is five-fold: First, the understanding of rituals is layered, from outer meanings on the surface that are widely known, down to inner ones. Access to the inner layers of comprehension depends on knowledge, but also on "poetic imagination, philosophical insight

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<sup>92</sup> Keesing writes that Clifford Geertz (1973) and David Schneider (1969, 1972, 1976) in the American tradition, Mary Douglas (1996) and Victor Turner (1967, 1974) in the British tradition, and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) and Louis Dumont (1966) in the continental tradition, moved too quickly and uncritically "from the fact that social action is collective to the apparent corollary that cultural meanings are shared" (Keesing 2012, 407).

<sup>93</sup> Keesing's research among the Kwaio on the Solomon Islands shows that Kwaio rituals do not have much procedures hidden from public view; there are no initiation rites and there is no knowledge restricted to elders: "(...) knowledge of genealogies, ancestral stories and epics, ritual details, cosmological metatheories, and magic could be acquired by anyone with the talent and interest (...) and commitment to learning" (Keesing 2012, 416).

and a global perspective” (Keesing 2012, 407). Second, the distribution of knowledge that is required for deep interpretations, depends on the political structure of the community. Third, rituals, like myths, may evoke diverse meanings for different members of the community. Fourth, due to this diversity, the ‘function’ of ritual cannot be to evoke a coherent body of shared understanding. And fifth, it is only necessary that enough members - a small minority of the community - have access to deeper symbolic layers of the rituals to add, modify, and maintain their coherence. Keesing calls those members of a ritual community who understand the “deeper symbolic designs” of ritual “experts”, which is not a coherent professional group, because there are experts “in different ways and different degrees about different things” (Ibid. 416). Ritual expertise depends on one’s social position within a community, but it is a matter of intellectual abilities and inclinations as well. And, ritual experts not only safeguard ritual consistency, but are also the ones most inclined and able to create new ritual forms.

Keesing’s arguments on the layered understanding of rituals can be applied to the *contemporary* art ritual as well. There are experts, such as curators, critics, academics, and artists, who (better) understand, or claim to understand, the deeper meanings of artworks. But this does not mean that artworks can be, at some point, by some expert, fully understood. Meaning can never be fully grasped, because meaning is not in things. As Gilbert Lewis argues in his thoughtful analysis of ritual among the Gnaou of Sepik New Guinea, ritual acts and objects do not have meaning, they evoke meaning (Lewis 1980, 221-222). There is therefore never a point of arrival, a moment when the student of art exclaims ‘now I get it!’. Although individuals might be convinced by their own interpretation, there is no interpretative consensus across the ritual community. Interpretations are so diverse that we can hardly speak of a coherent body of shared understanding; artworks evoke a variety of interpretations that depend on the different levels of knowledge of the participants. This stratification of comprehension might, when pushed to extremes, make participants abandon the ritual and even cause the collapse of it altogether, but the lack of coherence itself does not endanger the ritual. On the contrary, a lack of interpretative coherence strengthens ritual resilience as it can bring a diverse community, with diverging backgrounds and beliefs, together in its folds.<sup>94</sup> What is required in ritual is not a coherent body of shared meaning, but a shared belief in meaningfulness; the acts, objects, and utterances that are presented in ritual, should be regarded as meaningful, as full of meaning. Interpretations can widely differ and even contradict each other, but there needs to be a shared view that there

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<sup>94</sup> See for example *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account*, by Andrew Beatty (1999). Beatty gives an insightful ethnographic analysis of the slametan, a ceremonial meal in east Java, where various religious communities come together, share a meal, and celebrate village traditions. The ambiguity of the various proceedings and dishes, and the careful avoidance of explicit clarification, create the opportunity for each group to assign different meanings to the meal. It makes a shared meal possible, in a wider political context of religious factionalism: “a temporary truce among people of radically different orientation” (Beatty 1999, 25).

is 'something' there to engage with.

Symbolic anthropology formed the major paradigm within cultural anthropology of the 1960s and '70s. But a small group of anthropologists, doing fieldwork at that time, moved away from an anthropological approach that was too much centred on shared meaning (see for example Barth 1975; Lewis 1980, Keesing 1982, Valeri 2000). But they did not, unlike Gell (1998), steer away from meaning altogether; they looked in their detailed ethnographies of ritual communities at the tension that is created in ritual between meaning and the absence of meaning. It is, as Valeri argues, about the interplay between comprehension and incomprehension, about the "permanent inadequacy existing between stimulus and answer":

In effect, the rite appears (...) as a collection of signs, although without offering the code that allows for a full interpretation of those signs. On the one hand, it looks as if it is endowed with meaning; on the other hand, it seems devoid of any apparent sense. This contrast powerfully attracts attention and is tantalizing: it may stimulate a search for meaning in what is ordinarily meaningless but is "put in quotation marks" as if it possessed it. This can then prompt people to "play" with the rite's signs, to establish homologies and oppositions, to reunite things that are normally kept separate, and to separate things that are normally conjoined (Valeri 2017, 205-206).

Keesing's analysis on the shifting levels of understanding and Valeri's emphasis on the play between stimulus and answer, show that rituals do not make a clear fissure between incomprehension on the one hand, and comprehension on the other, but rather facilitate movement between them, from one pole to the other and back again. The movement between these poles does not just concern an incline or decline in the degree of knowledge, but a shift between types of knowledge. As I have written above, ritual concerns two types of messages: the self-referential, operating by means of indexical and iconic communication, and the canonical, operating by means of symbolic communication. Ritual processes oscillate between these types of messages, they go from an embodied experience of the here and now to an intellectual understanding of what it is about, and back again. And this applies to the ritual process of *contemporary* art as well; when artworks are interpreted, classified, and preserved, when they become part and parcel of a canonical order, artworks become more like symbols. But, after this transition towards a canonical order, the ritual makes a turn again towards the other pole, towards a state of relative incomprehension.

To facilitate and guide this double movement rituals make use of ambiguous forms - acts, objects, bodies and words that are in-between, that can be either this or that, or both. Ambiguity forms a core principle of ritual processes; without it, rituals would ossify. But what is ritual ambiguity and how is it accomplished? As I have argued in *Ritual words* (2.2), art publications



regularly co-create the ambiguity of art by embedding artworks within an obscure and impenetrable ritual language. Next to such ritual strategies that create ambiguity, writings about *contemporary* art often refer to the term ‘ambiguity’ as well. As Berndt and Koepnick point out (2018, 5), it has become commonplace, to describe *contemporary* artworks with words such as ambiguity, uncertainty, opacity, ambivalence, or liminality, while studies that theoretically analyze the notion of ambiguity in art are rare.<sup>95</sup> In what follows I will explore the notion of ambiguity in art by looking at it from a ritual perspective; I will argue that ambiguity does not reside within the artwork, but concerns a relative position within a ritual process. Ambiguity within ritual concerns a change, a moment of transition, within the ritual process. For the ritual of *contemporary* art this change involves a relative shift from an art that *stands* for something to an art that *is*, a shift from looking at an artwork as something that can be understood, to something that can only be experienced. When considering artworks at the moment when they are newly made, they can hardly be called symbols, because they do not represent. At this stage Gell’s theory on artworks as indexes instead of symbols is most applicable; artists try to make something that is not a symbol, they try to produce artworks that “fascinate, compel, and entrap as well as delight the spectator” (Gell 1998, 23).

The movement from one type of communication to another within the ritual process does not translate into a dualistic opposition between an incomprehensible experience and an intellectual understanding, but rather involves various modes of ambiguity. Below I will discuss a variety of rituals to arrive at a general theory of ambiguity in ritual, one that can be applied to the ritual of *contemporary* art as well. I will make an analytical distinction between three types of ambiguity in ritual processes: perceptual ambiguity, multivocal ambiguity, and positional ambiguity. These types of ambiguity are not mutually exclusive categories but rather different lenses to look at the creation of ambiguity in ritual. I will discuss the three categories of ritual ambiguity one by one, keeping in mind that most rituals involve all three of them simultaneously.

### *Perceptual ambiguity*

Perceptual ambiguity concerns the sensual qualities of a ritual act or object and the tensions these qualities can evoke in the perception of the beholder. In *Art and Visual Perception* (1974) Rudolph Arnheim focuses on the tensions created in the visual field by artworks. He describes a wide variety of perceptual components, such as balance, shape, form, growth, space, light, color, and movement, in which these tensions can occur.<sup>96</sup> Tension derives, Arnheim argues,

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<sup>95</sup> See for example Umberto Eco *The Open Work* (1989) and Frauke Berndt & Lutz Koepnick (ed.) *Ambiguity in Contemporary Art and Theory* (2018).

<sup>96</sup> Sensual perception is a large academic field, even when applied solely to the visual arts. The difficulty, for cultural anthropologists or art historians, is that questions about the cognitive aspects of experiencing art leads to what biology, psychology and the neurosciences have to say about perception. I do not want

from the deformation of familiar forms: “When the artist represents familiar shapes he can rely on the norm image the viewer harbors within himself. By deviating from this norm image one can create tension” (Arnheim 1974, 429). An important aspect of Arnheim’s analysis on pictorial deviation of form is incompleteness. I will pick just one simple example from Arnheim’s wide-ranging analysis: the architectural horseshoe arch, see figure 2.1 below.<sup>97</sup> The upper half of the horseshoe arch presents a semi-circular shape. Arnheim writes that this shape “contains forces in the direction of the completed circle” (Ibid. 430). This deviation of form, the incompleteness of the circle, creates a tension in the perception of the beholder that veers towards completion. Incompleteness is not just a flawed pictorial representation of a familiar form, but gives direction: “When the incompleteness of a well-structured pattern is displayed to the eye, a tension toward closure is created” (Ibid. 430).<sup>98</sup>



Figure 2.1

Alfred Gell, who shortly discussed Arnheim’s work as well (Gell 1998, 43), elaborates on the way the incompleteness in a work of art captivates and moves its beholder. According to Gell, all artworks, not just *modern* or *contemporary* works, constitute a “cognitive indecipherability”, they tantalize and frustrate the beholder’s capacity to recognize “wholes and parts, continuity and discontinuity, synchrony and succession” (Ibid. 95). Artworks form an intellectual and material challenge: “They are difficult to make, difficult to ‘think’, difficult to transact. Their peculiarity, intransigence, and oddness is a key factor in their efficacy as social instruments” (Gell 1998, 23). The artist creates something that can trap the beholder into a relation with it. One of the examples Gell gives is the intricate pattern of oriental carpets: “Who, possessed of an intricate oriental carpet, can say that they have entirely come to grips with its pattern; yet how often the eye rests on it and singles out now this relation, this symmetry, now that. The process can continue interminably; the pattern is inexhaustible, the relationship between carpet and owner, for life”.

Gell’s theory of agency concerns the relation between artist, artwork, and beholder. Yet Gell risks placing the indecipherability of an artwork in the artwork itself instead of seeing it as a relation within a ritual process, especially when he speaks of “the nature of the captivation

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to explore such avenues here, or in any way summarize this interesting field. See for example Arnheim (1974), Gombrich (1979), Howes (1991), M. Turner (ed.) (2006).

<sup>97</sup> Horseshoe arch. Source: Arnheim (1974, 431).

<sup>98</sup> However, such perceptual tensions always depend on the context. The letter ‘c’ for example does not usually prompt perceptual tension towards the letter ‘o’, even though it is an unfinished circle.

exerted by the index in and of itself' (Gell 1998, 72) (See also 1.3). The ambiguity of intricate patterns does not reside within the pattern itself, but in the relationship between the pattern and the beholder trying to find his way through the maze. Even if the pattern of an oriental carpet might be, as Gell writes, "inexhaustible", the relationship between owner and carpet changes and to understand this moving relationship we need to know much more about the carpet's surroundings; is it hanging on the wall or lying on the floor? Are its colours still vibrant? Is it an heirloom that for the current owner brings back memories of his family? Perhaps the pattern still induces a cognitive indecipherability, but the wear and tear might have become more important for the relationship between owner and carpet than the intricate pattern. At one moment artworks might instil awe, at another moment they are forgotten and thrown away. Whether it is through habituated seeing, through conventions of making, or through verbal interpretations, the most intricate patterns might become stale, prompting artists to make new patterns that can captivate again. Ambiguity is usually treated as an intrinsic property of the artwork itself, but to speak of the agency or ambiguity *of* the object is misleading as it suggests that there is something inside the work that acts. An artwork, or any other ritual act or object, does not physically act on people the way an object bounces against another object and causes it to move. Instead, artists/artworks express a difference within an art environment that might be perceived by ritual participants and trigger them to act – to select, interpret, circulate, or preserve.

Gregory Bateson argued that communication within living systems does not operate through force or impact and cautions against the implementation of physical laws of cause and effect within the sciences that study life forms such as biology, psychology and anthropology. Instead, living systems contrast with the non-living world in their ability to receive information - news of difference that has to be interpreted. News of difference within living systems is not a force or energy that can be quantified on a linear scale, but a sign that has reached a threshold in the receiver and is perceived; information is "a difference which makes a difference" (Bateson 1972, 459). The effect of a perceived difference within living systems is propelled by energy, but the interpretation of difference is not energy itself. Bateson illustrates his argument with a simple example: "If I kick a stone, the movement of the stone is energized by the act, but if I kick a dog, the behavior of the dog may indeed be partly conservative - he may travel along a Newtonian trajectory if kicked hard enough, but this is mere physics. What is important is that he may exhibit responses which are energized not by the kick but by his metabolism; he may turn and bite" (Ibid. 229).

Ambiguity does not reside inside the artwork, but it is just as misleading to speak of something inside humans that cause humans to act. Instead of creating a bounded description of object or

self, Bateson proposed an “ecology of mind” in which the human mind does not stop where the skin ends, but extends outwards connecting with a wider context of thought processes, of mind, that includes information systems of any kind, such as a human community or a forest – forming a mental ecology that humans are part of. Bateson’s ecology of mind has similarities with Gell’s extension of mind and Bourdieu’s field of cultural production; all three ideas concern the relational operations between individuals and the outside world rather than creating explanatory units such as ‘the individual’, ‘culture’, or ‘society’. But there are some important differences; unlike Gell’s extension of mind Bateson’s ecology of mind does not give human intention and consciousness a central position; Bateson would be wary of the causal connotations of Gell’s notion of agency. In that respect Bateson’s ecology of mind has more in common with Bourdieu’s sociology; with the concept of habitus Bourdieu by-passed the conscious individual as an explanatory unit as well and saw ‘culture’ like Bateson as a set of routinized practices (Harries-Jones 2017, 25). Yet Bourdieu’s field of cultural production is squarely placed within a human context, whereas Bateson extends his analysis beyond the human to include all life, thereby eliminating the split between ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ as separate fields of reality and analysis.<sup>99</sup>

The focus on perceptual ambiguity in *contemporary* art should lead neither to the individual mind of the artists, nor merely to the sensual qualities of artworks, but rather to the ways artists make use of perceptual ambiguities to create a relation with the outside world. Perceptual ambiguity is not a demarcated field of inquiry - all forms of ambiguity could be described as perceptual - but a focus on the sensual qualities of an artwork-plus-environment and an understanding of the ways these qualities invoke perceptual tensions in the beholder, can lead to insights into the wider ritual process of *contemporary* art. But this can only be accomplished when we consider all the senses; Arnheim focused especially on pictorial ambiguity, but *contemporary* artists work with a very broad range of possible media and can include a variety of sensual qualities beyond the visual in their works. Odours for example, although not often consciously used in *contemporary* art, are in many rituals an important vehicle for creating ambiguity. As Classen, Howes and Synnott write:

[W]hy do odours tend to be emphasized during such rites of passage? The reason would seem to be that there is a widely perceived or intuited intrinsic connection between olfaction and transition. To begin with, it is in the nature of odours to alter and shift, making them an apt symbol for a person undergoing transition. Consider the situation of the initiate at a male puberty rite. The initiate is no longer a boy but not yet a man. He is ‘betwixt and between’ the conventional categories of social perception. In a similar way, smells are difficult to classify, and even more difficult to contain. Their ‘out of

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<sup>99</sup> See the appendix for a more elaborate description of Bateson’s ecology of mind.

placeness' thus corresponds to the ambiguous status of the subject of the rite of passage (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994, 140).

It is, as David Howes points out in various publications (e.g. 1991, 2003, 2004), not just about opening up to other senses than the visual, but integrating them in to a wider anthropological analysis of sensory experience (see also Jackson 1983; Ackerman 1990; Taussig 1993; Classen 1993; Stoller 1997; Farquhar 2002; Geurts 2002; Rhys-Taylor 2014). As I have shown above (2.4), the art museum seems to focus on the visual, yet the deprivation of sound, smell, taste and touch operate together to orchestrate a particular and restricted visual emphasis on the works of art on display. Selecting one ambiguous element, such as the visual ambiguity evoked by an artwork, out of a wider sensorial ritual environment, might lead to interesting insights, but it does not do justice to the rich and subtle sensorial experiences of the ritual participant. Applying the insights of a multi-sensory anthropology to ritual does not only direct us to the various entangled ways in which ritual practices unfold particular sensorial landscapes; it can also help us to gain insight in the way rituals are experienced and interpreted differently by different members of a ritual community. An emphasis on sensorial experience counters the shortcomings of a narrow interpretative analysis, but as the next section on multi-vocal ambiguity will show, a sensitivity to the senses can also enrich our understanding of processes of interpretation, rather than leading away from it.

### *Multivocal ambiguity*

Ritual acts, utterances, substances, or objects can be open to a multitude of meanings; Victor Turner called this the depth of a 'symbol',<sup>100</sup> its "polysemy" or "multivocality" (Turner 1969, 41).<sup>101</sup> Valerio Valeri points out that Turner was the first to give elaborate descriptions of ritual actions and also studied them in their social context, questioning the interlocutors about the

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<sup>100</sup> Turner's definition of symbols differs from Peirce's triad of index, icon, and symbol. As I have stated in 2.4, 'symbol' in the Peircean definition concerns a sign process that works by means of arbitrary convention. Turner's definition of 'symbol' however concerns the sign-vehicle - a ritual act, substance or object. Part of the criticism of symbolic anthropology resides in a confusion of the definition of symbols. This confusion feeds the criticism on symbolic anthropology for treating art or ritual as language, yet Turner's 'symbol' can refer iconically, indexically, and symbolically (in the Peircean definition). Peirce's typology gives a more detailed and systematic classification of sign relations and throughout the thesis I will therefore use Peirce's definition of symbols. For Turner's 'symbols' I prefer to use 'ritual objects, substances, or acts', which makes clear that we are speaking of the sign-vehicle instead of the sign relationship.

<sup>101</sup> In *Capturing Imagination: A Proposal for an Anthropology of Thought* (2018) Carlo Severi elaborates on Gell's emphasis on the importance of the artwork's indexical aspects, but takes a step further by looking at the ways such indexical aspects can be combined with iconic and symbolic forms of representation in a single image. Severi calls this Chimeric representation - after the Chimera, a Greek mythical monster usually depicted as part lion, part goat, and part snake. This perspective leads to a fresh perspective on a wide variety of artworks. However, like Gell's cognitive indecipherability, Severi's description of chimeric ambiguity focuses on the artwork, rather than the wider ritual context. I will focus instead on the work of Victor Turner who discussed the multivocality of an act or object within a ritual context.

meaning they attributed to ritual actions, and thereby unearthing a variety of levels of meaning (Valeri 2014, 292). Turner's most famous example of the multivocality of ritual objects is his ethnographic analysis of the *mudyi* tree in *The Forest of Symbols* (1967). The *mudyi* tree, also referred to by Turner as "the milk tree", plays a central role in the girls' puberty ritual *N'kanga* of the Ndembu of Zambia. The tree is conspicuous for its white latex, which exudes in milky beads if the thin bark is scratched. Turner gathered a wide range of cultural connotations of the milk tree including womanhood, the mother-child bond, breast milk, the initiation into womanhood, the place for all mothers, women's wisdom, a place of suffering, and the unity and perpetuation of Ndembu society (Turner 1967, 52-58). The semantic structure relating to the milk tree may itself be likened to a tree, Turner writes, "At the root is the primary sense of 'breast milk' and from this proceeds by logical steps series of further senses. The general direction is from the concrete to the increasingly abstract, but there are several branches along which abstraction proceeds" (Ibid. 53-54 Turner). Different meanings were emphasized at different stages of the ritual, but the milk tree was generally seen as a representation of the unity of Ndembu society: "despite this multiplicity of senses, Ndembu speak and think about the milk tree as a unity." (...) They can break down the concept 'milk tree' cognitively into many attributes, but in ritual practice they view it as a single entity" (Ibid. 54).

Turner however observed a discrepancy in his fieldwork material. The interpretations of the milk tree given by interlocutors contradicted with the ways people behaved towards the milk tree in a ritual context. For example, people said that the milk tree represents the close tie between mother and daughter, yet in certain stages of the ritual that takes place near the tree, mother and daughter are separated (Ibid. 23). The milk tree was also said to stand for the unity of Ndembu society, yet in ritual practice it separates women from men, and some categories and groups of women from others: "the milk tree represents aspects of social differentiation and even opposition between the components of a society which ideally is supposed to symbolize as a harmonious whole" (Ibid. 22). The strength of Turner's analysis is that he does not only focus on the meanings given to him by his informants, neither does he rely only on a description of ritual actions; he attempts to understand the tension between fragmented ritual experience and knowledge:

I am convinced that my informants genuinely believed that the milk tree represented only the linking and unifying aspects of Ndembu social organization. I am equally convinced that the role of the milk tree in action situations, where it represents a focus of specified groups in opposition to other groups, forms an equally important component of its total meaning. Here the important question must be asked, "meaning for whom?" For if Ndembu do not recognize the discrepancy between their interpretation of the milk tree

symbolism and their behaviour in connection with it, does this mean that the discrepancy has no relevance for the social anthropologist? (Ibid. 25-26).

This discrepancy is not simply a lack of knowledge on the part of the novice, but concerns the tension between what Turner refers to as the “sensory pole” and the “ideological pole” of ritual (Turner 1967, 28). The ideological pole refers to the cosmological, moral and social orders, and is (as I see it) similar to Rappaport’s canonical order. The “sensory” or “oretic” pole, refers to the outward appearance of an act or object and the sensory affect it has on individual experience, and is comparable with what Rappaport calls the self-referential - it concerns the experiential here and now. The milk tree incorporates both poles; it is on the one hand a ‘semantic tree’ that symbolizes the hierarchical order of Ndembu society, yet on the other hand the tree’s white latex and a variety of other sensory elements induce an experience in the ritual participant that cannot be captured by this order. The trees’ multivocality, the combination of sensory and symbolic messages in one ritual object, provides a way to both reproduce the societal order, its rules and hierarchies, and transcend this order to indicate a unity that ties Ndembu society together.

The milk tree is not just ambiguous because it can evoke a variety of disparate meanings; it is also ambiguous because it condenses all these meanings into one tree.<sup>102</sup> The simultaneous manifestation of different meanings is the essence of a ritual object’s meaningfulness, writes Rappaport; it derives meaning from its unity instead of its separate meanings (Rappaport 1999, 256); summing up all the different meanings can never fully capture what it is ‘about’. The Nkang’a ritual and the ritual of *contemporary* art are surely very different,<sup>103</sup> yet they both involve a tension between, on the one hand, the evocation of a wide variety of possible interpretations and, on the other hand, the impossibility to provide an exhaustive list of all interpretations (thereby frustrating the anthropologist’s efforts of classification). What is more, the milk tree, like a collected body of artworks, embodies and reproduces a societal order, yet leaves room for a ritual experience that both disrupts and transcends this stratified order. Because the artwork can both evoke particular interpretations, and be meaningful in a way that transcends and negates those specific readings – that is, due to its multivocal ambiguity - it forms the revolving

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<sup>102</sup> Turner, although disagreeing with Carl Jung’s emphasis on the collective unconscious, agrees with Jung in his description of “symbols” as expressions of something relatively unknown (Turner 1967, 26). A sign, Jung wrote “is an analogous or abbreviated expression of a *known* thing. But a symbol is always the best possible expression of a relatively *unknown* fact, a fact, however, which is none the less recognized or postulated as existing” (Jung 1949, 601).

<sup>103</sup> One important difference is the function of initiation. The making of a new work of art does not fit the label ‘initiation ritual’; although young artists can be seen as novices, artists are also ritual experts that act within a different stage of the ritual process. Whereas the Ndembu novices strive to become part of society’s canonical order, artists temporarily undo the canonical order by making a new work of art that defies it. A better comparison between the ritual processes would require a closer view of Ndembu society (see Turner 1967; 1969; see also James A. Pritchett 2001; 2007).

centre of the ritual process. When the ritual order becomes a rigid and segmented symbolic system, when it has no base to stand on, and no roof that binds it together and connects it to the heavens above - no roots nor canopy, just a stem with numerous branches – there is a risk of ritual calcification, leading eventually to ritual collapse. But the ritual order can save itself by stressing its self-referential experiential character, and by maintaining a multi-vocal ambiguity that can facilitate the movement from one pole to the other. I will elaborate on the return to the self-referential below (in 2.8), but first I will discuss a different perspective of ambiguity.

### *Positional ambiguity*

When people speak of an artwork's 'originality', they usually refer to the artwork's contrast with other works; this concerns what I call the artwork's positional ambiguity. With positional ambiguity I want to highlight the ways ritual acts and objects, including works of art, can be ambiguous due to their position within a particular classification.<sup>104</sup> Ritual acts and objects can, at certain moments in a ritual context, defy and transcend classifications, as I have argued above, but this does not mean that they exist independent from classifications. Anthropological writings on classification have shown that ambiguity does not simply reside outside or before classification, but exists as a product of classification as well. As Adam Seligman and Robert Weller write in *Rethinking Pluralism*: "The world may well begin in chaos and be ordered through efforts human or divine, as so many origin tales relate. The very ordering of chaos, however, creates its own ambiguity" (Seligman and Weller 2012, 18). Dividing things into categories always problematizes the area around the category. Any creation of order, any imposition of boundaries and categories, therefore brings forth ambiguities. Ambiguity is not the same as chaos; it is a feature of classification and can thus only be understood, or at least, situated, when compared to a classification (Ibid. 20-22).

*Primitive Classification* (1903), written by Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, placed classification systems centre stage in the anthropological analysis of societies. They presented classification not as means by which an individual can order the world, but as a societal enterprise; Mauss and Durkheim believed that the individual human mind lacks the innate capacity to construct complex systems of classification and equated society's classifications with society itself (Needham 2009, 10). This was a bold argument, because it went against the prevalent notion that human classifications are a-priori structures of the mind, or the notion that classifications are the product of the way individual humans experience their surroundings (Rappaport 1999,

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<sup>104</sup> There is a difference between a classification and a canonical order. A canonical order can be seen as the embodiment and framework of a classification, it concerns the way a classification is more than a structural organization, but takes shape as a collection of objects, framed within an architectural and geographical environment. See 2.4



173).<sup>105</sup> Although, as Needham writes, there is no empirical ground for seeing society itself as the model for classification, *Primitive Classification* nevertheless laid the groundwork for anthropology's further inquiries into the nature of human classifications (Needham 2009, 24).

Anthropologists such as Edmund Leach, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Victor Turner and Mary Douglas advanced anthropology's inquiry into the societal production of classifications, but also started to focus on that which falls in-between established categories. Claude Lévi-Strauss became famous for his detailed analyses of the classificatory structures in kinships systems and myths (e.g. 1967; 1969b). Yet, in his analysis of myth he was not only interested in the way myths of various neighbouring communities are part of an underlying structure, but also in the way myths attempt to resolve the fact that many things in life cannot be placed into neat categories; myths thus expose the limits of classification.<sup>106</sup> Whereas Lévi-Strauss looked for the resolution of ambiguity in the oppositions, transformations and inversions in myth, Mary Douglas focused on the ways in which the ambiguous is placed centre stage within society (Keck 2009, 152).

In *Purity and Danger* (1966) Douglas focuses on matters out of place, things that are on the margin and do not fit within established categories. Besides her revealing discussions on the position of dirt in society, Douglas discusses the classification of animals, focusing mainly on Leviticus, the third book of the Torah and Old Testament, and the pangolin cult of the Lele; a community from the Kasai province of what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo where Douglas did her fieldwork.<sup>107</sup> Douglas argues that, on the one hand, matter out of place threatens a society's established orders with collapse. Yet, on the other hand, that which does not fit society's classifications can also be the source of the renewal of life.

A twin or triplet among the Lele is considered ambiguous because humans, in contrast to animals, normally reproduce singly. As Douglas writes: "When a human couple produce twins or triplets they have been able to break through the normal human limitations" (Douglas 1966, 169). Twins have a counterpart in the animal world, the pangolin. The pangolin, or scaly anteater, contradicts a range of established animal categories: It is scaly like a fish, yet it climbs trees. It looks like an egg-laying lizard, yet it suckles its young. Instead of running away or

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<sup>105</sup> Durkheim and Mauss argued against Frazer's (1890) idea that men were divided into clans according to the intrinsic classification of the world: "According to him [Frazer], men were divided into clans by a pre-existing classification of things; but, quite on the contrary, they classified things because they were divided by clans (Durkheim and Mauss [1901-1902] 2010, 48). This idea was further elaborated on and became the backbone of Durkheim's later and more famous work *The Elementary Forms of Religious life* (1912).

<sup>106</sup> For a good overview of Levi-Strauss's development of thought see *The Cambridge Companion to Lévi-Strauss* (Wiseman 2009).

<sup>107</sup> *The Lele of the Kasai*. Douglas, M. (1963).

attacking when confronted with danger, as most animals do, it curls into an armoured ball and waits for the hunter to pass. And, unlike other small mammals its young are born singly (Douglas 1966, 208). Yet, instead of being rejected as an anomaly, the pangolin is solemnly eaten in ritual as the most powerful source of fertility. Instead of avoiding ambiguity the Lele confront it by placing the pangolin centre stage. As Douglas writes: “They dare to grasp the pangolin and put it to ritual use” and thereby avoid a “division between ideal and reality” (Ibid. 210). The renewal of life is based on integration of the ambiguous in the social system.<sup>108</sup>

This perspective of positional ambiguity can shed light on the way certain artworks elude established categories of art. The identification of, for example, certain artistic styles, such as ‘impressionism’, outlines a category that encompasses a range of works. Yet, as categories have boundaries, there are works that might be associated with a certain category, but do not quite belong to them and occupy the fuzzy boundary area of a category, or artworks can fall in-between two categories, neither belonging fully to this nor that, yet be part of both. The works that defy the canonical orders of art in such a way might have a higher chance to be regarded as belonging to a higher realm of ‘Art’. But this is not an argument I pursue in the thesis. Instead, I will use the anthropological writings of positional ambiguity to look at the way artists pick certain themes and elements from their surroundings that are considered to be ambiguous and incorporate them into their art, thereby placing the ambiguous centre stage, like the Lele do with the pangolin. I will argue that the artistic engagement with positional ambiguity not only temporarily undermines a canonical and societal order but also enables a revitalization of both art and society.

With perceptual, multivocal, and positional ambiguity I have highlighted three different ways by which ritual acts, objects, utterances, or substances evoke ambiguity. I have argued that the ambiguity of an artwork does not reside inside the artwork, but concerns a difference with respect to the way one usually perceives and understands the world, the way one expects things to behave. This difference resides neither in the artwork, nor in that from which it differs. Difference cannot be located, Gregory Bateson says, “it is not in this, it is not in that, it is not in the space between” (Bateson 1991, 162). By making something that does not have a clear circumscribed meaning, something that is neither this nor that, artists create a situation for the onlooker, and for themselves as well, in which the certainties of everyday life, whether they are moral, political, social, or cosmological, are momentarily challenged. From the ambiguity, the confusion or uncertainty of meaning, I will now move towards the creation of a total absence of meaning.

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<sup>108</sup> See also Douglas, M. (1957) *Animals in Lele Religious Symbolism*. See also: *Animals Are Good to Think and Good to Prohibit* (Tambiah 1969) and *The Spider and the Pangolin* (Lewis, 1991).

## 2.7 *The Night of Brahma*

The total absence of meaning in the work of art can be found in two ideal modes: absolute chaos and absolute form. In *Entropy and Art* (1971) Rudolph Arnheim distinguishes two stylistic trends in the visual arts that he associates with two modes of entropy: the tendency towards “simplicity, symmetry, and regularity” of form and a tendency that relies on accidental or deliberately produced disorder, which Arnheim refers to as the “destruction of shape”, or the “catabolic effect” (Arnheim 1971, 23).<sup>109</sup> These two forms of artistic entropy are separately discussed in the art historical analyses of Rosalind Krauss and Umberto Eco (who do not refer to Arnheim’s work on entropy), whereas Krauss discusses the tendency towards the simplicity of form, Eco focuses on the destruction of form.

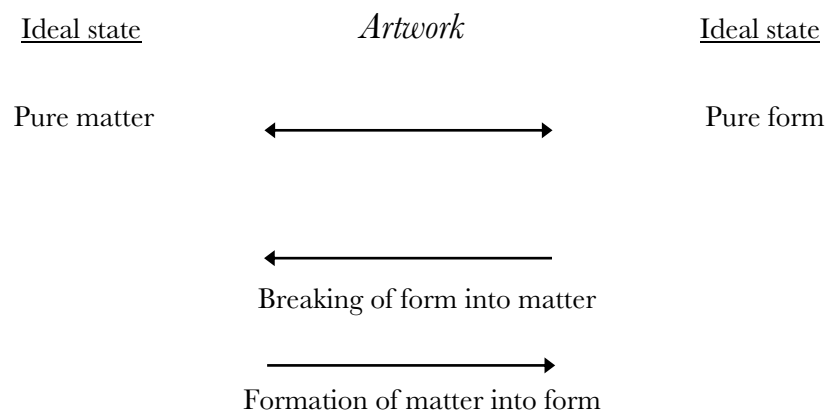
In *The Originality of the Avant Garde* (1986) Rosalind Krauss analyses the lack of meaning, “the refusal of speech”, in works that have grid-like, abstract, geometric forms. Krauss argues that the incentive for renewal among the avant-garde is not just about making something new that is different from what has been made before, but emphasizes the avant-garde’s quest for originality; artist above all attempt to make something that is original. Whether the avant-garde artist was seen as a revolutionary, dandy, anarchist, aesthete, technologist, or mystic, what they all had in common, writes Krauss, was the quest for originality (Krauss 1986, 6). The avant-garde artist does not just break with the past but searches for a new beginning: “More than a rejection or dissolution of the past, avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth” (Ibid.). Krauss exemplifies this search for an origin with the popularity of the grid among artists such as Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), Agnes Martin (1912-2004), and Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967). The grid, Krauss states, lacks a hierarchy, a centre, or an inflection and is therefore anti-referential and hostile to narrative, it is a “refusal of speech” (Ibid. 7). This ‘silence’ of the grid was not only a pursuit of perfected form and a striving for an absolute disinterestedness of the work of art, but a search for the origin of art as well: “No echoes of footsteps in empty rooms, no scream of birds across open skies, no rush of distant water (...). [I]n this new-found quiet, what many artists thought they could hear was the beginning, the origins of Art” (Ibid.).

Umberto Eco highlights the opposite pole; the artistic attempt to create absolute chaos, a situation where every possible resemblance to form is avoided. In *The Open Work* (1989) Eco

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<sup>109</sup> My reference to entropy concerns Arnheim’s definition of artistic entropy. Whether Arnheim’s two forms of artistic ‘entropy’ could be in any way aligned with the scientifically described phenomenon of entropy within thermodynamics is beyond the scope of this writing. As Martin, Smith and Francis point out, the concept of entropy is ridden with misinterpretations, both among scientists and non-scientists; see Martin, Smith and Francis (2013), for a historical analysis of entropy.

discusses paintings by Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) and the larger *Informal Art* movement. For Eco, Dubuffet's *Matériologies* series (1959-1960) are "much like a road surface or other bare terrain in their attempt to reproduce the absolute freedom and unlimited suggestiveness of brute matter" (Eco 1989, 99). "This sort of paintings (...) is a constant reminder of the original act of Creation" (Ibid. 102). Deprived of all indication, all direction what remains is original chaos, mere matter, substance or expression without any hint of form. The 'informal' is a rejection of earlier artist forms, but it does not proclaim the death of form; it proposes, according to Eco "a new, more flexible version of form as a *field of possibilities* (Ibid. 103, emphasis Eco). Eco writes that this state of chaos is only a moment; after this ideal state the work will start to take form again. But for now, I will consider both types of artworks described by Krauss and Eco as representatives of two ideal states of being, one of pure form, the other of pure chaotic matter or expression. How are these two ideal states related? In a way, every artwork is a union of form and matter; the making process of the artwork starts with raw material, paint, clay, stone, or a bodily movement, that gradually takes form, suggesting a direction from matter to form. Yet one can see an opposite movement as well; when artists break with certain formal conventions and attempt to make an artwork that is a spontaneous act, a pure expression of colour, matter, sound or body, they make something that moves away from form. The ideal states of pure form and pure matter find themselves at the endpoints of these two movements.



*Figure 2.2*

The above diagram presents both ideal states as opposite poles. However, Krauss and Eco refer to both states as an absolute beginning; how can pure form and pure matter both designate a beginning? Although these two ideal states seem to be opposites, two extreme points of a continuum, they have something in common; Arnheim points out that they both reduce tension, or difference. For an act of communication - any kind of communication, not just art - to mean something, difference needs to be perceived. Gregory Bateson defines information or "negative entropy" as "any difference which makes a difference" (Bateson 1971, 315; 1979 68-

69, 228). It is the perceived difference that establishes “what the thing is about” (Arnheim 1971, 41). Without any difference, whether it is a state of pure chaos or pure form, there is no information, nothing to make sense of. Both the striving towards absolute form and the striving towards the disruption of form into mere matter or expression presents something that does not signify, that is not about anything at all.

It might help to look at creation myths, as they tell and retell the story of beginnings as well. Creation stories typically narrate an initial state of unformed matter and the subsequent formation of the world out of that material. Bateson gives an example of the central origin myth of the Iatmul of New Guinea. In the beginning the crocodile Kavwokmali paddled with his front and hind legs keeping the mud mixed with the water. The hero Kevembuangga killed Kavwokmali with his spear after which the mud settled and dry land was formed. Kevembuangga stamped with his foot on the dry land and demonstrated “that it was good” (Bateson 1972, xxxi).<sup>110</sup> As Rappaport argues, many creation myths ignore the origin of matter and take it for granted. The beginnings are not about the creation of matter, the creation of something out of nothing, but about giving shape to a primordial undifferentiated substance (Rappaport 1999, 155).<sup>111</sup> Creation is “represented as the “informing of substance, and substantiation of form, a union of form and substance” (Ibid.) This altercation between form and matter is elaborated on in the rich tapestry of Indian mythology. I will shortly summarize one myth, of so many, which Heinrich Zimmer narrates from the Puranas: the story of Markandeya (Zimmer 1972, 23-53).

The myth of Markandeya begins with the deterioration of the cosmic order. Holy Dharma vanishes, people are filled with lust and evil, the bonds of sympathy and love have dissolved, there are no wise men, no saints. The seemingly holy Brahmin is no better than the fool. Old people try to behave like the young, and the young lack the candour of youth. The once harmoniously ordered City of Man has deteriorated beyond salvage; in short, the universe is ripe for dissolution. Vishnu, the Supreme Being, from whom the world first emanated in purity and order, now devours the outworn cosmos and dissolves all animate beings; from Brahma – the creator of life – down to the last leaf of grass, everything returns into Vishnu’s divine

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<sup>110</sup> The Iatmul live in Sepik River valley of New Guinea where the separation of land from water is often unclear. It is therefore understandable, as Bateson points out, that they are interested in the differentiation of land from water. In many origin stories, like Genesis, the separation between water and land occurs as well, but the Iatmul’s story is different from Genesis. In Genesis God actively sorts and divides, while in the Iatmul myth, sorting occurs if randomization is prevented. And indeed, mud does remain in suspension if randomly stirred and settles when the stirring ceases (Bateson 1972, xxxi).

<sup>111</sup> There are exceptions, for example in Indian mythology. In book 10 of the Rig Veda: “What was the base, what sort of raw matter was there, and precisely how was it done, when the All-maker (Viśvakarman), casting his eye on all, created the earth and revealed the sky in its glory? (10.81.2) (Doniger 2005, 35).

substance.<sup>112</sup> The night of Brahma has begun, the interval period after the dissolution and before the re-creation of the universe. Vishnu, the Lord of Maya, has taken on the shape of a giant and sleeps on the ocean of immortal substance. With his lips a little open, he breathes with a deep, sonorous, rhythmical sound. The giant and the cosmic ocean are dual manifestations of a single essence; they are both Vishnu. Inside the giant the universe is restored to an ideal vision of what the universe should be (or could be), outside exists only a dark cosmic sea. Inside the giant a holy pilgrim named Markandeya, thousands of years old, is aimlessly wandering the peaceful earth and is content with the piety of the people he encounters during his travels. But then something strange happens: Markandeya accidentally falls through the mouth of the all-containing Vishnu and plunges in the cosmic sea. He does not see the giant, only the dark ocean. There is no sun, no moon, no wind and no mountains and the saint despairs. Finally, he becomes aware of the partly submerged sleeping giant, who resembles a mountain range breaking out of the waters, glowing with a wonderful light from within. He swims towards him, but before he can ask anything, the giant swallows him up. Markandeya is contained again in the divine being, as a figure of a dream – although for his limited consciousness it is reality and the moment in the cosmic ocean a kind of vision, a dream. He resumes his former life as a saintly pilgrim and wanders for another hundred years. But then, once again, he slips from the sleeper's mouth and falls into the dark sea. The world familiar to him has vanished. This time, instead of a giant, he sees a baby, sleeping peacefully under a fig tree and then, by an effect of Maya, the little boy is cheerfully at play, amidst the vast ocean. In humble surrender, Markandeya prays: "Let me know the secret of your Maya, the secret of your apparition now as child, lying and playing in the infinite sea. Lord of the Universe, by what name are you known? I believe you to be the Great Being of all beings; for who else could exist as you exist?" Vishnu replied: "I am the Primeval Cosmic Man, Narayana. He is the waters; he is the first being; he is the source of the universe (...)." Vishnu swallows Markandeya again. This time the heart of the saint is flooded with bliss and instead of wandering further he seeks rest in a solitary place and hears the following: "Many forms do I assume. And when the sun and moon have disappeared, I float and swim with slow movements on the boundless expanse of the waters. I am the Gander. I am the Lord. I bring forth the universe from my essence and I abide in the cycle of time that dissolves it." The gander (*hamsa*), a male wild goose, manifests itself to Markandeya through a song, a melody of inhaling and exhaling. The inhalation is said to make the sound *ham*, the exhalation *sa*. By repeatedly humming *ham-sa*, *ham-sa* Markandeya is initiated in the universal melody of God's life-breath, flowing in, flowing out. The sound is the magic melody of the creation and dissolution of the world.<sup>113</sup> The opposition between the

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<sup>112</sup> Zimmer describes Brahma as "(...) the inner rule and cosmic life-spirit of the 'universal body'" (Zimmer 1972, 36).

<sup>113</sup> The gander is associated with Brahma; just as Indra rides on an elephant, or Shiva on a bull, Brahma

external world of the cosmic ocean and the internal world are now reconciled and identified as one (Ibid. 49-50). The myth ends with the beginning of a new cosmic cycle, Vishnu produces the universe again. He enters the water, gently stirs it, and waves ripple. A tiny cleft emerges which consists of ether and sounds. From the sound emerges a wind that expands far and wide. It arouses the water and from the friction emerges fire, which subsequently devours a great quantity of water. Where the water has disappeared a void remained, which became the upper sphere of heaven. Then, out of his cosmic body, Vishnu puts forth a lotus and the four-faced Creator Brahma, who sits in the centre of the golden lotus and creates the world with all its beings. Another cycle has started and the night of Brahma has ended, “moist and radiant with the living substance of its source, expanding in the sweet dawn” (Ibid. 53).

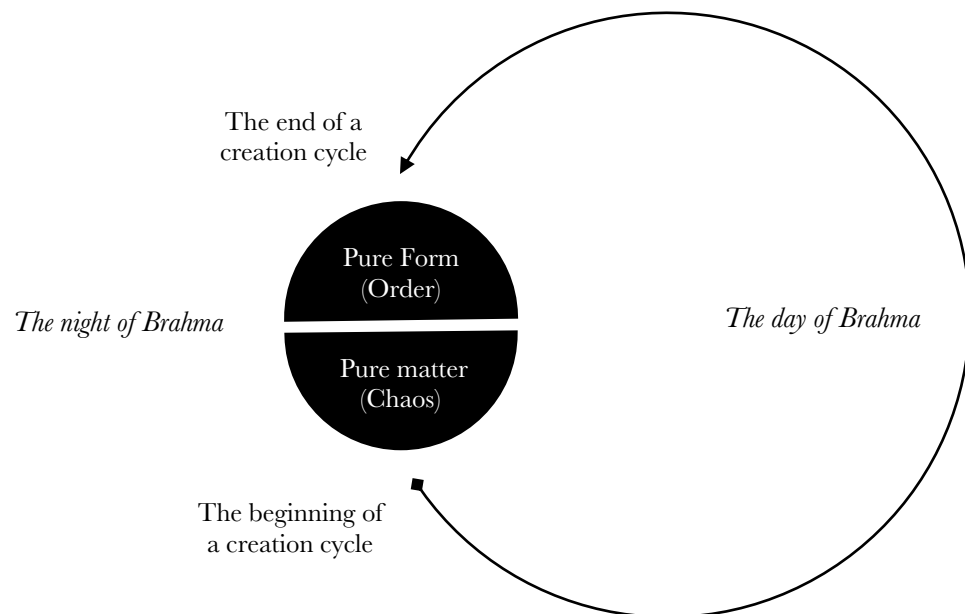


Figure 2.3

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travels with the wild gander. The Gander is the animal manifestation of the creative principle, embodied in Brahma. Why a gander? Zimmer asks. It swims on the surface of the water, but is not bound to it and can fly up to the sky, where it migrates south and north following the seasons. A wanderer between the upper celestial and lower earthly spheres: “We, like the wild goose, are citizens of the two spheres (...) on the one hand earth-bound, limited in life-strength, in virtues and in consciousness, but on the other hand a manifestation of the divine essence, which is unlimited, immortal, virtually omniscient and all-powerful” (Zimmer 1972. 49).

The myth of Markandeya expresses not just the differentiation of unorganized substance into organized form and the breaking down of form into substance (as shown in figure 2.2), but shows that after the dissolution of form and before the differentiation into new forms, in the night of Brahma, two states emerge, an ideal image of pure form and an ocean of chaotic matter (as shown in figure 2.3). Pure form and pure chaos are thus not opposed to each other in a linear fashion (figure 2.2), but form both the beginning and the end of a cyclical process of creation.

The *modern* visual arts have come up with an expression of both states of pure form and complete chaos as well, respectively described by Krauss and Eco. And when artists reach for an extreme, such as Malevich with his black square, the work might be considered simultaneously as pure matter and as pure form. But the night of Brahma comes to an end. Like the myth of Markandeya the ritual of *contemporary* art unfolds a cyclical narrative. The creation of artworks that represented either pure form or utter chaos is only a moment within a cyclical ritual process. As Umberto Eco points out, we cannot help to find a pattern in the chaos. Even works that express what Eco calls white noise, “a noise which, logically speaking, should give us the greatest possible amount of information, but which in fact gives us none at all”, can be a signal. By selecting something as a work of art it becomes something that invites the beholder to find the merest sign. Eco: “If I draw a square around a crack in a wall with a piece of chalk, I automatically imply that I have chosen that crack over others and now propose it as a particularly suggestive form - in other words, I have turned it into an artifact, a form of communication, simply by isolating it, by calling attention to it in a rather mechanical fashion not unlike the use of quotation marks in literature” (Eco 1989, 99). Intention alone, Eco argues, is enough to give noise the value of a signal. A work of art that seems to be pure vitality, action, movement, brute matter still invites “readings” (Ibid. 100).

And Rosalind Krauss points out as well that the grid is not just an ultimate beginning; grid-like, abstract geometric patterns can be found throughout history and are merely rediscovered by the modern avant-gardists. Krauss does not criticize those artists using a grid as un-original, but exposes the paradox inherent in the idea of originality. The grid gives the artist an ‘absolute beginning’, yet it simultaneously restricts the artists in making repetitions of that same grid pattern: “once one is involved in deploying it, the grid is extremely difficult to use in the service of invention” (Krauss 1986, 9). The employment of the grid is thus both a beginning and a repetition. When artistic attempts to express ideal form are preserved for posterity, and thereby suspended from the intervals of time, we forget that this ideal state can only be a moment in longer narrative; one that involves the de-formation of form as well. And, likewise, the expression of pure substance is only a moment that will be followed by the in-formation of substance. Artworks that attempt to express pure substance or pure form are integrated in



*contemporary* art's wider ritual process; they will be selected, interpreted, classified and preserved, become part of canonical orders, and perhaps transcend such orders to become part a higher order of Art. Strange forms become familiar, spontaneous expression becomes habit; works that confuse our perception are nothing more than a trick; works that fall between categories become part of a new category; works that are perceived as multi-vocally ambiguous, or works that are perceived as pure expressions, as having no meaning whatsoever, become symbols that mean something particular. But at some point in time, when 'the ordered City of Man has deteriorated', the ritual cyclical process of Art makes a turn again, a turn away from meaning, towards a new beginning. But, as I will argue below, this return involves more than the collapse of the canonical order of men; it also involves a descent of 'the gods' from their high pedestals, whether we call them 'Brahma' or 'Art' – "for the gods too have need of the profane."<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss (1964 [1898], 100). *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*. Translated by W. D. Halls.

## 2.8 Bite! Bite! Bite!

The ritual cycle of *contemporary* art is beginning to take shape. But before concluding this chapter with a comprehensive model of this cycle (2.9), a split in the cyclical path needs to be addressed. The sacralization of Art can be accomplished by either searching for ‘master’ works that disrupt and transcend the canonical order within the museum (2.4), by criticizing the styles, conventions and institutions of art (2.5), by making something new that is ambiguous (2.6), or by making something that is without meaning (2.7). These ritual acts can be summarized as the disruption of the canonical order. But there is another path, one that comes after sacralization. What happens when a higher order of Art has been reached? Is this not an endpoint of the ritual process of art?

Ritual participants cannot stay in this higher order forever; they have to return back to earth. The importance of this return was already described by Hubert and Mauss in their famous essay on sacrifice; they termed it “desacralization” (Hubert and Mauss 1898, 57). In *Prey into Hunter* (1992) Maurice Bloch gives, next to the ritual process towards the sacred, ample attention to the move away from it. Bloch follows Van Gennep’s and Turner’s tripartite ritual structure of separation, transition, and reintegration, but reinterprets them; he considers the stages of separation and transition not so much as a process that creates a radical temporal shift between two stages, a before and after, but sees them as a “dramatically constructed dichotomization located within the body of each of the participants” (Bloch 1992, 6). The novice of a male initiation ritual, for example, does not simply leave the group of the young and uninitiated to become part of a transcendental sphere of society, associated for example with the spirits of the ancestors. Instead, the “transcendental part of his identity”, one that concerns eternal truth, is added to his former identity – the part of his identity that does not belong to the eternal, but belongs to the sphere of life associated with the home, reproduction and mortality, what Bloch terms the “native vitality” of life (Ibid 5-6).

This splitting of a person into two contrasting aspects, rather than a complete transformation from one to the other, has a consequence for the interpretation of the third stage. Whereas Van Gennep describes this third stage as the reincorporation into society, and Turner as the reintegration into the mundane world, Bloch stresses that the third stage is not just a return to the condition left behind in the first stage. Bloch calls this third ritual step the “consumption of vitality” – an act that creates a balance between vitality and eternal truth (Ibid., 6). To better understand Bloch’s concepts of vitality and the sacred I will describe with some detail one of the case studies he presents. Bloch’s cross-cultural analysis of ritual in *Prey into Hunter* starts with

a description of an initiation ritual of the Orokaiva of Papua New Guinea.<sup>115</sup> The initiation of the Orokaiva, which involves the passage of both girls and boys into adulthood, acts out the transformation that gives the book its title: *Prey into Hunter*.

Before following the Orokaiva's ritual passage from 'prey' into 'hunter', I will shortly describe the difference between four beings involved in the ritual: spirits, birds, humans and pigs. The Orokaiva domesticate pigs and have a strong bond with them, as many other communities in New Guinea. The pigs of the Orokaiva are born wild in the forest; they are hunted down, caught, taken to the village, and live underneath the houses that are built on poles. The pigs are considered to be similar to humans and are called 'the children' of their owner. An important reason why pigs are like humans is because pigs die; that is, the mortality of pigs is emphasized. All pigs are eventually slaughtered at rituals in the centre of the village and their central place under the house is a constant reminder of death in everyday life. The killing of pigs is a festive occasion, but also a moment of real sadness; pigs, Bloch emphasizes, are seen as 'almost children' (Ibid. 12). Spirits are different, they do not have attributes such as bodies, grease, sexuality and death – attributes that pigs and humans share. Spirits are represented in Orokaiva rituals as predominantly bird-like. Although the beliefs of birds in New Guinea are complex, often they are considered to be beyond the processes of ageing (Lewis 1980; Hirsch 1987). The main difference with humans and pigs, Bloch points out, is that spirits and birds don't die. Whereas pigs are represented as 'over-mortal', spirits are represented as immortal or rather non-mortal (Ibid. 12).<sup>116</sup> This temporal difference is expressed in spatial contrasts as well, both vertically and horizontally: Spirits, like birds, are seen as creatures of the above, unlike pigs, which are seen as belonging to the 'underneath'. And, whereas domestic pigs are associated with the houses and villages, places for productive and reproductive activities, spirits live in the forest, away from work, daily care and ageing. Humans share attributes of both pigs and spirits/birds. Humans, especially children, are like domesticated pigs because they live most of the time in villages and are mortal. But humans are also like spirits, and bird-like; they are "immortal, feral, and beyond process" (Ibid. 13). Spirits are like humans, except for those attributes which humans share with domesticated pigs, and pigs are like humans without any trace of a spirit element. Humans are thus situated between pigs and spirits/birds. But this is not a static position; to become like spirits the Orokaiva children have to be initiated. The children, who are nurtured in much the same way as piglets, must "gain their bird-like aspect and discover their new spirit home in the bush" (Ibid. 14).

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<sup>115</sup> My description is mainly based on Bloch's analysis of the ritual. For more in-depth ethnographic publications see F.E. Williams (1930), E. Schwimmer (1973), and A. Iteanu (1983).

<sup>116</sup> The Orokaiva word for spirit is "the being who survives death" (Williams 1930, 267, in Bloch 1992, 12).

The initiation ritual starts with ‘an attack’ on the village from the outside, by people who have been hiding in the bush. Wearing masks decorated with bird feathers and pigs’ tusks, imitating the sounds and behaviour of birds and shouting that they are spirits, they chase the children who are to be initiated, maltreat them, act like hunters stalking wild pigs, and shout at them: ‘Bite, bite, bite’. Finally, they herd the children onto a platform – which looks similar to the platform on which pigs are killed at other rituals – cover the children in a blinding cape and take them out of the village into the forest. In the initiation hut the children do not eat normal food, are not allowed to wash, speak aloud, or look around. This is the stage of ritual separation. Like the dead, they have lost their individuality, their sense of sight and speech. In a transition period that can last several years, the initiates undergo various ordeals, are taught a number of secrets and spirit dances, and learn to play the sacred flutes and bullroarers. Most importantly, they are shown the feathered masks that they will be able to wear as initiated adults. During the seclusion the initiates’ feathers ‘grow’ on them, as the Orokaiva say. After the initiation the children have become – and will remain – partly spirits and have the right to wear the mask. When the initiated return to the village, they return as partly spirits. Instead of being hunted as prey, as if they were pigs, they become the hunters of real pigs, shout the same words ‘bite bite bite’, and after the ritual killing of the pigs, they distribute the meat wearing the feathered masks.<sup>117</sup>

The initiates leave the village by ‘dying’ as a village pig to become a bird-like spirit out there in the forest; the here and now is left behind by a spatiotemporal move towards a timeless elsewhere. However, the initiated young adults of the Orokaiva cannot become full-time spirits, permanently located in the forest; they have to return to the everyday life of the village. The move towards the beyond is politically unsatisfactory, for if you leave this life “the constructed totality becomes of no relevance to the here and now” (Ibid. 4). The first and second part of the ritual process (separation and transition) are well known among anthropologists, whereas the third part is much less commented upon. Bloch writes that anthropologists have often treated the return from the sacred as a reintegration of the initiate into society as it was. Yet Bloch argues that this last step of ritual has to be more than a return to the status quo. The return to the here and now, the retreat from the sacred, seems at first sight a contradiction. As Bloch asks: “What would be the point of leaving one form of existence behind with such panache merely

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<sup>117</sup> Bloch points out that initiation rituals involve not just the initiates, but many other people as well: “...in initiating their children, the adults have allowed their children to be killed, consumed and conquered by the spirits, just as they themselves were once killed and consumed at their own initiation, in order that these children will become successful hunters, killers, consumers and conquerors of their environment and of the future” (Bloch 1992, 16-17). The same can be said about the ritual of *contemporary* art; it is not just the artists, or the artworks that undergo a transformation, but the entire community of art lovers that take part in the ritual process, albeit in different ways.

to return to it? (...) Why leave the profane and enter the sacred at such cost, only to return to the profane?" (Ibid. 15). This contradiction is avoided in ritual, Bloch argues, by making the return different from the departure. The initiated do not return the village in the same way; it is not a return to a state previous to that of initiation. This means that society cannot be divided into 'the sacred' and 'the profane' – as two separated spheres that can only be bridged in ritual. An initiated young adult does not merely leave the sacred to return to the mundane world he had left behind, but returns as a changed person, a "permanently transcendental person who can therefore dominate the here and now of which he previously was part" (Ibid. 5). The transcendental is not left behind but continues to be attached to those who made the initial move in its direction. Initiated Orokaiva have now another home in the forest *in addition* to the village and can spend time in the cult house located in the forest. Like birds and spirits, they now belong to the forest as well. They have become dual beings with two homes, as Bloch writes, "one side of them is pig-like and located in the village and one side of them is spirit- or bird-like and located in the bush, but because of their duality, they are not really fully at home in either place" (Ibid. 14).

Bloch argues that the return from the higher order is made possible by the consumption of external vitality, a second act of "rebounding violence" that is different from the first act of violence (Ibid. 5-6). Before initiation, the pig element in children was 'given', part of their nature, it was internal and had to be 'killed'; this is the first act of violence. When the initiated young adults return to the village, they regain the pig element by consuming the meat of real pigs; this is the second act of violence, or "rebounding violence". The return is a conquest of vitality, a vitality that was lost in the process of sacralization. Vitality is regained, but not the vitality that was discarded in the first stage of the ritual: "Unlike the native vitality of the first stage which must be driven out of oneself, the vitality reintroduced in the second stage is taken from external sources and is consumed as the food of the transcendental subject, often literally through the mouth" (Ibid. 6). The second act of violence, Bloch states, can thus be seen as the consequence of the first: "it is the elimination of ordinary vitality which necessitates its replacement by a new, plundered vitality, and the contact with the transcendental which provides the impetus for this forced substitution. The whole ritual process can therefore be understood as the construction of a form of 'rebounding violence' both at the public and at the experiential level" (Ibid.). The recovery of vitality in ritual does not necessarily involve a literal consumption, but requires a conquering of something considered vital in society. This conquered vitality is obtained from "*outside* beings", usually animals, but sometimes plants, other peoples, or women (Ibid. 5). The presence of an alien species, such as pigs for the Orokaiva, ensures that vitality can be both abandoned and regained without contradiction (Ibid. 20).

Bloch's theory on vitality can be applied to the ritual of *contemporary* art as well. This first and second stage of the Orokaiva initiation ritual clearly show a resemblance with the same stages of ritual of *contemporary* art; both rituals accomplish a separation from the here and now, prompting various spatiotemporal transformations, to finally arrive at a sacred 'beyond'. But the third ritual step as well – the return from the sacred and the 'consumption of vitality' – forms part of the ritual process of *contemporary* art. Many *contemporary* artworks are the outcomes of engagements with a range of vital sources, such as organic materials, bodies and bodily substances, particular landscapes, or specific communities. In chapter 6, for example, I will elaborate on the use of materials such clay, rust, or bamboo by Kolkata artists, as engagements with vitality. Hal Foster describes these *contemporary* artistic engagements with everyday vitality as a "return of the Real" (Foster 1996). Foster identifies particular artistic practices that came up since the 1960s as "neo-avantgarde", and contrasts them with a "historical avant-garde", which is characterized by the flight from representation in search for abstract form and a general anarchic institutional criticism.<sup>118</sup> Foster's notion of the "the return of the Real" seems to resonate with Bloch's notion of a return to vitality, but there is an important difference. Whereas Bloch places vitality within a dynamic ritual process, Foster relies on the psychoanalytic registers of reality theorized by Jacques Lacan. Lacan's concept of 'the Real' and related concepts such as 'the Other', are presented as unknowable, fundamental, and therefore fixed categories.<sup>119</sup> Bloch on the other hand, does not write about 'the Vital' as a singular essence, but focuses on ritual actions, on the 'consumption of vitality'; he describes different engagements with vitality as transitory moments and acts within a wider ritual environment. Foster writes of a 'return' (thus a dynamic process) as well, but this return involves an art historical turn since the 1960s, not a ritual return. I do not deny the historical changes within *contemporary* art, but a linear perspective can lead to a neglect of the cyclical return of the ritual process. Foster associates neo-avantgarde artworks with the Lacanian register of 'the Real', as if these artworks are 'the Real', and thereby neglects the ways people perceive the artworks differently over time. Instead, I argue that during the ritual process of *contemporary* art,

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<sup>118</sup> Although the art practices of the neo-avantgarde can still be critical, they are critical investigations rather than straight-out negations, Foster writes (Foster 1996, 20).

<sup>119</sup> Lacan has constructed a triad of 'the Imaginary', 'the Symbolic', and 'the Real' that together present three fundamental dimensions of psychic reality. "The Real" is thus not the same as reality, but an aspect of it (Johnston 2018). W.J.T. Mitchell points out that Lacan's triad of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real correspond (respectively) to the Peircean triad of icon, symbol, and index (Mitchell 2005, 73-74). However, Lacan presents these categories as interconnected yet separate registers of the psyche, rather than analytic categories of sign processes. As I have discussed above (2.4), Peirce's categories are sign-processes that can be combined in various ways within a single sign-vehicle; there is no such as thing as 'the symbol', 'the icon', 'the index'. But Lacan's triad of fundamental dimensions does not allow for such flexibility. What is more, whereas the Peircean index is a clearly defined sign process, Lacan defines 'the Real' by negation, as that which is not presented by 'the symbolic' and 'the imaginary'; doing so 'The Real' becomes that which is unknown. Perhaps because 'the Real' is conceived of a black box, it has taken on an ever-increasing number of aspects and connotations since the 1960s and up through the end of Lacan's teachings (See Johnston 2018).

the artworks that Foster equates with ‘The Real’ will be embedded within a canonical order. The ‘neo-avantgarde’ artworks will not be permanently associated with ‘The Real’ – a next generation of artists will define their new ‘Real’ and might invent yet another term to replace the ‘neo-avant-garde’. Another reason for using Bloch’s ritual theory is that Foster’s ‘return of the real’ is embedded within a discussion of Western *modern* and *contemporary* art and cannot be simply applied to a discussion of *contemporary* art beyond the Europe and North America. Bloch’s analysis is more useful as it builds on the notion of vitality by looking at a wide range of ritual contexts, thereby presenting a general theory of ritual that can be applied to new case studies. Even if Foster’s analysis concerns *contemporary* art and thus stands closer to this inquiry, I therefore have a preference for Bloch’s analysis.

The Orokaiva initiation ritual and the ritual of *contemporary* art are surely very different rituals, yet they share an underlying ritual pattern. Bloch points out that a wide range of rituals, whether they belong to the anthropological categories of rituals of ‘sacrifice’, ‘imitation’, or ‘possession’, do not follow life but take the opposite direction.<sup>120</sup> Instead of an affirmation of birth and growth, rituals emphasise weakening and death. The significance of symbolic or actual killing, Bloch argues, is that the ritual participant can become part of those segments of society, such as a descent group of ancestors, that lie beyond the limitations of individual human life, beyond the process of life and death: “By leaving this life, it is possible to see oneself and others as part of something permanent, therefore life-transcending” (Bloch 1992, 4). The spatiotemporal transformation and consecration of artworks outlines the same ritual direction and can be described as a symbolic ‘killing’ of artworks. A new work of art is at first endowed with a native vitality, but it is separated from everyday life and then symbolically ‘killed’ in the process of canonization and sacralization. In what Bloch calls the ‘second half’ (that is, the third ritual step),<sup>121</sup> the making of a new work of art actualizes a recovery of vitality that was lost in the process of this first act of violence. By engaging with vitality, by ‘consuming it’, artists revitalize the higher order of Art.

An important difference between Orokaiva initiation ritual and *contemporary* art concerns the place of the ritual vis-à-vis the larger society. Whereas the Orokaiva initiation ritual, as

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<sup>120</sup> Bloch discusses a range of other rituals, such as Dinka sacrifice, Buid sacrifice, and Shona spirit mediums; although different they all share the underlying ritual pattern. As Bloch writes: “This matrix of Orokaiva initiation, which is found in many other rituals of initiation, is analogous to the underlying matrix of many of the rituals which have been called sacrifices in anthropological literature. (...) In the end, however, this comparison will lead to an even wider comparison of ritual forms, taking in such manifestations as funerary rituals, spirit possession and spirit mediumship” (Bloch 1992, 24-25).

<sup>121</sup> Bloch often refers to the first and second step as the ‘first half’, and the third step as the ‘second half’, thereby putting more weight on the third step of ‘reintegration’. For the sake of clarity, I will retain the tripartite structure.

described by Iteanu (1983), takes a central position in Orokaiva society, *contemporary* art, although widespread, occurs within a much more fragmented society and has to compete, or at least share public attention, with a wide range of ritual systems, such as those commonly referred to as religion. Another point of attention and possible difference concerns the relative appraisal of the different ritual steps. The Orokaiva ritual participants seem to value the expulsion of vitality and the reconquering of vitality as equally important. But within the ritual of *contemporary* art the appraisal varies and depends on the positions of the ritual participants in the field – curators, artists, museum visitors, art historians, or gallery owners, might all have a different take on this. The retrieval of vitality – the making of a new work of art by engaging with an external source of vitality – is often regarded as positive by young artists, but might prompt rejections from other ritual participants. And, whereas the first two ritual steps of separation and transition, resulting in the establishment of a canonical order and sacred order of Art, are accepted by most ritual participants, artists might lament the symbolic ‘killing’ of art and criticize its underlying practices, such as preservation, classification, and interpretation. An extreme case was the French artist Daniel Buren, who stated that in the studio the work is truly in its place. The work originates in the studio and belongs there, but it is also made to make a passage and thereby is burdened, as Buren remarks sharply and dramatically “[by] a mortal paradox from which it cannot escape since its purpose implies a progressive removal from its own reality, from its origin. If the work of art remains in the studio, however, it is the artist that risks death . . . from starvation” (Ibid. 158). When he was seventeen Buren went to the Provence in the southeast of France and visited artist studios of both young and old, known and unknown artists:

“What struck me about all their work was first its diversity, then its quality and richness, especially the sense of reality, that is, the “truth,” that it possessed, whoever the artist and whatever his reputation. This “reality/truth” existed not only in terms of the artist and his workspace but also in relation to the environment, the landscape. It was when I later visited, one after the other, the exhibitions of these artists that my enthusiasm began to fade, and in some cases disappear, as if the works I had seen were not these, nor even produced by the same hands. Torn from their context, their “environment,” they had lost their meaning and died, to be reborn as forgeries” (Buren 1971 [2010], 161).

There is another difference. Like the novices of the Orokaiva ritual, practicing artists could be said to attain a double identity; they take part in both the higher order of Art, while remaining connected to the vital sphere of everyday life. But the Orokaiva initiation ritual concerns the passage of humans, whereas *contemporary* art focuses on the passage of artworks. Works of art, whether they are installations, performances or paintings, do not live ordinary lives like humans.



And unlike the initiated humans, artworks themselves do not return to everyday life; when they become part of a (relatively) permanent museum collection, they remain there. Although artworks can re-enter the market after being part of a collection, they usually remain part of the particular category they were identified with – they are still embedded within the canonical order.<sup>122</sup> The artist however does live an everyday life and does not stay, cannot stay, within the higher realm of Art. Whereas an artwork cannot return, the artist can return by engaging with an external source of vitality, by making a new work of art. Yet very soon this new work of art is exhibited, interpreted, circulated and perhaps preserved; it becomes part of a canonical order and thus follows the same trajectory of the ritual cycle. The two acts of violence – the killing of the pig within the novice, and the killing of the pig – are clearly separated in the Orokaiva ritual process, but within the ritual of *contemporary* art the two ritual movements come together in a new work of art; artworks are Janus faced, they are both the end product of a ritual cycle and the beginning of a new ritual cycle.

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<sup>122</sup> This is not so much a difference between material objects versus humans. There are various rituals in which ritual objects undergo both ritual movements; the return to vitality is often accomplished by a (partial) destruction of the ritual object, by which it is turned back into the vital substance it was made from. A good example of this is Durga Puja in India, on which I will elaborate in chapter 6.

## 2.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that *contemporary* artworks are part of a ritual cycle. This ritual cycle enables and guides a range of spatiotemporal transformations; artists and other ritual participants, such as curators and critics, make and circulate artworks (in conjunction with art images, and art texts); the artworks are separated from the here and now, they are collected, interpreted, framed, classified and preserved, and become part of a canonical order; works of art might for example be aligned to form a temporal order of linear progression, or are framed within a national narrative. Referring to other works within a collection, an artwork becomes a member of class; it comes to signify symbolically, operating through convention, *in addition* to its iconic and indexical ways of signification. But not only artworks make this passage into a different spatiotemporal order; together with the artworks artists and other participants can extend themselves, both spatially and temporally, and materialize their presence in different times and different places.

But the canonical order is not sacred; it is accompanied and surpassed by a sacred order that relates the questionable canonical order to an unquestionable realm of eternal truth. The art museum leaves room for the wandering visitor to disregard and go beyond the canonical order. And art experts might elevate some ‘masterpieces’ onto a higher plane, a higher order that concerns an abstract and indescribable idea of Art. This abstract idea can be indicated by the word ‘Art’, but it cannot be known as such; it can only be experienced. The felt presence of something higher goes beyond the canonical order, but it can also sanctify and thus strengthen the canonical. More than merely a metaphysical trick to support a conservative ritual mechanism, this felt presence can create a sense of community, a feeling of ‘us’ that transcends and ameliorates the divisions within society.

Another way to go beyond the canonical order is through a more active negation of it. Ritual participants, especially practicing artists, might criticize the canonical order; they criticize conventions, particular styles, or the institutional framework of art. And, as the canonical order harbours and materializes the order of society, by criticizing the canonical order artists can criticize the societal status quo and attempt to instigate societal change. After such criticism, artists can make a new work of art. The disruption of the canonical order makes room for a new beginning, it helps to create the condition to create. Artists attempt to make a new work of art that cannot be classified, something that is ambiguous or without meaning. As a canonical order is based on symbolic signification and interpretation, the creation of a work that frustrates interpretation further undermines the canonical order. By disrupting the canonical order of art

artist do not go against art; they affirm the idea of Art and rescue it from a narrow and rigid frame and from a particular manifestation of it.

Yet, participation in the sacred order of Art can't last forever. The ritual participants have to return back to earth, back to the vital sources of everyday life. Artists do this by making a new work of art that engages with vitality. The ritual cycle of *contemporary* art thus presents two possible routes: the disruption of the canonical order and the engagement with vitality. The making of a new work of art often involves both paths. With a single new work of art an artist might criticize artistic conventions, make something ambiguous or without meaning, and engage with vitality. It is therefore often difficult to understand whether the making of an artwork is a continuation of the attempt to reach a higher order, thus to finalize art's sacralization, or whether the making of new artwork is a return to the everyday sources of life, a consumption of vitality. But the distinction can be made nevertheless, and will hopefully shed light on the works of art that I will describe in the ethnographic chapters below.

This chapter's description of the ritual process of *contemporary* art is a highly generalized theory. It outlines *contemporary* art as a ritual dynamic, without situating it historically or geographically. Anthropologists frequently used diagrams and models to analyse ethnographic data and summarize theories. Yet, in line with the scrutiny of anthropological knowledge production (see 1.4), diagrams and models have become less prevalent. Although I am sympathetic to the argument that the complexity of human behaviour cannot be caught into models, I do think that models can help to engage with complex cultural phenomena, as long as they are presented as aids to engage *with* reality rather than as models *of* reality. I present the model, visualized below as a tool to engage anthropologically with *contemporary* art practices, rather than a true depiction of reality.

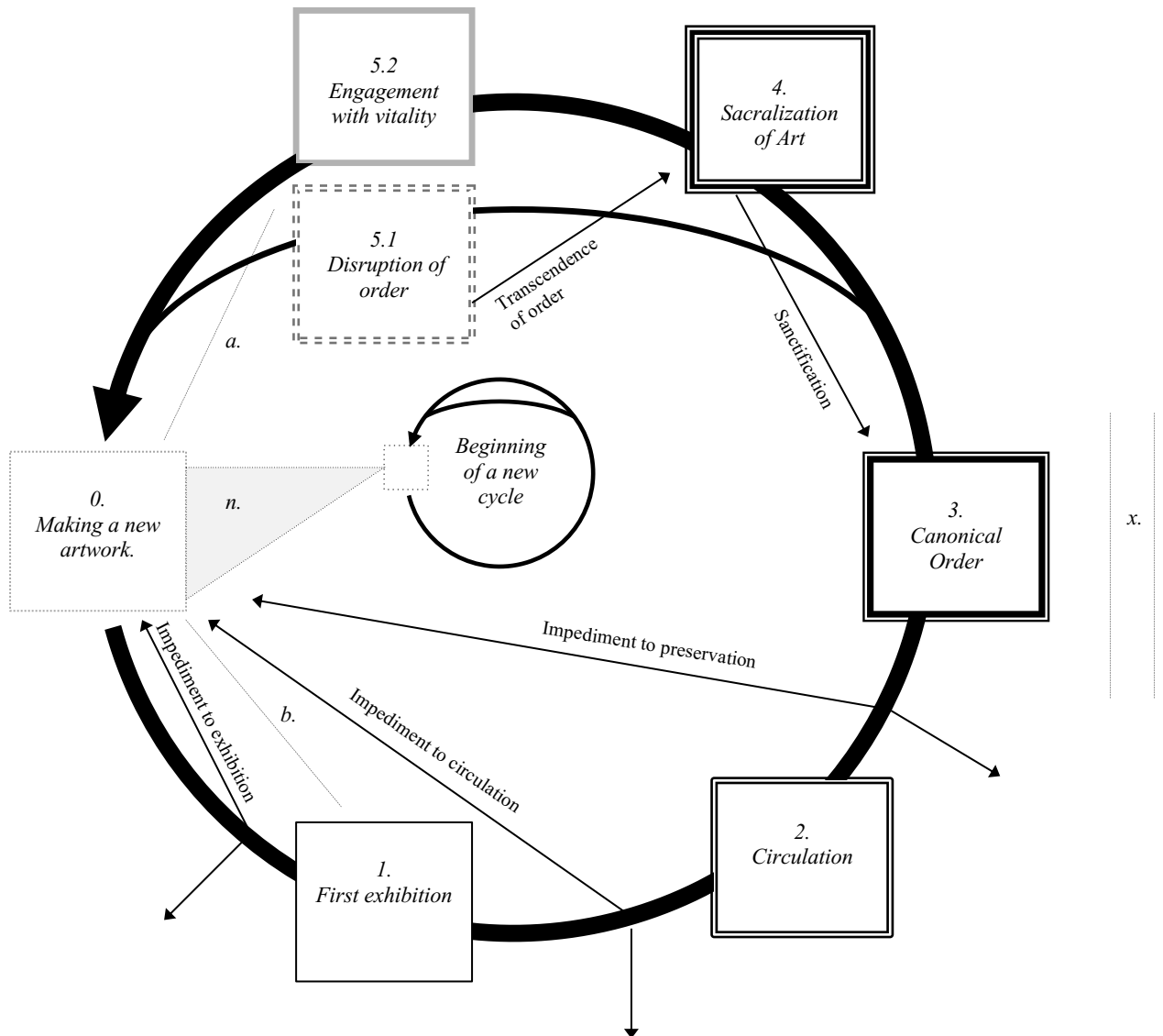


Figure 2.4

*Stage by stage description:*

Each stage – indicated by the seven squares – represents a range of practices involving various groups of ritual participants. Although the stages can be separated analytically, they are not clearly distinguishable in practice; rather than separated serial steps, the ritual process consists of an accumulation of spatiotemporal transformations that culminates in stage [4], the sacralization of Art. This cumulative process towards a higher order of Art is indicated by the thickening of the lines of the squares. It is followed by a disruption of the canonical order or a desacralization, leading to the renewal of the cycle. This return is indicated by a dilution of the lines of the squares. The thick black circular arrow depicts the direction of the ritual cycle, not the movement of artworks. In the description below I will refer to the various stages with square brackets “[...]” and refer to the corresponding sections of the chapter with round brackets “(...)”.

*Stage 1. First exhibition*

An art exhibition is characterized by the formation of a public, an assembly of several artworks – or the spatial distribution of a singular artwork – and the creation of a relation between the works or parts of one work. The *contemporary* art exhibition comes in many forms and is held at many places, but wherever it takes place and regardless of its duration and dynamic, the site is, or temporarily becomes, a liminal place set apart from the everyday, enabling different ways of walking, seeing, conversing and thinking. By means of a variety of material and verbal strategies, the temporary *contemporary* art exhibition fosters an idea of an undetermined global future elsewhere, and creates an environment in which artworks are placed in a border zone, on a threshold, ready to travel. (2.1, 2.2, 2.3)

*Line b.* The artwork does not need to be a clearly demarcated object of art that moves from a studio to an exhibition venue; stage [0] and [1] are in *contemporary* art practices often difficult to distinguish, represented here by the line ‘*b*’.

*Stage 2. Circulation*

After the first exhibition an artwork can be re-exhibited at other venues, sold at an auction, resold by a dealer, and it can circulate for some time within the (inter)national art market, accumulating value in the process. This stage does not only involve a further spatiotemporal transformation of the artwork, but also continues the process of interpretation initiated in the first exhibition. The work of art is separated from ‘the here and now’ because it moves physically from its place and time of making, but it also undergoes a symbolic transformation as the work is embedded within various interpretative frames. (2.3)

*Stage 3. Canonical order*

The art museum continues these processes of interpretation and classification, but it embeds the artwork more securely within a canonical order that takes form as a stable and relatively permanent arrangement of artworks. The order of societies can degenerate into disorder; it is therefore necessary for a society to actively reassert them. The canonical order reflects, embodies and sustains various orders and conventions of society. The museum— among other forms of physical collections – plays an important role in upholding the canonical order. By protecting artworks from decay, a museum changes the life expectancy of an artwork without, on the face of it, changing the artwork. This temporal transformation coincides with a spatial transformation in which artworks are placed together as a collection under one roof and classified into a certain order. By means of collections, texts, architectural divisions and pathways, a canonical order is created that sustains and reproduces both moral, spatial and temporal societal orders – concerning for example the relationship between citizens and the nation state, and a temporal order of linear progressive time. (2.4)

*Stage 4. Sacralization of Art*

Placed in such narratives, detached from the here and now, artworks risk losing their truth-value. When a sign cannot be separated from what it refers to it is self-referential and therefore unquestionable, but when a sign can be separated from what it refers to,

when it stands for something else, its truthfulness can be questioned, a problem central to human language (2.4). However, the art museum ameliorates the possibility of falsehood, limits alternative interpretations, and makes the canonical order unquestionable by giving it a semblance of changelessness, by presenting it as a unified whole, and by substantiating symbolic messages with self-referential messages – the symbolic and eternal is coupled to the here and now so that questionable interpretations seem unquestionable; the canonical order becomes sacred. But the sacralization of art is also accomplished by going beyond the canonical, for example by highlighting ‘masterpieces’ that transcend the canonical order; a higher or absolute order is created that sanctifies the canonical order (indicated by thin arrow [5]→[4]); the art museum simultaneously transgresses and affirms its canonical orders. (2.4)

*Stage 5*      *Disruption of order / Engagement with Vitality*

After stage [3] the ritual cycle of *contemporary* art splits into two different pathways: one leading to the *disruption of order* [5.1] (2.5-2.7) and the other to the *engagement with vitality* [5.2] (2.8) via stage [4]. Stage [5.1] concerns the rejection of the canonical order as sacred [3]→[4]; by criticizing certain artistic categories and conventions, by criticizing art institutions, or by addressing perceived societal wrongs, artists challenge canonical and societal orders. The disruption of the canonical order is not an attack against art, but rather an attempt to salvage the unattainable *idea* of Art (2.4). Museum visitors can disregard the museum’s canonical order by choosing alternative pathways and challenge interpretations, but the artistic challenge of the canonical order differs, as it precludes the next stage of making a new work of art. The *engagement with vitality* [5.2], on the other hand, does not necessarily involve a criticism of canonical or societal orders, but concerns a return to the everyday (2.8). At this stage [5.2] artists regard the sacralization of Art as accomplished and enact a move away from the sacred towards the vitality of everyday life. By engaging with a variety of sources external to the field of *contemporary* art, artists attempt to realign themselves with ‘the outside world’, whether political, social or environmental; this ‘real world’ of vitality forms a spatiotemporal contrast with the separated, elevated, and timeless – sacred – order of ‘Art’. (2.5-2.8)

*Line a.*      Although stage [0] and stage [5.1] and [5.2] often coincide, they indicate different ritual steps as well. The *disruption of order* [5.1] involves the verbal criticism of conventions, institutions, or perceived societal wrongs – a criticism that often precedes the making of a new work (2.5) – but it can also involve the making of a new work of art. Similarly, the artistic *engagement with vitality* can involve a range of activities that precede the making of a new work, but also the making itself. The line ‘a’ represents both the connection and separation of the different stages.

*Stage 0.*      *Making a new artwork*

The two different ritual pathways [5.1] and [5.2] can be seen as separate, but they often come together in the making of a new artwork: Artists disrupt the canonical order by making a new work that does not have a clear-cut meaning (2.6) or by making a work that does not seem to mean anything at all (2.7); this ambiguous artwork is nevertheless selected and presented as art, as meaningful rather than just noise. Through perceptual, multivocal, and positional ambiguity (2.6) artists attempt to confuse habitual ways of seeing and create a state of relative incomprehension. Doing so artists not only convey

a multiplicity of meaning but also challenge the symbolic logic of something that *stands for* something else (2.3). But this ambiguous artwork often concerns an engagement with vitality as well; the two pathways are therefore difficult to separate in practice (2.8).

*Line n.* Stage [0] can be seen as the last stage of the ritual cycle, but it also initiates a new ritual cycle. The making of a new work of art is both an end point and a new beginning in the cycle. Criticizing the canonical orders [5.1] or leaving the sacred order of Art [5.2] clears the ground for something new to happen – the day of *Brahma* has started and the ritual cycle resumes (2.7). Yet the next cycle is not an exact copy of the former one; the process of *contemporary* art over time can be visualized as a spiral in which the consecutive cycles repeat each other yet change over time as well. I have limited myself to a general description of a single ritual cycle and I did not look at the change that occurs in the sequence of cycle (see also the appendix: *contemporary* art as an adaptive system).

*Impediments.* Works do not always reach stage [1] [2] and [3]; they might not be selected for exhibition, and when they do reach stage [3], they might not be further circulated, might not invite interpretations that contextualize and classify the works, and might not be framed, archived and preserved; unselected the works remain in their place of origin. This failure of the spatiotemporal transformation of artworks and artists might induce an artist to make other works, thus resetting the cycle of art by a return to stage [0], indicated by the arrows pointing at [0]. This movement can be repeated many times so that artworks await a potential future incorporation into a canonical order as a collected body of works. Yet, unsatisfied with the possibilities for spatiotemporal transformations, an artist might also consciously leave the field of *contemporary* art, indicated by the arrows moving outside the ritual cycle. Artists can either quit as a professional *contemporary* artist, or search for alternative pathways that might change the field of *contemporary* art.

*Outside 'x'* The *x* on the right side of the model is an indication of the limitation of the model. This chapter is limited to a description of the of *contemporary* art as a ritual process with an internal dynamic; it does not discuss its relation to other 'cultural' fields such as literature, 'religious' fields such Christianity, or 'economic' fields such as consumer capitalism. What is more, I have limited myself to a general description of a single ritual cycle and do not look at the change that occurs in the sequence of cycles. Yet this limitation has allowed me to focus on the specific ritual dynamics of *contemporary* art. In the appendix I discuss the ritual of *contemporary* art in relation to external processes, by focusing on Gregory Bateson's notion of an ecology of mind.

I have sketched a tentative map and in the conclusion of this thesis I will reflect on its applicability. I will make frequent reference to the theories described above throughout the thesis, but I will also try to let the field 'speak'. In the following ethnographic chapters I will not discuss all stages of the ritual cycle; my ethnographic research focuses on the 'left half' of the ritual cycle – the disruption of the canonical order, the engagement with vitality, the making of new artworks and the first exhibition (stage 5, 0 and 1). I will write on what happens after the making and first exhibition as well – the ways in which new artworks are circulated, collected,

preserved, or fail to do so – but these sections show only the first tentative steps of a larger ongoing and still uncertain ritual process.



## 3. Hollow Times

### *3.1 Stepping into the field*

My research does not, in any measure, cover the entirety of the visual arts in current day Kolkata. As I have stated in the introduction, this writing focuses on artists who present themselves and their practices as *contemporary*. I do not see *contemporary* art as a predefined category of arts or an indication of present-day art, but rather as a term that is used by artists and other participants to position themselves within a field of art. Adopting the terminology of Weber's *Sociology of Religion* (1920) Bourdieu distinguishes between the 'priests' – artists with an established reputation who seek to defend their position in the field – and the 'prophets' – the avant-garde artists whose innovations oppose established artistic conventions (Bourdieu 1996, 204). This thesis focuses on the last group, 'the prophets'. But I will not use such religious epithets, as they can be misleading, and prefer to use the emic adjective '*contemporary*' (see 1.1). The groups of artists who consider themselves *contemporary* artists, as well as the artworks and institutions that are described as *contemporary*, are not easily defined, and it is not my intention to create a bounded definition. My approach has been practical; I simply started talking to and following the activities of those artists and curators who want to do something new, who express a need to break away from older practices of art, and who engage in art practices that depart from the way things have been done before. Some artists, often young but not necessarily, feel restless and bounded by the way art is done; they start to see those artforms that used to be ground-breaking as conventional, as out of touch and lacklustre. They want to unsettle artistic and institutional frames, disrupt the canonical order of art, and make something new.

In this chapter I will explore Kolkata's field of *contemporary* art and look especially at the tensions between the artistic ambition to make new works of art, and the condition of Kolkata's art infrastructure. But before I dive into the ethnographic material, I will shortly discuss some methodological concerns. My overall approach in this thesis is anthropological in the sense that I take a horizontal synchronic view that relates artists and their works to their current social and cultural environment, rather than a vertical diachronic view that seeks for historical patterns. I

do occasionally write about episodes in the history of art from West Bengal, yet this is not to construct a chronological order that shows a succession of styles, or a causal chain of events leading up to the present. Instead, when I refer to historical periods, I aim to show how current artistic dynamics resonate with art practices of different periods. I am especially interested in the way *contemporary* artists refer to art history; how they align themselves with it, or position themselves against it.

I conducted unstructured recorded one-on-one interviews, but most of my fieldwork consisted of informal talks and participant observation: I visited exhibitions, participated in the preparations and installations of exhibitions, joined artists' get-togethers, went along with short trips to the countryside, and more. Joining artists in their activities I could see how things are done and, in the meantime, ask many questions.<sup>1</sup> Besides listening to what people say, many arguments in this thesis rely on an attention to what people do, supported by photography and video recordings. I have attempted to pay not only visual attention to the artworks, but also to the making process of the works, the way works are installed in an exhibition, the way visitors walk around and engage with the works, and to what happens to the works after their exhibition. Much of what goes on during the making and exhibiting of *contemporary* art is non-verbal. Yet, words are not merely redundant descriptions of artworks (see 2.2), and part of my methodology consisted of gathering a variety of art texts such as press releases, art catalogues, newspaper reviews.

Anthropological knowledge production implicates a concern of cultural representation (Clifford and Marcus 1986; see also 1.4). Writing about particular communities involves on the one hand a moral-political dimension – especially when these communities have less financial and political leverage than the anthropologists and their affiliated institutes. And, on the other hand, ethnographic knowledge production involves an epistemological concern; anthropologists have to translate a rich fieldwork experience, taking in all possible sensory data – visual, material, oral, written, bodily, olfactory and auditory – into academic English, and be perceptive to what gets lost in translation. Next to the political and epistemological challenges of what they write, anthropologists are confronted with the question from where and for whom they write; depending on the field of research anthropologists can take the position of a journalist, activist, academic, religious expert, government adviser and more. Anthropologists of *contemporary* art are caught up in this potential multiplicity of roles as well; they can, next to fulfilling an academic role, also be a critic, a curator, a political activist, or a collector and buyer of art. As

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<sup>1</sup> Many artists in Kolkata speak English and most of my interviews were held in English. Yet among each other artists usually speak Bangla, and some art texts, such as exhibition reviews, were written in Bangla. This required from my part obtaining a basic knowledge of the language. Churni Bhaumik has helped me with the translation of both written and spoken sources.

I have pointed out above (see 1.3) anthropologists of art, art historians, artists, critics and curators are now forming a field of exchange in which it is sometimes difficult to make a clear distinction between artists and academics, creators and interpreters. Alfred Gell encouraged this confluence and wrote that anthropology “should be part of art-making itself, insofar as art-making, art history and art criticism are a single enterprise nowadays” (Gell 1996). Howard Morphy takes a different position, one that I have taken as well: during fieldwork the line between the double role of the anthropologist as participant and as observer does not have to be clearly drawn, but “it is important to distinguish between anthropology as art practice and the anthropology of art, even though the dialogue between the two may be highly productive” (Morphy 2010). It is not always possible or necessary to stake out a position as anthropologist, but I have nevertheless attempted to preserve a distinction between art and anthropology. I have presented myself in the field as an anthropologist and pointed out that I am not a critic, nor a curator, nor a collector. In several exhibitions I present myself and was included in the process as an ‘observer’ and in some press releases I was given that exact title – a designation that gave me the opportunity to follow the exhibition process in detail.

But I was also an outsider, an outsider with a potential network of contacts in the *contemporary* art scene of Europe. Even if I didn’t have such contacts, my Dutch nationality and my position at a German university did make me a person of interest. What is more, artists knew I was going to write about *contemporary* art in Kolkata. As I have shown above (2.2 – 2.4), writing about art potentially enhances its value, and artists are aware of this. Even if my research and this writing cannot be clearly separated from the value production in the field of art, I have made some practical choices that distinguish this writing from other writings about art, such as art historical texts or art reviews.

An important difference concerns the uses of titles; this writing does not refer to the titles of artworks with the professional precision of other art texts. I do mention titles of works, but I do not always refer to them consistently throughout the text, and sometimes I do not mention the title of a work at all. The naming of titles within art texts forms part of the field of cultural production of *contemporary* art; consistently mentioning the title of a work within an art text, can be a way to advance the circulation of the artwork and to frame it as a separate work of art – it thus supports the transition of a work of art into a canonical order. Another yet related difference concerns the names of artists; the circulation of names within the *contemporary* art scene might be as important for the creation of value as the circulation of artworks. In art texts it is standard practice to refer to artists by surname. Instead, I refer to artists with their given name, after first providing the full name. I address the artists, curators, and others, as I have addressed them in Kolkata – the same way as participants in the social context of *contemporary*

art in Kolkata address each other. This is common practice in ethnographies; it allows for a description of the ethnographic present that resonates with the social context. Departing from this ethnographic style would set aside the ritual practices of *contemporary* art from other cultural practices researched by anthropologists, whilst one of my goals in this thesis is to deconstruct the pedestaled position of art as something that is set apart from other cultural phenomena. A third practical difference concerns the use of photography. Many of the photos presented in this thesis do not equal the standards of professional artwork photography; often they are taken quickly and I did not always bother asking people to step aside. I consider photos as a research tool that help me to remember and notice things that I did not immediately write down in my notebook. What is more, I made most of them during the build-up process of the exhibition and therefore they do not always show the 'finished object'. In chapter 4 I will elaborate on the role of photography in the ritual process of *contemporary* art.

But these practical choices do not prevent this research from taking part in the field of *contemporary* art; this writing cannot be regarded as an objective and detached description of art practices. Perhaps the foremost challenge of writing about 'artists' and 'artworks' is the instability of these categories. The artwork has been shaken up to such an extent that it seems misleading to hold on to the binary of 'the artist' who creates 'the artwork'. As Christopher Tilley writes: "We do not move from mind to material objectification of that mind because the mind that is predisposed to think in a certain way is itself a product of these material objectifications" (Tilley 2006, 65). It is a dialectics, without a synthesis in the end, often described by anthropologists as 'mutually constituted'. It is therefore maybe better to talk about the mutually constituting processes of artwork and artist formations, instead of using the terms 'artworks' or 'artists'. However, even if it makes more sense, from an epistemological point of view, to describe artists and artworks as 'mutually constituted', and to look upon subject/artist and object/artwork formations as continuous processes, everyday life tends to look different. Despite the deconstructions of 'subject' and 'object', 'artist' and 'artwork', both from philosophical perspectives and within *contemporary* art practice itself, works are still being traded, collected, presented, preserved, and talked about, albeit in different ways, as 'artworks' made by 'artists'. I will follow the suggestion of Daniel Miller, who proposed an anthropology that can commit to a betrayal of philosophical understandings and turn to the "vulgarity of our relativism and our empathy with the world" (Miller 2005, 45). I will continue to use the terms 'artists' and 'artworks', while keeping in mind the 'working' aspect of 'art-works'. And I will describe and interpret the art practices I have encountered in Kolkata from an anthropological perspective, while keeping in mind that my writings are not merely external academic interpretations, but in one way or another take part in the ritual process of *contemporary* art.

### 3.2 *From the cavity of my wisdom tooth*

My first encounter with *contemporary* art practices in Kolkata was with *Khoj Kolkata* in December 2013. The artists of *Khoj Kolkata* had a studio and artist residency at Purna Das Road, a quiet lane close to the bustling textile market and traffic hub Gariahat in South Kolkata.<sup>2</sup> Abhijit Gupta was running the day-to-day business of the residency and in general was seen as the puller of *Khoj Kolkata*. As there was no artist-resident at that moment I stayed there as a paying guest during my first two months of fieldwork. Abhijit was interested in my research, introduced me to artists in Kolkata and in general helped me getting started as a novice in the field.<sup>3</sup> Abhijit lived with his wife Smriti Gupta on Sarat Bose road, formerly called Landsdown road, in South Kolkata; a modest apartment on the top floor with a large roof terrace, decorated with pot plants, and used for get-togethers, especially since *Khoj Kolkata* left their studio at Purna Das Road. Abhijit used the small construction on top of the roof terrace as a studio and later they rented it out as a bed and breakfast. Bamboo shutters, Indian folk art, Abhijit's terracotta sculptures, and his self-made wooden furniture give the house a distinctive charm. Like the 'swadeshi furniture' that became popular in many Kolkata households during the first half of the twentieth century to provide an alternative to European furniture, Abhijit's 'couch-chairs', for lack of a better word, sit close to the ground.<sup>4</sup> When artists gathered in the living room, some would sit on the floor and some on the available seats; in apartments with higher 'western' furniture this would result in awkward height differences, but Abhijit's low seats created a more levelled ground.

Abhijit and Smriti often welcomed me into their house. Enjoying their hospitality, I asked about *Khoj Kolkata's* projects, what is happening in Kolkata's art scene, and Kolkata in general. My research was still in its initial phase and my questions were not very focused. I planned to look at other exhibition spaces in Kolkata as well: the Victoria Memorial Hall, the Kolkata Museum of Modern Art (KMOMA), the Indian Museum and more – a plan I soon abandoned to focus on *contemporary* art only. Together with Smriti, Abhijit helped me to learn Bangla, not merely by practice, but by taking my questions about specific words as etymological passages into Bengali culture. Abhijit had a quality to bend a conversation into various directions and when I did manage to ask more specific questions relating to my research, he often referred me to others – oh for that you should talk to this or that person – as if he himself was a dilettante. I

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<sup>2</sup> This is not the far south of the city, which extends and keeps on extending much further southwards, but the area that used to be regarded as South Kolkata, comprising Tollygunge, Alipur, Ballygunge, Jadavpur, Jodhpur Park, Kalighat, Kasba and Garia.

<sup>3</sup> Abhijit helped me for example to find an apartment in South Kolkata, where I spent most of my fieldwork time.

<sup>4</sup> The *Swadeshi* movement initiated in 1905 was an economic strategy to boycott British products and led to a conscious preference for local products. See also this chapter, 3.5.

never worried about this, because I knew I could always visit him and ask more focused questions about his own work. In 2014 Abhijit passed away. Talking to his friends and family after his sudden and premature passing I realized that what he did for me – hosting me and connecting me with others – he did for many. It was through his efforts and presence that *Khoj Kolkata* took shape as a new art collective in Kolkata. Warm, gregarious, eloquent, and fond of drinks and laughter, he downplayed his own artistic pursuits. Only after his passing, I came to know more about his own art projects.

Abhijit's "*Hollow Times*" (2005-2006), is a fictional newspaper that satirizes the art scene. "*The one and only Hollow Times*" started as a website; Abhijit made the texts and images and sent them to his daughter Shohini Gupta, then living in Delhi, who made the website. For his retrospective exhibition Shohini, who is an artist and designer, turned a selection of the material in a four-page paper 'newspaper'. It has news articles, advertisements, and an editorial, and is printed on tabloid format. The lead article is titled "*Technological breakthrough in art, Invention of the Stylograph*". It talks about an invention, "*the stylograph*", an instrument designed by a hitherto unknown artist that will "*revolutionise the art-making process and completely eradicate the phenomena of prices nose-diving*". The article, by "*our special correspondent*", describes the instrument as follows:

*... the contraption is a framework built to encase the artist's working hand, which can only be manipulated by a string attached to a pulley fitted to a strapped headgear. This ensures that the hand is not free to move in any which way an artist might decide and therefore limits movement. The free hand that pulls the string is the only user-friendly element. Moreover, the device is fitted with a fail-safe system consisting of sharp knife edges that can hurt the wrist in case an artist decides to test the limits set by the device. Additionally, the device has been designed in such a way that even the slightest movement of the head will be registered, causing the knives to inflict pain. The sensitivity of the device is such that even thinking-out-of-the-box will adversely harm the user. The application of this device will therefore ensure stylistic consistency. Asked why this device is necessary given that a majority of artists already tread a narrow path – the inventor explained that it is for these very same people that the device is necessary. This will result in far greater consistency while increasing the productivity and help in stabilising prices. It could also be used to harness those artists who run amok in terms of style, and disturb the buyers' state of blissful equilibrium.*<sup>5</sup>



Figure 3.1

"Stylograph" from page 1 of "*Hollow Times*" (2006/2014).

The article concludes that the *stylograph's* demonstration to the public was a success. However, the editorial on page three discusses the ethical implications of the *stylograph* and asks whether

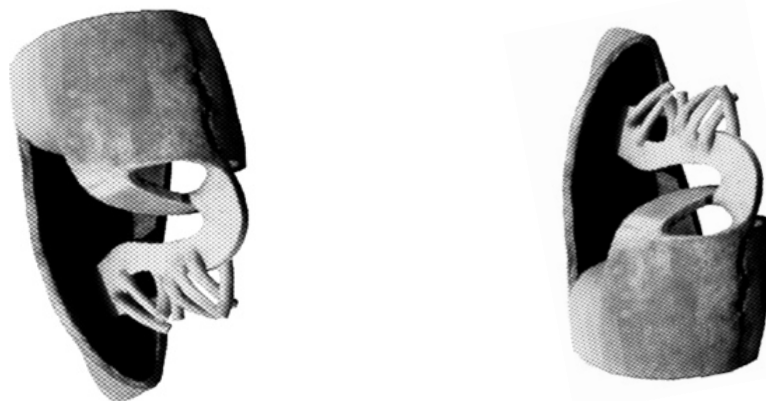
<sup>5</sup> "Stylograph" from page 1 of "*Hollow Times*" (2006/2014).

the *stylograph* might curb creativity and whether it, correctly calibrated, will be used to fake artworks. Another article, again by “our special correspondent” titled “*Indian art galleries bid to acquire artists for life*” talks about the (fictional) “*Indian Art League*”, which, based on the model of the Indian Premier League (IPL) for cricket, will facilitate the much-needed professionalization of buying and selling artists. These articles and other pieces, such as an article on the prospects of a game show for artists, a book advertisement “*Who’s Who*” published by “*social climbers incorporated*”, an awards announcement “*for the most visible face*”, and a shouts and murmurs “*from the cavity of my wisdom tooth*”, all satirize and criticize the art scene as idle, taken by market forces, caught up in the fetishization of personality, and straitjacketed into predictable styles. A small article on page two that reports on “*A rare archaeological find*” has a more subtle approach. The full text:

*Archaeologists in Kolkata recently unearthed what seemed like an exquisite death mask – a find they thought could challenge the figurines found in the Indus Valley and possibly pre-date it. They were of the opinion that this find would throw new light on the history of this region and change the way Bengal has been perceived until now – as a region without any kind of culture before the advent of the poet laureate, Rabindranath Tagore.*

*However, their initial elation soon turned to dismay. An artist identified the terra-cotta piece as his own after looking at it upside down.*

The “*death mask*” and some other works depicted in the newspaper are earlier works made by Abhijit. The “*rare archaeological find*” shown in “*Hollow Times*” was indeed upside down (below, left); it is a rotated and mirrored picture of a terracotta sculpture Abhijit made in 1991 titled “*the Flutist*” (below, right), which is not mentioned as such in “*Hollow Times*”.



*Figure 3.2*

Left: “A Rare Archaeological Find” from page 2 of “Hollow Times”  
 Right: “Flutist” (1991) Terracotta. 46”

The year 1991 was also the year that Abhijit left his designer business and fully took up his art practices again. In 1975 Abhijit opted out of Government Art College and worked as a designer and entrepreneur. During his college days Abhijit was, as he recalls himself, “brought up on a diet of Left politics. I was a fence sitter who liked the idea of socialism. I (resumed) making heavily socialistic work... but I found that I was now out of context with my time”.<sup>6</sup> Rather than a social realist style focusing on the suffering of the proletariat, Abhijit began to experiment with terracotta sculptures, hollow forms made from sheets of rolled clay. This was however not a move towards abstract formalism, which he rejected as well. Abhijit’s tubular terracotta sculptures of the early ‘90s can be better understood in the light of his growing interest in folk art. Eschewing both social realism and formal aesthetics Abhijit turned to folk art. In the early 1990s he started with Smriti to collect folk art in the districts of Bankura, Medinipur, Burdwan in West Bengal and Dinajpur in Bangladesh, and later also in Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Gupta collected folk art, supported folk artists and attempted to start a folk-art museum, but was frustrated, as he told me, by the government emporiums for promoting crafts merely for touristic purposes. Next to an endeavour to salvage and revive the folk arts of Bengal, it was also a way for him to find a new art form. As he put it himself: “(A) pursuit towards finding a more flexible form which could sway this way and that, to make adjustments for my not-so-steady beliefs”.<sup>7</sup>

But Abhijit could not avoid the Janus-faced character of modernity, simultaneously looking at the past and the future, not knowing where to go. Preceded by different generations of Bengali collectors and artists inspired by folk art, such as Gurushaday Dutt, Jamini Roy or K.G. Subramanyan, Abhijit realized he could not return to the past: “I feel like trashing everything and starting all over again with traditional or folksy form – but then I am too much of an urbanite”.<sup>8</sup> His earlier terracotta works of the 1990s indeed seem to belong to an ancient tradition, as if they were excavated from Bengal’s clay soil. But rotating the ‘death mask’ Abhijit realized that he is the author of his own work. Wary of being straitjacketed by the paradigms of social realism and aesthetic high modernism, and hesitant to emulate folk art forms, Abhijit’s art practice was driven into a corner.

In his dissertation *Re-thinking Indian Modernism* (2012) Kedar Vishwanathan emphasizes that the ruptures of Bengal’s modern art history continuously fluctuated between what he terms endogenous and exogenous discourses; Kolkata’s modernity should be understood not simply as a borrowing of western art forms counteracted by a search for Indian art forms, but modernity itself, whether referred to as ‘Indian’ or ‘European’ modernity should be seen as a

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted from catalog article by Paula Sengupta.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted from catalog article by Paula Sengupta.

<sup>8</sup> Catalog.



constant negotiation between endogenous and exogenous forms (Vishwanathan 2012, 396).<sup>9</sup> This tension between the endogenous and exogenous is clearly expressed in the beginnings of modern art in Calcutta. At The School of Art in Calcutta (now the Government Art School, where Abhijit studied as well) the painter Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), nephew of the well-known polymath Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), started with a select group of students to counter British naturalist oil painting and rediscover ‘the lost language of Indian art’.<sup>10</sup> This quest for the rediscovery and reformulation of tradition, a movement later referred to as the Bengal School, represented a major break. By the 1920s, as Tapati Guha-Thakurta writes in *The making of a new ‘Indian’ Art*, it marked the coming of age of Indian ‘art’ and ‘artists’ (Guha-Thakurta 1992, 2-3). As Rabindranath Tagore said about the movement: It did not start out as a full-grown political movement but it began to “give voice to the mind of our people trying to assert their own personality” (...) “a voice of impatience at the humiliation constantly heaped upon us by people who were not oriental, and who had, especially at that time, the habit of sharply dividing the human world in the good and the bad according to the hemisphere to which they belong” (Tagore 1924-26, 35). The Bengal School was a liberating art practice, a successful effort to break out of the confines of naturalist oil painting as taught by the British art school, and it paved the way for cultural independence, even if its search for ‘tradition’ was paradoxically infused by British Orientalism (Guha-Thakurta 1992, 8).

However, the ‘return’ to tradition, to an idealised past infused by Orientalist discourse, also posed limits to individuality and innovation and the movement became a straitjacket for other artists (see also Chakrabarty 1992; 2008). The art movement created, as Guha-Thakurta states, a “special ‘community’ of artists, who saw themselves as different from all others before and around them, who also ‘imagined’ themselves as genuinely Indian by placing themselves on an imaginary line of continuity with a glorious past and a ‘great art’ tradition” (Ibid. 9-10). The break from British academic confines had become an establishment in itself, it turned into ‘the Bengal School’, and criticism of the movement became more prevalent. In the January 1922 issue of *Rupam* magazine, the nationalist Benoy Sarkar (1887-1949) wrote a controversial article “*Aesthetics of Young India*”, in which he dismissed the Bengal School’s ‘spirituality’ of Indian art as a species of myth making. Sarkar, who visited Europe in the early 1920s, promoted the avant-garde ‘aesthetics of autonomy’ and argued that art in India needed an ‘infusion of modernism’ that would help the nationalist demand for self-rule or autonomy from the Raj (Mitter 2007, 16).

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<sup>9</sup> By calling the changes within Indian Modern art history “ruptures” Vishwanathan goes against Geeta Kapur’s assertion that Indian modern art does not have an avant-garde (Kapur 2000, 202 in Vishwanathan 2012, 120).

<sup>10</sup> The first British art schools in India were founded in the 1850s. The English art teacher Ernest Binfield Havell came to Calcutta in 1896 to head the art school in Calcutta. Havell found an ally in the young artist Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), and brought him to the Calcutta Art School to ‘Indianize’ art teaching. See Guha-Thakurta (1992).

This article was in the same year followed by the Bauhaus exhibition, under the initiative of Rabindranath, who visited the Bauhaus in Weimar in 1921, and the artist Gaganendranath Tagore, older brother of Abanindranath.<sup>11</sup> Rabindranath and Gaganendranath found allies among the Western avant-garde critics of urban industrialism, leading them to engage with expressionism, cubism and caricature.

This was not a capitulation to ‘Western’ tastes, but an alternative strategy to undermine the premises of colonial India. Gaganendranath Tagore, for example, moved away from the Bengal School of his brother Abanindranath and started to confront colonial culture in his caricatures that focused on urban and political issues (Sunderason 2016, 2; see also Bhabha 1984). Next to a satirical confrontation of colonial power and its mimics Gaganendranath’s and Rabindranath’s experiments with form undermined colonial modernity on another level. As Rabindranath wrote in his essay *Art and Tradition* “I strongly urge our artists vehemently to deny their obligation to produce something that can be labelled as India art, according to some old world mannerism. Let them proudly refuse to be herded into a pen like branded beasts that are treated as cattle and not as cows” (Tagore 1926, 60-61). Rabindranath Tagore, who always had an ambivalent relationship to the movement, criticized the Bengal School for being stagnant and founded the art school Kala Bhavan at his Visva Bharati University in rural Santiniketan in 1919 to create an art that was more connected to social life.<sup>12</sup> The art school Kala Bhavan was part of the wider educational philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore that stressed informality, the lack of routines and regulations, and an all-round development for students (Guha-Thakurta 1992, 310). In his wider critique on abstract knowledge that does not become personal Tagore tried to counter the British educational system where children “become students and not individuals” (Tagore 1916, 32) at Santiniketan.

Yet, Guha-Thakurta points out that the fragmentation of an integrated movement into separate schools should not be seen as clean breaks. The Bengal School, Rabindranath’s educational project at Santiniketan, and the ‘cubist’ experiments of Gaganendranath had much in common. Even though Rabindranath and Gaganendranath distanced themselves from the Bengal School,

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<sup>11</sup> The 14<sup>th</sup> annual exhibition at the Indian Society of Oriental Art showed work by Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Lyonel Feiniger, Johannes Itten as well as works by Uma Prosad Mookerjee, Shanta Devi and Gaganendranath Tagore. See Bittner and Rhomberg (ed.) (2013) *The Bauhaus in Calcutta: An Encounter of the Cosmopolitan Avant-Garde*.

<sup>12</sup> Santiniketan is a village 165km north of Kolkata in West Bengal’s Birbhum district and was founded by Rabindranath’s father Debendranath Tagore, one of the founders of Brahmo religion. The university, commonly known as Shantiniketan, began as a high school Phatha Bhavana in 1901 and turned into the Vishva-Bharati university after 1913. In the 1920s the university acquired a cultural centre, a university, a department of agriculture and an institute for rural reconstruction. The Kala Bhavana institute of fine arts was established in 1919. Some of India’s leading artists and thinkers (such as the filmmaker Satyajit Ray and the economist Amartya Sen) were educated at Santiniketan. See chapter 5.7 for a further description of Rabindranath Tagore’s ideas on art.

they all cultivated the same romantic image of the artist and fostered the idea of ‘the artist’ as a respectable occupation and the category of ‘art’ for a burgeoning Bengali middle-class society. As Guha-Thakurta states: “In the new romanticized notions of ‘art’ and ‘artist’, the question of the right Indian techniques and methods was far less important than that of the right ‘aesthetic disposition’” (Guha-Thakurta 1992, 308).<sup>13</sup> The idea of the artist cultivated in this period and written about by Rabindranath still forms an influence on *contemporary* artists in Kolkata today (see chapter 5.7).

Next to the famous tension between the Bengal School and its subsequent criticism, Bengal’s art history continued to fluctuate between, on the one hand, a search for ‘Indian traditions’, such as mythological imagery, folk art, or the romantic depiction of village life, and on the other hand, a search for outside influences, such as the Bauhaus and Japanese art forms that merged art and life, or Chinese woodcuts and European social realism that inspired Chittaprosad Bhattacharya (see Vishwanathan 2012). I do not intend to present Abhijit’s work as a product of Bengal’s art history, but rather to show how Abhijit worked through similar tensions of the local and the global, the home and the world.

Abhijit’s strategy to cope with this tension of modernity was to make works that are hollow and humorous. I will start with humour. Abhijit’s humour in his art is not only an individual disposition but can be placed in a Bengali tradition. Gaganendranath Tagore was a notable exception,<sup>14</sup> but overall humour has been rare in Calcutta’s visual art practices, as it has been in modern visual art practices in general.<sup>15</sup> There was however a strong tradition of satire and irony in Bengali modernism, especially in literature, theatre, and the ‘popular art’ of Kalighat paintings. Sudipta Kaviraj, focusing on Bengali literature, writes that irony was by no means

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<sup>13</sup> According to artist and writer K.G. Subramanyan the Tagores, specifically referring to Abanindranath, Gaganendranath, and Rabindranath, worked as a whole group. Even if Abanindranath was the flag bearer of the Bengal school, in his autobiographical notes he states that the different members of the family worked together in the same direction, whether working on literature, art, theater, design, music, or poetry, they considered themselves as part of the same movement. That the movement splintered up in different ‘schools’ was painful as they stressed to follow intuition rather than preaching any specific doctrine (Subramanyan 1978, 20-21).

<sup>14</sup> Gaganendranath Tagore’s body of work, comprising both ink sketches, painted landscapes, cartoons, and cubist compositions, is difficult to pin down. Whereas his brother, Abanindranath Tagore was the leader of the nationalist art movement, and developed an ‘Indian style’ of art that eschewed western influences, Gaganendranath oeuvre suggests, as Sunderason (2016) writes, a refusal of affiliation and a denial of closure. He satirized babu culture, but like Sukumar Ray’s nonsense verse (see chapter 5), also attacked colonial rationalism in his second album of cartoons *Adbhut Lok – Realm of the Absurd* (1917).

<sup>15</sup> Notwithstanding Dadaism, Surrealism, Pop art and the Fluxus movement, humour, satire, irony and caricature were never a central continuing force in modern visual art as they were in literature or cinema. As Thomas McEvilley writes: “The prejudice against humour is oddly restricted to the fine arts tradition (...) It was Marcel Duchamp who initially introduced humour into the confrontation with aestheticism, as did Dada in general. After World War II there was a resurgence of Dada-like tendencies on both sides of the Atlantic; in Europe, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni and others, in the United States; Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, and others, had worked on the introduction of humor (...)” (McEvilley 2005, 165-167).

new in Bengali literature and has its sources in classical and folk traditions. Yet, aside from these older influences, colonial Calcutta created a new and ambiguous situation for Calcutta's Indian elite, the Bengali *Bhadrolok* (gentlemen), and a genre of local town humour ridiculing 'babu culture' emerged.<sup>16</sup> The lower classes made fun of the Bengali 'babu', but the 'babu' also made fun of himself (Kaviraj 2015, 224-225).

This was a humour particular to Calcutta; it played with the ambiguous situation of the emerging Indian upper middle-class who, on the one hand, strived to belong to a humanity shaped by Western history, as "an illegal immigrant of narratives" (Ibid. 238), yet, on the other hand, strived to maintain their connection to 'Indian culture'. The Bengali *bhadrolok* belonged to two worlds; European culture offered arguments undermining superstitions of traditional Indian social norms, but Indian culture offered ways out for the immodest claims of Western, especially colonial, rationalism. This kept the 'Bengali' character, Kaviraj argues, "in a state of tension, of unfinishedness and search" (Ibid. 251).

It is from this ambiguity that Calcutta's particular humour emerged. But, as Kaviraj writes, by the 1940s the Bengali 'babu', along with political groups all over India, had overcome this split anxiety and found an answer to the uncertainty of the self through the political project of independence (Ibid). Since then the cultural importance of humour and self-irony has been in decline. It was the arrival of leftist intellectualism in Bengal that sounded the death knell for humour, Kaviraj laments: "By becoming entirely serious, one-dimensional, radically self-righteous, Bengali literary reflection slowly lost its taste for the ineradicable contradictoriness of being" (ibid 228). Caricature did exist in the visual arts of social realism, but it was used for political purposes rather than expressing doubt. Abhijit lost his faith in Marxism and told me that for him (post)colonial criticism had lost its edge. Subsequently Abhijit turned towards an irony and satire that resonated with the earlier form of Bengali humour and revealed the ambiguous position of the new Bengali middle class. Abhijit's "*Hollow Times*" reveals the posturing and hypocrisy of Bengali artists who display a romantic individual artist identity, yet are caught up in the commercial mechanisms of the art world, but more broadly "*Hollow Times*" indicates the doubt of the modern subject who can neither return to an idealized past nor believes in either socialist or liberal utopian futures.

The second important feature of Abhijit's post-1991 artworks is the use of hollow spaces. Hollow sculptures, or sculptures with holes, are of course nothing new. Sculptors, in different ways, have always played with the material and the empty space within; it is not just the lump, but

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<sup>16</sup>'Babu' is an honorific address, like 'Mr', or 'Sir', used to address the Bengali Bhadrolok.

also the hole that makes the sculpture.<sup>17</sup> There is however a difference between sculptural space and holes, even if this difference is not always clear. Sculptural space is often used to create a dynamic space inside and around the work, such as seen in Henry Moore’s work, or, to stay closer to Kolkata, in Ramkinkar Baij’s *Santhal Family*. Holes, however, have a different sculptural function. A hole is not meant to look through; it hides what is inside and suggests another world at the end of it. Holes are often mere small cavities in the material. Because they are small, they keep light from entering and therefore have a crucial effect on the overall sculpture; they demonstrate something that cannot be seen, the sculpture conceals something, something that might be perceived as a secret, an enigma. By means of such holes sculpture becomes, as Gell would say, indecipherable (See 2.6)

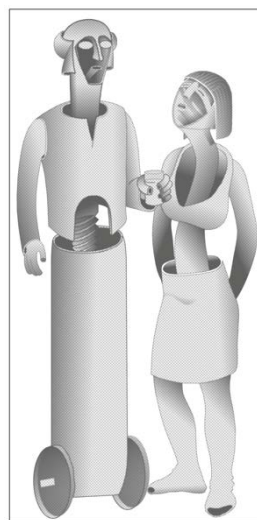


Figure 3.3

“Shotopir Shaheb and Pretty Polly at the inauguration of an art exhibition in Kolkata. Pic: Pure Slave” from page 2 of “Hollow Times”

Although some of Abhijit’s terracotta works have holes that conceal, that have an interior, his later tubular figures open up the holes and show more, or better, less. Especially his later figures are completely hollowed out; you can see the inside and see that it is empty. These hollow figures reappeared in different guises in much of his later work and writings and came to signify the hollowness of consumption. Abhijit’s hollow sculptures lead to his 2005 drawings of the “Sucker”. Returning from his artist-residence in Bahia, Brazil, at the Sacatar Foundation in 2005 Abhijit started a series called *the Suckerdom drawings*. In the first of this series, titled *Prologue* (2005), Abhijit introduced a hollow tubular figure called “*Sucker*”. Leonardo’s Vitruvian man is being replaced by “*the consumer*”, a tubular figure who is characterized by hollow tubular forms ending in apertures designed to suck up everything. This “*Sucker*” is in constant battle with his nemesis “*Vivek*”. *Vivek*, which means conscience or judgement in Bangla, is portrayed as a simple man, dressed in a *dhoti*, uneasy with urban living and the prospects of modernity. The *Sucker*

<sup>17</sup> As the well-known French sculptor Auguste Rodin said: “sculpture is the art of the hole and the lump, not of clear, well-smoothed, unmodelled figures”. C. Mauclair. Transl. C. Black (1905) *Auguste Rodin: the Man – his Ideas – his Works*.

eventually wins and corrupts *Vivek* and in 2006 Abhijit portrays him not anymore as the “*Sucker*” but as a God, the *God of consumption*, exhibited next to the *God of violence*. The hollow space has lost its secrets; the Sucker has, despite its power to suck up everything, no depth. And the rare archaeological find, instead of an ancient “*exquisite death mask*”, is merely a misstep

His hollow semi-abstract terracotta sculptures are not ‘innovative’; they do not constitute a new medium, engage with a public in new ways, nor create a new way of seeing. Abhijit has avoided his former style of social realism without creating a new form. These works can be better understood if we see them as belonging to a criticism, a statement on the corrupted condition of society, and on the art world which plays along, rather than as ‘new works of art’. Instead of sculptural forms where space and material, the hole and the lump, create a visual tension, Abhijit’s hollow works, just like his “*Hollow Times*”, express a negative form; they show that there is something missing.

By means of this strategy a new art form could emerge. As Deleuze and Guatarri write in *A Thousand Plateaus*: “A new rhizome may form in the heart of a tree, the hollow of a root, the crook of a branch (1987: 15)”. By hollowing out Abhijit opens up a space for something new to happen. Humour is a strategy that can be part of the hollowing-out phase as well. Northrop Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1971), called tragedy the mythos of autumn and irony the mythos of winter. Abhijit’s biting satire in “*Hollow Times*” and his “*Sucker*”, debunk the gallery scene, the way the art world is caught up in the hollowness of capitalist consumption, and pave the way for something new to come, emerging from the cavity of his wisdom tooth.



*Figure 3.4*  
Abhijit working on an artwork for *Boithak Khana*. Below left one of his terracotta sculptures.

### 3.3 Artistic capital

Abhijit's earlier artworks paved the way for his later site-specific artworks with *Khoj Kolkata*. As Paula Sengupta writes in the catalogue of his post-mortem exhibition at Harrington Art Centre: "In time, Khoj Kolkata became not just Abhijit's greatest commitment, but also the avenue through which he channelized his shifting practice and accommodated artistic aspirations that had lain latent within him for a long time. His last and considerable legacy lies with Khoj".<sup>18</sup> *Khoj Kolkata* was an artist group founded by Abhijit Gupta, Chattropati Dutta, Paula Sengupta, Sanchayan Ghosh and Ongshuman Dasgupta, but the latter two left the group as they became teachers at the art school Khala Bhavan, Shantiniketan. *Khoj Kolkata*, was a chapter of the *Khoj International Artist's Association* in Delhi, in short *Khoj*, yet the relations between them faltered and *Khoj Kolkata* became independent; they changed their logo yet kept the name as they were known by that name in Kolkata. *Khoj Kolkata* always operated with a larger group of mainly young artists, but it was Paula Sengupta, Abhijit Gupta, and Chattropati Dutta who managed the finances and selected the artists.

Their first project was the *Khoj Kolkata* workshop in 2006 for which they invited both Indian and International artists. "It was a success", Chattropati (Chattro) tells me, "also economically as we managed to sell some works". In 2009 they rented the place at Purna Das Road as office and artist residency and started to invite both national and international artists. Yet, they came to realize that the invited artists did their own projects in the limited amount of time they had. As Chattro recalls: "every artist was coming and doing their stuff and reacting with Kolkata or a location or whatever but it was not adding up, that was when we started thinking that we should have our own projects which people can come in and address, so that also yields, and becomes a more greater whole, than just having these individual residencies". From 2010 onwards they started to focus, as Paula Sengupta writes, "on the local rather than the global".<sup>19</sup> Their first site-specific project was *The Riverine Chronicles*, a project that was about and took place in the Sundarbans, the large delta comprising the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers and stretching out over both southern West Bengal and Bangladesh.<sup>20</sup> After cyclone Aila in 2009 they went to the village Mahespur in the Sundarbans and designed a shelter that could, in the future, withstand similar devastating cyclones. Besides a humanitarian project, *The Riverine Chronicles* was also a way to artistically engage with Kolkata's southern hinterland, the delta of West Bengal, and resulted in an installation at the Government Art College in Kolkata (2010) and as a site-specific exhibition at Mahespur and the opening of the Olive Ridley Shelter (2012).

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<sup>18</sup> Abhijit Gupta's exhibition catalog.

<sup>19</sup> Abhijit Gupta's exhibition catalog.

<sup>20</sup> The *Riverine Chronicles* consisted of separate projects: *The Boat project* (2010) and *Designs on a Delta* (2012).



Proshun Ghosh, who joined several of *Khoj Kolkata's* group projects, says that *Khoj Kolkata* was a pioneer collective in Kolkata when they started in 2005: “Ten years later there were several site-specific art projects, but back then *Khoj Kolkata* did something entirely new”. The artists of *Khoj Kolkata* shared a dislike for gallery practice and their main goal was to go beyond making artworks that can be sold in galleries, as Sengupta writes “to establish an alternative platform for the visual arts and sustain experiments and explorations that occur outside the mainstream in non-conventional art spaces, in communities, or in the public sphere”.<sup>21</sup> In 2.4 I will elaborate on an exhibition by *Khoj Kolkata*, but first I will describe the social context in which it came about.

In his studio Chattro tells me about the beginning of *Khoj Kolkata*: “the primary reason of beginning with Khoj (...) was to move out of the very poor circuit of just doing painting and exhibiting and selling and so on”. As an art teacher at Rabindra Bharati University Chattro had some leeway to step away from a gallery practice. “[we] were not really great practicing artists”, Chattro says. “neither Abhida [Abhijit], Paula, Sanchayan, and Ongshuman”. Chattro was showing a bit in galleries, but his main source of income was his teacher’s job. There was a short boom period for the visual arts in Kolkata that started in 2005/2006, Chattro says, but before that, artists did not hope to make a living selling their works and relied on other means of income. Chattro did his Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) at Government Art College in 1987 and his Master of Fine Arts (MFA) at Kala Bhavan Santiniketan. Already during college Chattro was doing design work for a commercial agency, from 7 to 10 in the morning before his classes started, knowing that it is not easy to make a living from art. And now Chattro fulfils many roles in Kolkata’s art scene; as a curator, an artist, a (former) teacher at Rabindra Bharati University, an art critic for the Hindustan Times, and, recently, as the director of Government Art College. After finishing his MFA in 1990 he decided with some friends to do a group show in Bombay: “Just after I finished my submission at Kala Bhavan (...) we all packed our paintings and went straight to Bombay, we booked the Jehangir Art Gallery and luckily quite a few of my works sold, which is quite surprising, because those days not much got sold”. The late 1980s begin 1990s was the time, as Chattro says, that the Indian market was opening up and big artists were being sold for good prices, “but even good prices at that point were not going over a lakh, that was like huge money”.<sup>22</sup>

Ranjit Hoskote, poet, art critic and curator based in Mumbai, writes that especially since the 1990s due to economic liberalization and the arrival of Internet, artists in India experienced an opening of their horizons writes: “The dream of belonging to an international avant-garde has

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<sup>21</sup> Abhijit Gupta’s exhibition catalog.

<sup>22</sup> A lakh is 100.000 INR.

seized the imagination of our artists again, as it did before, with the Tagore circle at Santiniketan during the 1930s, and later, the group of artists (...) the Baroda of the 1970s” (Hoskote 2002, 33).<sup>23</sup> How was this opening up of artists’ horizons experienced in Calcutta? Although West Bengal was governed by a communist coalition from 1977 to 2011, the economic liberalisation did have an effect on the art scene in Calcutta as well. In the 1990s some galleries came up in Calcutta, such as *Gallery '88* and *Gandhara Art Gallery*. As Chattro recalls: “Though there was no great boom, it was possible [to work as an artist], every year I had one show in Delhi, one in Calcutta, a group show here and there, I was existing, for 5 years or so I was managing, [selling works] even for 5000 (INR), [which was] at that time quite good money”. Yet, the economic liberalization did not have the same effect on the art scene in Calcutta as it did in other cities and there were only a few artists in Calcutta who could make a living with their arts. As Chattro says: “Looking up to the 1950s and ’60s most of the important names at the international auctions were from Bengal, but after that it was just a few names, it was Ganesh Pyne, Bikash Bhattacharya, Jogen Chaudhury, and that was also because Jogen Chaudhury to a great extent had his base in Delhi before he came to Bengal.” Chattro says that Calcutta largely missed out on the changes occurring in the Indian art market: “Everything was going global and so was Indian Art, the market opened up, huge things were happening, but Calcutta wasn’t really part of that”.

Chattro applied for a job in 1995 at Rabindra Bharati University as an art teacher and worked there for twelve years. He does not regret this decision, but it did keep him from his own art practice: “I discovered another world, I love teaching, I love to be with students, I did a lot activities, theatre, installations in the open field and things like that, but it also took away a lot of time from my own work, time to concentrate”. Although Chattro does not regret his decision to become a teacher, his decision is exemplary of the attempts of many artists in Kolkata to make it as an artist. Chattro contrasts this situation with the rich cultural history of Calcutta: “Calcutta was actually the artistic capital, [...] off course there was the Bombay school and the Delhi school that were coming up parallely during independence and they were also becoming important centres, of course Delhi was the capital it had to be, and Bombay was a big business centre that was also gathering a lot of people and a lot of interest”.

I will shortly elaborate on Chattro’s reference of Calcutta as the “artistic capital”. Calcutta was the capital of the Raj, but due to anti-colonial tensions it was transferred to Delhi in 1911. While

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<sup>23</sup> In the thesis I make a distinction between people I have met and talked with and other art players whose writings I quote. The quotes from Chattro, Boka, and Proshun in this chapter, for example, are all quotes from direct conversations, whereas the quotes from Ranjit Hoskote are from his writings. I refer to people ‘from the field’ with their first names (after introducing them firstly with their full names) and furthermore make a distinction between both sources by using “...writes” and “...says” to highlight the difference between a quote from writing and a quote from a conversation.

losing its position as administrative capital Calcutta remained an important cultural centre and is still referred to, in Kolkata, as the artistic or cultural capital of India. Although such epithets reveal nostalgia for what has been, the cultural importance of Bengal in the struggle for independence cannot be denied. In his essay *The religion of an artist* (1924-26) Rabindranath Tagore identifies three cultural movements in Bengal: The first was a social and religious reform movement, the Brahma Samaj introduced by Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), most famous for the abolition of *sati* and child marriage.<sup>24</sup> The second movement concerns a literary revolution that Tagore identifies with Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894), who's 1882 novel *Anandamath* fanned the flame of political rebellion against the colonial government. And the third movement was the nationalist movement in the visual arts that rejected the borrowing of British academic painting, which would later be referred to as the Bengal School. Rabindranath Tagore aligns the three movements that spanned his lifetime and sees them as equally revolutionary, attempting to break out of restrictive forms: "When an organization which is a machine becomes a central force, political, commercial, educational or religious, it obstructs the free flow of inner life of the people and waylays and exploits it for the augmentation of its own power" (ibid. 37).

There are other places, such as Mumbai, Baroda, and New Delhi, that played crucial roles in the birth and development of modern Indian art and literature as well, but the historical importance of Calcutta clarifies the use of the epithet 'artistic capital'. Yet, instead of throwing light on the historical cultural accomplishments of Calcutta, I want to point out that this identification of Calcutta as a (former) cultural capital has a value on its own; the aspirations and difficulties for artists in Kolkata to take part in the Indian art and international *contemporary* art scene are affiliated with the historical identification of Calcutta/Kolkata as cultural capital. There are other large Indian cities, state capitals, that have a relatively small art scene compared to Mumbai and New Delhi, but Kolkata is a special case as it was considered to be the cultural capital of India. This is not merely a nostalgic image of a past long gone; even if the cultural output, or the national and international significance attached to that output, is not what it used to be, the idea of being 'an artist' and the importance attached to cultural expression has not dwindled. In a *Barista* Tapati Choudhury, an artist who stays at the moment in Delhi but often comes to Kolkata and studied at Kala Bhavan, Rabindra Bharati, and Syracuse University New York, talks about the self-fashioned image of "the struggling artist".<sup>25</sup> Many young artists hang

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<sup>24</sup> Raja Rammohan Roy, as Rabindranath Tagore writes, "tried to reopen the channel of spiritual life which had been obstructed for many years by the sands and debris of creeds that were formal and materialistic, fixed in eternal practices lacking spiritual significance" (Tagore 1924-26, 34).

<sup>25</sup> *Barista* is an Indian coffee bar chain that started in Delhi in 2000 and opened its first outlet in Kolkata in 2002 (Sen 2009). See Payal Sen (2009) for a comparison between Indian Coffee Houses and the emergence of coffee chains, most notably Café Coffee Day and Barista, in Kolkata in the early 2000s.

around the Academy of Fine Arts, Tapati says, “they give off an image of the struggling artist, but they are living at home and their mother is cooking for them.”<sup>26</sup> People in Kolkata still have the idea that culture is important, Tapati says, young artists therefore get support from their parents. In Kolkata, the city that reveres Rabindranath Tagore, the idea of being ‘an artist’ has been cultivated since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and is regarded as an honourable vocation.

The aspirations of becoming an artist and the hopes to make it as an artist have stayed in place, but Kolkata failed to catch up with the national and international art scene. “It started with the 2009 international meltdown”, Chattro says “before that it was going hunky-dory (...) a lot of galleries in Bombay and Delhi were promoting art like shares (...) but you can never buy and sell art like stocks”. “The belief falls away, and all of a sudden people are not sure anymore about their investments” I interjected. Chattro: “that is exactly what happened, the appetite died completely. Now I think it is good again for the masters, you know the seniors who are big, who are 80-90 year category, either alive or dead, the market for them is okay now, but *contemporary* art is still having a rough time” (my Italics).

Proshun Ghosh tells a similar story: “In the 1990s there were only a few artists, like Ganesh Pyne, who could make a living from selling their works. In that period, people were not expecting too much when they chose to become an artist”. Proshun, who passed his BFA at Government Art College in 1991 and is of the same generation as Chattro, was prepared for this and learned other skills to be able to continue his art practices; he did some interior design work aside his art practice and still takes on side jobs to sustain his art practice. Proshun was trained in sculpture and got recognized as an artist with his ceramic works.<sup>27</sup> He still makes ceramic works for his own art practice as well, but has participated in site-specific installations with *Khoj Kolkata* and *Chander Haat* (see chapter 6) and supports his art practice by making sculptures commissioned by government or private institutes. In my apartment in (old) South Kolkata, where we regularly met for a language exchange, Proshun tells me about a sudden renewed opportunity for artists in 2005 and 2006 and the effect this had on artists: “Then the boom came and suddenly they [visual artists] got recognition, I’m an artist, who am I? Nobody

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Payal Sen (2009) *Coffee House to Barista: A Study of Cultural Change*. MA dissertation, Jadavpur University, under supervision of Dalia Chakraborty.

<sup>26</sup> The Academy of Fine Arts is one of the main and oldest cultural centers of Kolkata. It was founded in 1933 in the Indian Museum and moved to its current location on Cathedral Road, in the city center next to the Victoria Memorial Hall and the Maidan, in the 1950s. It focuses on the visual and performance arts; there is a Theatre Auditorium a small museum focusing on visual modern art in Kolkata and two large rooms for temporary exhibitions. The Academy of Fine Arts is part of a larger cultural complex that includes the Nandan Film Centre and the Rabindra Sadan cultural centre and theatre. In front of the Academy of Fine Arts there is always a bustling of activity, of tea and snack sellers, visitors, theatre students and artists. It is one of the main gathering places for members of Performers Independent (see chapter 5).

<sup>27</sup> Proshun received a Lalit Kala grant in 2002, had a solo show in Gandhara Art Gallery in 2006 and sold some works to Aicon Gallery in New York.

sees me, respects my work, and then people see you. People quit their side jobs and got a separate studio or made their studio much more professional, people could travel”. But this period did not last long. The art boom went down as fast as it came up and, after being out of the running for a couple of years, it was difficult for artists to get their side jobs back, Proshun says. Despite the short art boom in Kolkata, the art market never really materialized in Kolkata as it did in Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore says Chattro: “Somewhere [West] Bengal has lost out, the whole bigger picture never happened in [West] Bengal”. Chattro argues that it is not just about a lack of funding opportunities, but that it works also on an individual level:

“I think one of the reasons even the alternative movements are not generating energy is because there are some very fundamental problems here. An artist who is just out of college, 5 years out of college, is caught up in such complex problems of livelihood on the one hand and his practice on the other, it is also about what is happening around, and that influences the individual artist. [...] Of course funding is a big issue, but at the same time in each one’s [personal] position there are funding issues, so economy actually happens to be one big drawback here. In Bombay or Delhi an artist can do an odd job and can have more or less a decent life in his mid-twenties or early thirties. [...] Sustenance is a big issue here. And the bigger problem is the overall economy, which is not generating enough scope for anything to build on and go further. So that's a big problem and I don't see how it is getting solved very soon.”

As Chattro points out, limitations of the art scene are related to limitations of individual livelihood. To choose a new medium, for example, is not merely a matter of an artist’s exposure to new developments in the *contemporary* art scene; trained in a particular media artists want to explore relatively new media like video art and installation art, explorations which usually involve investing money in new tools, such as a good video camera, and spending a lot of time refining a new technique. Using such new techniques might lift an artist onto a more internationally oriented *contemporary* art circuit, but it might also involve making debts for new materials that can’t be easily repaid.

Even when artists are successful, it can be difficult to materialize that success. In 2014 Proshun got a scholarship from the ministry of culture, consisting of a 20.000 INR monthly scholarship fund for two years. Yet, in 2015 he did not receive anything yet. He went to Delhi but still didn’t receive anything. He thinks eventually he will get it (and in the end he got it), yet making art requires planning and the delay of about two years considerably changed his schedule; he had to go to Delhi by train twice (a one-way train ride takes approximately 20 hours) to ask for the money. Stifling and limiting bureaucratic procedures play such a large role in their everyday lives of artists in Kolkata that many seem to take it for granted; Proshun talked about his efforts to obtain his already won scholarship light-heartedly: “This is India” Proshun says, “You call

them, then they connect you with somebody else, etcetera”.<sup>28</sup> To situate Proshun’s stoic attitude I will in the following section look at ‘the outside’ *contemporary* art ‘world’, Kolkata’s attempts and failures to become part of it, and the continuing importance of centre and periphery.

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<sup>28</sup> The crippling effect of state bureaucracy in India is an interesting site for enquiry, but too large to get in to here. See Gupta, A. (2012). *Red tape: Bureaucracy, structural violence, and poverty in India*.

### 3.4 *Kupomanduk*

The relative marginal position of Kolkata's *contemporary* art scene can be seen against the background of an asymmetrical discourse of 'influence' since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a problem that Partha Mitter referred to as the "Picasso manqué" syndrome. In *The Triumph of Modernism, India's artists and the avant-garde, 1922–1947* (2007) Mitter dissolves Indian modern art from the confines of a singular western modernism. The British art critic W.G. Archer described works by Gaganendranath Tagore (1867-1938) as derivative of European cubism and labeled it as a "cubist manqué"; his work was derivative and simply a bad imitation of Picasso (Mitter 2007, 7).<sup>29</sup> Whereas Picasso's appropriation of African masks and statues was termed 'affinity', the appropriation of 'western art' in the 'non-western world' was designated by the word influence.<sup>30</sup> Mitter convincingly shows that Gaganendranath Tagore was everything but a derivative imitator, but was nevertheless forced into the logic of the 'not quite' and 'not yet'. As Mitter writes: "if the product is too close to its original source, it reflects slavish mentality; if on the other hand, the imitation is imperfect, it represents failure" (Mitter 2007, 7).

The history of art as a singular development of western modernity has been criticized and deconstructed, leaving room for engagements with modernity from multiple perspectives. Notwithstanding its entanglement with European art history, the story of modern art in India has its own dynamic, its own stepping stones, and will stifle when forced into the straitjacket of western modernism (Kapur 2000, Mitter 2007, Brown 2009). Yet the narrative of the 'not-yet' or 'not-quite' in Modern Indian art history remains persistent and should be seen within a wider cultural logic of colonialism where India had to play a game of catch-up with the West (Bhabha 1994; Chakrabarty 2008). Modernity's division between tradition and modern, the radical break between the past and the future, has always been a geographical division, where those from the colonies, the urban peripheries, or the countryside were always lacking with respect to the European or North American metropolis.

Is *contemporary* art in Kolkata still caught up in the same dichotomies of tradition versus modernity? Do artists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century encounter the same false choice between making either

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<sup>29</sup> Partha Mitter quotes the following passage of W.G. Archer's "India and Modern Art" (London, 1959): "apart from their very evident lack of power – a power which in some mysterious way was present in the work of Braque and Picasso – Gogonendranath's [sic] pictures were actually no more than stylized illustrations . . . weak as art, but what was more important, they were un-Indian. Not only had Gogonendranath's style no vital affinities with other forms of Indian expression but its prevailing tone seemed frigidly indifferent to Indian feelings, interests or sensibility. As a result, his pictures, despite their modernistic manner, had an air of trivial irrelevance" (Archer 1959,43 in Mitter 2007, 25).

<sup>30</sup> In *The Predicament of Culture* James Clifford criticizes the term 'affinity' as a universalizing term that excludes the social contexts where the objects of the other have been made and used (Clifford 1988, 190). See also S. Gikandi (2003) *Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference*.

‘Indian’ or ‘Western’ art? My experiences in general confirm Ranjit Hoskote’s remarks of Indian art after the 1990s. Indian artists, Hoskote points out, can more easily “close the gap”, and get over the problem of “belatedness” (Hoskote 2002, 32-33). (Post)colonial asymmetric temporalities are surely not a thing of the past, but among the *contemporary* artists of Kolkata politically embedded divisions between ‘Indian art’ and ‘Western art’, anxieties and accusations of western influence, of being derivative, were not prevalent. This does not mean, however, that the linear temporal order that divides communities and practices along the yardstick of progress has diminished. The field of *contemporary* art is not as clearly divided along the lines of empire as *modern* art during the twentieth century’s political struggles for independence and its aftermaths; the tensions are felt as much, maybe more, between Kolkata and Delhi, than between India and Europe. Yet the linear time line of modernity that creates asymmetrical binaries between centers and peripheries is persistent and the logic of catching up, of missing out, of being stuck in time, emerges yet again, albeit in different forms.

In chapter two I have argued that artists and artworks make spatiotemporal transformations. These transformations not only involve the physical movements of both artists and artworks, but also concern the classification of artworks into a canonical order. The separation of the artwork from its place of making and the ability of an artist to extend, to make a name, depends not just on the ability of the artist to make something ‘new’ and ‘original’, but crucially depends on the artist’s position within and access to a field of *contemporary* art, consisting of both individual art players and institutions, that can select, interpret, circulate, classify, and preserve art practices as valuable artworks.

The difficulty for artists to take part in the ritual of *contemporary* art depends, as Chattro has pointed out above, on the financial situation for artists in Kolkata. But the relatively marginal economic position of Kolkata is entangled with Kolkata’s art infrastructure, or the lack of it, in various ways. There is not just a lack of exhibition spaces in Kolkata, there is a lack of art institutions that select, interpret, collect, exhibit, and preserves *modern* and *contemporary* artworks. Without art writers, for example, that can select, interpret, and classify works of art, the aspired spatiotemporal transformations of artists and artworks is made much more difficult. This is not only because the works do not get much attention; Sanchayan Ghosh, artist and teacher at Santiniketan (see chapter 4), laments the scarcity of critical writing about *contemporary* artworks in Kolkata. It is especially writing, critical writing, that is needed, Sanchayan tells me in his home in Santiniketan close to the arts faculty where he teaches. When critics write about artworks here in Kolkata they often do not even see the work, Sanchayan says. This is partly related to the larger emphasis on ‘the concept’ of an artwork, rather than its material aesthetics - one does not have to have physical proximity to the ‘conceptual artwork’ to interpret and judge it. But this phenomenon is exacerbated in Kolkata due to the distance of Kolkata to the



centres of *contemporary* art; art writers who work for larger art magazines are usually not based in Kolkata and although they might visit Kolkata now and then, they often can't be present at the exact opening times of short exhibitions. Syed Taufik Riaz (Taufik) who instigated and co-organized the Kolkata International Performance Art Festival (KIPAF) (see chapter 5) was surprised that a journalist wrote about their work based only on talks and pictures of their performances, while KIPAF makes site-specific performances.<sup>31</sup> A lack of art magazines, of opportunities for art critics to get paid, makes critical writing on *contemporary* works in Kolkata scarce. Although many *contemporary* artworks are shared on Facebook, this does not give works the concentrated attention an art magazine could give and will not bring the works into the spotlight of collectors, curators, and critics.

Next to the lack of critical writing there is a lack of exhibition spaces. In 2008 it was announced that a new museum, the Kolkata Museum of Modern Art (KMOMA), would be erected to address the lack of space to exhibit and preserve *modern* and *contemporary* art in India. KMOMA, a public-private partnership, was projected to become "India's first global museum of modern art", and to be designed by internationally acclaimed architects Herzog & de Meuron.<sup>32</sup> KMOMA proposes, in the words of its initiator Rakhi Sarkar, to focus on a "global" art discourse while simultaneously retaining an "Indian" character and reserving a place for "folk and tribal communities" as well. KMOMA was planned to open its doors in 2014, but as of yet KMOMA has not materialized beyond its first brick in the newly built suburb Rajarhat. The delay or failure of this particular project is only one example of the difficulties for Kolkata's art scene, but it is indicative for a wider lack of Kolkata's current art infrastructure. Next to the documentation and preservation of Kolkata's cultural heritage and the opportunities for attracting foreign visitors and investments, a large museum would provide support for the *contemporary* art scene as well. The lack of museums that collect, exhibit and preserve *modern* and *contemporary* artworks hampers Kolkata's *contemporary* art scene on various fronts; without institutional support it is more difficult to build viable collections that sustain and promote a secure market value for new works, without museums it is more difficult to foster public engagement with new forms of art, and without museums artists and art students cannot see works on a regular basis.

This lack of institutional support does not only involve museums, but a wider art infrastructure. Auction houses, fairs, and biennials have become the main players for selecting and classifying

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<sup>31</sup> And also in this thesis I do sometimes write about artworks that I haven't seen during the exhibition, such as some performances in chapter 5 and Mallika Das Sutar's *Manasa* exhibition in chapter 7. See especially 5.5.

<sup>32</sup> See [www.kmomamuseum.org](http://www.kmomamuseum.org). KMOMA explicitly refers to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, established in 1929, and maintains relationships with MOMA's international department. They are however separate institutes and have only the name in common.

*contemporary* art and pushed art critics and museum curators, the traditional gatekeepers of the *modern* art field, to the sidelines. As Diana Crane states: “Museums follow trends set in the international art market but they no longer have the financial means to set trends by buying major contemporary art works” (Crane 2009, 336; see also Filipovic, Øvstebø and Van Hal 2010). Auction houses do not only sell artworks but help create the valorization of new art forms as well. In an article on market categories Khaire and Wadhvani take the construction of the category of “Modern Indian art” between 1995 and 2007 as a case study to show the importance of an institutionalized support to facilitate market exchange. The works today characterized as “Modern Indian art” were produced between the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the 1980s (Dalmia, 2001). Yet these works, as Khaire and Wadhvani point out, were usually classified and traded (if at all) as part of the traditional or provincial art of the Subcontinent (Khaire and Wadhvani 2010, 1289). The historical reevaluation of “Modern Indian art” as a separate category has been “adapted, simplified, modified, and represented” by auction houses to create new trade categories (Ibid. 1295). To make these works circulate in the art market as “Modern Indian Art” auction houses needed to translate a subtle art historical discourse into a specific set of terms for determining aesthetic and economic value that could be shared by collectors, dealers, museums, galleries and the like. What is more, auction house catalogues cite art historical discourse to give legitimacy to the works and to create an ongoing dialogue about the works (Ibid. 1291).

By analysing catalogues, annual reports, and webpages of auction houses, looking into a range of other texts related to modern Indian art, such as reviews and art history publications, and by interviewing people working at auction houses of Sotheby’s, Christie’s and Saffron art, gallery owners and collectors of Indian art, Khaire and Wadhvani looked for the specific language and themes used in the sale of art and how this is linked with the meaning and value of the artworks.<sup>33</sup> They identified four criteria for assessing Modern Indian art: first, auction houses often stressed the originality of the works, freeing them from either being embedded in traditional ‘Indian culture’ and from a repetition of ‘Western modernism’. Second, the career of artists was often highlighted, stressing biographical details, education, awards, and influences, to place the value of the artwork within the aesthetic development of a life’s work. Third, the auction texts emphasized an artists’ membership in particular schools or groups, which helped place a work vis-à-vis other works. These “moments and movements” helped shape distinct categories within Indian Modern Art for comparison (Ibid. 1293). And fourth, many catalogue

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<sup>33</sup> Saffron Art is an auction house dedicated to modern Indian art established in 2000. Khaire and Wadhvani emphasize the importance of Saffron Art for the establishment of modern Indian art: “Unlike the previous mixed auctions held by Sotheby’s and Christie’s from 1995 to 2000, Saffron Art’s exhibitions and auctions attempted to explain 20<sup>th</sup>-century Indian art *as a category* to prospective collectors” (Khaire and Wadhvani 2010, 1291).

texts stressed the international position of artists, highlighting foreign (European or North American) sojourns, education, and awards. By focusing on their international connections, Khaire and Wadhvani argue, these texts raised the artists beyond the local art world of crafts and traditional art and helped to establish the legitimacy of Indian modernism as more than a derivative aesthetic (Ibid.). The auction houses not only helped to create modern Indian art as a distinct category, but also created a basis for judgment of aesthetic value and price. Categories, according to Khaire and Wadhvani, establish stable collection identities for products and help potential consumers to interpret complex information about products and services more easily: “Categories (...) organize information, generate shared meaning, affect valuation, and facilitate exchange in market setting”. “They orient both consumers and producers toward shared assumptions about the similarity, comparability, and relative value of products” (Ibid. 1282; see also Urban et al. 1993; Zuckerman, 1999).

With the increase of the relative importance of Art Fairs and Auction Houses vis-à-vis museums, the market prices have become more central to determine the reputations of artists (Crane 2008, 337). Based on interviews with gallery owners in New York and Amsterdam and focusing on the primary market, where artworks are sold for the first time, Olav Velthuis argues that pricing is not just an economic act, but also a signifying act. The prices are not determined case by case, depending on the quality of individual works, but are a result of conventions of setting prices in the art trade. Velthuis distinguishes two conventions: first, prices of artworks do not decrease, and second, artworks of equal size within the oeuvre of one artist have the same market price. From an economic perspective, these conventions are abnormal, because it inhibits the movement of the market into equilibrium: “if lowering prices is really impossible, the market cannot be cleared in case of excess supply” (Velthuis 2003, 192). And the convention to price according to size is an economic anomaly as well; prices for individual works in this way are not sold according to demand. A missed opportunity as one of Velthuis’s respondents, a gallery dealer, acknowledges: “there is always somebody’s favorite piece in the show that you can sell ten times over” (Ibid.). Velthuis explains these two anomalies by the high uncertainty about the value of *contemporary* art; predictably pricing artworks provides a means of managing uncertainty (Ibid. 193). Price thus becomes a signifier for their quality value, “price signals quality in case of uncertainty” (Ibid. 197), and if prices are too low collectors do not take the work seriously (Ibid. 194). An increase in the price level of a work indicates that the artist’s career is developing, and therefore a good investment. Price decreases on the other hand not only give a smaller financial return, but, more importantly, as Velthuis argues: “by lowering the price an art deal conveys a message about the work of an artist’s work. They create “suspicion in the audience,” as one dealer put it; as a result, collectors will “distrust your instincts” and will lose “faith.”” (Ibid. 195) And, artists might lose faith in themselves as well (Ibid. 199). By controlling prices

art dealers enact their role as gatekeepers, Velthuis argues: “By accepting price differences, dealers would implicitly admit that differences in quality exist in works for sale. Thus, their gate-keeping role would be undermined”. There cannot be “second rate art” as one dealer emphasized (Ibid. 198). A lack of money for a gallery owner or dealer does not only make the trading in artworks difficult but impedes the ability to influence the criteria of value as well.

It is only in a few places that the wealthiest collectors and dealers of *contemporary* art gather (Crane 2008, 336). The market, Crane writes in 2008, is centred around only a few places; major international art fairs such as The Armory Show in New York, the Frieze Art Fair in London, Art Basel (Basel), and Art Basel Miami Beach (Miami); urban art biennales, of which only a handful - mainly Venice and Kassel - are major centres for art sales; and major auction houses, most notably Christie’s and Sotheby’s. In the last decade, some important extensions of these fairs, such as Art Basel Hong Kong, came up together with some new large art fairs, such as the Delhi’s Indian Art Fair (IAF) founded in 2008. Many new biennials have emerged, particularly in Asia, such as the Kochi biennale in India (see below), the Singapore Biennale and the Shanghai Biennale, and new auction houses, such as the earlier mentioned Saffron Art have blossomed. Yet, despite the increase of biennials, art fairs, and auction houses and the shift of ‘the *contemporary* art world’ to include other regions, to participate in the major events for selling *contemporary* artworks is for many artists who see themselves as *contemporary* artists, far away. As Christiane Brosius writes about the IAF Delhi: “It excludes galleries that lack the financial capital to participate. Thus, less known and financially potent contemporary art galleries located at the margins of the A-tier cities or neighbouring countries in South Asia might never fulfill the (undefined) criteria, and fees, of the art market and ‘fall off the map’” (Brosius, 2015).

Writings from authors such as Khaire and Wadhvani (2010), Crane (2008), Brosius (2015), Velthuis (2003), and Zitzewitz (2017) reveal aspects of the wider field of *contemporary* art’s cultural production. These analyses, which resonate with Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of art (see chapter 1), are often missing in assessments of *contemporary* art, also in those that adopt social and cultural theory. *Contemporary* art is often assumed to collapse modernity’s radical break between the past and the future, embrace a distorted field of multiple modernities, and promise a critical turn away from modernity’s order of linear temporality. In *Marking Time* (2011) Paul Rabinow differentiates ‘the contemporary’ from modernity. Whereas the modern was concerned with ‘the new’, or with distinguishing itself from ‘tradition’, the contemporary measures modernity as already historical: “Contemporary as an orientation or ethos is sceptical about the implicit metaphysics of the avant-garde or the nostalgia (or worse) of an unconditional allegiance to tradition” (Rabinow 2011, 111). If the rhetoric of linear progress is no longer dominant, and the old is not simply going away then the question of how old and new are given form and work

together becomes an important site for inquiry; this site is what Rabinow calls “the contemporary” (Ibid.). Claire Bishop makes a similar argument and describes a *contemporary* artwork as something that addresses the contradictions of living in world of “co-existing, competing, and unequal modernities” (Bishop 2012, 47). Claire Bishop points out that ‘the contemporary’ is difficult to define; in visual art ‘the contemporary’ meant post-war, until the late 1990s; ten years later it referred to the sixties and seventies; and now the year 1989 – the fall of communism and the triumph of neo-liberalism – is the split moment that defines ‘the contemporary’. Yet, as Bishop argues, this periodization is Eurocentric and assumes a too straight line between the rhythm of politics and art history. Bishop proposes to approach ‘the contemporary’ as a discursive category, an ethos rather than a period, and places it in opposition to the postmodern and postmodernist relativism of the 1980s; instead of irony or cynical refusal ‘the contemporary’ stakes out a position in history without returning to a singular modernism: “if the contemporary as a term is to have any traction today beyond being a marketing category for auction houses, fairs, and blockbuster museums, it needs to engage with antinomies and paradox: the imbrication of, and inequities between, specific contexts and histories” (Ibid.).

Although *contemporary* artworks might indeed, as Bishop argues, address co-existing, competing, and unequal modernities, *modern* art expressed such fragmented modernities as well; the *modern* art history of Calcutta is a good example. By separating ‘*contemporary* art’ from ‘*modern* art’ these writings express what Peter Pels (2015) calls “epochal thinking”; a discourse that announces breaks and critical turns and thereby establishes temporal dichotomies – of ‘modernity’ versus ‘tradition’, or ‘the contemporary’ versus ‘the modern’. Rather than eradicating a linear temporal order, such epochal breaks perpetuate developmental narratives. Writings that announce such breaks tend to present *contemporary* art as an ideal category of what art could be; they focus on the utopian potential of artworks. As such, these writings belong to the ritual cycle of *contemporary* art itself; like avant-garde art practices, such writings criticize the institutional frames of artworks and pave the way for new forms of art that are free from such perceived straitjackets. As part of ritual cycle of *contemporary* art these writings play an important role, but as cultural analyses they fall short; not because they are not aware of the institutions of art, but because they go beyond them, looking out for a better future.

To be *contemporary* does not depend simply on what artists make or the fact that they make it now; it depends on their position in an internationally distributed field of cultural production. *Contemporary* art - made up by biennales, art fairs, auction houses, residency programs, art centers and art players making, presenting, preserving, circulating and classifying *contemporary* artworks – forms a field of cultural production that, like the field of *modern* art, has a spatiotemporal dimension; to be *contemporary* means to be in certain places. But, perhaps more important than being in the right places for international *contemporary* art, is the necessity of

being mobile. Sayantan Maitra Boka (Boka) is an architect and curator. He spent his youth in Kolkata but graduated from the *School of Planning and Architecture* in Delhi and lived in Delhi for 16 years. Since a few years he has become involved in Kolkata's art scene and started several collaborative projects as a curator (see chapter 6.5). Sitting in the coffee bar *Abar Baithak*,<sup>34</sup> in South Kolkata, I asked him about what he thinks of the *contemporary* art scene in Kolkata. Besides the lack of an infrastructure, Boka stresses the economic difficulties for artists in relation to travel possibilities: "most of these artists in Kolkata are not rich people (...) so their exposure is limited. You can't take them to Kochi [biennale]. For many artists it is difficult to go to Kochi, if you fly to Kochi from Kolkata, it is 25 to 30 grands. So, painful at times." The Kochi-Muziris Biennale – founded in 2012 in Kochi, a port city in the state of Kerala – is the first and largest *contemporary* art festival of its kind in India and has become the most important international platform for *contemporary* art in India. As Robert D'souza writes: "While this new addition to the growing list of global biennales can be seen as another move in India's pursuit of global recognition, it can also be read as a conscious effort to elevate Indian art in terms of aligning it with a global and contemporary culture industry" (D'souza 2013, 299). The difficulty for artists from Kolkata to visit places such as the Indian Art Fair in Delhi or the Kochi Biennial, let alone participating in them as artists, isolates them not only from a national art scene and market, but isolates them from a wider international *contemporary* art scene as well.

The authors of *Life Between Borders: The Nomadic Life of Curators and Artists* (Rand and Felty 2013) point at the necessity for artists to be mobile: "You have to be mobile to 'make it' in the art world", writes Heather Felty, "Art residencies, biennials, art fairs, international art centres and museums form an infrastructure in which artists, critics, academics, and curators meet. Artists are present at more international exhibitions than ever before, and artists' biographies include the birth location of the artist as well as where he or she is currently working/based" (2013, 13).<sup>35</sup> The authors of *Life Between Borders* take on a critical stance towards "the nomadic life" of *contemporary* artists and curators, not sparing themselves: "We often travel in such a way that we seem to 'hover' above the real world. We fly into Artisan International, go to the Artisanian restaurants that serve the art community with people we already know, and who were likely at the last fair or biennial. We tell others and ourselves how much we are doing while at the same

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<sup>34</sup> *Abar Baithak* translates literally as meeting again, but refers more specifically to boithak khana, the drawing room of large Bengali homes. The Boithak Khana was, as a semi-private and public space, an important space for negotiating the frictions of modernity in colonial Calcutta (see this chapter 3.5). More than a place to drink coffee, *Abar Baithak*, with its lounge areas, bookshelves, and muffins is on the one hand part of the global rise of coffee bars in urban centers and on the other hand refers back to Calcutta's historic sites of a specific colonial modernity.

<sup>35</sup> The authors make a distinction between the migrant and the nomad; the migrant travels out of necessity, the artist or curator nomad travels rarely out of hardship, but for exposure and making connections (Rand and Felty 2014, 12).

time wondering what it is we are doing” (Ibid. 7). In the same volume Pascal Gielen writes: “artists and curators nowadays are morally obliged to leave their familiar biotope and seek an uncertain but always inspiring Elsewhere” (Ibid. 19). Travelling the globe and living in new places is a must for being a *contemporary* artist. Gielen relates the nomadic life of artists to a postfordist economy and a neoliberalist ideology of mobility,<sup>36</sup> but what I wanted to stress here is merely the importance, almost obligation, of regional or international travel for *contemporary* artists to ‘make it’ as *contemporary* artists, to understand better the perceived lack of mobility, of being stuck in the city.

When talking about the lack of a good art infrastructure in Kolkata the artists Suman Samajpati and Sourav Roy, together forming the artist-duo TAXI, talk about Experimenter Gallery, a gallery in South Kolkata run by Prateek and Priyanka Raja that has built an international network and is the only gallery in Kolkata that shows at the main centres of international *contemporary* art, such as Art Basel or the Frieze Art Fair.<sup>37</sup> Suman: “Things are possible, look at Curator’s hub [an international discussion about curatorship organized by Experimenter in Kolkata]. Now Prateek is a big name. He just did something nobody did before. We shouldn’t follow others because then we’ll always be a step behind. So, if there is a Kochi biennale, we shouldn’t try to do such a thing as well.” Suman and Sourav point out that Kolkata is not a good place for the commercial part of *contemporary* art, yet they are positive about Kolkata as site for making art. Sourav: “For marketing and for exhibiting it is not as good as Mumbai or Delhi, you can’t compare, but as a production space Kolkata is very good and also cheap.” Suman and Sourav make a variety of installation and multi-media works and stress the advantages of Kolkata for making art that requires a broad variety of materials and skills. “Here we are born and brought up, so we have lot of friends, they are working professionally in different fields in art. So, we have the advantage that we can actually share knowledge and skills in our projects, in that sense Kolkata or West Bengal is very good. But the next step is very difficult.” Suman and Sourav point out that for the promotion of your work you have to leave

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<sup>36</sup> Pascal Gielen relates the nomadic life in the artworld to a postfordist economy and neoliberalism. The artworld’s nomadic existence fits well in an “economy driven less by production, or even consumption, increasingly by a hyper dynamic of liquid assets” (Gielen 2014, 22). Unrestrained by production units, unions, or families the artist/curator nomad exemplifies the ideal worker in a neo-liberal economy. Why would art players, who often highlight the injustices of the global economy both in their artworks and writings, support a discourse of mobility that falls in line with a neo-liberal logic of unrestrained yet asymmetrical movement of goods and information? Gielen points to the highly individualized position of the modern artist since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially after the decline of the art academy and the advent of a dealer-critic based art market in which artists’ careers became pivotal for secure future investment. Despite their bohemian idiosyncrasies, artists both incorporated the prevailing values of a liberal civil society as prime models of free individuals and became entangled in marketing strategies for innovation and investment (Ibid. 22-26). For an analysis of the shift from the art academy to the present-day dealer-critic market see H.C. White and C.A. White (1965) *Canvas and Careers, Institutional Change in the French Painting World*.

<sup>37</sup> I will write more on Experimenter Gallery in chapter 4.

Kolkata, even though the internet has opened up many ways to get in touch with people: “Actually on the internet you can get in touch with people, you can share your art with the people, but when the question comes for exhibiting, or, for funding, then it is very difficult, but you can contact with everyone. You can share your work, you can get suggestions from anyone.”

Despite the lack of mobility Boka sees opportunities in Kolkata as well and has been especially involved with KIPAF (see chapter 5) and Chander Haat (chapter 6). Yet, overall, he was disappointed by what he sees in Kolkata and laments the lack of an art infrastructure. The galleries that are there, are shops, he says, too many galleries whose only goal is to show at the IAF [Indian Art Fair]. Gallery Experimenter is an exception, he says, but they are very small and are not bothering with Kolkata artists, “they could be anywhere (...) they want to represent very important artists, and that is how they are going about it. So of course Kolkata doesn’t have any chance” (...) “Just look at any other gallery in Kolkata, zero. That is very sad for artists. Who are going to show them? What is missing in Kolkata is people who can guide artists, (...) artists confide in people who have seen some more work. Who can do some critical thinking? Who can write some critical discourse? This is not happening in Kolkata, and that’s a massive massive loss”.

In 2008 the sisters Rakhi Sarkar and Pratiti Basu Sarkar addressed the lack of Kolkata’s *contemporary* art scene by opening Studio21, the same year Rakhi Sarkar announced her plans for the KMOMA. The Sarkars already run CIMA gallery (Centre of International Modern Art), which since 1993 focuses on the sale of paintings and sculptures of both young and established artists. Yet Studio21 was presented as an alternative space contrasting with CIMA gallery, as Pratiti Basu Sarkar writes in the Telegraph: “It is everything that CIMA” isn’t (...) “While CIMA is all about the more insular art community, Studio21 is meant to take art closer to the larger community as a whole”.<sup>38</sup> The term “gallery” was deliberately omitted and ‘21’ refers to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rakhi Sarkar says in the same interview: “Studio21 is all about the youth; the idea is not only to seek out young talent, but garner their involvement. Ideally, this process will also teach them certain professional aspects that we find lacking in much of our young artistic community (...). We have enough talent in our state. We just need to shake off our tendency to stagnate and keep it all dynamic. To create, maybe all that we need is a little

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<sup>38</sup> Source: Telegraph (Kolkata): “A cradle of creativity for the young”, by Arka Das. September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2008. The Telegraph is Kolkata’s leading English newspaper. Rakhi Sarkar’s husband, Aweek Sarkar, was the editor in chief of both the The Telegraph and the Anandabazar Patrika, the largest Bengali newspaper of Kolkata. In 2016 Aweek Sarkar stepped down as editor in chief and was replaced by his brother Arup Sarkar.



inspiration. Studio21 will offer that aplenty". Studio21 was thus envisioned not only as a space for alternative art practices, but also aimed at the professionalization of young artists.

Rakhi and Pratiti Basu Sarkar appointed Manas Acharya as the curator and coordinator of Studio21, an artist trained at Santiniketan who is closely involved with various *contemporary* art practices in the city. The art school Kala Bhavan in Santiniketan sprouted from the education philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore, a philosophy that propagated informality, the lack of routines and regulations and emphasized the all-round development of individuals (Guha-Thakurta 1992, 310). Manas continues this artistic ideal; with his long hair, long beard, round glasses, and laid-back manner he does not seem to embody the professionalization indicated by the Sarkars. Manas is a good singer and is often asked by other artists in Kolkata to sing; his nickname in Santiniketan and the art-circles in Kolkata is John Lalon, referring both to John Lennon, the Beatles singer, and Lalon Shah, who was a 19<sup>th</sup> century Baul mystic and songwriter. Manas is also one of the organizers of Baul Fakir Utsav, the Baul Music festival, yearly held in Kolkata. It is exactly Manas' connections with Santiniketan, his laid back character, and his familiarity with various aspects of 'Bengali culture',<sup>39</sup> that gives him the opportunity to collaborate with a wide variety of artists in the city. With Studio21 Manas has become one of the main supporters for new *contemporary* art practices in the city, yet Studio21 did not open many new opportunities for artists to connect with a national and international *contemporary* art scene.

Part of the problem, according to Boka, lies with art education in Kolkata. There are three main visual art departments in Kolkata: the Government College of Art and Craft, The Indian Art College, and Rabindra Bharati University. The Kala Bhavana Fine Arts Faculty at Santiniketan is a three hours train journey from Howrah Station in Kolkata, but it can be considered as belonging to the group of Kolkata art colleges as well due to the intensive contact between Kolkata and Santiniketan. The art schools' curricula are mainly focused on painting and sculpture and do not provide much space for formal training in practices associated with *contemporary* art, such as video art, installation art, or performance art. As state institutes the art schools are bureaucratic and slow to adjust to new developments and do not have the money to invest in new equipment. Being trained at an institute like the Government Art College does however not mean that students, after graduation, stick to painting or sculpture and I met many artists who do not seem to be limited to particular media. Boka sees potential for the schools, and thinks that, for example at Santiniketan, there is still space to think. Yet, overall Boka is

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<sup>39</sup> As Edward Dimock writes, Rabindranath Tagore was heavily influenced by Baul music, poetry and spirituality and Lalon Shah was one of the Bauls who had a profound effect on him. (Dimock 1966, 257). Tagore praised the Bauls and acknowledged his own poetic debt to them (Ibid. 253). Manas' knowledge of Baul music and songs of Tagore, together with his education at the visual art department at Santiniketan place him in the cultural centre of West Bengal.

critical: “I remember when I was in college I used to visit the Government Art College, the exhibitions they did, very skillful works. But no thinking.” Schools do not foster critical thinking, Boka says, and he thinks that even skills are getting lost in the art schools. What is more, he criticizes the old-fashioned structure of the curriculum of a school like Government Art College divided in ‘western art’ and ‘Indian art’.

Despite the curricula, schools like Rabindra Bharati and Kala Bhavan Santiniketan do experiment with *contemporary* art practices. A possible reason for this is that some of the teachers are practicing *contemporary* artists as well. Chattro and Paula Sengupta, co-founders of *Khoj Kolkata*, taught at Rabindra Bharati, and Chattro has recently become the director of the Government Art College. Sanchayan Ghosh teaches at Santiniketan and Adip Dutta at Rabindra Bharati. As I will write in the following chapter, although the curriculum of Santiniketan does not provide much space for new art forms, such as performance art, the teachers and students do organize a variety of activities outside the curriculum. Not only do artists bring their art practices in their teaching, the artists/teachers can do projects with students that would be difficult in a gallery setting. Much of Sanchayan Ghosh’s work, for example, is in collaboration with his students (see chapter 4).

Rathin Barman studied at the Faculty of Visual Arts at Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata and distinguishes Rabindra Bharati from the other Art colleges. Exhibiting at gallery Experimenter he is one of the few artists in Kolkata with an international outreach; he participated at the Vancouver and Singapore Biennales, went to Lyon for a residency and exhibited at the art fairs of Hongkong, Dubai, Delhi and Basel. Rathin lives in the north of Kolkata, in Dunlop; he usually works in a large shared industrial workspace, a 10 minutes walk, where equipment and space is available for making his sculptures. Here, he tells me during a walk towards the workspace, he can work comfortably and make noise. He does not often go in to the city centre and rarely goes to openings, but instead goes to see the exhibitions later. Rathin told me he learned to focus on his work at Rabindra Bharati and is positive about the training he got there: “when you produce one simple artwork (...) so much of material and tools are involved to make a small simple spatial structure”. But for many artists in Kolkata it is difficult to deal with many materials, because they have been trained in one medium only. Rathin says he was taught that anything can be material, “also ‘nothing’ can be material”. At Rabindra Bharati he learned to think beyond a “modernist way of thinking”, “that has happened, but we have to grow beyond this. An artist can do anything, can be anything, and engage with any kind of social situation”



*Figure 3.5*

Left: Rathin working on a sculpture for Experimenter Gallery in front of his workplace. Right: Rathin has a keen eye for his surroundings; going for a tea close to his home he notices a spider web that has neatly covered a hole of a ceiling

Apart from setting aside Rabindra Bharati from other Art Colleges in Kolkata Rathin emphasizes the difference from an art training in Europe. Work force in Kolkata is cheap, but it can be difficult to plan ahead as people are often late, don't show up in time. What is more, they don't have an idea about *contemporary* artworks, Rathin says. Rathin's helpers could be welders, casters, masons, or carpenters and have a lot of technical skills, but their skills have to be applied differently for the artworks. "For art you need a lot of patience, and sometimes they want to make shortcuts. So you always have to be there." Sometimes when he cannot be there he asks a friend from Art College to supervise the work. In the art schools in Europe, on the other hand, "people can cast for you, you don't have to worry about it. But people here don't know the artistic language so you have to know the technical procedure. In Europe people listen and listen and then do the work, as you want it. Here they start immediately but then make many mistakes. So there is a flexibility of the work by default. In Europe there are also more rules, with respect to insurances and so forth."

Rathin does not see working in Kolkata as limiting. Aside obvious upsides of working in Kolkata such as the much lower labour and material costs, Rathin sees the apparent advantage of better institutional support in Europe as a possible disadvantage for making art: "There is a lot of help from directors who can advise you on all things technical, so from the beginning you won't make any mistakes. If you don't make any mistakes I think there is a lack to perfectly

understanding the material.” Rathin sees the rust he uses for his artworks’ surfaces as a controlled mistake, something that is not carefully planned. Rathin talks about a work he made some years ago for a collector using steel square wire, after some time she wrote an email listing some problems with the artwork:

“So, she says there is rust, and there are some odd-looking welding points that I didn’t properly file off (...) I said there is no glue available in the market to stick one steel to another, if you file of the welding points completely then it won’t be structurally strong, number one. Number two, she had a problem with rusting, it is rust, part of the world. When I sent the installing maintenance manual, I have mentioned it, it will be rusted, if you don’t like rust, you have to go through this process and apply a particular kind of coating. So, she said it is a bit imperfect in production, some measurements, a little bit this much that much. I said that I’m inspired by architecture. I’m reproducing some ideas and some structural details of the architecture in front of me. Go to your home and look at your walls, how perfect is it? Does your wall look like a glass finish? (...) Cracks, ups and downs, look at the corner of your house. Is it perfectly single lined like hair? I said that I work with the workers who work for your building as well. How do you expect these guys, the same guys, to do this sort of perfection? (...) How do you expect the same idea to be perfect as a sketch, as a line drawing? It can’t be possible. When you transform an idea to a material there would be some controlled or uncontrolled mistakes. We have to expect it, I do expect this. She was kind of overwhelmed with the answer, collected a few more of my works and she commissioned an artwork, a few months back.”

Where he works and lives in North Kolkata the streets are flooded during the monsoon, which is inconvenient in many ways, but the humid climate of the monsoon is ideal for making his rust paintings. He makes drawings of rust, where he presses rusted iron on sheets of paper. In the monsoon season, when its hot and humid, it is easy to let the iron rust, Rathin says, but during the rest of the year he accelerates the process by keeping a room in his house hot and humid. Rathin likes to work with the material, he says, and embraces unexpected outcomes, mistakes. The combination of the environment and the lack of institutional support make the planning of his large artworks difficult and stressful, says Rathin; “you depend on many people working on different parts of your work and you don’t know exactly what the outcome will be”. For *Experimenter* Gallery this is not so much a problem, he discusses the changing process of the artwork with Prateek and Priyanka and they are open to possible alterations. But when he is showing at Art Basel, for example, he has to send a proposal one month beforehand and cannot alter the design.

Kolkata is surely an interesting place and, in some respects, a convenient place for the production of *contemporary* art, but to convert these opportunities into a market value and make Kolkata’s practices known to an ‘outside’ (inter)national *contemporary* art scene is something else.

Rathin depends on Experimenter's network and support, but the work of other artists who do not have this support remains in Kolkata. Aside from the lack of mobility and institutional calcification that Boka experiences in Kolkata, Boka talks about a mentality of Kolkata artists. "Another big problem which I was trying to sort out here was this extreme partitioning between filmmakers, and artists, artists and performance artists, performance artists and theatre people (...) no one is talking to each other and everyone is lost". He contrasts this with Baroda where writers, artists, and curators all work together. "They support each other because of the Baroda school, we don't have this in Kolkata (...), you have to be part of the art world."<sup>40</sup> The biggest problem Boka sees in Kolkata is the lack of communication between Bengali artists and artists from elsewhere. "This does not happen only in Kolkata, it's the same thing with Gujarati, same thing with Keralites. In that way Bombay and Delhi are much more interesting, you are talking the same language, at least for starters". Boka laments the regional identification of artists and the inability of artists to transcend these regional identities and connect with artists from other regions, whether nationally or internationally. Boka says it is foremost a language problem; Bengali artists have a strong tendency to shut out non-Bengalis by talking Bengali among each other, "you do not have to speak English, not necessarily, that is the next phase, internationally, but you need to speak some common language, speak Hindi, it could be broken Hindi (...). Even in Delhi Bengalis cannot stop to do it [speak Bangla]." This is, according to Boka, an important aspect of the isolation of Kolkata artists, "when you have a foreign friend, or someone from Gujarat or Delhi, you have to respect that feeling. This is the biggest problem with Kolkata people."

The predicament of 'the *contemporary*' in Kolkata does not only involve (post)colonial asymmetries, neither is it simply an issue of lacking funds; it concerns a wide range of integrated limitations that highlight the borders, both imagined and real, between Kolkata's art scene and a national and international art scene. I have focused on the ways artists talk about these limitations, the ways they are experienced by the artists that I follow throughout the thesis, rather than describing an objective comprehensive account of the art scene in Kolkata. I did not want to describe Kolkata's art scene as marginal in and of itself, but rather highlight the tensions between centre and periphery; the lack of Kolkata's *contemporary* art scene is not merely an objective absence of institutions but concerns the gap between aspirations and opportunities.

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<sup>40</sup> The Baroda group was a collective of artists trained at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda (Vadodara), Gujarat. The Baroda Faculty of Fine Arts, established in 1949 drew students from a variety of backgrounds and fostered relations between indigenous arts and crafts. The school formed an alternative to the existing schools of art in India such as the Bengal School and became famous especially for the emphasis on narrative in painting, a movement that turned away from abstraction and connected modern art to centrality of narratives in historical Indian art (See G. Kapur and V. Sundaram 1981).

The main character in Satyajit Ray's last film *Agontuk* (the Stranger) is an anthropologist. After 35 years wandering the world, in Europe, the US, and studying indigenous communities in Brazil, Manomohan Mitra travels back to Calcutta to visit his only surviving relative Anila Bose. Anila excitedly reads the letter announcing the arrival of her long-lost uncle, but her husband Sudhundra finds it suspicious, worries about the inheritance, removes some valuable art pieces before his arrival and makes Anila doubt about Manomohan's identity.<sup>41</sup> Their little son Satyaki, however, believes him to be his real great uncle, his dadu:

Satyaki (S) listens with Manomohan (M) to tribal music from Manomohan's tape recorder:

- S: I've found out.  
M: What?  
S: Who you are?  
M: Well, who am I?  
S: dadu!  
M: Real or fake?  
S: Real  
(...)  
S: So I'll call you great uncle from now on?  
M: More than a great uncle.  
S: who?  
M: a hopping great uncle. (chot dadu)  
S: Chot dadu?  
M: Yes, I am always ready to go hopping, all my life I have been hopping from place to place. I will rest here a few days and then go hopping again.  
S: You don't like it here?  
M: I will be here as long as I like it here.  
S: Will you go away after that?  
M: Listen, I will teach you something new, a very funny word.. Kupomanduk. what did I say?  
S: Kupomanduk  
M: Kupo is a well, and Manduk is a frog.<sup>42</sup>  
S: A frog in a well?  
M: Yes, think about it, what a nasty thing. No light, no air/wind, foul smell, slimy! And yet the frog never moves from there. There are such frogs among people also. They are called stay-at-homes. I am not one of them. That's why I am all the time on the move.  
S: What if I go out too?  
M: You must. If you don't, how can you taste armadillo meat?  
S: what kind of meat?  
M: Armadillo. It's a kind of anteater.  
S: Who eats such meat?  
M: haha, If I tell you everything I'll run out of my stock of stories. Wait. And then you'll have your reward.

<sup>41</sup> The actor who plays Manomohan, Utpall Dutt, is cast as a villain who attempts to steal a valuable Ganesha icon in Ray's *Joy Baba Felunath* (The Elephant God) (1979).

<sup>42</sup> In Bangla this Sanskrit expression is translated as *kuor baeng*.

For me the parable of the frog in the well has become an image of the limitations and ambitions of artists.<sup>43</sup> This research focuses on *contemporary* artists who want to extend, to broaden their horizons, but are often impeded from doing so. What if the frog wants to get out of the well, but can't? What happens when artworks do not make it further than their first exhibition, when artworks do not circulate beyond the studio, stay in Kolkata, and are not preserved, collected and canonized. Yet, more than just ambitions to cross borders, by making art, artists reflect on and 'work through' the uncertain relation between an 'inside' and an 'outside'. Art making in Kolkata is usually not a clear-cut calculation; it is haphazard, not made to solve a specific problem, it operates within a realm of uncertainty, and creates opportunities rather than certainties. It is not just about the incapability of artists to become part of the *contemporary* art world; it is also about the unresolved tensions between the comforts and conventions of a real and imagined home and the promises and uncertainties of the outside world. The central theme of Ray's *Agontuk* is the family's doubt about the stranger's authenticity and Ray subtly plays with questions of 'Bengaliness' and 'foreignness'. This uncertainty between the self and the other, the home and the world, takes a central position in this thesis as well.

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<sup>43</sup> Other Bengalis have picked up the parable of the frog and the well, albeit with different purposes. The Indian saint Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) tells the story of the frog in the well in a lecture at the World's parliament of religions in 1893. The parliament was organized to foster a dialogue among the world's religions (see [parliamentofreligions.org](http://parliamentofreligions.org); Houghton 1893). Vivekananda's more famous welcoming speech took place in Chicago on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 1893. The parable of the frog in the well was part of another speech he gave "Why we disagree" on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 1893. Vivekananda used the parable to warn against religious sectarianism, whether among Hinduism, Islam, or Christianity, and was the first who exported the ideal of a reformed Hinduism to the United States. He tells a version in which the frog from the well meets a frog from the sea. – 'Where are you from?' 'I am from the sea.' 'The sea! How big is that? Is it as big as my well?' and he took a leap from one side of the well to the other. 'My friend,' said the frog of the sea, 'how do you compare the sea with your little well?' Then the frog took another leap and asked, 'Is your sea so big?' 'What nonsense you speak, to compare the sea with your well!' 'Well, then,' said the frog of the well, 'nothing can be bigger than my well; there can be nothing bigger than this; this fellow is a liar, so turn him out.' – After this parable Vivekananda continues: "I am a Hindu. I am sitting in my own little well and thinking that the whole world is my little well. The Christian sits in his little well and thinks the whole world is his well. The Mohammedan sits in his little well and thinks that is the whole world. I have to thank you of America for the great attempt you are making to break down the barriers of this little world of ours, and hope that, in the future, the Lord will help you to accomplish your purpose (Houghton 1893, 258-259). Vivekananda rejected caste divisions, doctrines, dogmas, rituals, oral traditions and temples in favour of a universal essence of 'spirituality'. He took up the Vedic line 'The wise speak of what is One in many ways' and transformed it into 'Truth is one; sages speak of it variously' arguing that the *Rig Veda* was monotheistic (Doniger 2014, 18).

### 3.5 *Boithak khana*

I met the couple Piyali Sadhukhan and Saumik Chakraborty through Abhijit as they were both part of *Khoj Kolkata*. They work as artists, as theater backdrop designers and make Durga Puja *pandals* together as well (see chapter 6). Meeting Saumik and Piyali in their apartment in North Kolkata, with a couple of friends, old monk rum, and dinner, Saumik showed me some of his earlier works; small paintings on postcard size paper of approximately 10 by 20 cm. We were sitting in their living room under a large wall painting painted by Piyali depicting a man without a face lying on his back straitjacketed in a white garment on a purple grey background surrounded by an abstract corona of lines and blotches. The living room is without a couch and dining table - by now common furniture in Bengali middle-class residencies - lacks the pictures of family and gods that usually adorn Bengali homes, and in general seems somewhat bleak aside from the colorful textiles on which we sat. Saumik did not like his former works. I liked the little colorful abstract paintings, but I could not convince him; he did not so much disagree with the particular outcomes of the paintings in hand but with the overall practice and outcome of such abstract paintings. It did not do anything for him: “it is boring, just lines and colors, I can easily do this, it does not take me any effort”. He did not say it in an arrogant way, he just found it too easygoing, it wasn’t anything new and it did not do anything. Soon, after some drinks, the conversation switched to politics and he talked about social injustice and Naxalite violence.<sup>44</sup> Although Saumik did not make the relation very explicit, I had the idea that Saumik’s dissatisfaction with his former works and the social realities of West Bengal and India coincided; the abstract works could not express the suffering in society that Saumik cares about.

Even if abstract expressionism was never as dominant in India as it was in Europe and North America, for Saumik it forms a straitjacket nevertheless.<sup>45</sup> I did not ask whether Saumik’s abstract paintings could be traced to a tradition of abstract expressionism from India or to an American or European abstract tradition; his reaction against it is what interests me.<sup>46</sup> The

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<sup>44</sup> Saumik refers to the Naxalite movement, a violent Maoist political movement in India that drew many urban youths into the countryside in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The movement got its name from the village of Naxalbari in West Bengal where a peasant revolt started. The movement suffered a political defeat in the early 1970s, yet it continues to see resurgences across India. See for example Sumanta Banerjee (1984) *India’s Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising* and Sudeep Chakravarti (2008) *Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite Country*.

<sup>45</sup> Abstract art in India was, as Geeta Kapur writes, committed to “augmenting its iconographic resources through anthropomorphic intent, metaphoric allusions, elaborate morphologies”, and she contrasts the abstract aesthetic of Nasreen Mohamedi with artists like Bhupen Khakar, Gulammohammed Sheikh, or Arpita Singh who “succumb exuberantly to the great temptation of the imagination (...)” (Kapur 2000, 67).

<sup>46</sup> It was not my objective to trace such influences and questions of influence were usually not part of my questioning methods. For me the little postcard paintings looked like Euro-American abstract expressionism of the 50’s or 60’s. However, it is difficult and problematic to place the works in an isolated



outcomes of these reactions against abstract expressionism diverge, but whichever form it took, it is a reaction against a process by which artworks become ‘more symbolic’, over time. My main theoretical argument outlined in chapter 2 is that artworks undergo a ritual transformation in which they become part of a canonical order and possibly become equated with the higher *idea* of Art. In this process, which involves a spatiotemporal transformation, they are interpreted, classified, and preserved and come to signify symbolically in addition to their indexical and iconic signifying capacities (see chapter 2.4). Artists, reacting to this process, want to undo art’s symbolic value by making something new that does not have a circumscribed meaning, something that is not a symbol. W.J.T. Mitchell illustrates this process for *modern* abstract art “(...) the historical moment when abstraction could alienate anyone by virtue of being abstract is long past.<sup>47</sup> Abstract painting is familiar, classical, standard, even official. Works of abstract art no longer stand out as polarities in the dialectic of subject and object. They are more like members of a brother- or sisterhood of objects than Oedipal spectacles. They promise, not transcendence or purification of the singular beholder, but a *conversazione* (to recall the eighteenth-century pictorial genre) among beholders” (W.J.T. Mitchell 2005, 231). Abstract paintings have become not only symbols of, for example, the art market; they are in the first place, at least for some, familiar, “too easy”. They seem to limit the possibilities of art, form straitjackets from which artists want to flee. And, what is for Saumik perhaps most important, more than a mere worn-out visual composition, abstract painting does not capture the reality of everyday life.

Ranajit Hoskote writes that the art practices emerging from the 1990s onwards are radically different from before; from both the critical-adversarial stance of the 1980s and the solemn expressionism and studied allegory artists started to use non-conventional materials and technologies, use the widespread media of the moment, and shifted the sites of art. Hoskote distinguishes four “experiential landscapes” that Indian artists now address. The first

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sphere of influence. As I wrote above, the rhetoric of ‘influence’, in contrast to ‘affinity’, has connotations of following a certain style, of not being truly original.

<sup>47</sup> The lines of flight away from abstract expressionism in Europe and America started early in the twentieth century. As Hal Foster writes in *The Return of the Real*, in the 1920’s already the Dadaists and the Russian constructivists contested autonomous art and expressive art, the first through an embrace of everyday objects and a pose of aesthetic indifference, the constructivists through the use of industrial materials and the transformation of the function of the artist (Foster 1996, 4). Yet despite such influential art movements a withdrawal and formalism circulating around ideals of ‘significant form’ and ‘pure opticality’ forwarded by critics like Clive Bell and Clement Greenberg was the dominant idea of art throughout the twentieth century. From the 1950s Art had a religious ring to it writes Thomas McEvelley in *Art and Discontent*, a counterweight to a widely disparaged rationalism: “Spurred on by the prophets (critics), the faithful (collectors) gathered the relics of the saints (artists) under the auspices of the proprietors of the church (dealers). In terms of the market, this was a kind of Golden Age. The opiate was distilled, bottled in fine decanters, on sale, and in demand” (McEvelley 1993, 12). Yet, golden ages come to an end, as McEvelley writes, and from the ‘60s and throughout the 70’s critics and artists alike challenged the formalist paradigm (Ibid. 14).

experiential landscape is the breakdown of the classic painted frame, the second is the corresponding breakdown of formal sculpture, the third concerns the virtual space made available by the internet, and the fourth landscape involves a blurring of the conventional studio-gallery system and an entrance of artworks in the public domain (Hoskote 2002, 37). These breakaways occurred within a specific context of India's 1990s economic liberalization and the advent of Hindu nationalism. Hoskote writes that art came fully into its own during the 1990s yet ironically achieved this through a turning outward to the world, rather than an inward looking for 'Indianness' of earlier generations of Indian artists.<sup>48</sup>

*Khoj Kolkata* played an important role in the opening of these four experiential landscapes in Kolkata. As Paula Sengupta writes: "Abhijit was able to poise himself as a pivotal player in the gradual shift that occurred from high modernism in Bengal to *contemporary* practice in the '90s. As a matter of fact, at mid-career, he was instrumental in effecting the emergence of this shift in Kolkata and its environs."<sup>49</sup> Abhijit, Chattro, and Paula attracted young artists, such as Saumik and Piyali, and together they embarked on a variety of site-specific projects. Young artists Chattro says, "are interested in the new type of art practices, it's very difficult to bring in the older artists into this form, we tried once or twice, but it's very difficult for them to believe in this, its one thing to participate in one workshop, it's not just coming and working in one event, its about whether it becomes part of your practice or not." As Paula Sengupta writes, *Khoj Kolkata* was founded "to support an upcoming, emerging generation of artists".<sup>50</sup> The urge to do something new, to break away from former practices, was shared by all artists participating in the projects of *Khoj Kolkata*.

Are these merely belated versions of avant-garde art practices in India and elsewhere? Is *Khoj Kolkata's* interest in site-specific art practices, merely a follow up of earlier site-specific practices by *Khoj* (Delhi), and are India's earlier experiments with site-specific art merely continuations of a form of art that has started in 'the West'? I could not see, at first sight, how the move towards site-specific art by *Khoj Kolkata* is different from what happened elsewhere and earlier. What is specific about *Khoj Kolkata's* site-specific art? To answer this question, I will look in more detail at one project by *Khoj Kolkata*.

*Khoj Kolkata* started in 2013 with the *Boithak Khana* project. *Khoj Kolkata* looked for families that were willing to open their *boithak khana*, the colonial Bengali equivalent of the English drawing room, to the public for an art exhibition. There have now been two *Boithak Khana* exhibitions, and although I was partly involved in the second as well, I have focused on the first

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<sup>48</sup> A move similar to Rabindranath Tagore's interest in the Bauhaus movement described above.

<sup>49</sup> Abhijit exhibition Catalog.

<sup>50</sup> Abhijit exhibition Catalog.

*Boithak Khana*, at the *Chaudhuri bari* (Chaudhuri house), a large free standing villa in the southern Kolkata neighbourhood Bhowanipur. The *Chaudhuri bari* belongs to a Bengali family of zamindars (landlords) and solicitors who opened their *boithak khana* to the artists in the weeks before the exhibition and to a public during two days of exhibition. I was appointed as ‘observer’ and co-wrote with Chattro the following text, that served as a press release and was printed out on a large sheet at the entrance of the exhibition:

### *THE ‘BOITHAK KHANA’ PROJECT*

Boithak Khana – the Drawing Room. Where the home and the world come together.

From what began around three existing villages of Sutanuti, Kolikata and Gobindapur a city took shape with the emergence of British colonialism. Its subsequent rich history up to the present made Kolkata into a versatile metropole. Although the city got rid of its colonial skin, much of the past lingers. This past can be seen directly on the surfaces of Kolkata’s buildings, but many stories lie hidden beneath the surface. One of the ways of excavating the layers of Kolkata is to explore the existing lived-in spaces within the city, the households of old Kolkata that carry the past with them. This is what the Boithak Khana project sets out to do. Traditionally seen as a space for receiving guests, Boithak Khana serves as a crossing point between the domestic and the public; a space for interaction, *adda*<sup>51</sup>, and entertainment.

The Boithak Khana project aims to draw artistic parallels within these domestic spaces. Therefore, this exhibition does not want to lay emphasis solely on the artworks. As an unexpected blending between the gallery space and the drawing room it aims to start a dialogue between the contemporary artworks and the household artefacts. By resounding the past, materialising social relations, or drawing possible future perspectives, the jointed imaginations reveal the burdens of history and shed light on the challenges of tomorrow. By placing the contemporary artworks in-between the objects and walls, a range of questions will be asked. Questions concerning the boundaries between work and leisure, between public and private space, and between exhibition and inhibition. Furthermore, questions will be asked concerning colonial and contemporary injustice, class differences, and changing gender roles. All questions that revolve around the supposed dichotomies of the past and the present, the local and the global. Between the home and the world.

The Chaudhuri house is the first in a series of Boithak Khana’s. A team of twelve artists and one observer have discussed their artworks and the spaces available for their instalments with the residents. Once the works have been installed on

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<sup>51</sup> *Adda* is a get-together of friends for long and informal discussions. See 6.4.

site, the space will be opened up for viewing with an open studio. The residents as well as the artists will be present during the hours of public viewing, each work interpreting the site and thereby prompting dialogue and discussion. The Boithak Khana project is looking for appropriate domestic spaces where the residents are open to the idea of an intervention and the opening up of their space to the public.

In the weeks before the exhibition the artists of *Khoj Kolkata* visited *Chaudhuri bari* several times to research the space and history of the house. I will give a short description of the *boithak khana* as I experienced it before the exhibition: Ascending the marble staircase, in our socks, passing a large mirror, and some old family pictures, we enter the drawing room, a large and high room, with white-grey marble and red stone and two rows with three ionic columns each. On the columns and the walls hang small pictures of gods, two with Kali trampling Shiva, two pictures of the goddess Durga - one of a *pandal* tableaux where she conquers the buffalo demon *Mahishasura*, another that zooms in on her face – a picture of Krishna and Radha, and one with Ganesha; they are small pictures and don't draw much attention. There are larger pictures of Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, and Sarada Devi,<sup>52</sup> interspersed with family pictures and oil paintings. A large oil painting standing on a small table against the wall depicts Lakshmi on a red lotus.<sup>53</sup> In the middle and on one side of the room stands some furniture, yet the room is so large that the chaise longues, chairs and dining table seem relatively small. There are dressing tables (*almira*) with inlaid mirrors, multiple English table clocks in glass bells, small statues, vases, a standing clock, and two large 'Belgian' mirrors. On the ceiling hang fans, glass lamps and a chandelier.

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<sup>52</sup> Rabindranath Tagore has been introduced already. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), disciple of the 19<sup>th</sup> century mystic Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886), was an Indian saint and religious reformer. Sarada Devi (1853-1920) was a Hindu mystic and saint, married to Sri Ramakrishna.

<sup>53</sup> A rumour circulated that this was a painting by Raja Ravi Varma (1848 –1906) a famous Indian painter and artist who worked in a realist style depicting Hindu iconography.





*Figure 3.6*

Up: Staircase leading up to the drawing room.  
 Middle: One of the inhabitants reading his newspaper in the drawing room. Left the oil painting with Lakshmi on the red lotus.  
 Below: Drawing room

The *Chaudhuri bari* seems a relic of a bygone past, yet there are signs of everyday use, a television, some magazines, the statesman newspaper, a small child's bicycle and objects of a more recent date, such as two statues of dogs under a table. Six wooden panel doors with red curtains in front of them lead to the other quarters of the house, out of bounds for visitors, as well as the artists in the days before the exhibition. There is a door leading to the terrace and several windows on two sides of the room. All in all, the room is impressive yet light, and even with its eclectic collection of objects seems not overcrowded.

The twelve participating artists chose various perspectives for their works; some engaged with the history and future of the family, others more broadly with colonial history and social inequality, and one artist focused on more recent political events. There were two works installed outside in the courtyard of the house, two in the library room downstairs, and the rest upstairs in the drawing room. Abhijit, for example, interviewed the family members, young and old, and asked what they would bring with them if they would move. "What is perceived as home?" he wrote in his art note, "What would be the memories that the residents take away (...) Is it the associated objects and furniture? Is it events, loves and emotions? Or is the warm breeze on a sultry afternoon or the musty smell after the first rain?" With the feedback of the

family members Abhijit created “memory boxes” but also added his own memories, subtly, in the boxes. During the installation of the work at the courtyard of the Chaudhuri house, Abhijit related a particular private memory of his childhood home that he incorporated in the work, yet he asked me not to mention this particular memory.

Anuradha Pathak’s “...*And a constrained access*” addresses the ambiguous character of the *boithak khana* and the ground floor library, and especially the place of women in the house. Anuradha studied Visual Arts at Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata. After her studies she moved to Delhi and worked for Delhi Art Gallery as an assistant curator aside from her art practice. She returned to Kolkata to take care of her parents and in 2013 opened the Kolkata chapter of the Centre for Art and Social Practice (CASP), a platform to bring social scientists, artists, writers, architects, and designers together. During the time of the *Boithak Khana* exhibition in 2013 Anuradha was still orientating herself anew in the city and its *contemporary* art practices and doing so came in touch with *Khaj Kolkata*. For the exhibition Anuradha used a corner of the downstairs library room and created a zoned off space with curtains, with a curtain print inspired by the wallpaper design of a private room she has seen in the house. In the separated corner there was a small *almira* (dressing table) on which Anuradha placed a jewellery box containing the law book “*Landmarks in Indian Legal and Constitutional History*” in which segments were highlighted on the right to education for women. In a ‘letter’ placed at the bottom of the *almira* Anuradha wrote about her return to Kolkata, female illiteracy in India and the right to education, and refers to a family relation of the Chaudhuri family who became a Justice at High Court in 1930. Anuradha’s artwork, as she wrote in the art note is “a tribute to all the women in this house who came out of the strong social taboo entrusted upon women in Indian families”.

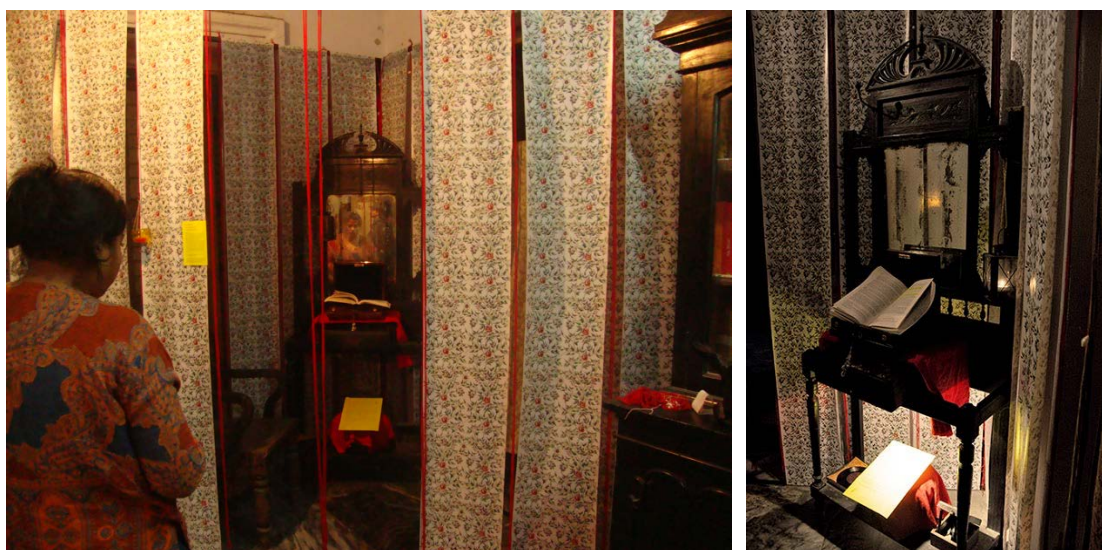


Figure 3.7  
Anuradha with her work “...*And a constrained access*”. Right: the *almira* with the lawbook and letter.

Anuradha's work reminded me of a scene in Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire*, translated as *Home and the World*. *Ghare Baire* was published in 1916 and was adapted on film by Satyajit Ray. *Ghare Baire* is perhaps the most well known Bengali perspective on the tension between the local and the global. Tagore's novel lays bare the contradictions of the *Swadeshi* movement initiated in 1905, an economic strategy to boycott British products as a reaction to the first partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon, and an important step in creating political awareness for the Indian nationalist movement. But, more than a political novel *Ghare Baire* deals with the tensions, felt by Tagore himself, between India and the West, tradition and modernity. It narrates the fictional story of a zamindar's house through the perspectives of the landlord Nikhilesh, his wife Bimala, and his friend Sandip. Nikhilesh is a liberal reformer and advocates liberal ideals, such as women emancipation. He is critical of the colonial empire and attempts to compete with English monopolies by setting up and investing in local businesses, yet he is inspired by European liberal ideals and unwilling to fully support the reactionary and at turns violent aspects of the Swadeshi movement led by Sandip. Sandip stays over at Nikhilesh's house and enjoys his hospitality, but he opposes Nikhilesh's liberalism and advocates homegrown products, food, and medicines. Bimala is encouraged by her liberal husband Nikhilesh to go out into the world and leave the secluded quarters of her home. While hesitant at first, she gets caught up in the Swadeshi movement as well as in Sandip's amorous advances and sells off her jewellery for the cause. In the novel the jewellery case and the *boithak khana* play a crucial role as mediators between inside and outside. The jewellery case is a locked box inside Bimala's bedroom, where she keeps her valuables and a photo of both Nikhilesh and Sandip. The *boithak khana* is Bimala's relation to the outside world. To meet Sandip, Bimala often enters the *boithak khana* where Sandip comes often under the pretense of finding a book, to the suspicion of her sister-in-law. In a crucial scene, Bimala brings the jewel case to the *boithak khana* so that they can be sold for the Swadeshi cause: "I drew out my jewel-box from the folds of my shawl and placed it before him."<sup>54</sup>

The Bengali word *ghare* means inside the room/house (*ghar*), *baire* means outside. Yet *ghare* also more generally refers to 'the home' and *baire* to 'the world'. As Partha Chatterjee writes in *The Nation and its Fragments*, *baire* is associated with the world of material interests and practical considerations, and typically the domain of the male. *Ghare*, the home, is considered as the domain of women and must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the outside (Chatterjee 1993, 120). The architectural boundaries inside the traditional Bengali home reflected this division as well and demarcated an 'inside' quarter, that was the domain of

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<sup>54</sup> R. Tagore (1916) *Home and the World (Ghare Bhaire)* Transl. by Sreejata Guha (2005, p159).



women, and an ‘outside’ quarter where women had to be veiled and follow a system of *purdah* (from the Persian word curtain) which involved clearly defined behavioral codes with regard to visiting men (Donner 2008, 14). Tagore uses this division to reflect on the tension between India, as home, and the outside (colonial) ‘world’ of politics and commerce and plays with an inside/outside dynamic in various ways. Just like Tagore in his novel, Anuradha plays with the boundary of *ghare* and *baire*. With “...*And a constrained access*” Anuradha re-creates the enclosure of women with a curtain. Inside the library, which can be seen as part of the *boithak khana* of the Chaudhuri *bari*, she creates an intimate private space, curtained off, with an *almira* and jewelry box. Yet she emphasizes the entrance into ‘the world’ by highlighting the story of the family member and thus crosses the boundary at the same time.

“...*And a constrained access*” creates a fissure in the division between *ghare* and *baire*, an opening to instigate change, in this case the educational advance of women in India. But the entire *boithak khana* can be seen as ambiguous place that played an important role in the transformation of society. As Swagato Ganguly in his foreword to *Ghare Baire* writes, the drawing room is “an ambiguous space, neither indoors nor outdoors; it is where home meets the world” (2005, xiv). The room serves, in the novel, as a metaphor for the choices between conservatism and reform, and the false choice for India or the West. But more than a metaphor, it is the place where these predicaments of modernity were negotiated. Rosinka Chaudhuri has written an insightful essay on the ambiguous nature of the *boithak khana*. Chaudhuri points out the importance of the *boithak khana* as a pivotal place for modernity in Calcutta. ‘Drawing room’ and ‘*boithak khana*’ can now be seen as similar, yet they have a different genealogy. Drawing room derives from ‘withdrawing room’, a place to withdraw after dinner, a room, according to the OED, for “comfortable sitting or entertaining in a private house” (Chaudhuri 2011, 4-5). Such a room did not exist in Bengal before the English; traditional Bengali houses of the well-off had, among other rooms, the *andarmahal*, the inner chambers for women and domestic affairs, and the *bahirmahal*, or outer chambers, for business by the men of the house and male visitors (Ibid.). *Boithak khana* was a Hindustani term for a private reception area in the house of Muslim nobility and was mostly used for music or dance in the zamindari houses (Ibid.). These large rooms changed into drawing rooms in the European style. Yet, around the 1920s and 30s the drawing room transformed into a “hybridized Indian form” (Ibid. 1). Upper class families (for only they could afford to have a drawing room) started to resent colonial mimicry and the drawing room became a locus for the expression of national identity (Ibid.). A process also described in *Ghare Baire* where Nikhilesh replaces an English vase for a Bengali brass pot.<sup>55</sup> The *boithak khana* of the Chaudhuri *bari* filled with European objects seems a relic of the past with a distinct colonial

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<sup>55</sup> R. Tagore (1916) *Home and the World (Ghare Bhaire)* Transl. by Sreejata Guha (2005, p100).

character, but it is not a relic of a unified past. Like the places described in Tagore's novel the *boithak khana* shows 'Indian elements' such as the subtle yet conspicuous presence of Indian gods and saints as well as 'European elements'. It is a place that covers the historical processes and contradictions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity; there is one glass bell that protects an English clock and on another one that covers a small statue of Swami Vivekananda.

The participating artists described the *Boithak Khana* project as site-specific. I have said something about the site and its ambiguous character, but how does this particular site-specific project fall within the broader movement of site-specific art? Bruno Latour writes, there are two traditions of thought concerning space. The first tradition argues that if we clear a space, something remains, a leftover we call space. When we name something, we give life to it and when we use the word space, we imagine that there is something like space 'out there'. The second tradition, forwarded by writers such as Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, argues that when you remove every-thing from a space, nothing is left (Latour 2009, 142).<sup>56</sup> The practice of site-specific art embodies this latter position; landscape does not simply surround 'the tree', and a gallery space does not simply surround 'the artwork' (see also chapter 4.6).

Miwon Kwon in her book *One Place After Another* traces a genealogy of site-specific art. Site-specific art emerged in the late 60s and early 70s out of minimalism and was based in a phenomenological or experiential understanding of the site, its physical characteristics, the size, scale, texture, the walls, ceilings, lights, topographical and climate features (Kwon 2002, 3). The physical space became not just a container, but part of the work. As Richard Serra wrote "To remove the work is to destroy the work" (quoted in Kwon 2002, 12). The breaking out of the painting's frame moved towards an investigation of not only the gallery space, but the wider interrelated spaces and economies of the art worlds; the studio, gallery, museum, art market and art criticism. Works by for example Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke and Mierle Laderman Ukeles, as Kwon writes, complicated the site of art as not only a physical place, but as a "cultural framework" constituted through social, economic, and political process (Kwon 2002, 3). The next redefinition of site-specific art, or context-specific art,<sup>57</sup> involved a move beyond critical investigations of art contexts towards exploring a wider range of public realms; sites such as street corners, natural history museums, hotels, prisons, schools, or supermarkets but also sites that are not architectural, such as magazines, radio, newspapers, internet, and in addition to

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<sup>56</sup> Henri Lefebvre is one of the earlier advocates of this last position that space is not simply there, but is always produced (Lefebvre 1974). As Michel Foucault writes in *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias* (1967): "we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be coloured with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another" (Foucault 1967, 3).

<sup>57</sup> There is a variety of terms to refer to site-specific art, such as "Site-determined, site-oriented, site-referenced, site-conscious, site-responsive, site-related" (Kwon 2002, 1).

these spatial extensions site-oriented art investigates “discursive fields” by means of a broad range of disciplines such as natural and cultural history, urbanism, psychology, literary criticism, anthropology and sociology, computer science, philosophy and political theory (Ibid. 26). Artists now engage with for example a neighbourhood, or a social cause, by investigating the way texts, spaces, images, things, and practices form informational sites: “the site is now structured (inter)textually rather than spatially, and its model is not a map but an itinerary, a fragmentary sequence of events and actions *through* spaces, that is, a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist” (Ibid. 29). Kwon argues that this pursuit for an engagement with the “outside world” and “everyday life” blurred the division between art and nonart (Ibid. 24).

Some participating artists at *Boithak Khana* observed that several visitors focused too much on the artworks, instead of focusing on the relation between the artworks and the Chaudhuri *bari*, thereby treating the artworks yet again as separate objects of art rather than site-specific art. Nevertheless, the *Boithak Khana* project can be seen a site-specific project that falls within the third group Kwon describes. It explores a site, but that site functions not only as an architectural site but also as a stepping-stone for criticizing colonial history or addressing gender inequality. Yet, as Kwon points out, the three different incarnations of site-specific art – from a spatial practice, to art institutional criticism, to an investigation of sites as discursive fields – have an overall chronological order; they do not form a neat linear trajectory and can be also seen as overlapping and competing paradigms that can occur simultaneously in single projects (Ibid. 29-30). This applies to the *Boithak Khana* project as well; the organizers did not have a very clearly defined idea of what site-specificity exactly is, and artists were free to choose their own perspectives. Whereas some took the site, the *Boithak Khana* of the Chaudhuri *bari*, as their focus, others took the house merely as a take-off point to address colonial history or class inequality. The conflation of different approaches, focusing both on the physical site as well as the broader discursive field, can lead to what Kwon calls a “semantic slippage between content and site” (Ibid. 28) This slippage was behind some of the frictions between the family members and the artists. The family members were for example critical of Piyali Sadhukhan’s work “*Yet not named*”. On the ceiling she hung a large ‘human pulled’ ‘ceiling fan’ that resembled a skin, and in her accompanying art text criticized the exploitation of the “*pankhawallah*”, a servant who used to pull a string to keep the fan moving for the house’s inhabitants. Whereas Piyali took the house merely as a take-off point to address colonial menial labour exploitation, the family members took it as a direct reference to their family history and emphasized that they did not have a *pankawhalla*.



Figure 3.8

Left: Piyali (left) working on her artwork with Saumik and friends.  
 Right: visitors talking during the exhibition under Piyali's artwork.

Despite such overlapping and competing approaches to site-specific art, Kwon does see a historical pattern in site-specific art and relates the increasing artistic engagement with particular places, not merely as geographical sites, but as places etched out by particular histories and particular social practices, to the loss of a sense of locality, an assumed homogenization of places and erasure of cultural differences, the “locational *unspecificity*” of modern capitalism (Ibid. 8). The artistic efforts to rethink the art-site relationship can be seen, as a compensatory symptom for this loss of a place-bound identity. Lucy Lippard’s *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (1997) presents a sense of place as therapeutic remedy, “the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere, one antidote to a prevailing alienation” (Lippard 1997, 7). Yet Kwon is critical of Lippard’s emphasis on belonging and instead encourages site-specific projects that refuse both nomadic, unbound, fluidity, but also avoid a nostalgic longing for rooted identities (Kwon 2002, 8).

How does the *Boithak Khana* project fit into this? Celebrating the *Boithak Khana*, even if approached with critical scrutiny, is partly a reaction to urban change; colonial era mansions are crumbling away, extended families split up into nuclear families, land is sold and new apartments are built in the suburbs (See De Neve and Donner 2006; S. Chattopadhyay 2012). But it also reflects a wider Bengali nostalgia. During my fieldwork period I have encountered several projects of *contemporary* artists who engage with a variety of heritage sites in the city. But the artistic interest in heritage sites is not only an attempt to preserve specific heritage sites, but is an expression of a more widespread, more difficult to define, feeling of loss.

In his essay *Are Indian Cities becoming Bourgeois at Last?* (2004) Partha Chatterjee describes that in

the first decades after independence, in the 1950s and 1960s, the urban elite replaced the Europeans in positions of governmental authority and took on the social, cultural, and moral leadership of urban neighbourhoods, strung together by a range of formal and informal institutions and gatherings that were neighbourhood based such as schools, sports clubs, markets, tea shops, libraries, parks, religious gatherings, charitable organizations, football matches, open-air theatre performances, or the annual Durga *puja* (Chatterjee 2004, 132). A new urban community was created, despite being heterogeneous in class, language, religion, and ethnicity, held together by a strong idea of the neighbourhood (*para*) (Ibid. 133). In the 1970s and 1980s this changed. On the one hand, Chatterjee writes, in the big Indian cities rival political parties to the dominant Congress party intensified their effort to mobilize electoral support and, on the other hand, there was a steep increase in population caused mainly by migration from the countryside resulting into pressures on urban livelihood (Ibid. 134).

As Gyan Prakash points out: “The nonlegal basis of urban existence and politics in the slums and squatter settlements of the global South mocks the classic ideal of the city as the space of civil society and political discourse. Never realized in practice even in European cities, this ideal lies in ruins (Prakash 2008, 4).<sup>58</sup> In colonial Calcutta a public sphere was never realized, for instance because civic rules were mainly written in English, but, most importantly, because Calcutta’s Indian inhabitants were subjects, not citizens. Chatterjee writes that instead of a civic society, Indian cities, including Kolkata, have created a political society. The necessary welfare for the urban poor amounted to a different logic from the citizens organized in civil society. Given the available resources, Chatterjee writes, “it was unrealistic to insist that they first mend their ways and turn into proper citizens before they become eligible for governmental benefits” (Chatterjee 2004, 134). Instead of citizens who share in the sovereignty of the state, the urban poor were treated as populations, empirical categories with specific social and economic attributes that asked for specific governmental policies (Ibid. 136).

After independence, when citizenship became at least a theoretical possibility, civic order proved difficult to maintain. The 1947 partition of Bengal into West Bengal and East Bengal (now Bangladesh) prompted a steady stream of refugees came to Calcutta and by the mid-1960s the demographic pressure had increased to such an extent, Kaviraj writes, that erstwhile broad pavements of middle-class neighbourhoods, filled up with hawkers’ stalls, and large parks intended for leisurely strolls, were gradually taken over by the urban poor (Kaviraj 1997, 100-103). The migrants from East Bengal transformed the city, settling initially in any unoccupied space in the city such as gardens, public parks, and railway platforms, and, amidst corruption

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<sup>58</sup> See J. Habermas *Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere* (1962) and Crossley and Roberts (2004) for a critical assessment of Habermas’ ideal (and incomplete realization) of a public sphere in Europe.

and a municipality that often looked away or eventually ratified the illegal shacks, the refugees started to permanently settle on lands where only temporary residence was officially allowed.<sup>59</sup>

Sudipta Kaviraj (1997) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002), writing on parks and bazaars (respectively), show how Calcutta's efforts to create a civic public order has been repeatedly thwarted and allowed for a parallel co-existence of a spatial urban division of the 'inside' (*ghare*) and the 'outside' (*baire*); a division that overlaps but is also fundamentally different from the division of the city into a 'private' and 'public' sphere. The outside comprises the streets, squares, bazaars, and bathing *ghats*; crowded places and in that sense social but not so much a civic space with norms and rules (Kaviraj 1997, 98). The street is the outside for which you do not have responsibility; it is merely a negative of the inside and the *ghare/baire* divide is therefore different from the private/public. Kaviraj argues that the middle-class response to the Western idea of the public and private was one of partial emulation. Whereas the European concept of the public centres around control, order and (internalized) discipline, in India, also after independence, an idea persisted that the 'outside' cannot be controlled, not by the individual, family, nor by an organized authority. The outside is left over to chaos (Ibid.).<sup>60</sup>

Chatterjee writes that there was always a sense among the middle classes of the great colonial cities of India of not being in control of their surroundings and writes about his guilty relief of his discovery in the 1970s when visiting Bombay that the relation between the city and its bourgeoisie wasn't much better (Chatterjee 2004, 134). In the 1970s and 1980s this lack of control of the middle classes amounted to a retreat of politics altogether. The management of the urban poor within political society involved a disengagement of the middle classes from the "hurly burly of urban politics" (Ibid. 142). Chatterjee sees this as an important precondition for the emergence of a new image of the post-industrial city in India in the 1990s.

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<sup>59</sup> Although privileged public spaces like parks in middle-class neighbourhoods were eventually cleared, large slums developed over the decades after partition in parts of the city that belonged to public grounds, for example along the rail lines from Sealdah Station, under flyovers, or people even lived in the large unused sewer pipes lying on the streets for years awaiting construction (Kaviraj 1997, 104). See also Partha Chatterjee (2004).

<sup>60</sup> Kaviraj writes with engaging detail on Deshapriya park, a "second stage" park, created after independence in middle-class South Calcutta. Deshapriya park was used to stroll and play cricket by the mainly middle-class neighborhood inhabitants, but was slowly 'taken-over' by the urban poor. The large fence was used for the construction of small hawkers' shops, public statues were used for drying clothes, rubbish piled up, dirty waters from the shacks seeped into the park, and the park's grass withered under the constant football games replacing the earlier cricket games. Filth, and disorder, Kaviraj writes, acted as a barrier that benefited the new dwellers since their tolerance of garbage was greater than that of the upper-middle-class groups (Kaviraj 1997, 107). This does not mean that Deshapriya park has lost its function as a park altogether; just like before when the middle classes would come there to exchange greetings and gossip, now the lower-class inhabitants similarly congregate in the evenings and exchange greetings and gossip in their own style; only the content of conversation and their bodily postures are different (Ibid. 108).

By the 1990s there was an increasing pressure on the then communist-led government of West Bengal to clean up the streets of Calcutta. As William Mazzarella points out, both the ‘new’ and ‘old’ middle classes appear to find common cause in urban politics of ‘liveability’ such as neighbourhood order, cleanliness, and decency and instead of concerns with economic development, general education and poverty alleviation the focus shifts to garbage, pavement encroachments and traffic congestion (Mazzarella 2005, 6-7; see also Fernandes 2004). In 1996 “Operation Sunshine” removed within two weeks a very large part of the street-side stalls, cleared the pavements, and planted trees in Calcutta (Chatterjee 2004, 61). Chatterjee writes that the urban poor, sensing that they were abandoned by the left, turned to opposition parties (Ibid.). After a 34 years (1977-2011) communist led government, Trinamul Congress, under Mamata Banerjee, benefited from the decline of support of the urban poor for the communist party, and is in power since 2011. And, at the time of my fieldwork (2012-2017), much of the roadside stalls have taken their place again on the pavements of Kolkata.

With India’s liberalization opening up new market forces the urban city centre has seen a steady decline of absolute population, especially in the Northern and central parts. The move of the Bengali middle class into new neighbourhoods like Salt Lake and Rajarhat caused the Bengali speaking communities in the older metropolitan area to shrink, in 2004, to 51 percent of the population and in the old areas probably no more than 40 percent (Ibid. 145). Whereas many European cities have seen a refurbishment of the historic city, Kolkata, like several American and Asian cities, focuses on exclusive suburbs and new business districts for attracting foreign investment, like Rajarhat New Town in the Northeast close to the airport and Kolkata West International City (KWIC) in Howra.<sup>61</sup> These ‘new towns’ belong to a category of suburban building projects in Asia that are socially and spatially removed from the “pariah edge” of peri-urban slums or shanty towns and offer gated enclaves to a growing urban middle class in Indian and Chinese megacities (Davis 2006 in Chen, Wang & Kundu 2009, 463). While such new neighbourhoods are, or at least present themselves as, globally connected, they are locally disconnected from large sections of the population (Chatterjee 2004; Sassen 2005).

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<sup>61</sup> Rajarhat (king’s village) was conceived in the 1990s as a self-sufficient urban centre with an expected population of one million to cope with an increasingly overcrowded city centre. It was a public-private partnership model under the then ruling communist government (CPIM); the government was in charge of land acquisition, development and sale. Rajarhat was designed to become the IT hub of Eastern India and aimed to attract young upwardly mobile professionals who aspire to live in a “global city”. Rajarhat was a government-led planned township (not like KWIC) with (at least an attempt) on minimizing negative socio-economic impacts of displacement through provision of service villages, resettlement housing and compensation. Local resistance to land grab under the CPM played an important role in the growth of Trinamool Congress who has lent voice to the protests against the Communist party (Chen, Wang, Kundu 2009; see also livement.com, May 4, 2009).

What is more, unlike the 1960s and 1970s, mainly rural migrants from other states like Bihar and Orissa supply the demand for low-wage labour, due to successful land reforms and agricultural development by the communist government. And, one-fifth of the city's Bengali speakers are university graduates. These processes have driven the Bengali middle class away from the old city and undermined the cultural leadership of their beloved city (Ibid.146). The political leadership has reacted to the change of the city by reconstituting Kolkata to fit the model of the post-industrial city focused on high-technology industry and attracting foreign investment, which has led to the eviction of squatters and hoarders, clearing of slums and building of office blocks, shopping malls and secluded residential areas (Ibid.). Another response of the political leadership has been to assert a 'Bengaliness' over a city that they have physically abandoned by, for example by changing street names from English to Bangla.

The artists' occupation with the city's heritage sites could be seen as a reaction and a way to cope with these urban transformations. Some of the artists, like Chattro, and Paula, still live in the larger old city centre. Abhijit, who lived in the 'old city' as well, in Bhowanipur, at walking distance from both *Boithak Khana* projects, used to lament the transformation of the quarter where he lived at Sarat Bose road and occasionally complained about the noise pollution of the slums close by, yet he was also adamant in staying there and not moving to the quieter suburbs. The *Boithak Khana* project can be seen as a way to cope with these changes, for the artists, the family who turned their home into a temporary exhibition site, and for the visitors. Confronted with the disappearance of the city of their youth, they turn towards the past of their youth or to a past long before their times. But the *Boithak Khana* project is not simply a form of romantic nostalgia. The *boithak khana* as a site is interesting because it does not bring the spectator to a unified past, but to an already split past of modernity, a place that was a manifestation of the frictions between 'India' and 'the West', and expressed a search for a national place of belonging. What is more, the *boithak khana* of the Chaudhuri *bari* is not merely a relic of the past, but remains, to some extent, an ambiguous place that both welcomes outsiders yet simultaneously wards people off from the private interior of the house. The *Boithak Khana* project does not simply salvage a bygone past, but expresses the on-going tensions of Kolkata's modernity, on which I will elaborate below.



### 3.6 *Stuck in the city*

Kolkata's art infrastructure cannot be separated from the city itself. In the last section of this chapter, I will move away from *contemporary* art practices and look at the ways some other parts of the city express similar aspirational tensions of the *contemporary*. The idea of the Indian 'contemporary global city' started to take shape in India 1990s. Kolkata, especially since the fall of the communist led government, seemed eager to catch up, connect to the global economy, attract foreign investment, and make the shift from industrial manufacture to a city driven on finance and information processing. The West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee often makes references to Singapore and repeatedly announces Kolkata as the (soon to be) first wireless city of India. However, notwithstanding the change of government, the announced shift to an information economy and the bidding for foreign investment, Kolkata's promised development is marked by delays and delusions. As novelist and essayist Amit Chaudhuri writes about Kolkata after communist rule:

A new universe was at hand, comprising an impatient aspirational class. To write of it, one would probably need to adopt the epic mode, or the expansiveness of the 19th-century novel, one of whose themes was the invention of fortunes – albeit of families, rather than of nations and cities. One could partake of this creation-myth by writing of Bombay, because it embodied its ambitions so vibrantly, and of New Delhi, which had benefited even more tangibly than Bombay in terms of political power from the new dispensation. Bangalore, too, and even Chennai and smaller cities could be part of the new epic. But not Calcutta, which was out of joint.<sup>62</sup>

Instead of focusing on the circumstances and policies that have caused 'the decline' of Kolkata, I will look into the visual-material surfaces of the city that express and reflect urban imaginaries of global aspiration and progress, and contrast sometimes starkly with the repetitive failures and delays of such dreams. I will refer to these material surfaces as 'smooth surfaces', surfaces in the city that evoke a sense of novelty and progress, yet at the same time create urban boundaries, insides and outsides.<sup>63</sup> Looking for smooth surfaces in Kolkata leads the gaze to the glass façades of AC shopping malls, glossy television commercials, vinyl billboards advertising 'global' products, AC restaurants, 'beautified' green zones, large property development hoardings that advertise new flats and promise a suburban (upper) middle-class dream with pools, parks and

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<sup>62</sup> Chaudhuri, A. (2013). *Calcutta: Two Years in the City*. Vintage.

<sup>63</sup> Not to be confused with the concept of "smooth space" as discussed by Deleuze and Guatarri in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). I will therefore avoid talking about "smooth space" and use "smooth surfaces" or "smooth places" instead. If anything, Deleuze and Guatarri's "smooth space" designates an opposite of the division between smooth and rough surfaces. Smooth and rough surfaces, being material strategies for accomplishing spatial hierarchies fit better within the category of "striated space", the antipode of "smooth space". See Deleuze and Guatarri (1987, 474-500).

high-rise views, and new private cars with AC that are kept impeccably clean, sometimes with the plastic still on the chairs. But I will only look into a few examples and forego a comprehensive description of Kolkata's urban sites. Nonetheless, the examples should not be seen as isolated sites; as Sanjay Srivastava writes in *Entangled Urbanism*: “a city is not a collection of independent realms—the slum, the up-market gated community, the shopping mall, the ‘resettlement colony’—but a series of interconnected spaces and processes (Srivastava 2014, 4).

When taking a quick impression of surfaces with a smooth quality it becomes clear that the smooth surfaces are not simply part of a global contemporary consumer culture; they are not only local variations of a ‘global’ phenomenon but are also embedded in local politics and have particular histories. These smooth surfaces create places that seem to cater to middle class publics, but this can be turned around; are they satisfying the tastes of a middle class or do they help materializing the ideals of middle-class aspirations? These places are new, they point towards the future, but for how long will they stay ‘smooth’, what about the smooth surfaces of some years ago that have started to show cracks? By embedding these quick glances within a body of literature on Kolkata, other Indian cities, and the ‘global city’ I hope to provide a sense of a city that is not merely a backdrop. Kolkata is not just the context in which the artists live and work, influencing their art practice; the artworks react to and resonate with the city's forms in various and unexpected ways (see especially chapter 6 and 7).

Shopping malls are one of the clearest examples of smooth places in the city. A short history of shopping malls in central Kolkata from Forum Mall constructed in 2003 to Quest Mall in 2013 shows a wide variety of façades, but they all share a guarded, climate controlled, shopping space that contrasts sharply with the hustle and bustle ‘outside’ of the streets. Malls in Kolkata are, as elsewhere, predictable and controlled environments that act to keep deviant behaviour on ‘the outside’, ‘the rest’ of Kolkata. It starts with the glass and plastic façades, clearly visible from the street and adorned with very large billboards showing international brands and light skinned models. Before entering one of Kolkata's malls you go through security with metal detectors and personal checks and enter a large inner courtyard with escalators leading to the many franchise stores. Mall owners promote the mall as a safe place for family shopping by means of security checks at the entrance; surveillance technologies and security guards make sure that no ‘rough’ types will disturb the carefree shopping experience. The mall provides a place where you can stroll and chat with your friends, without the constant disturbance of honking cars or hawkers selling food and tea on the pavements, and the sudden drop of temperature makes the difference between inside and outside clear-cut.

As Malcolm Voice writes in *Shopping Malls in India: New Social 'Dividing Practices'* (2007), shopping malls create and tap into middle-class aspirations to form a “consumerist form of citizenship”

(Christopherson 1994) and ignore the local community's histories to advance a global consumer culture instead (Voyce 2007, 2057). Worldly consumption serves as an escape from the "imprisonment of the local", taking over the tastes and identities of global consumer culture (ibid.). Inside these crystal palaces you could be anywhere in the world, it seems.<sup>64</sup> Writing more generally about shopping malls Voyce argues that malls are non-places, similar to airports or downtown centres around the world (Ibid. 2057; see also Augé 1995). But, whether malls are indeed global non-places is debatable. Describing the architecture, surveillance technologies, and billboard images as a global consumer culture is, in a way, buying into the mall's performance of the global.<sup>65</sup> Kolkata's smooth surfaces are more than mere reiterations of 'western' capitalist consumerism. As William Mazzarella points out, the 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of a mass-mediated 'Indianness' on television and in the Hindi cinema that was both "globally savvy and often culturally conservative" (Mazzarella 2005, 9). 'The global' is always performed locally; there is no such thing as a global culture with a tightly shared set of values that 'homogenizes' the local. Globalization does not only concern the flows of goods, images, and people but, as I argued in the introduction, also concerns the gaps and tensions between aspirations and realities fostered by the asymmetry and turbulence of such flows (Chatterjee 2004; Brosius and Wenzlhuemer 2011).

In "*Live the Way the World Does*": *Imagining the Modern in the Spatial Returns of Kolkata and Calcutta* (2010) Mark Jackson writes about Kolkata's South City Mall and shows the way the mall presented itself during its opening in 2008 as being part of the world - "Live the Way the World Does", a "world-class" club, or "international standard mall", "you could say it is Singapore!" - and discusses the irony of the repetitive renewal of 'the global,' in a city that has never been anything else but 'global'; established in imperial modernity the city, now little more than 300 years old, has always been a commodity driven international city, Jackson writes (Ibid. 33).

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<sup>64</sup> In *The Aesthetics and Politics of Colonial Collecting: India at World Fairs* (1989) Carol Breckenridge has pointed out that London's Crystal Palace exhibition of 1851 (that reserved the largest and most central part of the exhibition for 'India') formed, together with following world fairs, a conflation of colonial collecting and commodity merchandising presented in "an aura of amusement", making them "sites of the commodity fetish" (Benjamin 1978, 151 in Breckenridge 1989, 201). Two major institutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, the museum and the shopping mall are inextricably connected in the way they retrieve their strategies to create consumer citizens. Tony Bennett has elaborated on the way these "exhibition complexes" paved the way for the emancipation of the working class, making them middle class citizens, to learn how to behave in public (Bennett 1995).

<sup>65</sup> Marc Augé in his *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* defines non places as follows: If a place can be read as relational, historical and concerned with identity, a space which cannot be read as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity, will be a non-place (Augé 1995 [1992], 77-78). Voyce quotes Augé, but Augé does not write about shopping malls. Malls differ from airports or roads (described as non-places by Augé) in that they are not just transit points. A mall is not simply an a-historical non-place, a nowhere for mindless consumption, but also an 'everywhere' for conspicuous consumption that connects consumers to the world in locally specific ways.

South City opened its doors in 2008. Now, as I write this, and after a fire in 2016, South City is being renovated:

The proposed refurbishment will comprise three aspects: comfort, safety and greenery. In the first, restrooms will become premium and corridors will get a new ceiling. In the second, the entire electrical wiring will be overhauled and new-generation CCTV cameras, smoke detectors, heat detectors and motion sensors installed. The security check-points at the entrance will be upgraded. In the third, the entire illumination will use LED, water will be recycled and a more efficient HVAC (heating, ventilation and air-conditioning) system will replace the current one.<sup>66</sup>

Shopping malls like South City and Quest Mall seem to make one forget the modern past and treat the rest of the city as ruin or failure. Through comfort, safety, greenery and a rhetoric of novelty malls are contrasted with all that is outside its walls. But that outside is also modern, albeit a more layered and ambiguous modern; earlier promises of the once new and once global show their inevitable material decay, the smooth surfaces have become rough, places of cold modernity become warm intimate places with multiple forms of dwelling (Jackson 2010, 33).

This repetitive dream of the ‘global elsewhere’ is surely not for everyone, especially in a city like Kolkata. The smooth surfaces of the shopping mall and other AC zones do not just perform the global or the modern, they also erect boundaries that divide those who can consume the middle-class dream from those who can’t. Kolkata’s smooth surfaces perform ‘the global’ and act as class dividers in the context of India’s economic liberalization. Security, glass facades, noise and smell control, create “quasi-public spaces” (Voyce 2007, 2055). These “dividing practices” (Ibid.) or “spatial purification” (Sibley 1995) by means of architecture and surveillance technologies amount to an exclusion as they deny access to parts of the population, the working class and the poor.

In *The Politics of Forgetting: Class Politics, State Power and the Restructuring of Urban Space in India* Leela Fernandes, taking Mumbai as a case study, analyses what she calls the “spatial reconfiguration of class inequalities” after economic liberalization in India. The growing visibility of the new Indian middle class represents a shift, Fernandes argues, “from older ideologies of state socialism to a political culture that is centred on a middle-class-based culture of consumption” (Fernandes 2004, 2415). Products that were unavailable before became cultural symbols of a new India that has opened its borders. The target group for these products has been the English-speaking urban professional segments of the middle classes, but more importantly, the construction of the new consumer middle-classes rested on the idea that upwardly working

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<sup>66</sup> Times of India January 14, 2017.

classes can aspire to this idealized middle-class representation (Fernandes 2004, 2418; see also Mankekar, 1999). The boundaries of the middle class, Fernandes points out, are fluid precisely because they hold the promise of access (Fernandes 2004, 2418). The “new urban aesthetics of class purity” (Ibid. 2420) includes a variety of spatial practices and the shopping mall surely falls into this category. But also dining out has become a status marker. The AC restaurant, just like the shopping mall keeps the poor urban class or the lower-middle-class out not only because of the prices; they simply know that these places are not for them. As Christiane Brosius points out in “*The Enclave Gaze*”, this insulation is not only established through architectural practices; “the enclave gaze manifests itself and circulates through various visual ecologies, spatial regimes, and moral discourses” (Brosius 2013, 76).

Unlike the exclusiveness of AC zones such as shopping malls and restaurants, everybody can enjoy Kolkata’s billboard hoardings. Billboards from a4 size to enormous sheets dwarfing the buildings underneath them adorn the main thoroughfares of Kolkata and form a dominant visual presence in the city. Partha Chatterjee writes that more than economic liberalization it was especially the circulation of images through cinema, television, the internet as well as the Indian middle classes’ greater access to international travel that bolstered the idea of the ‘global city’ in India (Chatterjee 2004, 143). Billboards can be added to these circulating images promoting the ‘global city’. Yet, Kolkata’s billboards reveal not just a ‘worldly’ culture, but also a ‘national Indian’ and ‘Bengali’ culture. They express regional as well as national and global imaginaries that promise another and better life, but at the same time – waiting for a bus on a crowded and polluted junction gazing at these smooth surfaces – they accentuated the lack and repetitive delays, the unfulfilled promises of progress.

The lifespans of billboards are short and the character of the streets in Kolkata can change drastically overnight when new vinyl sheets replace old ones. Shiny products presented by beautified models on large smooth vinyl sheets turn to rags in months if not weeks. Next to their size and smooth patina, it is their fast circulation, creating perpetual novelty, which seems to give them their attraction. The billboards belong to the smooth surfaces, but soon they fade, get torn, and become part of Kolkata’s rough-surfaced residues of novelty when hawkers and the urban poor use the leftovers to protect or decorate their stalls and their simple residences on the pavements. Such ‘ruins’ of modernity are not simply a sign of the inevitable tragic downfall of the modern city, but, as Walter Benjamin already showed (Benjamin 1978, 162), lie at the heart of modernity’s renewing project. Presenting promissory worlds through commodities and advertising amidst a background of ruin and decay establishes a tension and suggests an epochal change, the advent of progress (Jackson 2010, 35). The new *contemporary* smooth places are built amidst the ruins that once were the hope of a new city. As Gyan Prakash has pointed out, the language of temporal succession forgets this history and gets caught up in

the present; “the history of the modern city as a space of porosity, multiplicity, difference, division, and disruption is concealed when urban change is represented as the unfolding of one historical stage to another” (Prakash 2008, 6). We tend to forget that the idea of a ‘placeless’ city, accomplished by the shift from industrial capitalism to neoliberal capitalism, from modernity to postmodernity, was once identified with industrial modernity as well (Ibid. 6).<sup>67</sup> One wonders how often such repetitive articulations of a ‘new city’ can be made.

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The canonical order can be disrupted with a variety of ritual acts that concern both criticism and the creation of ambiguity, as discussed in chapter 2. The artworks and exhibition discussed in this chapter incorporate them all; they express a criticism of artistic styles, conventions, art institutes, and of a wider societal status quo, and they can be perceived as perceptually, positionally and multivocally ambiguous. I started this chapter with a description of the work *Hollow Times* by Abhijit Gupta. *Hollow Times* is a subtle, satirical, and sometimes biting criticism of the overall art gallery scene in Kolkata. *Hollow Times* could be described as ambiguous and teases, for example, the beholder with a perceptual ambiguity by turning the sculpture upside down, thereby confusing the interpretative process of artworks. But more than evoking ambiguity through a confusion of meaning, Abhijit’s ‘hollow’ works are without meaning; they are literally empty. The making of a new *contemporary* artwork, as I have argued in chapter 2, is not creation ex nihilo; usually it includes or is preceded by a criticism of former art styles, conventions, or art institutions, or it might include a more general societal criticism, and often it combines all of the above. This criticism can be verbally expressed before making a work, but it can be incorporated in a new artwork as well. Abhijit’s *Hollow Times* and his hollow sculptures are both artworks in and of themselves, and criticisms that cleared the ground for something new to happen.

This multifaceted disruption of the canonical order created an opening for new form of art. Abhijit’s co-creation of the art group *Khaj Kolkata* facilitated a new way of making art in Kolkata,

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<sup>67</sup> As Gyan Prakash argues, the transformations of the city brought about by the postcolonial aftermath, globalization, consumerism, and deindustrialization does not mean the demise of the city. He criticizes the announced epochal change from the modernist to the ‘Generic City’ (Koolhaas 1988) – an “amorphous and expanding spaces of urban networks” – and emphasizes the continued experience of the city as a local lifeworld: “Urban sprawl and the rise of vast urban networks (...) do not erase the idea of cities as particular places (...). Urban dwellers experience their globally situated and connected urban space as decidedly local lifeworlds, thick with specific experiences, practices, imaginations, and memories” (Prakash 2008, 2).

one that avoided the gallery and instead engaged with a variety of sites. These new art projects were also made possible by a short economic boom that gave Kolkata's *contemporary* artists the possibility to experiment with new forms. However, after some successful projects, *Khoj Kolkata* had difficulties to make ends meet and to continue their practices. The struggle of *Khoj Kolkata* cannot be seen as an isolated case; it relates to the wider state of Kolkata's *contemporary* art scene. I have described the tension between, on the one hand, Kolkata as the (erstwhile) artistic capital and as a city full of creative energy and, on the other hand, the current lack of opportunities in the field of *contemporary* art. This concerns a lack of funding or opportunity to sell work, a lack of art writing, and a lack of art institutions that can support artists, but it also concerns more general problems of livelihood. I did not provide a list of all limitations that artists encounter as these limitations are entangled to such an extent that naming them one by one would oversimplify the matter. Besides, they are not distributed equally over the *contemporary* art scene and I have addressed some only in passing while others more in detail.

Although these lacks and limitations concern tangible and actual shortcomings, they are also relative and can only be understood in relation to a wider field of art. To understand the perceived limitations of Kolkata's *contemporary* art scene, it is necessary to understand in what ways the 'outside' art scene serves as a template for comparison. In *Kupomanduk* (3.3) I focused on the gap between Kolkata's art scene and the national and international *contemporary* art scene. I have highlighted the notion of 'catching-up' with respect to the field of *modern* art in Kolkata and ask whether the current practices of *contemporary* art in Kolkata are still forced in the temporal straitjacket of tradition and modernity. Although the artistic field does not point any longer to a particular city in 'the West', like Paris or New York, there are still strong divides between centres and peripheries. From the perspective of a *contemporary* artist in India the places 'to be' are the galleries in Delhi and Mumbai, the Indian Art Fair in Delhi, the Kochi Biennial, and extend abroad to places of importance such as Art Basel, Singapore, and still the old art capitals such as New York, London, Venice, or Berlin. The relative peripheral position of *contemporary* art in Kolkata can be traced back to a colonial history and to a more recent Indian context of liberalization. In *Stuck in the City* (3.6) I have described the ways in which Kolkata more generally aspires to be a *contemporary* city, yet struggles to keep up with the promises of progress. The 'hollow times' of Kolkata's art scene are part of a larger narrative that involves Kolkata's aspirations and delusions of ever-becoming a modern, or *contemporary*, city. The story of 'catching-up' at the scale of the city runs not just parallel to Kolkata's *contemporary* art scene, they are intimately entwined.

The general tenor of this chapter has been somewhat despondent. I have described the way artists feel limited by certain artistic styles and conventions, and by the wider gallery-centred

art scene in Kolkata. And then I focused on the entangled limitations that *contemporary* artists in Kolkata encounter when trying to make new works of art. It has become clear in this chapter that escaping the canonical order of art, by either criticizing the current institutions of art, or by making new forms of art, is not just a matter of artistic creativity. Artists are not just caught up in artistic straitjackets, but are simultaneously impeded by limited economic means and trapped in a peripheral position where they always seem to lag behind; they are caught up in a city that doesn't seem to live up to its own history and can't keep up with the world. Hollow times indeed. But the way Abhijit criticized the art scene through satire, ridicule, and self-critique – turning his own sculpture upside down to reveal a hollow mask – created an opening that led to different ways of making art. The *Boithak khana* exhibition (3.4) was an important moment in this search for new forms, an exhibition that has changed the artistic landscape in Kolkata; it provided artists with an opportunity to escape the artistic conventions and economy of the gallery and to make a form of art that relates directly to its environment. In this sense the exhibition can be seen as an artistic innovation that can be placed within an international artistic development of site-specific art. But next to this formal innovation, *Boithak khana* also provided a stage to address a variety of societal issues, such as the position of women in Bengali society, and the historically embedded divisions of class and caste. Furthermore, *Boithak khana* can be seen as a heritage project that resonates with a wider international artistic trend; one that addresses the loss of a sense of locality, the homogenization of places and the erasure of cultural differences under modern capitalism. However, *Boithak khana* was not simply another internationally distributed celebration of 'the local'; it took the visitor to an already split past of modernity and reflected on the historically embedded enunciations of the 'local' and 'the global', the home and the world. *Boithak khana* followed in the footsteps of wider national and international artistic developments of site-specific art, and of a wider artistic engagement with heritage, but *Boithak khana* was not a belated repetition of international trends; it introduced a new form of art that is particular to Kolkata.

Yet, new forms of art might not always be as free as artists might have imagined. This became apparent in some small frictions between the artists and the family members. Some artists, for example, were upset that they had to use the service quarters when they needed to go to the toilet; they were not allowed to use the family's bathroom. The artists of *Khoj Kolkata* avoided the confines of the art gallery and attempted to go beyond the making of art objects for the art market, yet found new limitations in their site-specific projects, relating to the social strictures of class and caste. This also concerns the freedom of *contemporary* artists to make what they want to make. Piyali experienced the family's concern about her *pankawahalla* artwork as a violation of her freedom as an artist. The seclusion of the gallery can be confining, but can provide freedom as well in a city that is not familiar with *contemporary* art practices, a city that is often not in line



with the aspirations of artistic and individual freedom of *contemporary* artists; this gap between the values of artistic freedom and the realities of the city come to the fore when artists move out of the relative protected sphere of the gallery. In the next chapter I will 'return' to the gallery and look closely at a gallery exhibition by Sanchayan Ghosh. Instead of moving out of the gallery, Sanchayan makes a critical return to the gallery.

## 4. It's not about Birbhum



*Figure 4.1*

The artists I spoke with often contrast the term “gallery art” or “AC gallery”, to their own site-specific, multi-media, installation, community or performance art. As I wrote in chapter 3, galleries in Kolkata are criticized for being too focused on selling artworks, mainly paintings and sculptures, and are not open to other forms of *contemporary* art that are more difficult to sell. But there are galleries in Kolkata that focus on other *contemporary* art forms, such as Studio21 and Experimenter Gallery. In this chapter I will write about the exhibition *Reversed Perspective, 3 conjunctions* by Sanchayan Ghosh at Experimenter Gallery that ran from December until February in the winter of 2013-2014. I would like to do two things in this chapter: first, I will analyze in detail how Sanchayan avoids, counters, and reflects on processes of representation by means a variety of material strategies. My second objective is to tie the exhibition to the main question of the thesis; how and under which conditions do *contemporary* artworks in Kolkata produce novelty? Contrary to the site-specific exhibitions of *Khoj Kolkata* of the previous chapter, or the performance art by *Performers Independent* in the next chapter, this is a gallery exhibition. Sanchayan is surely part of the avant-garde search for different spaces to exhibit, different ways

of making publics, and critical of the gallery space as a continuation of representational practices. Yet at the same time, he is wary and critical of site-specific projects held in Kolkata for failing to extend beyond the art circuit and is critical of the renewal for the sake of renewal. There are on the other hand also artists who are critical of Sanchayan's continuing commitment to the gallery. In a wider search of moving out of the gallery space, how can Sanchayan, who did move out of it on several occasions, return to the gallery? What renewal can be accomplished by a return to the gallery?

#### *4.1 Experimenter*

Before unfolding Sanchayan's exhibition, I will shortly describe the gallery *Experimenter* and focus on the way the curators and founders of the private gallery, Prateek and Priyanka Raja, have situated *Experimenter* in the international art scene. Prateek and Priyanka Raja started *Experimenter* in April 2009. Prateek studied business management and worked shortly for a corporate company but soon started with a little gallery to deal in modern art. But he didn't like "all that speculation", as he told me in an interview just before the exhibition, and travelling a lot to Mumbai, talking with artists, visiting galleries, he learned about *contemporary* art. Priyanka stopped her job at Procter and Gamble (Mumbai) and together they travelled through Europe and the US, did a course at Sotheby's on South Asian *contemporary* art, and started *Experimenter*. The gallery comprises part of the ground floor of a two-storey building situated just off the main Gariahat crossing, one of the biggest textile markets of Kolkata in the southern part of the city center. Getting off at Gariahat crossing, a very busy junction, you have to duck and dive through clothes, hawkers, and the shopping public and turn left to enter the much quieter Hindustan road where *Experimenter* is situated. The house, built in the 1930s, is on the front side a sari shop called Kanishka's, an old and well known high end sari shop run by Prateek's parents; walking past the shop into a narrow alley and turning right through a glass door, you enter the gallery.

The gallery space has a typical character, which makes it both an interesting and challenging space for artists to exhibit their work, Prateek says. The gallery used to be part of a living house with an inner open courtyard. This small courtyard has been covered and incorporated in the gallery space and, being about 20 inches lower than the rest of the floor, forms a depression in the midst of the gallery. This former courtyard still has that function as a place where people come together, Prateek says, first as a private place, now as a public place. The windows that

used to be there are cemented and the entrance glass door is the only opening where natural light comes in, turning the space into a “black box”, as Prateek describes it, where light can be easily regulated; a term that sets Experimenter apart from the ‘white cube’ gallery space associated with modern art galleries.<sup>1</sup> Entering the gallery there is on the right a small office with a backdoor connecting the gallery to Kanishka’s. Prateek tries to be there as often as possible, “to stay in touch with the visitors and to be open for questions”, and they deliberately chose to have the office in the front of the gallery. After a short hallway the gallery opens into the main L-shaped space. Past the main L-shaped space there is a narrow extension of the gallery, “where more intimate works can be shown”, and next to it a small office where the gallery assistant of Experimenter works.

Internationally oriented, visiting international hubs of the *contemporary* art scene such as the IAF in Delhi, Art Basel, Hong Kong (Art Basel), and the Dubai, Dhaka and Singapore art fairs, publishing their press releases and catalogues solely in English, and representing a small group of artists, they stand out from all other galleries in Kolkata for their connection to the international *contemporary* art scene. Yet, both in the talks I had with Prateek and in media interviews, Prateek emphasizes their local engagement as well.<sup>2</sup> Experimenter has the ambition “to do something with the city”, Prateek told me, and they take an active position to address the lack of vibrant art centers in the city. And, if bureaucracy allows it, they try to engage with older art institutes in Kolkata<sup>3</sup>. Prateek emphasizes that Experimenter is not a ‘white cube’ discouraging people from entering and, as Kolkata is considered to not be a thriving place for the *contemporary* arts, works actively to establish an institution that operates on both an international, national, and city level. Because of the lack of *contemporary* art institutes in India Prateek and Priyanka try to encourage international collaboration, for example by yearly organizing *Experimenter Curator’s Hub*, a small discussion group of national and international curators discussing curatorial practices that is open to visitors as far as the gallery space allows it. In line with their support of *contemporary* art practices that concern community involvement Prateek and Priyanka encourage a variety of social gatherings within their gallery space. Perhaps for this reason they quickly understood my general research aim and welcomed my

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<sup>1</sup> See O’ Doherty, B. (1986). *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the White Gallery Space*. University of California Press.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Huffington Post Art and Culture: An Interview with Prateek Raja by James Scarborough. March 20<sup>th</sup> 2013.

<sup>3</sup> In the winter of 2016, for example, they organized an artist talk and exhibition with Bani Abidi at Government Art College. But Prateek said that such collaborations do not always work out and criticized the bureaucratic mentality in India and particularly in West Bengal. In December 2012 and January 2013, he wanted to organize a show of Sudarshan Shetty at the Tagore house, but he didn’t manage due to the bureaucracy. It is a mentality according to Prateek: “They don’t want to take on new things, scared that they will be punished for it. They are just thinking about their careers, a position is just a step in a longer career. So, it’s better to not do anything out of the ordinary. They get paid and nothing happens.”

suggestion of following a project at Experimenter. Because I already knew Sanchayan they suggested I could follow his exhibition and, together with Sanchayan, Prateek and Priyanka allowed me to closely observe the process of installation in the weeks before the opening and asked me to write the gallery catalogue essay of the exhibition.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I wrote the essay after the exhibition, during my fieldwork, and it was printed in the Experimenter catalogue 2012/2013. This catalogue essay – online available at [experimenter.in](http://experimenter.in) – is approximately 4 pages long and gave me the opportunity to explore art writing for an art gallery. I wrote a description of the exhibition, similar yet less comprehensive to the description below. Prateek and Priyanka were generally positive and suggested only minor revisions, such as the use of Sanchayan’s family name ‘Ghosh’ rather than his given name ‘Sanchayan’. In the catalogue essay I used Sanchayan’s surname Ghosh. See chapter 3.1 for the deliberate choice of using given names.

#### 4.2. A quick survey

Sanchayan studied at Kala Bhavan Shantiniketan since 1995, now teaches there, and lives near the campus. The university town Shantiniketan lies in Birbhum district in West Bengal which is part of the larger Rahr area - a geographic zone situated between the Chhotanagpur plateau on the west and the Ganga delta on the east, characterized by its red laterite soil and its distinct flora and fauna. Sanchayan says Birbhum is a fringe landscape, not just geographically; with its large scheduled caste population and stagnated economic development it forms a cultural and political fringe area as well. Sanchayan's long engagement with Birbhum, with the land, its history, and people, has unfolded mostly in village theater plays and workshops in Birbhum. Although Sanchayan has done a variety of art projects unrelated to Birbhum, the landscape and people of the area form a main focus in many of his artworks. This exhibition in Kolkata can be seen as a temporary extension of these engagements. Yet, Sanchayan told me the exhibition is not about Birbhum: "I really do not want to say anything about Birbhum. Birbhum is just a take-off point." Instead the work is about "our preconceived notions of representation." Although this (or any) exhibition cannot be fully reduced to a particular predicament, Sanchayan's *Reversed Perspective* does have a clear target: to address and challenge the diverse ways landscape is represented.

Although Sanchayan did have a plan for the exhibition, one he discussed beforehand with Prateek and Priyanka, he did not have a finished picture of the exhibition in his head. When something goes 'wrong' in the weeks before the opening he takes it lightly and leaves the deadline stress to Prateek and Priyanka. Sanchayan told me he does not really like gallery spaces: "There are many artists who do not think about the space they are exhibiting in. They first think about the work, and then they just see how it fits in the gallery space. They make the work before the space". Sanchayan has certain ideas about what he wants to do, makes sketches, and then starts to work with the space. In the process he welcomes mistakes and adjustments. Writing a text on the wall from a section of a textbook on the history of Birbhum, Sanjib Mondal, a student of Sanchayan who helped him with the mounting of the exhibition, wrote sentences down until the corner of the wall and then started with the next line in the textbook without finishing the sentence. The gaps had to be filled and Sanchayan chose to put the missing parts in front of it. He was not bothered at all by the 'mistake'. He likes it, he says, when things go slightly different than expected and continuously changes things, right before and also after the opening of the exhibition. He sees the opening of the exhibition merely as one point in a wider process. The artwork only materializes in relation to the space and this is a process open for negotiation. And Experimentier gives him the opportunity, Sanchayan says, to experiment

with the space itself. Before the exhibition Prateek said, while folding open his paper notebook: “He [Sanchayan] wants to open the space like a book.”

At the opening of the exhibition visitors approach the exhibition cautiously. They stumble somewhat disoriented upon a wooden frame of red light expanding in the two directions of the gallery. The visitors have to duck beneath the upper rods of the frame if they want to proceed further. The frame appears weightless, as if floating above the gallery, and illuminates the gallery space in a red haze. Throughout the gallery space a soundscape of chirping crickets, birds, a crying child, temple bells, howling dogs, chatter and singing can be heard, suggesting an everyday evening in a Bengali village. Yet, a moment later, the friendly sounds are disturbed by a grinding, scraping sound, which after a minute or two fades away again. Inside the frame hang six silk screens showing silhouettes of people; someone holding a plough, another a sickle, a man reciting a poem, a woman sitting next to an oil lamp, people sitting together and chatting. The shadow casts, as Sanchayan calls them, are negative, reversed, images; in theater workshops people chose their postures and posed in front of a silk screen infused with photosensitive material mixed with clay. By exposing the screen to light, shadows were left behind.

Stepping carefully further through the wooden frame visitors find what seem to be a laboratory table, ‘the second conjunction’ (although one could visit them also in the reversed order). Full of test tubes, labeled bags containing soil samples, and maps indicating the provenance of the collected samples this conjunction presents an experiment for the measuring of the pH-value of Birbhum’s soil. The adjacent wall shows hand-written scientific data concerning the acidity/alkalinity of the soil, diagrams of the layers of sediments, and a step-by-step method for soil collecting. The handwritten texts and diagrams on the opposite wall inform about Birbhum’s historical political events, mention worshipped gods, and show the percentages of forests, cultivable and non-cultivable land. A visitor encountering the lab table commented somewhat surprised “is this a *scientific* display?” It seems so, yet much of the writings on the walls cannot be read easily; they are partly written in red and therefore obfuscated by the red light. Only by picking up one of the small plastic flashlights at the lab table can people expose and read the exhibited information.

Leaving the lab table and turning the corner the visitors move out of the red-lighted frame into the third arm of the gallery and enter a small space, ‘the third conjunction’. Here the walls and the ceiling come together ending in a vertical line where the two walls meet. In the corner where the enclosing walls and the ceiling come together a video is projected of a wooden incense box that contains images of a passing landscape, hills of stone rubble, and close-ups of a dry and

cracked soil; the images were regularly obfuscated by smoke coming through the holes of the incense box.

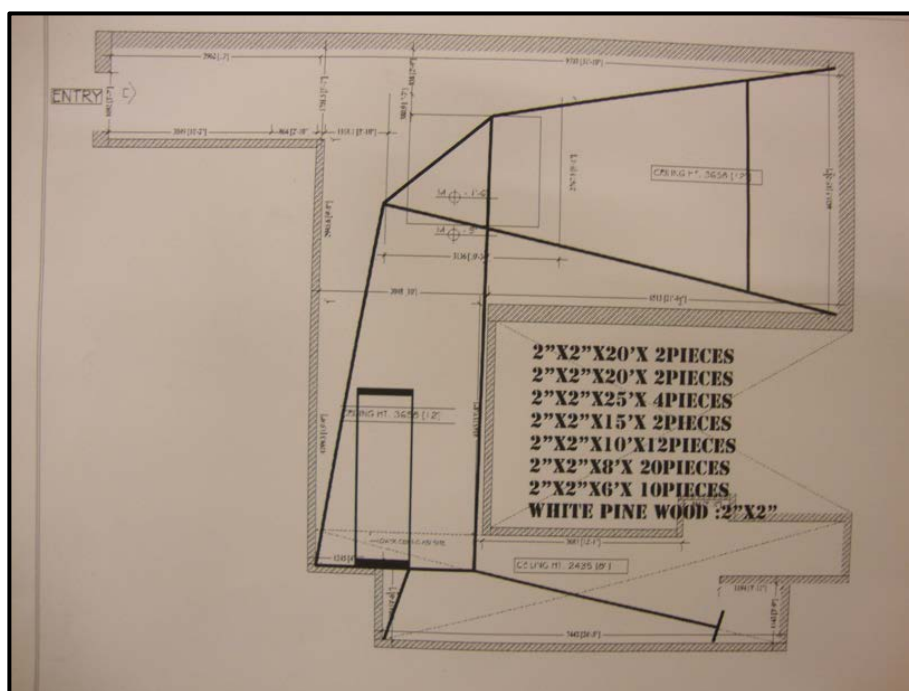


Figure 4.2: Plan of Experimenter Gallery used as an exhibition work plan. The black lines in the plan mark the wooden frame, and the rectangle the lab table. The entry is in the top left (the office which is on the right-hand side of the entrance cannot be seen on this plan). Walking from the entry towards the gallery one first encounters the depression, marked in the plan with a (almost square) rectangle. The measurements indicate the required supplies for the white pine wooden frame.

The exhibition at Experimenter is just one manifestation of ongoing collaborations with Birbhum communities through workshops and theater plays. Later exhibitions such as *Reversed Perspective II* at the group exhibition *Land of No Horizon* at gallery Nature More (May 2014, New Delhi) and the group exhibition *Immateriality In Residue* at Experimenter Gallery (November-December 2015) continue these collaborations. Also when installing the exhibition at Experimenter Sanchayan collaborates and encourages others to contribute to the exhibition. Listening to advice he discusses the work with Prateek and Priyanka, with his (former) students Durbananda Jana, Soumyadipta Sen and Sanjib Mondal from Shantiniketan Kala Bhavan, with Uma Ray the gallery manager of Experimenter at that time (and also as a former student of Sanchayan), and with me as well.<sup>5</sup> Uma said it is difficult to pin down his work. He doesn't archive it all, which makes it difficult for her to summarize his work for the Experimenter website and catalogue but was very positive about his working methods: "He gives you that space".

<sup>5</sup> When I was there mostly during the winter of 2013-2014 Uma Ray worked there but later quitted her job to focus on her own art practices.





*Figure 4.3*

From left to right: First row: left: Prateek and Sanchayan stand in the depression of the gallery and discuss the exhibition installment; right: carpenters are constructing the wooden frame. Second row: left: Sanchayan and Sanjib, who is writing the text on the wall; right: three silk screens with shadow casts, before they are hung in the gallery. Third row: left: two silk screens in the red light; right: video projection on enclosing walls showing the incense box and the passing landscape images. The photo, unlike the others not taken by myself, captures a moment when the parched and cracked soil is visible.

### 4.3 Against representation

The shadows, the soil samples, the writings on the wall, at first sight they might seem to suggest that landscape can be objectified - here is the land of Birbhum, you can even touch it. But it soon becomes clear that *Reversed Perspective* does not try to objectify landscape. It is not *about* the landscape of Birbhum, Birbhum is merely a takeoff point to address and play with ideas and practices of representing landscape. Sanchayan does not want to create a representation of Birbhum. "Its not about Birbhum, just like Cezanne's apples are not about apples", he told me. He is interested in scientific and artistic methods that have been used to analyze and depict a landscape, yet wary in providing a picture of Birbhum himself. Sanchayan attempts to find a place in-between, a place to reflect about processes of representation itself rather than representing a place, and attempts to develop a practice in which he does not just document for example a village theater play, but engages in an ongoing dialogue, to connect his works with other practices and to connect his past works to his future works. Doing so, the traditional modernist balance of the exhibition where the autonomous artist produces autonomous artworks, selected (or rejected) and exhibited by the curator, seems to make way for an emphasis on collaboration and process.

The criticism of representation is of course not something new; the idea of unbiased unmediated representation has been thoroughly deconstructed and there are multiple strands one can follow.<sup>6</sup> But this deconstruction was not just an ethical and political move, nor merely an epistemological readjustment; whether the criticism was directed at the representation of the female body, the colonial other, the representation of reality as such by 'realistic' painting, or the impossibility of a Cartesian split between subject and object, mind and body, it was and is an aesthetic project as well. As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, neither the phenomenon of orientalism nor a version of a coherent 'Europe' as the singular scene of the birth of the modern disappear simply because some of us have now attained a critical awareness of it: "Analysis does not make it go away" (Chakrabarty 1992, 2). Even if representational practices have been heavily scrutinized, they do not simply disappear. Despite, for instance, the widespread criticism on the artificial creation of the exotic other the mechanisms of cultural othering - such as in tourist brochures or popular movies - are rampant and ask for both critical and aesthetic strategies. Rather than restating the epistemological argument that there is no such thing as representation, I consider representational practices not only as epistemological fallacies, but as

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<sup>6</sup> For a critique of representation within the visual arts see for example Derrida *The Truth in Painting* (1978) Stephen Melville's *The Temptation of New Perspectives* (1990), or Paul Duro's edited volume *the Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork* (1996).

social facts embedded within a range of disciplines and material practices, practices that can be undermined by alternative aesthetic strategies.

*Reversed Perspective: 3 conjunctions* is too versatile to distill it into a coherent plan, but despite this versatility there are some specific yet overlapping aesthetic strategies that can be highlighted and analyzed. These strategies do not only aim their arrows at the predicament of representation; many of the strategies described in this chapter can, for example, also be seen as ways of resisting the commodification of the artwork. Artworks allow for different interpretations and a wholly different text could be written that, for example, traces the exhibition's connections with South Asian and Euro American traditions of minimalism, conceptual art, installation art and site-specific art.<sup>7</sup> I have however limited myself to the ways in which a selection of material practices can be seen as attempts to understand and undermine processes of representation. Rather than finding a wide variety of possible interpretations I want to describe the ways an artist's material strategies can address a specific, in this case epistemological, straitjacket.

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<sup>7</sup> Below I touch on parallels with the tradition of postwar Euro-American Minimalism, but this should not be seen as a comprehensive art historical contextualization of Sanchayan's work.

#### 4.4 The crude methods of Dr Ghosh

The first strategy I want to discuss is the playful and deliberate confusion of different fields of knowledge. Looking at the laboratory table and the adjoining writings, visitors are at first sight led to believe that the arrangement is a scientific soil analysis measuring the alkalinity, neutrality and acidity of Birbhum. “*Dr. Ghosh’s crude method for soil testing and knowing your land*” on the wall describes the process in which pH tests connect the acidity, neutrality or alkalinity of a variety of soil samples with the politics of the land. With his research assistants Durbananda Jana, Soumyadipta Sen and Sanjib Mondal, Sanchayan collected soil samples from Birbhum which were for the exhibition arranged on the lab table. But the writings on the wall reveal that something else is happening.

Some of the texts, drawings of scientific observations and poetic and historical narratives were written in red and due to the red light illuminating the gallery the visitor could not read these parts. The visitors could however pick up little flashlights from the lab table to illuminate and expose the red writings on the wall. By going into the details of soil composition and by having the ‘evidence’ of the soil sampling method exhibited on the lab table it appears to be a scientifically correct, representational, soil sampling method. Yet, if we take a closer look at *Dr. Ghosh’s Crude Methods* things are not as clear-cut as they seem to be. Part of the wall writing<sup>8</sup>:

*Dr. Ghosh’s Crude Method of Soil Testing and Knowing your Land.*

*Soil is a heterogenous system. To get a true representation of a soil composite sample needs to be made with at least 10 samples.*

*Step-I (Soil Sampling)*

1. *First choose an area of land min. 1 katha (720 sq. feet)*
2. *Collect samples of soil from 6” below the ground level to avoid shallow Roots.*
3. *More samples one takes more is the precision.*
4. *Soils can be collected by (i) Collecting soil in a zig-zag way around the land (ii) If there is a slope, divide the land laterally according to the different levels and collect soil from individual levels.*
5. *To collect soil from individual samples first 1 sq.ft area needs to be demarcated. Then scrap the grass roots.  
Cut the area into a ‘V’ shape 6” inside the ground. Then scrape 1” soil layer as soil sample.*

*Step II (Making a composite soil sample)*

1. *Collect Minimum 10 samples of soil from 1 katha area.*
2. *Take equal amount from each sample and mix them thoroughly.*
3. *Then spread the composite sample evenly in a circular form on the ground Then divide the circle into 4 equal parts. Then remove 3 segments from the circle and collect the 4th segment.*

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<sup>8</sup> The parts in red here were also written in red on the gallery walls. This is just one part of the ‘scientific’ writings on the gallery’s wall. Next to his ‘Crude Method of Soil Testing’ are diagrams and drawings relating to the pH analysis of the soil. And on the other side of the gallery are more texts; there is an English historical summary of political (violent) events in and around Birbhum and a Bangla text shows excerpts of a Bengali book *Birbhumer Itihas* (history of Birbhum) by Gourihar Mitro.

*Repeat the above process with the 4<sup>th</sup> segment to get a new composite soil sample. Repeat this 2-3 times to get the final sample of composite soil.*

*Step III (Soil Testing)*

*pH Testing*

*pH Testing is the process of testing Soil Reaction.*

*Acidic <-> Neutral <-> Alkaline*

- 1. Take small pinch of equal amount of Soil sample and Barium Sulphate in a Test tube.*
- 2. Add distilled water to the mixture and stir it well.*
- 3. Then add three to [‘to’ is inserted] four drops of Indicator and stir it well.*
- 4. Allow the liquid to rest for 10 min to see the change in colour.*
- 5. First add Universal Indicator to late the general character.*
- 6. Then according to change of colour add specific Indicator to determine the specific pH level.*
- 7. If the change of colour is Red or leading towards Red > Soil is Acidic. If the change of colour is green > soil is neutral. If the change of the colour is Blue or leading to purple . soil is Alkaline.*

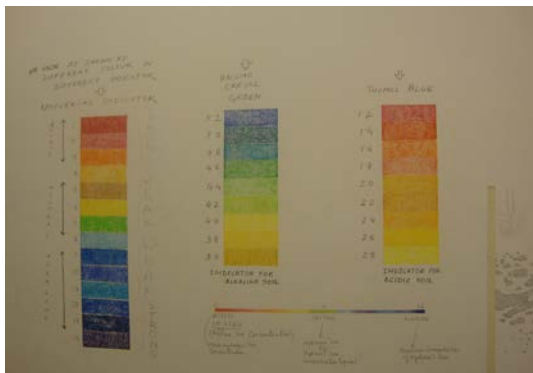
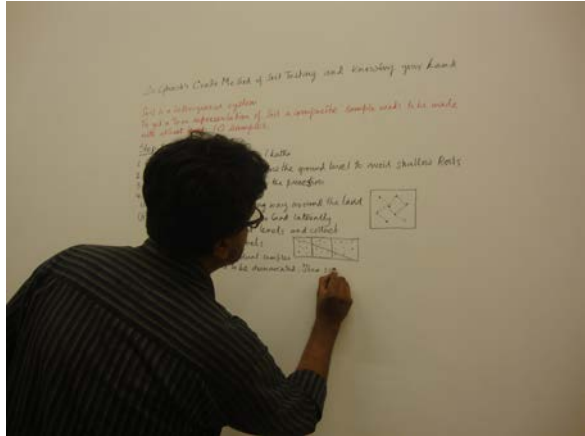
This step-by-step method for “testing and knowing your land” is clearly spelled out and seems to be a do-it-yourself recipe for anyone to try. Although most steps, such as the pH-testing and the change of color, are scientifically sound, some of the steps seem strange. Step II (making a composite sample), for example, describes the mixing of the samples. By taking 10 samples and mixing them, Dr. Ghosh finds perhaps the most representative average sample, minimizing the risk of abnormalities and thereby taking out the best representative piece of land. Yet Step II was given a different emphasis because it was written in red, and, due to the red light saturating the exhibition space, the red parts could barely be seen and were unreadable. Carefully tracing the sentences with the beams of flashlights the visitors discovered the texts hidden in the haze of red light. But this does not mean that the red parts are fiction and the black parts facts. The collection method and the mixing of the samples is according to soil sampling procedure, mixing it gives a proper ‘representation’ of the soil.<sup>9</sup> After reading the whole text the visitor is still in doubt about what is ‘properly scientific’ and what isn’t. Perhaps Sanchayan wrote Step II in red because the mixing of samples goes against the notion of purity and representation; the pure ethnographic subject and the pure unspoiled landscape do not allow for any mixing, for any hybrid processes.

Using the material language of science, such as a lab table composition, mimicking scientific methods, while simultaneously slightly changing them, Sanchayan invites the visitor to think about the ways truth and facticity are created. Here, and in some other works as well, Sanchayan Ghosh refers to ‘himself’ as Dr. Ghosh. Why “Dr. Ghosh”? I asked him. Sanchayan said Dr. Ghosh plays with the ambivalence of truth and fiction. And indeed, looking at the method of soil testing it is, to me at least, unclear where the boundary between fact and fiction

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<sup>9</sup> See for example the soil sampling protocol of the *Comprehensive Assessment of Soil Health – The Cornell Framework*. 2016. Cornell University, Geneva, NY. P31-34.

lies. Like an alchemist he mixes things, things that 'should be' kept separated, connecting layers of soil sediments to layers of narratives. Confusing and conflating scientific, political and art historical registers of representation. Sanchayan is playing with methods of representation, with the scientific authority to tell the truth.



Dr. Ghosh's Corro Method of Soil Testing and Knowing your land

Soil is a heterogeneous system  
To get a true representation of Soil a composite sample needs to be made with atleast least 10 samples.

Step-I (Soil Sampling)

1. First choose an area of land min 1 katha (720sq ft)
2. Collect samples of soil from 6" below the ground level to avoid shallow roots
3. More samples one takes, more is the precision
4. Soils can be collected by
  - (i) Collecting Soil in a zig-zag way around the land
  - (ii) If there is a slope, divide the land laterally according to the different levels and collect soil from individual levels
5. To collect soil for individual samples first left area needs to be demarcated. Then scrape the grass roots. Cut the area into a V shape 6" inside the ground. Then scrape 1" soil layer as soil sample.

Step-II (Making a Composite Soil Sample)

1. Collect Minimum 10 samples of soil from 1 katha area.
2. Take equal amount from each sample and mix them thoroughly on the ground.
3. Then spread the Composite Sample evenly in a circular form on the ground. Then divide the circle into five equal parts. Then remove 3 segments from the circle and collect the 4th segment. Repeat the above process with the 5th segment in similar way and again collect the 4th segment to get a new composite soil sample. Repeat this 2-3 times to get the final sample of Composite soil.



Si → Silicon tetrahedron  
Al → Aluminium octahedron

③ Available Nitrogen (Primary Nutrient)

Soil: C:N = 10:2:1

④ Available Phosphorus (P) (Secondary Nutrient)

(a) Key energy source  
less amount of Phosphorus → diminishes root growth (NPK)

⑤ Available Potassium (K) (Secondary Nutrient)

free lance Nutrient → acts as a enzyme



Figure 4.4

First row: left: Soumyadipta working on the pH color graphs; right: Sanchayan writing the soil-sampling method on the wall. Second row: the lab table with soil samples. Third row: left: pH graphs with the gallery light turned off in red light, faintly illuminated by a torchlight. Fourth row: left: "step-by-step method" red and black; right: overview of the lab table in red light. Fifth row: left: Visitors shining their torchlights on the graphs and texts on the wall during the opening; right: soil samples with site indications. Sixth row: left: Dr. Ghosh's notebook with the chemical composition of the soil; right: the lab table in the red light, Sanchayan inspecting the soil samples.

Yet it would be too easy to conclude that Sanchayan is making a caricature of scientific methodologies. Rather than pursuing an outright negation of the validity of scientific methods he collaborates with academics from a variety of disciplines and sees his work as part of an interdisciplinary approach to engage with landscape. In a workshop held at Experimenter during the running of the exhibition, Sanchayan invited Ayshuman Dasgupta (art historian), Debanshu Mazumdar (economist) and Malay Mukherjee (geologist), all from Visva Bharati University Shantiniketan, to discuss different academic fields of studying landscape. Trying to understand “what we mean by the word study” Sanchayan is interested in practices that approach landscape as a physical entity: “I found that only the visual tools are not enough to engage in a certain social or cultural situation. And [besides contemplative visual culture] there are a lot of avenues which are not enough explored. That’s how this whole interest evolved”.

Apart from this engagement with a variety of scientific disciplines that engage with landscape, there is another maybe more fundamental way in which Sanchayan goes beyond simply debunking scientific practices of representation. By writing some words with capitals and underlining other words, such as “*Roots*” and “*grass roots*” when referring to vegetation, the relation between (grass root) politics and scientific practices of soil analysis are accentuated. By highlighting words such as *Roots* and *grass roots* Dr. Ghosh hints at resemblances between the soil and grass-root politics. Or, by linking the outcome of the pH test “*If the change of colour is Red or leading towards Red > Soil is Acidic*” a relation is forged between the soil of Birbhum, ‘land of the red soil’, and its troubled history.

Sanchayan’s exhibition combines engaged disciplinary practices on the one hand and ambiguous methods of multiplicity, irony and play on the other. It is both a subtle deconstruction and a simultaneous effort in making new connections. The strategy against representation is not one of negation of the possibility of scientific representation as such. It is an exposure of processes of representation without trying to get rid of them altogether. It is also not a strategy of ironic detachment; the creation of ambiguity through precision, multiplicity, irony and play does not simply mean a deliberate attempt to spread confusion among the visitors. *The crude methods of Dr. Ghosh*, and the exhibition in its entirety, invite the visitors armed with flashlights to become part of the material thinking process themselves. By drawing imaginative connections Sanchayan dis-oriens and impels the visitors’ curiosity making them part of his crude methods.

The ambiguous play of Sanchayan with scientific methods of representation is thus not only a way of making new hitherto unforeseen connections that circumvent the dualistic notion of representation, it also helps to create a community, a community not based on identity but on ambiguity. Many of the visitors at the exhibition opening are Sanchayan’s students from the



Fine Arts Department Kala Bhavana. The students I spoke with at Shantiniketan are positive about Sanchayan's teachings at Kala Bhavana and say he is open to many different practices. Many of his students came from Shantiniketan for the opening of the exhibition and the gallery became an extension of the classroom.<sup>10</sup> The students from Kala Bhavan are, at least to some extent, familiar with the landscape of Birbhum and are aware of Sanchayan's ongoing work in Birbhum. However, this does not result in a community of identification where some people 'know' Birbhum and therefore 'understand' the exhibition. Instead of identification through shared representations, it is through ambiguity that Sanchayan creates a community. Sanchayan has woven an intricate pattern and created a multiplicity, a "cognitive indecipherability" (Gell 1998) that evades comprehension (see chapter 2.6); simultaneously he draws in and frustrates the viewer, and in doing so binds people and creates a community. Patterns that are difficult to grasp, Alfred Gell argues, "slow perception down, or even halt it, so that the decorated object is never fully possessed at all, but is always in the process of becoming possessed" (Gell 1998, 81). The artwork, instead of an object of knowledge that can be understood, a sign that represents something, becomes an ambiguous fragment that creates a relation with its beholders.

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<sup>10</sup> Kolkata to Bolpur Shantiniketan is an often-travelled route of about three hours by train, but from door to door it takes about five hours.

#### 4.5 Making things light

The second strategy I will discuss is the strategy of lightness. *Reversed Perspective* does not exhibit heavy, solid art objects, pedestals and frames. The thin white pinewood frame, the silk screens dangling from the ceiling, the thin handwritings and drawings on the wall, and the red haze of light, all evoke lightness. *Reversed Perspective's* materiality of lightness seems to contrast with the heavy, solid, stable art object. Sanchayan says he is not interested in selling his work, in creating valuable objects. He teaches at Shantiniketan for a living and is not financially dependent on his art practice. Instead of making objects that you can pick up and place somewhere else, in a living room for example, his light and process based works are difficult to sell. Most of the things in the exhibition can't be bought separately, such as the writings on the wall, the lab table, or the video projection. The silkscreens however could be bought, but Sanchayan did not want to sell them separately. If somebody would be interested, he preferred to sell the entire exhibition instead of a fragment and was in conversation with Prateek and Priyanka concerning this wish.

The strategy of making things light in this exhibition can be seen as a strategy against commodification. Together with the emphasis on collaboration and process Sanchayan's ephemeral work undermines the art market. By refraining from making a singular solid object, Sanchayan undermines the infrastructural logic of an artwork that can be put on a pedestal, framed, packaged and sold. This approach resonates with earlier and ongoing artistic attempts to circumvent the art market. Instead of creating singular objects of art artists have, roughly since the emergence of performance and conceptual art of the 1960s and 70s, often presented themselves as collaborators and producers of situations, rather than makers of finished, portable and conservable works of art. By undermining the stability of the artwork, its 'objectivity', artists have attempted to evade processes of commodification.

Making things 'light' or ephemeral, is an important strategy to avoid processes of commodification, but there are other strategies as well; by for example making multiple copies to undermine the originality of an artwork, by making artworks very large<sup>11</sup>, or by making works that are 'abject', too dirty or smelly to be exposed to on a daily basis, artists can circumvent the commercial mechanisms of the art market. As various authors have pointed out, a variety of new art forms, such as performance art, conceptual art, video art, and installation art, started as a rebellion against the art market and the 'currency' of the artwork (Belting 2001, 14; McEvilley 2005, 93; Bishop 2012, 2). It is however important to note, as Claire Bishop points out, that these strategies cannot be generalized into universal remedies against commodification

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<sup>11</sup> Although large installations can still be bought and preserved by museums, for private buyers this becomes more difficult.

(Bishop 2012, 277). Because the reverse can also be true: ephemeral or participatory works can fall yet again in the seams of commercial branding and event marketing, as I will argue in the next chapter.

Making works light is not just a way to avoid commodification, but can be seen as a wider challenge to the artwork as finished object and the artist as its individual creator. The ‘dematerialization’ or fragmentation of the art object is a reaction against the unique solid stable finished and framed object of art and its accompanying value.<sup>12</sup> And, as is clear from Sanchayan’s emphasis on working together, or from his ironic use of *Dr. Ghosh*, the de-valuation of the meaningful valuable object coincides with the de-valuation of the subject, the idea of the unique singular genius artist. The singular object and the singular subject, the artwork and the artist, reflecting, consolidating and reaffirming each other, are both debunked.

Aside from a strategy to avoid the object-subject binary logic within *contemporary* art’s infrastructures, the contrasting pair of lightness and heaviness can be seen as a more widespread way of thinking that extends beyond the visual arts. I have already pointed out the role of lightness in Gawan society as described by Munn (see 1.6), but also within literature, music, or mythology the play of lightness versus heaviness plays a role.<sup>13</sup> Lightness, as Italo Calvino writes in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, is a reaction to the weight of living: “Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don’t mean escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification” (Calvino 1988, 7). Like Calvino’s short stories, *Reversed Perspective* exhibits lightness. It displays an ephemeral materiality of light and a delicate play with sounds, shadows and materials that work together to evoke a sense of lightness. The soil samples come

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<sup>12</sup> Commodification and processes of representation are inextricably connected because commodities themselves, especially in the modernist capitalist sense, are objects that have value extending beyond their use value and therefore function as signifiers of something else, such as a sign of cultural capital. See for example Appadurai’s *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986).

<sup>13</sup>The Ramayana contains one of the richest exploration of heaviness and lightness I encountered. The monkey god Hanuman, son of the wind, does not fly but jumps. To save Sita, daughter of the earth goddess Bhumi, from the demon Ravana, he prepares to jump to Lanka from the mainland. Resembling a mountain, shaking and roaring like thunder, he crouches on his haunches and draws his feet inwards. Hanuman jumps, taking plants, creepers, and birds nesting in the flowering trees with him. The trees fall into the seas the way the mountains had plunged into the ocean from fear of Indra. Suddenly the hidden mountain Mainaka rises from the sea. Long ago all the mountains had wings and they flew everywhere with the speed of the wind. Gods and sages were terrified of the mountains so Indra struck them down with his thunderbolt. Mountain Mainaka however was saved by the wind. Due to his debt to Hanuman’s father Mainaka invites Hanuman to rest on him. Hanuman has no time to lose, yet does not want to offend Mainaka and says: “I cannot alight on you, but I shall touch you with my finger!” He touches the mountain with reverence and flies onwards, taking the path of his father, the wind. Summary from chapter 1. p.406-408 from book five “Beauty” (*Sundara Kaanda*) of *The Ramayana*, translated by Arshia Sattar (1996).

from the heavy land, but the light-colored wood of the table, the transparent chemical glass containers, the visitors holding small plastic flashlights playfully creating shadows on the walls, the sounds of crickets, the *ektara*,<sup>14</sup> temple bells, the call of the *chatok* bird<sup>15</sup>, the scattered chatter, and the singing in the background<sup>16</sup>, all convey a sense of lightness.

But the exhibition conveys heaviness as well. Only later I understood that the grinding sound, disturbing the delicate village soundscape, is that of heavy machines working in an open clay mine at Kharia, a village in Birbhum.<sup>17</sup> In 1955 the privately-owned china clay mine promised industrialization and development; farmers gave up arable land and Kharia's demography changed with the influx of labor migrants from Scheduled Castes. While changing the arable landscape surrounding the village, the clay mine did not bring the expected development. It continues to operate but the village has become a reverse dystopian image of the Nehruvian development ideal.<sup>18</sup> As Shamik Bag writes about Kharia in his review of Sanchayan's later exhibition at Experimentier *Immateriality In Residue* (2015): "There is garbage everywhere, open drain fest with accumulated waste, the path is broken and slushy from the heavy truck traffic carrying clay from the gigantic mine to the factory, and villagers relieve themselves in the open", and Bag sees Sanchayan's work as a metaphor for "an industrialization that left a society and an environment fragmented".<sup>19</sup> Here heaviness attains moral values; the heaviness of the machines extracting heavy material from the stone mine relates to the grabbing of arable land and the fragmentation of the relation between the land and its inhabitants.

*Reversed Perspective* evokes a sense of lightness as a reaction to heaviness. Whether it is the heaviness of solid, framed, artworks, the heaviness of the disciplinary methods and discourses

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<sup>14</sup> A one-string (ek-tara) instrument played in Baul music.

<sup>15</sup> The *chatok* bird is known in India as the harbinger of the monsoon and is believed to only drink raindrops from the sky. There is an anecdote of Ramakrishna: One day I had said, the chataka bird does not drink anything except the water from the sky. Narendra said, chataka bird drinks ordinary water as well. Then I said to the Divine Mother, 'Mother, are my words false, then?'" Later Ramakrishna finds out that Narendra mistakes bats for the chataka birds and is relieved. Narandra clearly did not know what he was talking about, Ramakrishna was right all along. Story summarized from Rajagopal Chattopadhyaya p55. *Swami Vivekananda in India: A Corrective Biography* (1999).

<sup>16</sup> Sanchayan told me the songs are sung to praise the heroic deeds of the Imam Husayn ibn Ali, grandson of Muhammad, during the Mourning of Muharram; a Shia festival celebrated widely by Muslims in West-Bengal (not just followers of Shia Islam) in which people remember and reenact the battle of Karbala where Husayn died in 680AD. Sanchayan furthermore mentioned the practice of walking over hot coals in Birbhum by young men as part of the rituals accompanying the Mourning of Muharram.

<sup>17</sup> In other works, Sanchayan's involvement with Kharia and the mine is more outspoken. For example, Sanchayan's following exhibition at Experimentier: *Immateriality In Residue* (2015).

<sup>18</sup> As Neve and Donner write, "While the Gandhian version of nationalism employed the imagery of 'village India', which became the 'true' site of Indian tradition, the contemporary Nehruvian vision highlighted cities as places of progress and modernity, to be achieved through planned urbanization and industrialization" (Donner and de Neve 2006, 6; see also G. Prakash 2002).

<sup>19</sup> Shamik Bag (2015) *Promised land*. A review of *Immateriality In Residue* (2015). In LiveMint, December 19<sup>th</sup> 2015.

representing landscape, or the heaviness of a botched scheme of industrialization, lightness provides an outcome, or at least, a temporary respite. In the example of Gawan canoes, described by Munn (see 1.6), the opposition between heaviness and lightness is not simply a preference of lightness above heaviness, but is rather about the transformation from heaviness into lightness. Heavy materials from the land are transformed into light canoes that can take off from the land and travel outwards on the sea. In *Reversed Perspective* we can see and hear the transformation from heaviness to lightness as well: the written history of Birbhum is obfuscated by the red light, the video images of a barren landscape are muffled by smoke, the heavy grinding machines are replaced again by the delicate sounds of village life, and the soil samples on the lower part of the table contrast with the glass test tubes on the upper part and their shadows on the wall, from soil to glass to light and shadows.

The opposition and transformation between heaviness and lightness could be explored as a general principle in ritual; *Reversed Perspective* is just one way it takes form. In other artworks the direction of transformation might be reversed, from lightness to heaviness. What is more, as seen in the Gawa example and in the works I discuss in the following chapters, the opposition lightness-heaviness is aligned to other oppositions such as smooth-rough, fast-slow, and outside-inside, light-dark, clean-dirty. Although such avenues could be explored further with respect to Sanchayan's works, I would like to look at the next strategy. The main strategy in *Reversed Perspective*, or at least the strategy that is most explicit, is that of reversal. Wearing the winged sandals given by Hermes, Perseus flies through the air. He supports himself, Calvino writes "on the very lightest of things, the winds and the clouds" (1988, 4). Athena helped the hero as well and gave him a polished bronze shield. When Perseus reaches the cave of Medusa he looks at her in the reflection of the shield: "To cut off Medusa's head without being turned to stone he fixes his gaze upon what can be revealed only by indirect vision, an image caught in a mirror" (Ibid. 4).

#### 4.6 Reversed perspectives

When I asked Sanchayan to tell me a bit more about his work one of the things he talked about was the way artists have been traditionally schooled to study landscape from a certain perspective. A tree, for example, has been drawn sketched and sculpted according to its direct visual presence. ‘A tree’, just like any other ‘object’ is connected to a wide network of other things, an ecosystem (that includes humans as well). When an artist renders the tree as a single object from one perspective, captures its ‘essence’, he misses the chance of expanding on a variety of possible perspectives.



Figure 4.5

Left: Construction of the pinewood frame before the exhibition.  
Right: visitors walking inside the frame during the exhibition.

Instead of framing a landscape within a linear perspective, Sanchayan has placed a wooden frame with an outward, reversed perspective in the gallery. The frame does not vanish into a point at the horizon, it points to the corners of the gallery. Doing so the frame reverses the relation between inside and outside; instead of looking into a landscape, the visitor is invited to imaginatively follow the reversed perspective beyond the gallery walls. Next to the lines of the frame, *Reversed Perspective* changes the direction of light. Whereas landscape paintings attempted to contain light within a frame, Sanchayan made a frame that is made of light. The frame has played a supportive but submissive function in art history, as Paul Duro states: “We see the artwork, but we do not see the frame” (Duro 1996, 1). *Reversed Perspective* reverses this and makes the frame a central element of the artwork itself. Sanchayan has mounted a frame within the gallery that does not frame the artwork but has become an intrinsic part of both the artwork

and the gallery. The frame is porous, and the visitor can step in and out of it. Yet it was interesting to see that during the opening of the exhibition many people stayed within the frame.

As described in chapter 2, at the moments when particular artistic forms are considered inadequate to express the real world, when they seem to confine rather than open the possibilities of what art can be, artists aspire to a break out of them. This involved a breaking out of 'realist' perspective, breaking out the frame of painting and sculpture itself, or breaking out the frame of the art institution, which nowadays, among many artists including Sanchayan, translates into a tendency to work outside of the museum or gallery space. In *Reversed Perspective*, however, Sanchayan chooses not so much to break out of linear perspective, but instead reverses it. What is that, a reversal of perspective? To begin to answer this I will first look at the importance of linear perspective within pictorial representation.

The invention of linear perspective in the first half of the fifteenth century, introduced a new relationship between the viewer and the world. Erwin Panofsky in his essay *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927) argued that the invention of perspective in the arts involves a paradox because it entails simultaneously a subjective position, as the linear direction of the gaze starts from an arbitrary subjective point, as well as an "objectification of the subjective", as perspective translates the phenomenal space of subjective perception into a rationalized geometrical space (Panofsky 1927, 66). For the 15<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance artists the invention of linear perspective elevated art to a science; a subjective visual gaze was rationalized and became the foundation, Panofsky states, "for a solidly grounded and yet, in an entirely modern sense, 'infinite' experiential world" (Ibid.). By creating a pictorial space in which bodies and objects are on a receding remove from the observer, perspective creates a distance between observer and observed yet at the same time presents the world within reach of the observer. Perspective is thus a two-edge sword, Panofsky states; "Perspective creates distance between human beings and things (...), but then in turn it abolishes this distance by, in a sense, drawing this world of things, an autonomous world confronting the individual, into the eye" (ibid. 67).

Landscape painting in the 17<sup>th</sup> century extended its mastery over space. From the depiction of scenes in which a succession of planes evoked a theatrical stage, as can be seen in the paintings by the 16<sup>th</sup> century painter Brueghel the elder, 17<sup>th</sup> century painters such as Jacob van Ruysdael and Claude Lorrain created the impression of homogeneous depth, masking the artifice of perspective construction (Descola 2013, 61). In his book *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013) Philippe Descola argues that linear perspective in landscape painting established a confrontation between men and nature that was to become characteristic of the modern worldview (Descola 2013, 59-62). Landscape painting was the artistic expression of what Descola calls 'the great divide', a particular history of the modern West that saw the creation of Nature and Culture as

separate entities; a separation, Descola argues, that could only grow out of Western modernity.<sup>20</sup> The dualism of western modernity, separating Nature from Culture, already started in ancient Greece with the teachings of Aristotle, but it was sharpened and consolidated due to a radical change in the ways of seeing and knowing our surroundings.

The invention of linear perspective coincided with inventions in geometry, physics, astronomy and optics that provided new ways of making reality visible. Instruments such as the microscope (1590) and the telescope (1605) enabled an expansion of the visual field and created new frontiers of knowledge (Ibid. 61-62). The relationship between humans and the visualization of their spatial surrounding thus changed. In *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias* (1967 [1984]) Michel Foucault contrasts the idea of an open space with that of emplacement. In the Middle Ages there was a hierarchic ensemble of sacred and profane places, protected and open places, urban and rural places. Although, as Michel Foucault points out, this ‘medieval space of emplacement’ never really disappeared, it partially made way for another idea of space. Galileo’s astronomy was crucial for opening up this hierarchy of emplacements to the idea of a continuous infinite space. The real scandal of Galileo’s work, Foucault writes, “lay not in the discovery, or rediscovery, that the earth revolved around the sun, but in his constitution of an infinite, and infinitely open space” (Foucault 1984, 1). The unfolding of a continuous space in the early 17th century gradually became the norm. As Descola points out, the expertise of clockmakers, mapmakers, glassblowers, lens grinders and many other craftsmen made the objectification of the world not only possible, but also part of everyday life. The fact that this new way of seeing and knowing the world was historically constructed was forgotten and the grand divide became a natural ontology (Descola 2013, 61-62). It was at this moment, Descola argues, that ‘Nature’ became an entity in and of itself.

This does not mean, however, that the perspectival view remained unchallenged. As Panofsky observes, perspective in its earlier stages before the 17th century was rejected because it introduced an individualistic and accidental viewpoint into a world that transcended the subjective viewpoint of mankind (Panofsky 1927, 70). This was a different critique from the later attacks on perspectival space from expressionism and cubism. Whereas the earlier rejection of perspective was an attack on its arbitrariness, the critique from the avant-garde painters of the late 19th and early 20th century endeavored to free form from the rigid rationalization of

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<sup>20</sup> Although there are many cultures that recognize such separations as well, the strict separation between nature and culture is a particular phenomenon of Western modernity, Descola argues: “... binary oppositions are neither a Western invention nor fictions of structural anthropology but are very widely used by all peoples in plenty of circumstances, so it is not so much their form that should be questioned but rather the suggested universality of their content” (Descola 2013, 121).



perspective.<sup>21</sup>

The aesthetic confrontation with perspective has come in many forms; cubism, for example, inspired by and entangled with the mathematical and scientific thinking of the time, endeavored to change the perspectival view of space (Küchler 2001, 60).<sup>22</sup> After the drastic metamorphosis of the painting's surface, the outer edges of the canvas were to be scrutinized as well; the frame of the painting as a constitutive yet taken for granted invisible supplement, defining the conditions of visual reception and representation, became visible and unstable (Marin 1996). An artistic project of breaking out of the frame ensued leading to multiple denunciations of the painting's frame and eventually to a challenging of the borders of art and the museum. One of the later incarnations of the many dissolutions of the painting's perspective and frame was Postwar Euro-American high aesthetic modernism in which only shapes and colors could legitimately enter into the work of visual art. An aesthetics moving beyond all reference and suggestions, beyond representation, immediately addressing the soul as McEvilly mockingly puts it, where only abstract art could supposedly refer to eternal truths: "No ideas, words, or representations of things were to be allowed; no references to the world, no extra-aesthetic feelings such as anger or pity – in short, nothing that refers to anything beyond its own presence as a shape or a color. But questions remained. There was something wrong with the insistence on colors *and* shapes. Since the artist was supposedly not representing things, why were there shapes in the picture at all?" (McEvilly 2005, 39).

The focus turned to color without shape; Yves Klein's thoughts about how the individual self can dissolve into color like the particular dissolving into the universal, Barnett Newman who wondered how far you could "stretch a red," and Jules Olitski's remark of powdered pigment flung into the air saturating the entire space, marked the next aesthetic frontier in the battle against pictorial representation (Ibid. 38). A dissolution into color, light without form, powdered pigment flung in the air, are all attempts to create a separation between substance and form, as described in chapter 2.7 *The Night of Brahma*. Spreading a red haze through the gallery and using an overall minimalist visual language it might be argued that *Reversed Perspective* evades meaning entirely and turns towards an absolute state before (or after) creation. Yet the exhibition does

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<sup>21</sup> Yet both these objections are directed to the same point, Panofsky argues. Whether perspective is attacked for its subjective point of view or conversely for the objective rationalization of this subjective viewpoint, both rest on the negation of creating an artwork based on empirical visual space (Panofsky 1927, 70), "Whether one reproaches perspective for evaporating "true being" into a mere manifestation of seen things, or rather anchoring the free and, as it were, spiritual idea of form to a manifestation of mere seen things, is in the end little more than a question of emphasis" (Ibid. 70-71)

<sup>22</sup> Euclidean geometry, as Suzanne Küchler points out, had remained unchallenged for centuries, but received a dramatic denunciation in 1915 when Einstein founded his new theory of gravitation upon the premise that our physical space possesses a non-Euclidean geometry that is created by the presence of mass and energy in the Universe (Küchler 200, 59).

not express a complete negation of meaning. Instead of joining the ranks of aesthetic modernists who tried to get rid of form altogether, *Reversed Perspective* aims for a reflection on representational forms rather than a complete negation of it.

#### 4.7 *Leaving traces*

Yet, do the sounds of crickets, birds, and temple bells, the shadow casts, and the writings on the wall not transport the visitor to Birbhum after all, even if the shadows and sounds are the outcome of a workshop? Do the exhibition's reversals not turn back on themselves? To approach this question I will discuss the exhibition in light of the different possible ways of renewal in *contemporary* art described in chapter 1: societal criticism, institutional/ritual criticism, the creation of perceptual, multivocal, or positional ambiguity, and a separation between form and substance (2.6 and 2.7). Artists might articulate, in manifestos or in the artworks themselves, an alternative direction for art; one that addresses societal wrongs, and/or challenges the ways art is caught up in institutional straitjackets and market forces. Alongside these criticisms artists create something that resists interpretation; by means of a variety of semiotic and perceptual strategies, the artwork is perceived as ambiguous or, for a moment, entirely without meaning. This does not mean that an artwork at that moment is not meaningful. On the contrary, its lack of clear-cut meaning promises and invites a wide array of interpretations; it prompts the question 'what does it all mean?' To repeat Valerio Valeri on ritual: "On the one hand, it looks as if it is endowed with meaning; on the other hand, it seems devoid of any apparent sense" (Valeri 2014, 307).

The different ways of renewal often work together and are therefore difficult to unravel. This is the case in Sanchayan's artwork as well: the ephemeral material strategies of *Reversed Perspective* discussed above are a way to frustrate the art market's demand for sellable objects of art, yet simultaneously, they are a way to undermine the order of binary representation or to cope with the exploitation of landscape diminished to an economic resource. Nonetheless, the emphasis varies. *Reversed Perspective* does not express an unequivocal institutional criticism. Although it does circumvent the commercial logic of the art market, to work with a gallery in a time when many artists criticize it, supports its validity. Neither does the exhibition propagate an explicit societal criticism. Looking at Sanchayan's other exhibitions, reading the press release and reviews one can discern a political engagement in Sanchayan's work, but these texts are not written by Sanchayan and can be, for now, seen as separate from the artwork. (In the final section of the chapter I will discuss what the writings – press releases and reviews including my own – do to change the exhibition).

It seems that the exhibition's main thrust of renewal comes from its multivocal ambiguity (see 2.6). I have described above that by conflating geological, socio-political, and artistic fields of knowledge Sanchayan creates ambiguity. In *Dr. Ghosh's* method of soil collection, for example, materials that are at first sight presented as meaning one thing, come to mean another thing as

well: small bags of dirt are first presented as soil samples with a particular pH-value to analyze the composition of the soil, yet, with the help of a flashlight, others layers are added: the pH-value of the samples are aligned to the social situation of the people inhabiting the land. Yet, the exhibition involves more than a deliberate confusion of meaning; it accomplishes ambiguity by making a semiotic shift, a change in the Peircean sign relationship of icon, index, and symbol. Let me explain by contrasting *Reversed Perspective* with the ways ethnographic museums represent communities and landscapes, a topic I studied for my MA research in West Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya.

Most of the state and missionary run ethnographic museums in the state capitals of Northeast India have large museum dioramas; an early 20<sup>th</sup> century invention used in both ethnographic and natural history museum display. The ethnographic museum dioramas show wax/plastic dolls dressed up in what are purported to be traditional clothes, usually performing a certain agricultural or domestic task, sometimes dancing. Next to these human effigies there are usually plastic or wooden props of houses, plants, trees, or animals. On the back wall a painting continues this scene into a wider landscape, creating a visual integration between foreground and background along a linear perspective. The entire scene is framed within a large box separated from the visitors by glass and illuminated from an unseen light source creating a sharp contrast with the relatively dark area where the visitors walk. These ‘dioramic landscapes’,<sup>23</sup> involving not only dioramas but also panoramic wall paintings and photographs, present a pristine ‘natural’ landscape that is stripped from present-day roads and buildings; they invite the visitor’s gaze to an unspoiled elsewhere. Yet, even if they distort reality, the museum nevertheless makes a claim of realistic resemblance; the dioramic displays are iconic representations.

Situated next to these dioramas there are object cabinets, usually chock-full with a range of collected objects such as tools, ritual objects, cooking utensils, and clothes. The individual makers are not identified; the objects are ‘made by the community’. They are physical extensions, indices, of the community represented. By placing the ‘authentic object’ in or right next to a diorama the museum integrates the material indices of the community with iconic ‘natural’ landscapes staged in the dioramic display, conveying to the visitor: look, there are people out there who live *like this*, and here are their *real* objects. A strong connection is made between diorama and ethnographic object, between an iconic and an indexical representation, thereby conveniently bypassing the collection history of the object, which in the case of the museums in Northeast India involves both a historical context of colonial administration and

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<sup>23</sup> The word “diorama” has Greek roots: Dioran, to see through – dia: through and horan: to see. Oxford English Dictionary.

missionary conversion.

Then, there are the catalogue texts, the explanatory texts in the exhibition rooms, the guided tours, and the architecture of the building that frame and contextualize the iconic-indexical representations within a symbolic superimposed order, what Rappaport calls a canonical order. As described in chapter 2.4, canonical orders are spiritual, conceptual or abstract in nature and need symbols, arbitrary sign vehicles, for their construction (Rappaport 1999, 54). The most prominent canonical order within the ethnographic museums of Northeast India is a spatial-temporal order where a split is made between on the one hand the linear progressive time of modern urban life and on the other hand a place frozen in the past, somewhere, out there, where indigenous communities are presented as living in the past, a denial of living in modern time, what Johannes Fabian called the “denial of coevalness” (Fabian 1983). Such canonical messages cannot be understood by simply looking at the ethnographic objects on display, but are communicated to the visitor by the textual and architectural-narrative messages of the museum and belong to a wider discourse beyond the museum.

Yet, symbolic forms of communication can be falsified. As I have argued in chapter 2.4, symbols permit a distance from the here and now due to their relation by convention. This freedom of sign from signified, the aspect of human language that sets it apart from nonhuman semiosis, did not just open up many possibilities in the range of communication across time and space, it introduced the possibility of the lie, and therefore the truth, as well (Rappaport 1999, 11). Due to their uncertain trustworthiness symbolic messages need a relation to the here and now to become credible. Symbolic messages obtain more credibility Rappaport argues, when they are substantiated, otherwise they might be discounted as mere words (Ibid. 56). The authentic ethnographic object on display, an index of the represented community, is undeniably substantial and therefore unquestionable; they substantiate the canonical order of the museum, and thereby naturalize and strengthen the museum’s representational claims. Doubts of authenticity of the displayed objects are therefore detrimental for the credibility of the entire museum’s operations. Cultural representations of communities in ethnographic museums thus combine indexical, iconic, and symbolic sign relationships, the different sign-relationships complement each other to establish a canonical order that transcends the here and now, and naturalize this order by incorporating the here and now.



Figure 4.6

Left: two visitors looking at the *Naga* diorama in the Indian Museum, Kolkata. The Naga is a community living in Nagaland, a state in Northeast India, and one of the most documented and well-known examples of ‘tribal communities’ as represented by missionaries, anthropologists, and the tourism business. Right: displayed objects of the Angami Naga at the Indian Museum. The British made the first contacts with the Nagas (of which there is any documentation) around the 1820s when searching for routes through the hills from the Indian plains to Burma. Probably the first European reference to the Nagas was made by geographer, botanist, zoologist – explorer - Francis Hamilton (1762–1829), who referred to them as ‘extremely savage’ (Hamilton 1822, 258 in West 2001, 94). The geographical location of the Nagas is important in any consideration of their identity and their relationship with the British. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the highland area of the Nagas, stretching across current day Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Burma, formed a significant physical barrier for the British and was taken to constitute a political border as well as a natural boundary. The Nagas were not only living on the boundary but straddled the border, which gave them a political, national and geographical marginality, yet also a military prominence (West 2001, 102). Incited by ethnographic production in the form of objects, sketches, photos, films and writings that focused on their headhunting raids and ‘closeness to nature’, the Naga perfectly fulfilled a romanticized colonial imagination of the untouched wild tribe inhabiting the frontiers of the unknown, worthy to civilize and christianize.

A slightly different yet similar conjoining of signs occurred in the depictions of village life by pre- and post independence 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengali artists; especially in the works by Deviprosad Roy Chowdhury, student of Abanindranath Tagore and the Bengal School, the photographs of Sunil Janah, or the early works of Jamini Roy, who studied under Abanindranath Tagore at Government Art College as well. These depictions of village life were on the one hand symbolic markers for a struggle against urban colonialism; they stood for something beyond a realistic depiction of village life. Yet, on the other hand these works depicted village life and natural scenes detached from urban life and the political struggles of the time. By disguising the hand of the artist who framed ‘reality’ a distance between observer and observed was created.

Sanchayan’s six silk screens showing the cast shadows of people engaged in village life reminded me at first of such nostalgic and romantic rendering of ‘ethnographic subjects’. However, like Abanindranath Tagore, who became critical of his own orientalism, Sanchayan does not try to pin ‘the other’ down on the canvas. Sanchayan follows up on the practices of artists like

Nandalal Bose, Benodebehari Mukherjee, and Ramkinkar Baj, who attempted to make works beyond orientalist depictions of the ethnographic other; an example is Nandalal Bose who placed his self-portrait next to depicted villagers on a mural in Shantiniketan.

It is the combined aspect of signification that is undermined in *Reversed Perspective*; Sanchayan does away with both symbolic and iconic references of Birbhum and its inhabitants. The shadow-casts show shadows, not painted shadows, but shadows physically caught on silk. A person's shadow is an index of a person; it refers to it by means of physical connection, like smoke is an index of fire. As Piotr Sadowski writes in *Between index and icon: Towards the semiotics of the cast Shadow* (2016), “ (...) the shadow unmistakably testifies to the solidity of an object, what casts a shadow must be real” (Sadowski 2016, 334). The distance between observer and observed that occurs in modernist practices of cultural representation falls away. The shadows are a negation of the ethnographic subject represented within the picture frame. When the shadow is in some way caught and separated from the person, like Sanchayan's shadow casts, the indexical link is stretched, but it still present, like the imprint of a footprint left behind by the person who walks ahead. Sanchayan makes a connection between the urban public of Experimenter gallery and his shadow workshop in the rural area of Birbhum, without representing Birbhum through iconic or symbolic means.

At the lab table something similar occurs; the soil is physically collected from the land and brought to the gallery, it becomes part of a sculpture, the lab table, which presents the soil as collected soil from specific indicated areas. The dirt does not represent the landscape by resemblance or convention; it looks like any other dirt, at least to those untrained in geology, and it is not clear what the soil would mean symbolically. It is not about Birbhum, it is physically part of Birbhum; it is an index of Birbhum.<sup>24</sup> Sanchayan strips away or at least obfuscates the iconic and symbolic forms of representation to leave only an indexical reference.<sup>25</sup> These exhibition materials are therefore not in Victor Turner's sense, multivocal; ritual objects that combine and condense indexical, iconic and symbolic sign-relationships (see 2.6). The exhibition does not so much create ambiguity by adding layers of meaning, but by stripping meaning, varying modes of signification, away. What remains is an indexical reference.

Yet the emphasis on indexical reference does not lead towards a disavowal of meaning altogether. Shadows, as Sadowski observes, are not only indexical extensions; they often

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<sup>24</sup> This is not necessarily a natural index, because Sanchayan could have collected it from some place else; he presents it as a natural index based on a part-whole relationship, and he shows maps to prove it, yet it could still be from anywhere. It is thus a constructed index.

<sup>25</sup> Artworks always have an indexical reference as they can be seen, as Gell argued, as extensions of the artists (Gell 1998). Artworks are thus never completely without signification. But the indices described here are not just extensions of the artist, but refer indexically to the landscape and people.

resemble what they refer to, they are also icons. It is thus not a ‘true index’ (Rappaport 1999, 63-66), but a mixed form (see Buchler 1955, 108). It is neither a pure icon; the shadow casts of the exhibition are still recognizably human, but they resemble in a different way from the way a painting can resemble a person; the shadows’ iconic resemblance is still a function of the sign’s indexical origin (Sadowski 2016, 339). The exhibition’s soundscape obfuscates iconicity as well. The performed village sounds are iconic: they resemble the soundscape of a Bengali village. Yet the idyllic village soundscape is disturbed by a grinding crunching noise, a sound that does not seem to mean anything. It is, in Umberto Eco’s sense, “white noise”, the point where meaning breaks away. Whereas the shadows, village sounds, and soil samples have an indexical reference, the grinding sound does not seem to refer to anything at all, also not indexically. It is only later that I understood that this grinding is the sound of the machines working in the open clay mine, but this is not made clear in the exhibition. Yet after a while the grinding noise fades away and the village sounds can be heard again. The entire soundscape thus oscillates between meaning and noise.

To answer the question posed in the beginning of this section, *Reversed Perspective* does not fall back into the straitjacket of pictorial representation, because Sanchayan does not attempt to make a radical break in the first place; the exhibition does not complete the breaking down to pure form and substance. With the light materials, the rough soil samples, the reversals, and the grinding noise the exhibition seems to hesitate to take on meaning, but there is not an absolute negation of content. There is only a partial separation, a loosening, between meaning and form. Although signification is not negated fully, by leaving merely indexical references, stripping away iconic and symbolic signification, or by exhibiting a pendulum movement between ‘pure noise’ and meaning, *Reversed Perspective* creates ambiguity and leaves the visitor in limbo about what it all means.



#### 4.8 *Something red*

As Rappaport writes, it is the combination of substance and form that make up the strength of ritual; the physical and symbolic aspects of ritual complete each other (Rappaport 1999; see chapter 2.4). It is in this light that *Reversed Perspective* can be seen as well, but instead of the reunion of substance and form, an unraveling of substance and form occurs. Yet, this does not mean that the exhibition goes against the logic of ritual as Rappaport describes it, there is only a delay in its completion. The ritual process of *contemporary* art might take years to unfold and involves processes of interpreting, collecting, exhibiting, and preserving artworks, embedding them into a variety of canonical orders, as described in chapter 2. Sanchayan's exhibition is only the first act in a longer ritual process; in subsequent stages the artwork will be spoken and written about, images of the artwork will circulate, and perhaps it will be bought, canonized, and preserved. Because *Reversed Perspective* is relatively recent, many of such processes have not yet occurred and might not occur. I will here only shortly dwell on some writings circulated soon after the exhibition. I will focus on one aspect, the 'redness' of the exhibition. Below some excerpts:

The work in this show, with its fiery red hue, harks to the lateritic soil of Birbhum district of West Bengal as well as to the symbol of the Communist Party that held sway over the area for decades. More obviously, red is the color of blood, with immense potential to allude to multiple histories of violence—political, communal and ideological. - Somak Ghoshal, Livemint.

Part of the district merges with the fertile alluvial farmlands in the east and it is also called as the land of red soil probably because of the fertile alluvial soil. Ghosh has thus used the color red to depict the area of Birbhum. - Kalyani Majumdar, Domus Magazine.

(...) [T]he use of the color red in creating the setting within which these works are placed, seems to hint at the configuration of the red soil (*ranga maati*) and also to the multilayered history of the land, ridden with religious, communal and cultural conflict. - Press release Experimenter.

Red has become meaningful in these writings. Yet, the red light in the exhibition, immersing the shadow casts in a red glow and obfuscating the red writings on the wall, does not seem to refer to anything explicitly. The redness of the pH value, indicating acidity, might invite interpretations concerning political strife, yet this is never made explicit by Sanchayan. Like lightness described above, the 'redness' of the exhibition is a "qualisign", a term coined by Peirce that refers to the sensuous qualities of objects (Peirce 1955, 101). The idea of a qualisign, Webb Keane writes, is that significance lies in certain qualities beyond their particular

manifestation (Keane 2003, 414). Keane argues that the qualisign and its sign vehicle have an ambiguous relationship and gives a fine example taken from Charlotte Zolotow's children book, coincidentally involving redness as well:

'She likes red,' said the little girl.  
'Red,' said Mr. Rabbit. 'You can't give her red.'  
'Something red, maybe,' said the little girl.  
'Oh, something red,' said Mr. Rabbit.<sup>26</sup>

'Redness' must be embodied by something in particular, as Mr. Rabbit reminds us, but, as Keane points out, the little girl has a point as well; for her a number of different objectifications will do (Keane 2003, 414). 'Giving red' requires an objectification of it. And as we see in the excerpts, by writing about the exhibition, redness becomes *something* red; it becomes the red of the soil, of blood, of the Communist party, and violence. Writing about art adds meaning to the artwork. Even pure formal description, as Panofsky has argued, places the artwork in the realm of meaning (see chapter 1.2, *The persistence of meaning*). And, this chapter as well is full of references that transform an ambiguity or absence of meaning into verbal interpretations. What to a visitor might seem merely a grinding sound; to the reader of this chapter noise becomes the sound of mining machines associated with the political and environmental strife of Birbhum. The red writings on the wall were obfuscated by the red light; although visitors could use flashlights to illuminate the texts, carefully reading the texts was very difficult. I have however reproduced part of the writings and made them readable, such as "the step-by-step method" by Dr. Ghosh. I have given a relatively comprehensive survey of an exhibition experience that was much more fragmented. Even if the writing leaves interpretation open by using words such as 'suggest', or 'hint', instead of outright stating what it means, the 'redness' of the exhibition is contextualized, placed within a framework of meaning based on language, and thus separated from the here and now. Sanchayan's artwork becomes *about* something, about Birbhum.

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<sup>26</sup> Charlotte Zolotow *Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present* (Harper 1962). Quoted in Keane (2003, 409).

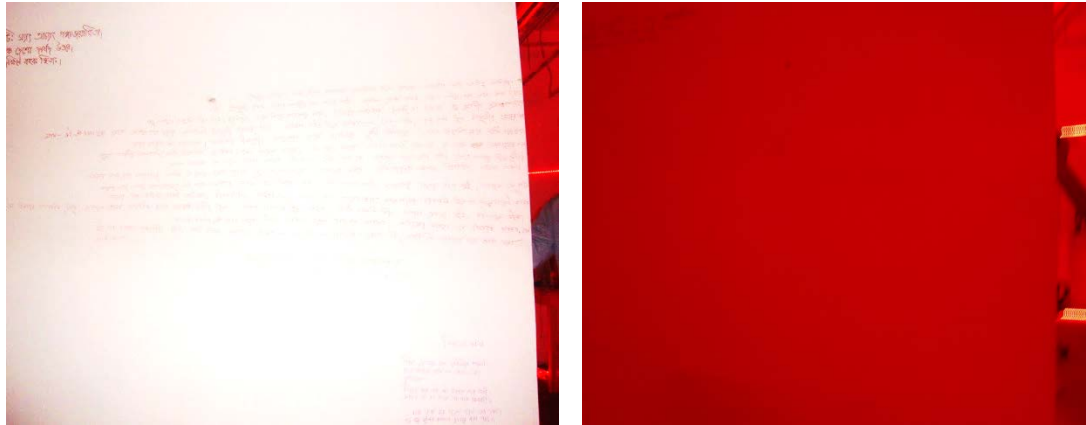


Figure 4.7

Left: Writings on the wall, photo taking with flash.  
 Right: Same segment of wall, photo taken without flash.

Rita Datta, who wrote a review of the exhibition for the Telegraph, associated the exhibition with the red light of a photographer's darkroom. The red light in a photographer's darkroom is the only light to illuminate the workspace where the negatives are developed. As the black-and-white prints are sensitive to blue and green light, red is used to prevent the premature exposure of the prints. The exhibition's redness can thus also be seen as a reference to the process of creating pictures, rather than their end result. Instead of creating a finished representation of landscape, *Reversed Perspective* creates a room where negative images are developed. What then can we say about the photographs made of *Reversed Perspective* that now circulate online, that are featured in the catalogue, and shown in this chapter?

What comes to mind is Walter Benjamin's famous essay on the loss of art's aura due to the possibility of mechanical reproduction (1935). Yet, instead of the potential possibility through mechanical reproduction to replace the uniqueness, the here and now, of an artwork, I only intend to understand the photograph that 'merely' depicts an artwork; a depiction that aims to inform the viewer about the artwork and often aims to invite the viewer to come and see the real thing. A photograph of an artwork seems to be no more than a neutral representation of the work. Yet, as Bernard Berenson writes, due to the lighting and angle of the camera every photograph of a painting changes the way one sees an artwork (Berenson 1948, 222). This does not, for Berenson, disqualify photographs of artworks. When analyzing an artwork he welcomes as many photographs as possible because they show things the artwork itself only fleetingly reveals and that easily go unnoticed: "Nowadays I hesitate to come to a conclusion about a work of art without submitting it to the leisurely scrutiny of photographs. The more photographs of the same object, the better. Each contributes something of its own, even prints

from the same negative that should be identical” (Berenson 1948, 224). Berenson was talking of black-and-white photographs of paintings. What about photographs of performances or site-specific artworks or installations? What happens when a three-dimensional object is ‘turned into’ a two-dimensional surface?

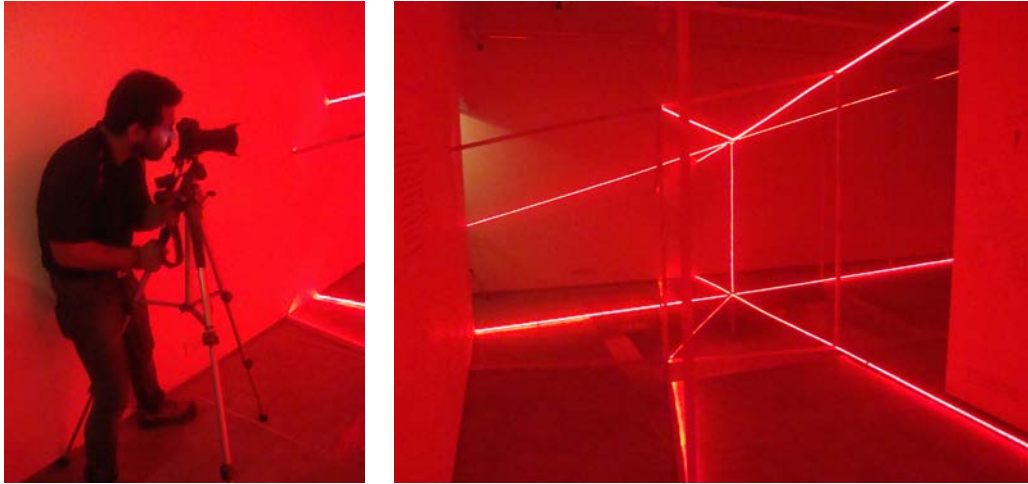
Perhaps the most important yet taken for granted aspect of photographs of artworks is the absence of people in them. This seems normal, in line with how it is usually done, but it is exactly this ordinariness that is interesting. Photography of art is nowadays ubiquitous; often a photo of an artwork is already shown in the press release of an exhibition, announcing the exhibition and attempting to haul a public. After that, the visitors of the exhibition make photos and journalists/art critics, often coming on quiet days, or invited just before the opening, make photos.<sup>27</sup> Sometimes overview pictures are made, showing a larger section of the exhibition space and capturing a collection of artworks, but usually the photos zoom in on singular artworks. And when the artworks are too big, in the case of an installation, photos zoom in on certain specific elements of the installation. Usually the photographer cuts the ritual participants from view. And, often the photos are accompanied by short descriptions; title of the artworks, its provenance, date, and materials, and the name of the artist.

A way of breaching the ordinariness of artwork photography is to see the images of artworks as research entryways in and of themselves. Instead of merely depicting an artwork these images have lives of their own, travelling in different directions, with different speeds and different effects, as the artworks they seem to represent. Patricia Spyer and Margaret Steedly in their edited volume *Images that Move* (2013), stress that to understand processes of image circulation, we need to look both at how images circulate as well as the material infrastructures that make this circulation possible and the frictions that hamper their movement, such as institutional forms of censorship (see also Kaur and Mazzarella 2009). How are images detached from their context, but also, just as importantly, how are they re-embedded, re-contextualized and re-framed? (Spyer and Steedly 2013, 19). Yet, despite images’ inherent heterogeneity and instability, images may keep some link to their source: “Unmoored from their sites of production, mobile images may still retain traces of their initial provenances even as they are variously inflected, refracted, reframed, remixed, digitally enhanced, cropped, hijacked, and amplified and their effects intensified or muted” (Ibid. 18). This counts for photos of artworks as well. Photos of artworks are indices of the artwork; they do not only resemble the artworks, by means of the exposure of light they have an indexical link to the work as well. And as ‘true’ indexical references to the artworks, they can help to naturalize the textual messages that

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<sup>27</sup> Different from museums in India, photography of the artworks is usually allowed during *contemporary* art exhibitions.

accompany them. Even if they are cropped, selected, adjusted, multiplied and circulated beyond the artwork they seem to primarily point to the work of art.



*Figure 4.8*

Left: professional photographer making photos of the exhibition.  
Right: photo of the exhibition without visitors.

The photos of *Reversed Perspective* on the website of Experimenter Gallery or any other photos of the exhibition I have seen in magazines, do not show visitors. In an exhibition where the artwork is everywhere around you a visitor can only get such views when he is the only visitor. Such photos undo the fragmented, situated and process-based nature of *contemporary* artworks. Although Sanchayan wanted to integrate the artwork with the gallery's architecture, the photos lift the artworks up so that they can circulate beyond the gallery, available to those who have not seen the exhibition. Whereas the texts highlight the name of the artist and separate it from a wider of community of ritual participants – from visitors to carpenters to gallery owners – the photos objectify a range of practices and experiences into a visually framed artwork.

What the exact difference is between a particular artwork and its photographic 're-presentation' should be studied case by case. But, we can say that the transposition of an artwork into an art image-text involves a fundamental change; time-based, fragmented, and dispersed works of *contemporary* art turn into more stable more singular art objects, and reinstate a subject-object divide that many artists have tried to undo. Although commercial considerations can be part of the framing of such works, it is part of a wider process by which artworks move through different stages; a ritual process, described in chapter 2, that accomplishes a valorization and embeds artworks in a canonical order. *Reversed Perspective* was, due to the red light, not easy to photograph and resisted therefore its own visual representation. Yet, with the right exposure an exhibition

where visitors had to carefully stumble across the wooden frame is turned into a disembodied picture, like the distant landscapes of perspective painting.

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After discussing the various ways in which the artists of Khoj Kolkata criticized and broke out of the gallery space in *Hollow Times*, I returned in this chapter to the gallery with an exhibition by Sanchayan Ghosh. Yet, as I have said at the beginning, this ‘return’ is not a reactionary move against the new site-specific art practices that unfold outside the gallery – practices in which Sanchayan himself is active – but a way to critically engage with placemaking itself. After describing the internationally oriented gallery Experimenter in 4.1 and taking a quick ‘survey’ of the exhibition and Sanchayan’s involvement with Birbhum in 4.2, I moved towards the main theme of the chapter in *Against representation* (4.3). Sanchayan’s exhibition *Reversed Perspective, 3 conjunctions* avoids, counters, and reflects on processes of representation through a variety of artistic strategies. Although the exhibition is too versatile and subtle to be described as a coordinated plan against representation, Sanchayan’s artistic strategies can nevertheless be seen as a joint effort to break the epistemology of representation, the logic of *this stands for that*.

In *The crude methods of dr. Ghosh* (4.4) ‘dr. Ghosh’ exposes and juxtaposes various scientific and artistic frames in which a landscape – Birbhum – is represented. But this is not a downright deconstruction; dr. Ghosh invites the visitors to become part of the representational process, to expose with the handed-out flashlights all the details of Birbhum. Yet, by drawing imaginative connections and by playfully confusing different fields of knowledge, Sanchayan dis-oriens the visitors. In *Making things light* (4.5) I looked at the exhibition’s ephemeral atmosphere; the delicate play with light and shadows, the thin white pinewood frame immersed in a red haze, the silk screens dangling from the ceiling, the thin handwriting on the wall, the transparent glass containers, the smoke rising, the sounds of crickets and *ektara*, and the call of the *chatok* bird – all work together to evoke a sense of lightness. I have argued that ‘lightness’ is a ritual strategy that is used to create a contrast with ‘heaviness’. But this is not just an opposition. In the example of Gawan canoes (see chapter 1.6), this opposition concerns the transformation from heavy materials from the land into light canoes that can take off from the land and travel outwards on the sea. In Sanchayan’s exhibition this transformation from heaviness to lightness can be seen as well; the written sources of Birbhum disappear in a red haze, the heavy grinding mining machines give way to the delicate sounds of village life, and the soil samples on the lower part of the table give rise to the glass test tubes on the upper part and their shadows on the wall –

from soil to glass to light and shadows. Although the exhibition's lightness is also a strategy to avoid the commodification of 'the art object', to counter the singular status of 'the artist', and a way to go beyond representational styles of painting, the exhibition is more than a criticism of the canonical order of *modern* art; it counters the wider representational logic within various spheres of society, based on a symbolic sign relationship where something refers to something else, a logic that turns everything into precious stones.

In *Reversed Perspectives* (4.6) I have discussed the strategy of reversal. The exhibition's dissolution into color and light might, at first sight, resemble a minimalist visual language that aims for a complete negation of meaning – the night of Brahma has started; the ordered world has been dissolved and is waiting for a new creation to begin (see chapter 2.7). Yet, instead of joining the ranks of aesthetic modernists who radically separated form from substance, the exhibition aims for a reflection on representational forms rather than a complete negation of it. Instead of getting rid of the frame of linear perspective, Sanchayan reversed it; he placed a wooden frame with an outward reversed perspective in the gallery. Instead of drawing the visitors into a representation of Birbhum, Sanchayan invites the visitors to imaginatively follow the reversed perspective beyond the gallery walls.

Yet, such a reversal also poses a risk. In *Leaving traces* (4.7) I asked the question whether the exhibition's reversals do not turn back on themselves. Sanchayan's six silk screens reminded me at first of nostalgic and romantic rendering of 'ethnographic subjects'. But the screens are reversed images, shadow casts as Sanchayan calls them. Sanchayan does not try to pin 'the other' down on the canvas, but plays with orientalist forms of representation. But what happens when such screens are taken out of the subtle and multivocal environment of the exhibition? In *Something red* (4.8) I made a short inroad into the inevitable continuation of the ritual cycle of *contemporary* art. By looking at the textual and photographic ritual practices that come after the exhibition, I discussed the ways this perceptually and multivocally ambiguous work is placed within an interpretative frame. The way Sanchayan's work will be circulated, sold, archived, preserved, and become part of a canonical order, is beyond the scope of this research. But I have shown how the first exhibition reviews give a work that subtly plays with form and meaning, a particular meaning, and how art photography selects and cuts out an entangled and grounded work into separate and detached images. A work that attempts to counter the logic of representation is re-presented. A work that is not about Birbhum, is turned into a picture that is in the end, about Birbhum.

## 5. A Messy Festival

In this chapter I will write about the art group Performers Independent (PI) and their festival KIPAF (Kolkata International Performance Art Festival), held yearly for several days in the month of January.<sup>28</sup> My perspective comes mostly from visiting KIPAF in 2015 and 2016 and from conversations with members of PI, especially with Syed Taufik Riaz.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to the previous chapter where I zoomed in on one artwork, I will in this chapter describe a several performances, and focus on the way the artists of PI, and especially Taufik, position themselves as artists and attempt to find a new way of being and making art in the city.

Many of PI's performances take place in the streets of Kolkata. There are a number of sites they regularly go to, such as the pavements in front of the Academy of Fine Arts, the public square behind Victoria Memorial Hall, the flower market at Malik Ghat next to Howra bridge, the streets surrounding Jadavpur University, the empty swimming pool area at college street, and Sheldah train station. What these sites have in common is that they are busy public sites and PI's performances therefore attract attention of diverse groups of people, such as daily commuters, loitering youth, groceries shoppers, and rickshaw pullers waiting for a ride, as well as friends who deliberately come to see the performances. Most of the sites for their performances have historical and political significance and carry an iconic value for Kolkata's inhabitants. During KIPAF such public sites are used as well, but in addition PI selects some private sites that offer more seclusion, such as Studio21, TENT, Chanderhaat, or Ghosh Bari.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> KIPAF 2015 and 2016 were both organized from the 23<sup>rd</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> of January, a holiday period. Yet the duration of later KIPAFs varies. KIPAF 2017, for example, was organized from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> of January.

<sup>29</sup> The performance art practices in Kolkata are dynamic and expanding and this chapter is not representative of PI, KIPAF, or other related performance art practices in the city. What is more, in 2016 PI has split up, resulting in the organization of two KIPAFs (see 4.6). I have focused mainly on the KIPAF organized by Taufik.

<sup>30</sup> Ghosh Bari is a colonial mansion in North Kolkata with a large inner courtyard that PI can use, through a contact of one of the members of PI, during the festival. TENT is an "alternative art space" managed by Madhuj Mukherjee and Avik Mukhopadhyay located in a residential neighborhood in (old) South Kolkata near Deshapriya Park. Since 2012 TENT features films and organizes exhibitions that experiment with moving images. It hosted some performances of KIPAF 2015 and co-organized the second installment of Boithak Khana with KHOJ Kolkata. For Studio21 see chapter 3.4, and Chander Haat see chapter 6. Such relatively secluded indoor spaces provides a platform for performers from Kolkata and performers who are not acquainted with the city to meet and interact, but the use of such spaces is also a conscious artistic choice to provide an opportunity for those artists who want to perform



Although PI's performances could be defined a site-specific, a term indeed frequently used by them, PI's engagement with sites differs from the way *Khoj Kolkata* engages with sites. Whereas the artists of *Khoj Kolkata* study the historical, social and political dimensions of a site and make their works in accordance with these contexts, the performances of PI seem to take place in them without unfolding a site's multi-layered histories. Yet, this relative neglect of the site's cultural complexity is substituted by a heightened emphasis on community. PI's focus on the community seems to resonate with wider international developments of performance art. Miwon Kwon, in her book *One Place After Another* (2002) describes the shifting emphasis to community-specific rather than site-specific art; a shift that involves a search for the "average man on the street", "real people" outside the art world, and attempts to empower the audience by involving them in the making of the artwork (Kwon 2002, 107). The risk of site-specific artworks, Kwon argues, is that they remain works of art for an exclusive art-educated audience that can understand a complex visual language. Performance-oriented projects move away from stable sited material artworks and focus instead on ephemeral processes of interaction between local participants and artists (Ibid. 104). It is often activist and communitarian in spirit, and it uses a broad range of media including painting and sculpture, street art, theatre, video, page art, protest demonstrations, dance, murals, oral histories, billboards etc. Community based performance art is politically engaged and addresses social injustice by pleading the case of the disenfranchised and disadvantaged, and defending humanitarian values (Ibid. 105; see also Raven 1989). PI's performances resonate strongly with these international developments of community-specific performance art as described by Kwon, yet their practice is a reaction to a specific history of performance art in Kolkata as well and their performances engage with the specific urban environment of Kolkata. This chapter will focus on the various ways a performance art movement with international ambitions is entangled with the city in various ways.

### 5.1 *Shunnostan*

Before the term PI came up Taufik was playing with various names that speak to the lack of *contemporary* art practices in Kolkata. With Debashis Ghosal Taufik published a manifesto called *Shunnostan*, literally 'zeroplace' or 'nothingplace'. *Shunnostan, a compilation* is a collection of drawings, poems and short essays by several contributors and was published as a booklet in

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indoors, as Rahul Bhattacharya, Sumana Akter, Anirban Dutta and Mome Bhattacharya discuss in an interview with Kaahon ([www.kaahon.com](http://www.kaahon.com)).

2011, a year before the first KIPAF.<sup>31</sup> Another name that circulated was *Katha Bulb*, referring to the torn filament of a lamp. But the choice for the performers group fell eventually on PI. PI stands for Performers Independent, but as Taufik told me, also refers to the number Pi ( $\pi$ ), to the relation between centre and periphery. Taufik: “Suddenly it happens that you come up with an idea and then you see that it reflects certain other things as well. Personally I had an interest in mathematics, so Pi was very interesting”. Pi comes from the Greek word for periphery ( $\pi\epsilon\rho\iota\phi\acute{\epsilon}\rho\epsilon\iota\alpha$ ) and describes the ratio of a circle’s circumference to its diameter. In mathematical terms Pi ( $\pi$ ) is called an ‘irrational’ and ‘transcendental’ number, which means that it cannot be expressed as a common fraction; its decimal representation never ends and never settles into a permanently repeating pattern. The transcendence of  $\pi$  implies that it is impossible to create a square with the same area of a given circle with a compass and straightedge. A circle can thus not be ‘translated’ into a square, a problem known as ‘squaring the circle’, which was an inspiration for mystic interpretations among European medieval thinkers.<sup>32</sup> The *Shunnostan* booklet shows a number of doodles of circles, squares, and triangles that resemble diagrams of the philosopher’s stone and mandalas, hinting at this mystic connotation as well. The name of PI, besides an acronym for Performers Independent, is interesting for Taufik because of its associations with ‘periphery’, ‘irrationality’ and ‘transcendence’, themes that make up the core of this chapter.

Names like PI, *Shunnostan*, and *Katha Bulb* address the lack of Kolkata’s contemporary art scene, the city’s peripheral situation. Although there are realistic grounds for Taufik to present the contemporary art infrastructure as relatively lacking, Kolkata is not, and never has been, void of art practice. More than merely addressing the lack of art opportunities in the city such names and the adjoining critical writings pave the way for something new to happen. As argued in chapter 2.6, when artists feel that established works of art do not express the idea of Art, they will attempt to make something that is different from established works of art. The making of a new work of art, however, is often preceded by some form of criticism; not sure what they will make, artists first articulate what they do not want to make. Artists verbally criticize and distance themselves from established ‘traditions’; doing so artist not only refute established ‘traditions’, but mark certain works or styles as ‘traditional’, as backward and out of joint with time, and thereby open up the future for something new to happen.

To establish ‘*Shunnostan*’ existing art practices had to be criticized. The *Shunnostan* manifesto does not provide a roadmap for something new, but is first of all a criticism; of art institutions, of society more generally, of artistic styles or artistic media that have become too familiar, too

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<sup>31</sup> Some poems are provided with an English translation, but most of the writings are in Bangla.

<sup>32</sup> See C.G. Jung *Psychology and Alchemy*, Collected Works Volume 12, 1968. Bollingen Series 20, Princeton University Press.

habitual. After a few lines from a poem by Sukumar Ray (see 5.4), it starts with a critical review written by Taufik of an exhibition by Ganesh Pyne, one of Kolkata's most famous artists,<sup>33</sup> at CIMA gallery titled *Ganesh Pyne, his Mahabharata* (2013). Taufik does not criticize the medium of painting and praises Ganesh Pyne's earlier works that "used to express unexpected discovery". Yet he condemns Pyne's "static" and "habitual" depiction of the characters of the Mahabharata instead of engaging with the dynamic character of the Mahabharata itself. Pyne's scenes and characters of the Mahabharata do not express the "netlike complexity", "savagery", "vastness" and "darkness" of the epic, Taufik writes. The point Taufik makes is not that Pyne's works give a 'wrong' interpretation, but that art cannot be used to represent something as complex as the Mahabharata, which by some is regarded to be as complex as life itself.<sup>34</sup> As I have argued in chapter 2, the avant-garde criticism of established art does not only consist of a rejection of conventional art forms, but can also express a rejection of art as something that *stands for* something else, a rejection of the symbolic claim of art. Moreover, Taufik criticizes Pyne's depictions of women's "helpless beauty" and sees it as a component of masculine gratification. In the end of the review Taufik writes: "Of course we hesitate to say this in relation to such an honoured and talented person. But seeing the exhibition we spoke our mind". Young artists in

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<sup>33</sup> Ganesh Pyne (1937-2013), a painter and illustrator - at the moment of the *Shunnostan* publication still alive - was born in Calcutta where he studied at Government Art College. Besides a short period of traveling in India and Europe, he always remained in Calcutta and avoided the limelight of his success. He was educated under the Bengal School, and was inspired especially by Abanindranath Tagore's watercolours. He became famous since the late 1960s after exhibiting at the Paris Biennale and receiving praise by the renowned painter M.F. Hussain who coined him the best Indian artist of the time. Pyne sidestepped the progressive art movement of international modernism and instead reconnected to the Bengal School. He held on to local traditions, R. Siva Kumar writes, at a time when artists were turning away from the Bengal School. Yet, drawing inspiration from both European and Indian symbolist artists and poets such as Paul Klee, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Shakti Chattopadhyay, as well as European and Indian cinema, and witnessing the tumultuous years between the mid-fourties and early seventies in Bengal of partition and communal riots along with personal losses Pyne did not fall back into the traditionalism of the Bengal School. Rather, Pyne's works continued the Bengal School's affinity with mythology and folklore in new ways with what Kumar calls "a strange mixture of gloomy darkness and luminous fantasy" (R. Siva Kumar: *Bengal mourns: Farewell to the interpreter of Thanatos* in *The Sunday Guardian*, March 2013).

<sup>34</sup> There is a commonly held belief in India that reading the entire Mahabharata is inauspicious. To this day, Wendy Doniger writes, many people fear to keep complete written texts of the Mahabharata in their house (Doniger 2009, 220; See also J.D. Smith 2009, xiv). This belief might be ascribed to the fear of keeping something in the house that tells of a great holocaust and genocide, or might be reverberation of the historical disinclination in India of putting stories that have always been orally transmitted into writing (Ibid.). Perhaps such belief can also be ascribed to the totality of the Mahabharata; as one verse says it 'The whole world is Vyasa's leftovers' or another verse, 'What is there may be elsewhere. But what is not here is nowhere else' (Ramanujan 2004, 162). A totality cannot be represented; one can take in only bits and parts. Just like "no Hindu ever reads the Mahabharata for the first time" (Ibid. 161), no one can ever finish reading it because like life itself it will always change and find new forms in new retellings. If the Mahabharata is as complex and vast as life, to attempt to represent it fully by keeping it in written form on the bookshelves might be associated with stagnation, with lifelessness rather than life, and therefore inauspicious. Taufik's criticism on Pyne's representation of the Mahabharata might also be seen as a metaphor for the impossibility to represent the idea of Art (see chapter 2.4). The only way to engage with the fullness of the Mahabharata is to retell it, just like the only way to search for Art is to remake it. Not only for storytellers and artists, but also for their publics, for listening and seeing are creative acts as well.

Kolkata treat senior artists with respect and reverence and it is not very common for young artists to criticize a senior artist. By criticizing the work of an established artist, Taufik not only criticizes a particular exhibition but also sets himself apart from an older and established generation of painters. *Shunnostan* does not have an outline of what art should be, it is not a declaration of intentions, motives, or views and I therefore hesitate to call it a manifesto. Yet, its criticism paves the way for something new to happen, even if this new art is not clearly articulated yet. The last poem in *Shunnostan* reads:

Not this way I guess  
Must be that way  
Whichever way seems right  
One shall go.<sup>35</sup>

*Shunnostan* resonates with the newspaper *Hollow Times* by Abhijit Gupta, described in chapter 3. Yet, whereas Abhijit used irony as his main strategy, *Shunnostan*, and the later activities under PI, shows on the one hand an affiliation with the absurd, inspired especially by the nonsense verse of Sukumar Ray, and on the other hand an activist societal criticism. Notwithstanding these differences, they both criticize the gallery system. At his family home in Beck Bagan, a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood in central Kolkata, Taufik tells me that next to his performance art he still paints, but does not sell his paintings. He went to galleries in Kolkata and Delhi after his studies to try to sell his paintings, but says he felt alienated: “you paint, you go, you put it in a show, then it is not sold and you take it down, take it back, so the whole thing is a big performance”. Performance art was for him an outcome to counter the gallery and the gallery’s dealing in art as commercial art objects. Already during his studies at Santiniketan Khala Bhavan, where he attended in 1996, Taufik experimented with performance art, but it was not something he thought he would be doing later. Performance art was not part of the curriculum and Taufik only slowly came to understand what it could be for him: “I never knew this word performance art before I went to Santiniketan and never saw anything like it. I went to museums with my parents, but everything was traditional paintings and sculptures and theatre. (...) And even in Santiniketan when I went there, the term performance art was not really used.”

In Santiniketan Taufik got to know Sanchayan Ghosh (see chapter 4). Sanchayan graduated in 1997 and was experimenting with performance art, although it was usually referred to as happenings. These happenings were collective practices that included installation work and were, as Taufik recounts, extensions of painting and sculpture practices. It was in '99, Taufik recalls, that the term performance became more prevalent: “we slowly understood that this

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<sup>35</sup>Poem by Pabitra Khara, translated by Churni Bhaumik.

is a medium [in and of itself] and that there have been similar practices going on elsewhere. At that time we took it seriously (...). After 2000 there was this event of internet and all these things, that sort of led people know, ok this is happening, but still it wasn't taken seriously by the academicians and the art colleges as such.” Performance art was incorporated by art colleges, Khala Bhavan included, but Khala Bhavan has the advantage, Taufik says, that it encourages multi-media arts. Furthermore, its relatively secluded campus life provides a space for the students where, in line with Tagore’s initial philosophy when founding the art school, art and life merge. Instead of daily commuting to an art college where you learn and work at regular time-slots Khala Bhavan enables what Taufik refers to as “physically being in a space”.

Taufik started to take performance art seriously, but he was still uncertain about it. He performed only minimally in Santiniketan from 2005 onwards, but not yet in Kolkata and friends were encouraging him to focus on his paintings. Taufik recalls his friends saying: “you should get out of Kolkata, you should go to the galleries, why are you not painting, you are wasting your time in the streets like this”. Aside from the dissuasion from his surroundings Taufik says he always had a shyness to perform: “Throughout childhood and when I went to Santiniketan I had stage shyness, a shyness to perform on stage. I could never do it, and even in my schooldays I did not join the school theatre”. Taufik, who is tall and slender, says he was never good at sports: “I had these physical inhibitions about myself, physically I am not a very able person. But in Santiniketan, working with Sanchayan, I slowly came out of this”. To practice performance was thus also a way to overcome his bodily shyness. In 2009 Taufik went to Bangladesh to visit the first ‘CRACK international art camp’,<sup>36</sup> where he met performance artist Abu Naser Robi: “[he] was the first performance artist I met, who was saying I’m a performance artist”. This was a big inspiration and it gave him the confidence to continue his practice: “suddenly you find out, ok somebody is doing it, and you get a confidence, and you understand, I am not a weird person”.

In 2009 Taufik did his first individual performance at the *Baul fakir festival*, a yearly festival for Baul music in Kolkata. After that Taufik started to perform more regularly in Kolkata: “I was sort of alone, I had one or two friends working with me, I did things in the middle of the night, on the streets. People came and asked, the police came and asked”. But overall the city was

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<sup>36</sup>Crack international Art Camp (CIAC) is a yearly art camp at a fish seed farm in Rahimpur, Bangladesh. CIAC, as written in their mission statement, endeavours to promote an international and multidisciplinary platform for young artists and thinkers: “It would like to build a potential cross-cultural relationship keeping away from the conventional corporate culture. Through various activities Crack want to exchange of thoughts, ideas, concepts, & beliefs of artists and other professionals around the world. (...) Sharing and caring for cross-cultural art is also aimed at the establishment of an eco-friendly platform that take into account the oneness of planet earth that we all share equally”. See [www.crackbd.org](http://www.crackbd.org).

helpful, Taufik says, even if people think “these are mad guys”, people were generally interested. One of the reasons why people on the streets show interest is due to the former popularity of street theatre, most notably Badal Sircar’s *Third Theatre*. Before the appearance of Performance art in Kolkata in the 2000s, there was already a rich tradition of street theatre in Kolkata that foregrounded the reception of Taufik’s initial performances and the later activities of PI.

Badal Sircar grew up in Calcutta and while trained as an engineer, he became a theatre person, both acting and directing, since the early 1950s until his death in 2011. Highly productive, Sircar played a pivotal role in the transformation of theatre practices in India after independence (see for example Sircar 1982, Bharucha 1983; Schechner 1983; Deshpande 2002; Mitra 2004) In the early 1970s Sircar moved deliberately away from the established ‘modern theatre’ with its psychology, drama, spoken word, proscenium stage, box set, and separate audience. He took theatre out of the proscenium and started performing in villages and in Calcutta’s parks and streets (Schechner 1983, 25); a movement similar to that of performance arts in the United States in the late 1950s, what Bishop calls “An “anti-theatricality” (Bishop 2011, 3).<sup>37</sup> In a letter to Richard Schechner, a New York professor of performing arts who worked with Sircar, Sircar wrote:

The immediate reason was that of communication – we wanted to break down the barriers and come closer to the spectators, to take full advantage of direct communication that theatre as a live-show offers. We wanted to share with our audience the experience of joint human action. But in taking that course we also found our theatre outside the clutches of money. We could establish a free theatre, performing in public parks, slums, factories, villages, wherever the people are, depending on voluntary donations from the people for the little expenses we needed. We stopped using sets, spotlights, costly costumes, make-up - not as a matter of principle, but because we realized that they are not essentials, even if sometimes necessary. We concentrated on the essentials - the human body and the human mind. Our theatre became a flexible, portable and inexpensive – almost free – theatre (Sircar 1982, 56).

The strength of theatre is, according to Sircar, its here and now. Performers and spectators come to the same place at the same time; they share the same place and acknowledge each other’s presence (Mitra 2004, 65). The proscenium theatre inhibited such coming together of performers and audience by creating obstacles such as lighting and seating. With a new form of theatre called ‘*Third Theatre*’ Sircar attempted to bring spectators and performers together, to

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<sup>37</sup> A critique of the traditional modern theatre in which, as Claire Bishop summarizes, costumes, everyday clothing, instructions, scores, and improvisatory chance replaced characters, narrative, rehearsals, and scripts. There was no suspension of disbelief necessary because everything was purportedly “real”, taking place in the actual space-time of the viewer (Bishop 2011, 3).

create an intimate theatre, where as Sircar writes “The performers can see the spectator clearly, can approach him individually, can whisper in his ears, can even touch him if he wants” (Sircar 1982 in Mitra 2004, 67). Sircar wanted to move away from proscenium-based theatre practices, what Sircar coins ‘second theatre’, yet neither did he want to ‘return’ to traditional Indian folk theatre, ‘first theatre’. As Sircar writes: The indigenous folk theatre of India, strong, live, immensely loved by the working people of the country, propagates themes that are at best irrelevant to the life of the toiling masses, and at worst back-dated and downright reactionary (Sircar 1981, 56). As Shayoni Mitra writes, “Sircar felt the need to break away from both the indigenous folk styles widespread in India before colonization and the genres ‘imported’ by the British, which were the two predominant theatrical strains in post-Independence India” (Mitra 2004, 62). Theatre practices were thus positioned in a similar double bind as the Bengal School visual arts that navigated between an Indian tradition on the one hand and a Western academic tradition on the other (see chapter 3.2). Sircar’s solution of *Third Theatre* would as Mitra writes “employ an idiom unique to the postcolonial urban environment, drawing on the foundations laid by the first and second theatres that so far had peaceably coexisted in India” (Ibid. 62).

There are many elements that *Third Theatre* and PI have in common and the performance practices of PI can be seen as an extension of it. The dissolving of the boundary between performer and observer is brought to an extreme in the performances of PI, as I will elaborate on below. Furthermore, both *Third Theater* and PI shun hierarchical group formation. In *Third Theatre*, Mitra writes, no individual could impose decisions on the collective: “there are not demarcations or function within the group. No elected functionaries make decisions that will be imposed upon other members of the collective. Sitting in a circle at the start of each play, members discuss themes and share ideas. Scripts often emerge from this communal brainstorming” (Ibid. 71). PI continues this practice and performs without a pre-planned choreography. Uma Banerjee, a long-time member of PI, who is trained in dance, says she wants to break out of the rehearsals of theatre, the repetition to advance to perfection. Instead of rehearsing she tries to practice spontaneity in her performances. The members of PI talk about possible performances in workshops, about ideas, about what to perform where, but the actual performance is usually not rehearsed.

Taufik acknowledges the importance of *Third Theater*, but simultaneously distances himself from it. There is for example an important difference in the rules of what can and cannot be used within a performance. *Third Theatre’s* removal of the boundary between performer and audience resulted in the stripping away of obstacles that could hinder communication such as elaborate

settings, lightning, costumes, make-up, and physical props (Ibid. 65).<sup>38</sup> The body of the actor became the text, as Sudhanva Deshpande says: “Movement, rhythm, mime, formations and contortions were used to express physically instead of verbally, resulting in a Spartan production stripped to its bare essentials” (Mitra 2004, 73).<sup>39</sup> Taufik told me he experienced such rules as a limitation to what performance art could be.

So I was trying to pursue, to seduce people in this practice, (...) I didn't have the inhibition of the old performance art (...) We had a problem with it every time. When we were performing, the traditional Third Theatre people were opposing us, because they had their own rigid, to us rigid, ways (...) We were using pre-recorded voices, or keyboard sounds, these sort of things, which they opposed. They were of the opinion that Third form theatre is the theatre of the poor, you should be wearing only cloth, you can't use technical devices.

Taufik did not aim his arrows at *Third Theater* as such, which he regards as a great inspiration: “I never thought that the 3<sup>rd</sup> theater itself was rigid. Rather, I consider it to be a vibrant and dynamic movement of the '70s Calcutta that worked till late '80s. After that there was nothing innovative or new happening.” Taufik instead aims his arrows at those groups that came after: “So, by the time we shifted to performance art, Bangla 3<sup>rd</sup> theater was dead. Well, you will still find (...) [some groups] doing their regular shows in Nandan campus and still there will be some audience, but then you will experience nothing striking. Old rehearsed pieces with decadent acting (...)” To regard the *Third Theater* movement as rigid would be counterintuitive, considering Sircar's longstanding endeavor to break out of the conventions of the ‘modern theatre’ and ‘folk theatre’. Yet, the art forms that are liberating for one, can become a straitjacket for another; practices that are initiated to break out of the confines of earlier forms of art, become customary or decadent; and proclaimed rules of how things should or shouldn't be done stifle the movement of artists who want to do something new. As Atish Saha, a performance artist and photographer from Bangladesh, says in an interview with Kaahon: “When I am working with a medium for a period, by default it results in a certain set up. So, two things: one is that the medium has its limitations, which is beautiful, plus the medium also tends to create boredom. The word is not exactly boredom. But it's better to say that it creates a certain type or a default system. To break the default system, I guess people immediately look for a new medium”.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Mitra points out that these changes were not introduced all at one, but were established gradually through a policy of trial and error (Mitra 2004, 65).

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Sudhanva Deshpande by Shayoni Mitra. New Delhi, 14 January. 2004

<sup>40</sup> *Kaahon* is a Kolkata based platform that supports and archives performance art practices, focusing on theatre and music. See kaahon.com. Translation from Bangla to English by Kaahon.



The conventionalized form of *Third Theater* is only one of the perceived straitjackets for the artists of PI; there are a number of perceived limitations from which the performances of PI try to break out from, such as commercial based gallery art, traditional proscenium-based theatre, and the professionalization and institutionalization of art festivals. Next to such medium-based limitations, there is a range of perceived societal wrongs, most notably capitalist consumerism, family expectations and nationalist politics, which the artists address in their performances. In the following section I will describe a range of critical strategies and practices that concern both societal and institutional criticism. I will describe PI's intentional strategies to avoid the commercialization and professionalization of art, their less intentional unstructured and unplanned style of living and performance practice, perhaps best be described as collective dilettantism, and look at a recurring performative theme of binding and cutting enacted to address various perceived societal straitjackets.

## 5.2 *Un-organization*

In 2016 PI's KIPAF (Kolkata International Performance Art Festival) was held at Chander Haat, an artist village at the southern edge of the city on which I will write in the following chapter. The performers from PI and the guests coming from Kolkata, India, and abroad, performed, ate and slept at the premises of Chander Haat. Morning and evening performances were held at Chander Haat and during the day people went with small buses to several sites in the city centre.<sup>41</sup> Chander Haat was providing food and accommodation, but the organization - the programming, picking up artists from the airport, the daily trips to the city center etcetera - was in the hands of PI. However, PI's organization of the festival seemed inadequate. From the beginning there were problems: two performers from Sweden were not comfortable sleeping in a large room with all the other artists and were brought to a hotel nearby; the same artists and an artist from Australia complained about the transport from Chandler Haat to the city centre, and there were complaints regarding the constant delay and changes in the program. Besides the organizational frictions, there were complaints relating to a more general lack of focus during the performances. Members of Chander Haat and some performance artists did not understand why the organization was often staying inside, while most of the performances were held outside. Many of the PI members were not there during performances, and if they were there, they seemed distracted and did not look at each other's performances with a concentration I would expect. And when someone was doing a performance, somebody else might start doing something simultaneously, distracting the public, or completely drawing it away to the other performance.

At KIPAF 2015 I heard similar complaints. Because there was no clear time schedule, the artists did not know when and where to prepare and concentrate before a performance. Especially for someone who has not visited Kolkata before, the city can be difficult to navigate. While the foreign artists did not mind at all to take care of their own expenses, some of them did expect a more organized welcome. I also met some people who criticized especially Taufik's inability to separate private from public, something I encountered myself as well. I was listed as an "observer" for KIPAF festival 2016. Although I did talk with Taufik about possibilities of having some role in the festival beforehand, I was only aware of the confirmation of my role in the festival as "observer" when I saw the announcement of the festival and I was never informed about what I should do. This example is innocent, and in my role as ethnographer and writing

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<sup>41</sup> College Square (an area around a swimming pool next to college street that serves as a park), the park behind Victoria Memorial Hall, and the area around The Academy of Fine Arts. One day all the performances were held at Chander Haat and the other 3-4 days of the festival the artists went to more central parts of the city.

about it here, it made a lot of sense. But there are also examples where the boundary between informal talks and public announcements or correspondences can be experienced as problematic, which played a role in the eventual breakup of PI (see 5.6). I asked Taufik, about the apparent absence of structure, the haphazard way of performing, and the frictions encountered during KIPAF. Taufik, recounting the earlier held festivals says that he is not very good at arranging projects:

In 2012 almost for 6 months we had been very busy with this star musician from Bangladesh, Arnob. It's a really funny or tragic affair we had. We had this plan to have a big performance show, in kala mondir on Shakespear sarani (formerly Theatre Road), an old good stage, where there are music programmes, dance programmes, theater programs; an elite space basically. So it was a quite an ambitious project, (...) then what happened in December, there was a visa problem, and on the final day Arnob couldn't come. So what we did, from my point of view and some others, it was a successful thing, at the last moment he performed in Dhaka, he presented it through skype on stage. (...) [But] most of the audience was frustrated because they wanted to see him live, and we had a lot of economic loss. So it was a mess.

The absence of organization in KIPAF is however not just an inability to organize an event, although this is part of it as Taufik admits. PI's 'unorganization' is also a deliberate attempt to avoid the professionalization of performance art. I already mentioned that performance art for Taufik is a way to avoid what he calls the capitalist base of visual arts. Yet, as Quinn (2005), Bishop (2012), and Brosius (2015) have shown, cultural festivals are certainly not free from the appropriation by market-driven objectives. Bernadette Quinn writes that since the late 1980s festivals in urban areas have dramatically expanded. Quinn connects this growth of urban festivals to the de-industrialization of cities and their transformation to a service economy. This transformation from landscapes of production to landscapes of consumption prompted cities to differentiate themselves and compete with other cities as attractive places to visit and to invest in (Quinn 2005, 4-5).<sup>42</sup> Raising a city's international profile, Quinn writes, has become the main reason for organizing festivals: "Even when the festival or cultural event has been strongly culturally orientated at the outset, the city marketing impetus seems to overwhelm the process and crowd out any other potentially driving-force underpinning the use of festivals in urban arenas" (Ibid. 6).

Claire Bishop, writing from the perspective of *contemporary* art rather than city management, is critical of the commercial instrumentalisation of participatory art, art that is based on

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<sup>42</sup> See also Zukin (1991, 1998) and Ward (1998).

collaboration and the involvement of many people rather than the singular artist.<sup>43</sup> The appropriation of participatory art by the market, non-governmental or governmental organizations concerns the branding of cities as creative sites to lure investments, but involves, as Bishop points out, the branding of the artist as well. The artist becomes the role model of the flexible, mobile, non-specialized labourer who can creatively adapt to multiple situations and becomes his or her own brand (Bishop 2012, 12). What is more, Bishop points out that this instrumentalisation of participatory art occurred simultaneously with the dismantling of the welfare state in European and especially in the UK (Ibid. 5).

The rise of public art festivals as described by Quinn and Bishop, who focus mostly on Europe, is an international phenomenon and has emerged in India as well. Yet, as Christiane Brosius shows, a public art festival in an Indian city engages with different kind of sites that have particular histories and publics, and can therefore not be simply equated to similar activities in Europe or elsewhere (Brosius 2015, 85). As described in chapter 3, the notion of public space cannot be simply transposed from a European context to an Indian one; research on art practices within public spaces therefore requires empirical – on the ground – research, to understand how the ideals and stated goals of festivals work out in particular places (Quinn 2005, 5). Brosius has closely followed ‘*48°C Public.Art.Ecology*’ (from here on 48°C), a public *contemporary* art festival in Delhi held in 2008, and describes the way the festival was set out to explore alternative ways of belonging and participation in the city against the backdrop of marketing efforts that present Delhi as a “world-class” city; a city branding that facilitates the rapid change of Delhi’s urban environment privileging the tastes and desires of elite groups (Brosius 2015). The artworks of 48°C, referring to the highest recorded temperature in Delhi, addressed themes such as air pollution, water scarcity, deforestation, urban planning, population density, and real estate development. By means of the artworks, community involvement and accompanying activities 48°C aimed to open up the city, to find a place in-between, and allow for alternative interactions with ownership in and of the city (Brosius 2015, 80).

Yet, Brosius observes a gap between on the one hand the critical and creative potential of the festival and on the other the organizational difficulties and actual participatory involvement. For example, to obtain permits for exhibition sites proved to be more difficult than expected. As Brosius writes: “Most festival sites were ‘public’ only once permits were granted, after gates and minds were opened, and all kinds of boundaries were shifted” (Ibid. 115). Moreover, the

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<sup>43</sup> Bishop defines participatory art as an expanded field of post-studio practices that have occurred since the 1990s going under a variety of names: socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, interventionist art, participatory art, collaborative art, contextual art and (most recently) social practice (Bishop 2012, 1)

sites became 'public' in different ways for different communities. Curators, artists, and researchers experience the festival's imagination of a more inclusive city differently than the commuters, daily wagers, or schoolchildren who do not visit all the sites, but merely pass by a single site. Although other social groups were not excluded, the festival, Brosius observes, reflected the perspective of an educated and English-speaking middle class familiar with the discourse on climate change and public art interventions (Ibid. 83, 116). Festivals like *48°C* temporarily reveal aspects of the city that otherwise remain invisible, forgotten, or marginalized, yet, despite their critical and creative potential, they run the risk of "turning art and urban space into a didactic strategy that merely serves the agendas of larger economic-political issues, and interests or anxieties of a privileged social stratum" (Ibid. 79).

When participatory art becomes an instrument of city branding, when the artist becomes his or her own brand, or when an art festival serves the interests of a privileged social stratum, it is not enough anymore to stress the participatory character of art. It is not enough anymore to stake out your place as a group and oppose the idea of the singular artist. This explains why PI turns against professionalism as such. It is not just group art opposed to the individual artworks; it is the collective that seeks an indeterminacy that won't fit in any slots society provides. As Taufik recollects:

So Pi came up in 2012, the first KIPAF happened like that. And we found that yes, there were no laws. The most important thing was that we could manage it economically, that we could invite the artists, and it was like we said like we won't be paying for the travel or any remuneration, because that was also again sort of important political thing, its good like, you go somewhere, ask an artist, she needs to travel, expenditures, all these thing, but India what we have seen is that it becoming a career oriented thing, like you don't work unless you are paid. And we haven't been working like that. We went to a place and worked. Went by ourselves, stayed at a friend's place, that should be the ways of KIPAF. Let KIPAF be like that.

The lack of organization of KIPAF cannot be only ascribed to PI's inability to organize an international art festival, but involves a strategy to avoid professionalism as well. Taufik admits that he is not good at organizing projects, yet the absence of a proper organization of the festival, the absence of a clear program, is also done on purpose. By depending on a group of friends and their hospitality, by keeping the festival informal and flexible, PI prevents their performance art from becoming "a career oriented thing". The frictions between some artists and the organization of PI and the misunderstandings in the planning are thus more than mere mismanagement but reveal different ideas about performance art.

This does not mean this strategy of unprofessionalism is very consciously chosen and followed throughout; there is not a very clear marking point where PI 'becomes unprofessional' and

therefore it can be seen more as a tactic rather than an explicit strategy. PI's laidback attitude, the lack of focus and informality, manifested during the KIPAF festival is similar to their gatherings during the rest of the year. Their meetings are both regular and spontaneous and there are no strict rules concerning their practice. This makes PI and their festival KIPAF an inclusive movement that can bring in different people with different backgrounds. The performers of PI come from all kinds of disciplines, such as film studies, dance, singing, graphic arts, visual arts, and commerce and Taufik stresses the importance of flexibility. As Suman and Sourav said,<sup>44</sup> who are friends with some of the artists and occasionally work together: "they are Bengali hippies. They are funny, if they get food they eat it but if there is no food they are also fine and just won't eat." Whether they hang out at Taufik's house, or just besides the main square in front of the Academy of Fine Arts, or organizing an international festival, there is a live-and-let-live mentality where the boundaries between making art, talking about art and the rest of their lives blurs. Instead of a directed strategy against professionalism PI creates a way of being together which rejects a clear programme or purpose.

Taufik told me that there are a lot of negative points of being so laid back: "People don't generally invest in such things, and artists coming from abroad might not take us very seriously." Yet he thinks it is an important part of his art. Taufik does not believe that art should have a clear purpose and rejects the implication of public art as socially committed:

Personally I can never make projects, never been successful making any projects. Because the point is that I can't justify art, (...) Its my personal view that art is something extra, you cant justify it as such". (...), I am keenly observing the shift of the terms. At a certain period of time you [one] talked about the people's art, then in our period you don't talk about peoples art, you talk about public art, because it's becoming a sort of profession of an individual artist to make something with the public. [But I cannot say] that it is for the good of the public. I never found that it happens like that, most of the time it basically exploits a situation, exploits a people, so we never went for that, that project oriented fund based thing, and so the first year KIPAF was done like that and we were a bit confident and those who came were also happy and said that it should go on.

Taufik said that he did not want to write a manifesto that would align their performance practices to a particular group or a political body: "we never felt like making an artist group. These things happen, the idea of commune, the idea of a group, we have seen elder generation senior artists, 5 or 10 of them together, buying some land, making some houses, doing a commune, and then splitting up, (...) We never had that illusion, we though that that was an illusion, that age had past". PI's unwillingness to define and institutionalize a collective comes

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<sup>44</sup> Suman Samajpati and Sourav Roy together form the artist-duo "TAXI". See 2.3.

from witnessing the failures of collectives. The members of PI, most of them in their twenties or thirties belong to the first generation of artists to practice their art after the communist party lost the elections in West Bengal. When the artistic, political, and ethical pitfalls of community-based art come to the surface, Miwon Kwon writes, the need for imagining alternative possibilities of togetherness and collective action become more pronounced (Kwon 2002, 153). To think about these alternatives requires, according to Kwon, a reconceptualization of “community”. Quoting Jean-Luc Nancy Kwon writes: “there is no communion, there is no common being, but there is being *in* common (...) The question should be the community of being and not the being of community” (Kwon 2002, 153).<sup>45</sup> Anirban Sarkar, a member of PI, told me that he felt that the performances were not the most important thing of KIPAF. It was staying together in the big sleeping rooms of Chanderhaat, where around 40 people from different countries, ate, talked, drank, smoked, slept, all in one room. Instead of forging a relationship with an existing community, it is more about creating a community of performers without defining this community.

But, this does not mean that the members of PI are apolitical. PI’s performances throughout the year are done in public places and often carry an undeniable political message, as I will show below. Moreover, the members of PI are politically engaged and take part in the recent political student protests. Yet this political activism does not have to crystallize into a clear political programme for their arts. As Bishop points out, references to community, collectivity and revolution are enough to indicate a critical distance to neoliberalism (Bishop 2012, 12). Being in common itself is perceived as an antidote to a perceived alienation in society.

Before KIPAF 2016 started PI introduced themselves with a presentation and performance at Chander Haat, the venue where a large part of the festival took place. In front of a large projection showing a video on the wall one performer was tied with a rope, lying on the floor, and tried to crawl forward, away from another performer who was holding the other end of the rope. This performance continued, painstakingly long, without much variation, during the presentation of a video *The society of the spectacle*, a mash up of contemporary imagery, mostly commercials and news clippings, uploaded on youtube in 2011, leaning especially on Guy Debord’s work *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967).<sup>46</sup> I have seen many performances by PI in which

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<sup>45</sup> See Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) “*Of Being-in-Common*” in Miami Theory Collective, ed., *Community at Loose Ends*, 4.

<sup>46</sup> These ideas resonate strongly with theories of the alienation caused by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism. Among other popular writers like Walter Benjamin, Michel de Certeau, Paula Freire, Deleuze and Guattari, and Hakim Bey, Guy Debord is, according to Bishop, the most popular and frequently cited in participative art circles for his exposure of the alienating and divisive effects of capitalism (Bishop 2012, 11).

the performance artists are bounded or enclosed by something, either with ropes or tape or for example by being trapped inside a pile of bricks from which the performer tries to escape.

The act of binding and breaking free is often repeated but can have different connotations; next to performances that address abstract political ideas, such as capitalist consumerism and alienation, there are other, more concrete perceived societal wrongs that are addressed. In an interview with *Kaahon* Piya Brar, 24, says that her aunt scolded her saying, “Grow your hair! Who is going to marry you?” and talks about the pressure from her family to get married. Together with Kalyani Uday and Rituparna Banerjee she did a performance on Kalighat road close to Kalighat temple gate. Piya Brar: “I have short hair while Rituparna had very long hair and we decided to make a switch. So I made little ponytails in my hair while Uma came and tied the strings and joined it with Rituparna’s hair. And then Rituparna’s hair was cut off and it all came on my head. And I was sitting like a male smoking a *bidi* and there was a switch between feminine and non-feminine”. This performance addresses the expectations of women, expectations that express themselves, as Kalyani Uday says, in certain norms of walking and wearing clothes, having to look fair and grow your hair long.

In her book *Domestic Goddesses: Maternity, Globalization and Middle-class Identity in Contemporary India* (2008) Henrike Donner writes about the expectations towards marriage in middle-class families in Kolkata, focusing on the neighborhood Taltala in central Kolkata. To marry, Donner writes, is to follow the rules set and accepted by the wider society. Not only is there, from early childhood onwards, a nurtured desire to marry, but marriage is also seen as a precondition of becoming a mother or father, a step toward maturity, which is only fully achieved with the birth of a child. To remain unmarried “was represented not so much as a social problem but as a personal tragedy and a collective worry” (Donner 2008, 65). The performance is not simply an expression of a generational struggle of a younger generation fighting off the conservatism of an older generation. Marriage, Donner writes, is strengthened rather than weakened by discourses on modern Indian middle-class selves: “far from being marginalized marriage emerges as a necessary precondition for the development of a recognizable ‘Indian’ woman” (Ibid. 66).

The performance reverses such family expectations by the physical act of cutting hair, an act that is not merely metaphor for the defiance of family expectations, but an *act* of defiance. What is more, by doing so in a street crowded with traders and visitors of the famous Kali temple, the performers also do something that normally will provoke remarks. Meeting in the streets, being and performing together also forms a way to cope with and escape from middle-class family expectations. The separation between *ghare* and *baire*, as I wrote in chapter 3, is a divide between the inside, associated with the private sphere of the home and the ‘outside’, which can refer to



city, the streets, markets, and public transport, or the world in general (see chapter 3.4), a division of social space that not only corresponds with the division of gender but actualizes and continues it as a spatial division. *Baire* – associated with the streets, parks, markets, restaurants and bars - is, if not off bound, considered at least as an ambiguous and dangerous place for women to dwell, especially in the evening. This sometimes translates in dividing spaces for women's security and comfort, such as the strict separation of male and female sections in Kolkata's metro and buses where women sit on the left side of the bus and men on the right side. Or it translates into verbal condemnations of all too free behaviour in 'public', such as smoking cigarettes while walking on the pavement. The city is however not equally divided in an inside and an outside; a street like Kalighatroad, leading towards Kalighat temple, differs from an area such as the surroundings of Academy of Fine Arts where smoking of cigarettes by women will not cause much consternation. The performance described above is therefore not only a performance of binding and cutting hair that communicates a message against family expectations, but also concerns the mere presence of women on Kalighatroad, sitting in the street, smoking a cigarette, or defying sartorial convention by wearing clothes that show the shoulders. Not just the performance, but also the presence of the performers, men and women together, is a political act by which the artists claim the city as a space for women as well.

### 5.3 Matter out of place

In 2015 Taufik did a performance titled “OSCILLATION” at the Performance Festival “Der Längste Tag / The Longest Day” in Zürich. The organizers of “The Longest Day”, Irene Müller and Dorothea Rust, performed in KIPAF 2014 and Taufik subsequently was invited to perform in Zürich.<sup>47</sup> Some minutes before Taufik’s performance I assisted him in folding a stack of printed text on A4 and helped to adjust his sari that he wore during the performance. He started the performance, walking from the exit of the main venue towards a low wooden bench on the other side of the street. While walking he dropped 10 to 15 of the printed texts on the street, while some others were distributed in the audience. He placed two plastic bowls on the opposite sides of the street. Carrying a bucket with water he started walking back and forth crossing the street between the bowls, occasionally adjusting his sari. He walked with a slow intensity and concentration and it seemed to me that he was walking slower and slower. At both sides of the street he made his feet wet by standing in a bowl. He stood still in the bowls of water for a few seconds before returning to the other point. At the side of the bench, while standing in the bowl, he used a brush, the water from the bucket, and a red liquid to paint words on the wooden bench.

“That’s called *alta*”, he told me when I asked him about the red liquid when he visited me in Heidelberg after “*The Longest Day*”, “it’s a very old material used by household women, usually it’s a red colour that women put under their feet, the married women I think”. Before the performance Taufik told me he hoped the sun would shine, so that the *alta* could dry up in the sun, otherwise he had to think of something else. It started to rain though, not hard, but enough for people to unfold their umbrellas, for my notebook to get wet, and for the texts written on the wet bench to fade away. Nevertheless, he wrote: “Hunger is a political word”. He walked back to the other side, and returned to the bench again writing: “Water is a political word”. He repeated this ‘oscillation’ several times, changing the ways he held the bucket, and wrote “From Sharmila is a political word”, “Air is a political word”, “pollution is a political word” and more.

Taufik’s printed leaflet gives some insights into the performance; it discusses a range of topics, jumping from one topic to the other, such as the sari in India, the play *Red Oleanders* by Rabindranath Tagore, the problems he encountered acquiring a visa for his travels, islamophobia, a childhood memory, and the medieval Bengali story of *Manasa*. Below two fragments of the hand-out:

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<sup>47</sup> I met Irene Müller and Dorothea Rust in Kolkata at KIPAF and I was invited to attend the *The Longest Day* as an observer and shared my thoughts at a roundtable discussion the day after the festival.

A walk anyway is interesting to me. Ephemeral footprints and the east-west oscillation. So I was pondering over that old issue of what to do as a performer this time, and the other necessities regarding travel started to take toll. It was those well-known complicacies of getting visa and changing your flight tickets accordingly and waiting for the amount of the cancelled ticket to reach account etc. etc. These are practical points. But pragmatism often overlooks certain funny sides of a situation that is majorly political in context. The world will go on spinning on her toes towards and through this strange intervention of the human race in an era of “one globe”. We see capital and capitalism, often crony spread over horizons and borders. And we have seen labor and environment put to confinement of compartments, fragmented alienated from a peaceful living, human beings floating with nowhere to put feet and no border open to enter. Artists will come and artists will go.

One of my earliest memories of my mother is that she put down the storybook she had been reading to fetch the water supplied by the corporation at a fixed time of the day. My mother had to pull water from the courtyard to our kitchen and washrooms upstairs. For many this journey in need of water is far more lengthy and problematic. I try to speak about the struggles of the human beings, their labor and love for beauty. I try to humbly recall the person who in protest of state oppression refuses to eat or drink for over 500 weeks now. In the middle-age Bengali text of *Manasa-mangala* we see a young lady go on a voyage to the gods with the dead body of her newly-wed husband to revive him to life. At times I feel that our life is a journey with a dying culture, a slowly exhausting suicidal civilization. Only that who is the gods anyway? Everything is finally footprints of water on earth, breath of fire in the air. We are what we do with the moments we get.

In chapter 3 I have stressed the importance of travel for *contemporary* artists. Pascal Gielen argues that the nomadic lifestyle of art players such as critics, curators and artists is not only a requirement for success in the *contemporary* art scene (see 3.3), but that it is part of a discourse consisting of words such as ‘rhizomatic’, ‘global drift’, ‘dislocated’, ‘diaspora’, ‘unbelonging’, ‘connectivity’, ‘networks’, ‘deterritorialization’, ‘exodus’, and ‘cosmopolitanism’ (Gielen 2013, 18). Such language caters to an ‘international public’, that is, a public that is mobile and is accustomed to at least inter-city, but usually, international travel. Not only are such words markers of *contemporary* art, they also signify mobility. As I have argued in chapter 2.2, these words, including prefixes such as “para-”, “proto-”, “post-”, “trans-”, and “hyper-” are part of a ritual language, also referred to as IAE (International Art English). One of the effects of this semi-comprehensible language is that it advances the spatiotemporal transformation of artists and the artworks.<sup>48</sup> These words create an imaginative elsewhere beyond national or regional

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<sup>48</sup> In chapter 2.2 I have written about International Art English (IAE), a term introduced by Rule and Levine to denote an art language that uses a particular jargon in press releases and other art texts accompanying the exhibition of artworks (Rule and Levine 2019). Elaborating on the work by Rule and

borders and, by association, the artists and artworks are ‘deterritorialized’ as well, placed on a threshold ready to travel. Such texts might highlight the ‘local origin’ of the artist. Yet, an emphasis on locality is usually accompanied by words of mobility pointing away from this local origin, thereby presenting a model, a direction, for the spatiotemporal transformation of artists and artworks. By connecting artworks with an artist biography and embedding the works within a language that points to an elsewhere beyond the here and now, such art texts sets the scene for the potential circulation of the artworks.

Such IAE keywords of mobility are missing in Taufik’s text. Instead Taufik writes about the practical problems he encountered travelling. His text is a personal account, threads of thought loosely woven together; it does not use the jargon of IAE, neither does it classify his work within an artistic tradition; it goes against the conventional guidelines by which artworks and artists are described and labelled. The text is therefore unprofessional, expressing both an inability and unwillingness to use IAE, and thus a subtle criticism of the professionalization of art. But, even if Taufik’s text does not use IAE, it does place his performance within an interpretative framework, as all texts do. Because of their symbolic quality, words can accomplish a transition in which physical acts, objects and substances that point to the here and now are placed within a canonical order, even if these words seem to be ‘mere objective descriptions’ of the artworks (see 2.2 – 2.4). For example, Taufik’s reference to “the person who in protest of state oppression refuses to eat or drink for over 500 weeks” concerns the civil rights activist Irom Sharmila.<sup>49</sup> Taufik’s work can thus be interpreted as a political protest in support of Irom Sharmila’s fight against injustice, thereby creating a relation between his performance, seemingly devoid of symbolic meaning, and a particular moral order. Yet, reading the text, the work does not become about Irom Sharmila; because Taufik’s text jumps from one topic to the other the reader will have difficulties to pin down what the artwork ‘stands for’.

Next to his personal meandering writing style Taufik did something else that frustrates interpretation. By dropping the texts on the street, Taufik makes his writing part of the performance, rather than an outside text that frames the performance. Like Sanchayan writing

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Levine and anthropological analyses of ritual language I argued that by using abstract and esoteric words this ritual language of *contemporary* art creates, first, a participatory environment that some recognize and others feel estranged from, second, emphasizes and to some extent retains the ambiguity of art and thereby copes with the epistemological gap between material artworks and words, and third, places the physical objects and acts of art, that which is part of the here and now, in a verbal context that refers to a time and place beyond the here and now (See chapter 2.4). Although ritual language can be used to connect a ritual object or act both to a (mythical) past and a (mythical) future, IAE mainly uses words that evoke an imagined future elsewhere.

<sup>49</sup> Irom Chanu Sharmila is a civil rights activist and poet from the Northeastern State of Manipur. In 2000 she began a hunger strike in defiance of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (1958) that applies to the seven states of Northeast India. She ended the fast in 2016. See for example Mehrotra, Deepti Priya (2009): *Burning Bright: Irom Sharmila and the Struggle for Peace in Manipur*. Penguin Books India

red texts on the wall in the red-lit room of Experimenter Gallery (see chapter 4), Taufik frustrates the possibility of interpretation and classification by throwing the texts on the wet ground. During the performance some people picked up the a4 texts, some read the text, or part of it, leaving them on the ground, and some ignored them altogether, leaving the printed words to fade in the rain. At the end of the performance Taufik dipped the brush in the bucket, turning the water in the bucket slowly red, and wrote, “forgetting is a political word”.

Taufik’s performance is, in accordance with his ideas of performance art, unrehearsed and he incorporates unforeseen events, such as the rain, in his performance. The fading of the words in the rain was not planned, but taken up as a conscious element in his similar performance at Jadavpur in South Kolkata on the last day of KIPAF 2017 titled *Water is a political word*. This performance, which I did not attend myself but analysed from its recordings,<sup>50</sup> took place in front of Jadavpur University. Taufik put on a red sari and carefully combed his shoulder length long hair. Uma helped him adjust his sari and painted the bottoms of his feet with *alta*. Barefooted Taufik walked on the busy pavement, holding a plastic bowl and a bucket containing water, surrounded by participants of KIPAF, some of them taking photographs and filming. Taufik placed two bowls of water on both sides of the street and – assisted by other performers – made two approximately 30cm thick lines with red crayon from one side to the other, covering the white lines painted on the tarmac that mark the pedestrian crossing. Taufik started to slowly walk on one red line from one side of the street to the other, holding the bucket, disregarding the red traffic light and manoeuvring carefully between the oncoming honking traffic. At both sides of the street he made his feet wet by standing in the bowl so that the *alta* on his feet, the water in the bowl, and the red coloured line blended. Every time he arrived at the opposite side he dipped a toothbrush in the red-stained water from the bucket and quickly wrote on the tarmac. He wrote, “water is a political word”, and walking back and forth across the street repeatedly wrote other words in Bangla and English; what, I don’t know. In the video the words

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<sup>50</sup> I did not attend this performance myself, but there is a video of the performance made by *Kaahon*. As I have already pointed out in my writings on method (see Introduction), I have focused most of my analysis on works of art that I have seen during fieldwork, yet I discuss some works that were performed or exhibited outside my fieldwork period. As this case shows, artworks can resonate with other works over time, using documented material of artworks can help to give a broader view of art practices than a fieldwork experience based on participant observation could provide. But there is another reason for relying on recordings. I have attempted to adopt a stance, during my fieldwork and in my analysis of the material that does not focus solely on the artwork, but on that which surrounds the artwork as well; a method that coincides with the PI’s view of performance as well. I could have made some videos of PI’s performances, but instead often I took a step back and tried to broaden my gaze. This broadening helped me to keep an eye open for that which is usually not regarded to be part of the performance, such as the audience that looks at the work, and for that what occurs before and after a performance; a view from the side instead of a frontal view focused on ‘the artwork’. Yet this broadening of the gaze made it sometimes difficult to describe the work afterwards. I fall partially back on recordings because they give a focused view of performances that are otherwise too spread-out to be caught in a detailed description. The selecting and framing of a work through recordings, such as video or photo, make descriptions of the work easier; visual and verbal processes of selection and interpretation thus work hand in hand.

are barely visible, but also being there it must have been difficult to read them as Taufik hurriedly wrote them before the cars came and as the tyres constantly erased the words.

There are some important differences between the performances. In Zurich he did not apply *alta* to his feet and there was no red line drawn across the street. In Kolkata he did not have printed texts. In Kolkata he wrote words on the tarmac in both English and Banlga, in Zurich he wrote the words on a bench, only in English. And in Kolkata other artists were helping him to draw the red lines and two performers painted their hand red and held them up towards the oncoming traffic, whereas in Zurich there was a sharper separation between the performance and the audience.



Figure 5.1

Taufik's *OSCILATION* in Zurich and his *Water is a political word* Kolkata. Up: left: in Zurich, Taufik drops his texts (photographer: Thomas Zirlewagen, Zurich); middle: the red line at Jadavpur Kolkata; right: Taufik writes on the bench with *alta* in Zurich (photographer: Thomas Zirlewagen, Zurich); Down: left: Taufik walks with the bucket in Zurich (photographer: Thomas Zirlewagen, Zurich); right: at Jadavpur with "water is a political word" written on the tarmac.

Furthermore, the surroundings are different. Whereas the street in Zurich crossed by Taufik, where most of the performances were held, borders on the *Labyrinth Platz*, a quiet park in the city centre of Zürich, the street in Kolkata is an important junction in South Kolkata with busy traffic. Whereas in Zürich the painted words were washed away in the rain, in Kolkata the chances of rain are slim in January; instead, the tires of auto rickshaws, buses, taxis, private cars and motorcycles spread out the red dye across the tarmac and erased the words written a moment before. In both performances Taufik wore a sari, soft pink, green and purple in Zurich, and bright red in Kolkata. Taufik told me that its harder to wear a sari, as a man, in Kolkata, but also harder to make a point wearing a sari in Zurich. The change in contexts, whether environmental, political, or social, of at first sight two similar performances changes the performance drastically; the surroundings of the performances do not merely form a backdrop, but take part of the artwork itself.

It has been my argument throughout the thesis that an anthropological analysis of art involves asking the questions *where* and *when* artworks take place, rather than merely trying to answer the question *what* the artwork is. Following that logic it would make sense, and be interesting, to focus on a comparison between the two sites and for example at the interpretations of the two performances by the different Swiss and Indian audiences. However, in this case I was more drawn to what was performed and I will focus on the elements that both performances have in common – Taufik’s use of the sari, his pendulum movement walking back and forth across the street, and especially his use of *alta*.

More than simply a decoration of the feet and sometimes hands, *alta* marks a woman’s belonging to the home and is seen as a symbol of prosperity and fertility (Uuksulainen 2013, 89). It is used to perform a post-wedding ceremony in which the bride enters her in-laws home for the first time. Before entering the new house, often the house of her in-laws, the bride steps into *alta* and then walks inside the home, leaving a trail of her footsteps. This trail indicates that the Goddess Lakshmi in the form of the bride has now entered the home. Applying *alta* to his feet Taufik seems to enact an inversion of a regular societal order; by using *alta* as a man in a public space, *bairi* instead of *ghare*, Taufik transgresses the societal spatial boundaries of gender. The text in *Oscillation* begins as follows: “When I wear a sari I don’t do so to be a woman. I do so because I have deep affinities and love for sari and I think I see it politically as well. In classical and folk practices usually a man dresses like a woman to act like a woman. For me it is nothing like that. I wear a sari as a man”. Taufik does not transgress the boundary of gender himself, by ‘dressing-up’ like a woman, but instead by wearing a sari as a man, applying *alta* to his feet,

and subsequently crossing a boundary, literally a boundary with a red traffic light, Taufik enacts a transgression of gendered division between *ghare* and *baire*.<sup>51</sup>

Yet, this is only one possible interpretation. Although *alta* might generally refer to femininity, it carries a variety of connotations and uses in Bengal, also considering its connection with *sindoor*,<sup>52</sup> and does not give way to a single explanation; like the milk tree of the Ndembu described by Victor Turner (see chapter 2.6), *alta* can be called a multivocal symbol.<sup>53</sup> By extension, the use of *alta* by Taufik in his performance does not lead to a precise interpretation and remains, at least to some extent, ambiguous. My first connotation when seeing the performance in Zurich was its resemblance to blood; only later I realized there is a much wider variety of uses and possible meanings. It might be associated with blood, or with the footprints of Lakshmi and the place of women as part of the household, but PI members also use it as colour in their street paintings where it does not have such connotations. Taufik himself does not pinpoint an exact meaning to *alta*; it is first of all, he says, a cheap colour, locally available and bright. What is more, *alta* does not last long and easily gives off to other surfaces and dissolves with water. It can be easily applied and easily erased. It is this quality, bright yet fleeting, that makes *alta* a substance of perceptual ambiguity – an ambiguity that concerns a perceptual tension of a particular form or material (see chapter 2.6). *Alta*'s bright colour is easily erased with water and smudged by the dust of the road, bringing forth a perceptual tension between bright and smudged that, within Bengali society, corresponds to a moral opposition of unblemished and tainted and the spheres of *ghare* and *baire*. Instead of an association with one thing or another, it is this ambiguous quality of *alta* that makes it a central substance in some of Taufik's performances.

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<sup>51</sup> Also in Bengali literature one can find mentions of *alta* when the crossings of boundaries are concerned. In Bibhutibhushan Banerji's *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Road), Durga - the older sister of Opu, the main protagonist - constantly crosses the boundaries of various compounds and orchards in her village in search for fruit, playing and roaming around. Her mother Shorbojoya is worried whether Durga will ever find a husband when she grows older. On one such occasion, on the day of the festival of the holy pond (*Puniypukur brata*, a ritual vow practiced by women for the wellbeing of a brother), Durga returns home after collecting fruit: "Her face was sunburnt, her hair tangled and untidy, and her feet were thick with dust; but in spite of the dust she had painted the edges of her feet red with *alta* dye. Shorbojoya, scolds her " (...) 'look at the condition you're in. Your skin is dry and you are covered in dust. And as for your hair, it makes me sick to look at it.'" (1971, p88). Bibhutibhushan Banerji uses *alta* as a metaphor in his novel - which is mainly about Opu's travel into the world - to express Durga's ambiguous position; Durga is reaching an age in which she should prepare for her homely duties as a future wife but she is still playing around and neglecting the duties of the home. Durga is interested in her mother's *alta* but she is still going around and getting dust on her feet, thereby spoiling the *alta*. *Pather Panchali* (1929) by Bibhutibhushan Banerji, translated by T.W. Clark and Tarapada Mukherji. The Folio Society. London 1971.

<sup>52</sup> A vermilion red powder usually used by married women in India applied on the parting of the hair.

<sup>53</sup> Aside the bridal ceremony and use inside the house *alta* is used by women dancers on their feet, and generally is associated with femininity. See A. Chatterjea (2009) *Red-Stained Feet: Probing the Ground on which Women Dance in Contemporary Bengal*. In *Worlding Dance*. Furthermore, it is thought to heal *haja*, a fungal infection that results from working in moist or watery areas (Churni Bhaumik, personal communication) and said to have a "cooling effect and increases happiness" (Tagore, A., & Tagore, G. 2018).



By adorning his feet with *alta* and walking outside, thereby smudging the bright red colour with every step he takes crossing the road, taking matter out of place, Taufik transgresses the separation of *ghare* and *baire*. But he also uses *alta*'s bright yet fleeting quality in another way. Taufik's writings and his footsteps on the tarmac with *alta* is soon after erased by the tires of the oncoming cars, making it difficult for the onlookers to read the words. Although some words could be read, others vanished before one could read them. This act can be interpreted in various ways; it can for example be read as a metaphor for forgetting societal injustice, but it can also be seen as an act that plays with the dynamic of comprehension and incomprehension of the ritual cycle of *contemporary* art.

As I have argued in chapter 2, when artworks are interpreted, classified, and preserved, when they become part and parcel of a canonical order, artworks become less ambiguous. After this movement towards a canonical order, the ritual makes a turn again towards a state of relative incomprehension through the act of making a new work of art that restarts the ritual cycle.<sup>54</sup> Using words within or in the vicinity of an artwork at the stage of making a new work can be beneficial as they suggest the work's connection with something that transcends the here and now, yet it also threatens the ritual dynamic as the artwork at this stage should embody the here and now and be without symbolic meaning. Using words at this stage therefore requires an accompanying act or a way of using words that ameliorates this risk. Taufik suggests meaning in his acts of writing, but by letting the words disappear in the rain or letting them be erased by the tires of cars, Taufik frustrates attempts at comprehension. Performing something meaningful without a clear-cut meaning, Taufik creates something new that invites interpretations.

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<sup>54</sup> See 2.9 for a summary of the ritual cycle of *contemporary* art.

#### 5.4 Nonsense

Taufik distinguishes his performance art from performance art that encourages a direct relation with ‘reality’: “I had this difference with Indar Salim”<sup>55</sup>, Taufik says “because they [Salim and likeminded] are of the opinion that in performance, things should be real, like blood should be blood, like that, you can’t fake in performance art (...) I never had this opinion that this is like that, because I took it as an open medium of art and expression.” PI’s performers usually feel free to use any kind of materials, a strategy that can be seen as opposite to *Third Theatre’s* strategy of stripping away certain forms, such as theatre props, as well. Rather than avoiding certain forms in a way to liberate performance from theatre practices, or only using that which is considered ‘real’, the performers of PI expand their performances to a situation where anything could happen, try to avoid strict rules, and search for a multiplicity of forms.

In this search for an “open medium of art and expression” where anything goes, PI finds inspiration in the Bengali tradition of ‘nonsense verse’. Taufik’s interest in nonsense is evident in his admiration for the nonsense verse by poet, short story writer, playwright, and editor Sukumar Ray (1887-1923). Taufik did a performance based on Sukumar Ray’s *Abol Tabol* some years ago, and in his writings, such as the *Shunnostan* booklet and PI’s curatorial notes, Ray’s verses are frequently quoted. Sukumar Ray, father of filmmaker Satyajit Ray, was an unique author within the Bengali literary landscape who’s neologisms and personages have been absorbed in the collective Bengali imagination and have become part of everyday Bangla (Lorea 2008, 7), and his work forms an essential part of the wider tradition of Indian nonsense literature (Heyman 2007).

Nonsense verse, Michael Heyman writes in *The Tenth Rasa: An Anthology of Indian Nonsense* (2007), “emerges from an excess of sense rather than a lack of it” (Heyman 2007, xxiv). It does not convey an absence of meaning but rather balances, as Wim Tigges writes in an *Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, “a multiplicity of meaning with a simultaneous absence of meaning” (Tigges 1988, 255). This multiplicity of meaning is not a complete confusion of meaning, something that makes no sense at all. It is, Heyman writes: “important to recognize that nonsense operates not by ignoring the rules of sense but by subversively playing with them—stretching, squeezing, flipping upside down, yet, in the end, still depending on their existence” (Heyman 2007, xxiv). It is “a particular kind of play, one that is not pure exuberance, not unrestrained joy, and above all, not gibberish (although these are often elements of it). Rather, it is an art form rooted in sophisticated aesthetics, linguistics and [structured] play with logic” (Ibid. xx-xxi). Literary

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<sup>55</sup> A well-known performance artist, living in Delhi.

nonsense exhibits, Poushali Bhadury writes, “a fine balance between sense and nonsense”, it occupies “a liminal position between meaning and non-meaning, and it is this quality of unpredictable ‘in-between-ness’ that is the chief source of the surprise and the delight they occasion” (Bhadury 2013, 13).

There are two related aspects of Ray’s nonsense that PI elaborates on: its whimsical character and its political criticism. Ray coined the term *kheyal-rawsh* (the spirit of whimsy). His whimsical nonsense verse was meant primarily for children. In many verses Ray, who graduated in chemistry and physics, plays similar to Lewis Carroll, with lessons of grammar, maths, and biology.<sup>56</sup> As Lorea writes in *Sukumar Ray e la Letteratura Nonsense* (2008) Ray’s comic play with things that children find most annoying, such as schoolteachers, grammar and fractions, sides with children and their fondness for talking nonsense, for absurdity and fantasy (Lorea 2008, 25). Taufik has translated Ray’s verse *Kichudi* in *Shunnostan*, below the first couplet:<sup>57</sup>

Disobeying the grammar  
The Duck & the Porcupine  
Made up their mind  
To form the Ducupine!

*Khichudi* presents the reader with a variety of beasts combined out of two animals, such as the whalephant (whale and elephant) and the stortoise (stork and tortoise). These hybrid beasts, where the animal that provides the head becomes the dominant part, are not merely funny absurd creatures but have, as Bhadury observes, political undertones as well. Especially in Ray’s drawings of the beasts he describes in his verse, these hybrid creatures express “feelings of being unsettled and out of place” (Bhadury 2013, 19). Bhadury argues that Ray, a colonial subject, created what Bhabha calls an “inbetween space”; a “Third Space of enunciation” based not on exoticism or the diversity of cultures, but on the “inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*” (Bhabha 1994, 38; Bhadury 2013, 17).<sup>58</sup> These political undertones in Ray’s Nonsense

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<sup>56</sup> Both Taufik’s uncle and younger brother are chemists as well.

<sup>57</sup> *Kichudi* is a Bengali dish, a ‘*hotch-potch*’ or *mish-mash*.

<sup>58</sup> Heyman compares Ray’s nonsense with Michael Bakhtin’s description of the “carnavalesque”. In his book *Rabelais and His World* (1984) Bakhtin defines the carnival as a “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (Bakhtin 1984, 10). There are certainly parallels between Ray’s nonsense and the European carnival described by Bakhtin; both use strategies of mocking, reversals, and hybridity. Yet there are important differences as well. As Stallybrass and White point out in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), Carnival’s rites of reversal were often intended to preserve and strengthen the established order: “they removed the stopper to stop the bottle being smashed altogether” (Stallybrass and White 1986, 13). Similarly, Terry Eagleton is sceptic of

become more explicit in *Ekushey Ain* (“The Rule of Twenty-One”), in which Ray satirizes the unjust repressive policies of Colonial rule.<sup>59</sup> Below a translation by Taufik of two couplets:

In the native lands of Shiva the lord  
The laws and orders are certainly odd  
If you slip or trip by chance  
The cops will pounce and jump at once  
To take you to court and make you pay  
Twenty One rupees of fine, good day!

Taufik, who quoted this verse in both *Shunnostan* and KIPAF’s curatorial note, is inspired by Ray’s political satire and uses it to address the inequality and arbitrariness of political rule in contemporary India. In their curatorial note of KIPAF 2014 PI wrote: “Apart from politics, performance arts has been one of the very few remaining spaces for serious nonsense. It is believed that nonsense bypasses our sense and opens up windows outside our social conditioning”. Yet, PI’s nonsense operates in a very different political context. As Bhadury writes, Ray’s criticism of colonial society is oblique, hidden in the guise of children’s literature, populated by imaginary personages and thereby bypassing the censorship of the British authorities (Bhadury 2013, 26-27).<sup>60</sup> This is very different from the current political context where PI can perform in public spaces without much restriction by the authorities.

As PI can address perceived societal wrongs much more easily the line between performance and protest easily blurs. During KIPAF 2015 and 2016 I occasionally made a round asking bystanders what was going on.<sup>61</sup> Many said it was street theatre, but several times people told me it was part of a student protest. The performances of KIPAF were not student protests, but the proximity between student protests and PI’s performances makes the mix-up by the serendipitous publics of KIPAF understandable. In September 2014 a series of student protests started under the name of *Hok Kolorob*, literally ‘let there be clamor’. After the molestation of a

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Bakhtin’s positive embrace of carnival and sees it as “a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony”, (...) “ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art” (Eagleton 1981, 148). Sukumar Ray’s subtle criticism of colonial rule disguised in ‘innocent’ children’s literary publications does not fit the mould of the European festival of exuberance and reversal prior to the time of abstinence during the fasting period of Lent.

<sup>59</sup> See Supriya Goswami *Colonial India in Children’s Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

<sup>60</sup> On returning from England, S. Ray became an indispensable part of *Sandesh*, the children’s literary magazine founded by Sukumar’s father Upendrakishore Ray in May 1913 and whose publication and editorship fell into Sukumar’s hands after his father’s death in 1915. Most of Sukumar’s nonsense prose and verse first appeared in *Sandesh* before being collected posthumously in *Abol Tabol* (1923) (Bhadury 2013, 16).

<sup>61</sup> Usually presenting myself as an uncomprehending bystander, which was not far from the truth.

female student at the Jadavpur University (JU) campus in August 2014 students gathered together to demand an investigation by the university administration; a peaceful protest that was crushed by a severe police intervention. The public outrage that followed turned the JU student protest into a wider protest movement against sexual violence, police brutality and the sitting Trinomial Government, culminating in a march of 100.000 protesters (Dey 2019).<sup>62</sup> The protests of *Hok Kolorob* were accompanied by a range of creative expressions such as graffiti, posters, poetry, songs, street paintings and performance art, which lead to a broad range of 'street art' or 'protest art' by a group called *Aabra'ca'dabra (A'ca'D)*. *A'ca'D* was inspired by the performance art of PI and the two groups worked together to give A'ca'D concrete shape. Taufik's performances, such as *Water is a political word*, in front of JU can be seen as an unambiguous political act due to the location associated with political protests and the transgression of conventional behaviour in a public space. However, even though Taufik joined the protests and expressed his solidarity to the *Hok Kolorob* movement, Taufik distances his performance practice from *Hok Kolorob* as he tries to steer away from a direct political purpose.

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<sup>62</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the movement see: Dey, S. (2019). *Let There Be Clamor: Exploring the Emergence of a New Public Sphere in India and Use of Social Media as an Instrument of Activism*. Journal of Communication Inquiry.

### 5.5 On the same plane of empathy

In addition to PI's strategies of unprofessionalism, their reluctance to create a manifesto, their use of ambiguous performance materials such as *alta*, and their affinity with nonsense, PI creates situations of uncertainty or confusion by disturbing the temporal sequence and widening the spatial circumference of performances. Like the artists of *Khoj Kolkata* or Sanchayan Ghosh (see chapter 3 and 4), PI attempts to break away from the spatial and temporal boundaries of 'an artwork' or 'a performance piece'; as Anirban Sarkar told me: "we want to break out of the boundaries of space and time". But, different mediums ask for different strategies.

A central element in the performances at KIPAF concerns the dissolution between performers and audience. To accomplish this dissolution performers actively include the audience during performances. This can happen in many ways. Performers might, for example, go around with a plate of food; also if you choose not to eat what is offered, you become, through negation, part of the performance. In a performance during KIPAF Stefanie Knobel outlined the shadows of people standing in the public with a piece of chalk, thereby making somewhat hesitant onlookers part of the performance; the people whose shadow was 'caught' usually did not dare to move much, and if they moved slightly, the artist quickly adjusted her drawings. Another performance artist from Switzerland, going by the name of Mirzlekid, performed at Chander Haat during KIPAF. With a glue gun he produced a thin thread that could stretch several meters and stuck to the clothes and skins of bystanders. Walking around small groups of people, guiding the line around shoulders, arms and legs, he connected approximately 40 bystanders who looked at the performance. Whereas at first onlookers were walking around freely, when caught they did not dare to move afraid to break the fragile yet sturdy line of glue.



Figure 5.2

Swiss performance artist Stefanie Knobel tracing the cast shadows of curious onlookers at KIPAF at the square behind Victoria Memorial Hall.

Next to such spatial strategies that dissolve the boundaries between performers and audiences, there are temporal strategies that undo a strict demarcation of a 'performance piece'. During KIPAF I found that it is often unclear when a performance starts and when it ends, the duration

of the performances of KIPAF was often unpredictable and performances often lacked a clear narrative arc with a beginning, a middle part, and endpoint. Mirzlekid's performance, like many other performances, was not announced; people were walking around in the courtyard of Chander Haat drinking tea and all of a sudden, they became part of a performance.

However, many of the invited performance artists at KIPAF, both from India and abroad, did frame their performance more clearly, rehearsed for their performance, set the stage in advance and announced the start of their performance to the public. I pointed out this difference in performance frames to members of PI, and although they acknowledged this difference they did not worry too much about it. Anirban: "we talk about our vision with other artists, but if other artists want to make a performance in a particular way that is fine". Yet this difference also led to miscommunication. At Chander Haat during KIPAF performances were announced on a sheet of paper. Although the handwritten schedule changed several times, it did at least suggest that the performers had individual time slots. But, often while one performance was still going on, another performer started, thereby splitting the audience's attention.

What is more, the members of PI often seemed unconcerned with particular performances, looking at a performance shortly, walking by, doing other things, eating, chatting, talking on the phone. The apparent inattention to individual performances was partly due to an intentional disturbance of the sequential order of performances, but was perceived by some as incompetent organization or as indifference. Misunderstandings and a perceived sense of chaos during KIPAF are not only a result of an intended and unintended unprofessionalism, as I have described above, but also the result of two different and competing temporal forms of performance art. Whereas some onlookers and performers expect a sequential performance, one that evolves through time in a certain order, many of the performances at KIPAF do not hold on to a clear temporal sequence.

For Taufik the temporal aspect is not important and says that he sees performance art as a spatial art: "A performer [of performance art] ideally shouldn't be disturbed by any odd action in a particular space", Taufik says in an interview with *Kaahon*. A phone ringing in the audience of the theatre disturbs, the actor gets out of his character and asks to switch off the phone (something that happens quite often in Kolkata theatres). In the case of performance art, however, the performer is looking forward to such incidents, Taufik says. Anything that happens in the circumference of a performance, including both "animate and inanimate bodies", can become part of the performance: "In theatre it's commonly known as prop. We don't call it prop. Like objects my body is a kind of material for me. Chinese painters had this notion that the paintbrush is the extension of the arm and so is the canvas and the paint. It's all the same thing."

Many places where the performances of PI are held are busy and unpredictable; the performers of PI usually look for places where disturbances occur all the time.<sup>63</sup> Even though some venues at KIPAF are relatively zoned-off from the hustle-bustle of the streets, such as Ghosh Bari, TENT, Studio21, or Chander Haat, many performers walk out of these protected places during a performance, onto the street, surprising pedestrians and shopkeepers. These changed surroundings become subsequently part of the performances, according to Taufik: “When I am on the road, whether it is a street dog or a passer-by with whom only a glance is exchanged, or a brick, my body is on the same plane of empathy. So moving one of the pieces, or someone walking by is what gives the rhythm to this entire image. So my performance is inclusive of all that”. The space surrounding the performance is thus not merely a background of the performance, but becomes part of it. The size of the performance area, the spatial circumference can change and depends on the viewpoint of the onlooker as well, as Churni Bhaumik points out - who is not part of PI but has visited several performances. It can be said to converge towards the performer, the closer you are to the performer the more you are part of the performance, yet this space also has a certain elasticity: “When I feel a bit shy and do not feel to be part of it I might go a bit further, I might have a cup of tea, at a place where I can still see the performance, but won’t feel I have to participate. But then again, when I throw the cup of tea towards Taufik, I will be part of the performance”.

Taufik contrasts painting with the performing arts and music: “In Performing Arts or music, one can quantify the experience in time, approximately, but not in painting. No one says it’s a five or ten minutes or two hours long painting. So time is not really such an active component. I felt the same thing about performance art. It has certain characteristics of visual art and [is] not like [the other] performing arts. I personally believe that in performance art only space exists”. In his book *Art and Visual Perception* (1954) Rudolph Arnheim recollects a discussion between two students, one a painter, the other a musician: “The painter said: ‘I cannot understand how you can keep the parts of a piece of music together since they are never given to you at the same time!’ The musician assured him that this was not much of a difficulty, but, he said, ‘what I don’t understand is how you find your way in a painting, not knowing where to start and where to end, nor where to turn next at any point!’” (Arnheim 1954, 375). All things are located in time; a public sculpture, under influence of rain and air pollution, changes through time, it has a life of its own. Yet, as Arnheim observes, psychologically, a statue is outside of time. Relative to the surrounding pedestrians, cars, and crows, the statue is perceived as static (Ibid. 373). The difference between a performance and an object is not that a

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<sup>63</sup> Some of the venues for KIPAF are better zoned off; it is especially the performances held throughout the year where the performers go to busy street corners, markets, and train stations.



performance involves the experience of passing time whereas an object does not. Rather, the difference concerns the sequence of events; during a performance, what Arhneim terms a happening, “we witness an organized sequence in which phases follow one another in a meaningful one-dimensional order” (Ibid.), whereas with a painting or sculpture the observer scans the various areas in succession “because neither the eye nor the mind is capable of taking in everything simultaneously, but the order in which the exploration occurs does not matter” (Ibid. 376).

It is in this sense that PI’s performances come closer to art objects such as paintings or sculptures. The performances of PI do happen in time, but they do not always have a clear sequential order. As Arhneim says, “when the event is disorganized or incomprehensible, the sequence breaks down into a mere succession” (Ibid. 375). In the majority of cases, Taufik says “the beginning and end of a performance by an artist is always marked by an ambiguity. It’s a blurred zone.”<sup>64</sup> This does not mean that the performances of PI are the same as paintings, but that a clear distinction between the visual arts and performative arts cannot be made. There are narrative paintings that must be ‘read’ in a prescribed sequence, such as the Bengali *pats*, and there are performative events that are not sequential, such as waltz in a ballroom (Ibid. 375-376). The performances of PI can be situated somewhere in the middle as well. The performances do not completely eliminate temporal sequence; there is still a perceivable succession of events in time that contains a sequential order. Even though the beginning and endings are blurred, the performances retain to some extent a beginning and an end, and therefore a middle part as well. Yet the performances enact a move away from a strict temporal sequence, a beginning and an end, towards a spatially distributed work of art. By pulling the performance arts more towards a spatial exposition and less into a temporal frame, PI confuses the expectation among spectators - myself included - to watch a performance from the beginning to the end. By frustrating such expectations and deforming the sequential order of performance art, PI breaks with conventions, breaks with the temporal frames of works of performance art, and creates something that is ambiguous, chaotic, sometimes misunderstood, and new.

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<sup>64</sup> Kaahon interview.

## 5.6 Failures and crystallizations

Despite PI's efforts to steer away from forming a bounded community of performers and despite their efforts to create a form of art where anything can happen, that is open and without rules, they are not immune to processes of crystallization. I use crystallization here as a metaphor and umbrella term for the processes of the ritual cycle of *contemporary* art in which artworks are separated from the here and now, become part and parcel of an unquestionable canonical order, and undergo a range of spatiotemporal transformations that might lead to the sacralisation of artists and artworks. Crystallization encompasses both the classification of artworks into distinct categories and styles of art, and the interrelated objectification and institutionalization of ambiguous works of art that might be unstable, ephemeral and fragmented into identifiable artworks that are selected, described, preserved, circulated, archived and re-exhibited – a ritual movement from incomprehension to comprehension (see 2.9).

Crystallization indicates a process that works not only top-down but also bottom-up: works are not only classified by, for example, the museum, but works 'classify themselves' as well according to their mutual differences and similarities; they acquire meaning with respect to each other. Although I do not want to equate these human ritual processes with natural physical processes, I find the term crystallization useful as a metaphor to downgrade, to some extent, the importance of top-down intentional canonization of artworks. Words such as canonization and especially institutionalization and commercialization are often perceived as developments that are imposed on artworks from the outside, they seem to indicate merely an external manmade procedure that intentionally frames and classifies the artwork. Although this is partially true, it is also true, as I have argued in chapter 2, that the artwork's separation from the here and now is a result that emerges from the accumulation of artworks themselves as well; simply by putting artworks together they create relationships between each other rather than merely individually referring to something else, that is, they become symbolic signifiers *in addition* to their indexical or iconic signifying aspects (see 2.4).

The selection and collection of works does not have to occur according to an existing framework of classification, but can be a relatively haphazard gathering of works. Yet, what starts as a random accumulation of works becomes at a certain point a fertile ground for classification. The crystallization of ambiguous acts and materials into relatively stable works of art is thus not only due to the posterior classifying practices of an art historian or anthropologist, but is already instigated by a variety of gathering practices. The act of making a photograph of a performance by PI and posting it on social media can hardly be described as institutionalization, but it does

frame an unruly performance - consisting of a fragmented gathering of successive acts within an undefined spatial circumference - into something that can be collected, archived, and described.



*Figure 5.3*

Performance of Augustine Tilak at studio21 during KIPAF 2014. Anirban Sarkar and Victoria Nivedita take pictures.

Below I will sketch some processes in which the practices of PI crystallize into both expected and unexpected formations. But I will start with some insights into the failures of PI's performances to break away from established artistic conventions in the first place. A limited number of artists and teachers I met criticize PI's performances as derivative of 'the West'. Yet, to regard PI's art practices as mere echoes of something that happens elsewhere and confine their performances to the label 'western performance art' is very imprecise at best. Part of the problem is the rhetoric of influence. Whether artists are influenced, or, to use a less leading word, inspired by particular 'western' art practices, or whether these artists encounter similar straitjackets and therefore find similar solutions is difficult to untangle, especially now that artists have much more access to what happens elsewhere through internet and do not rely solely on expensive art magazines or the occasional exhibition. What is more, it is misleading to use the label 'Western' as a catchall term for everything foreign. Although Europe, the United States, Australia or Canada, generally associated with 'the West', might have a bigger pull on artists from Kolkata due to funded residency programs and festivals, the foreign artists that come to Kolkata for the festival come from many directions. 'International', for lack of a better term, would be more correct.

Strategies employed by PI are used and have been used elsewhere, whether they are temporal strategies changing the time frame of performances, closing the gap between audience and public through direct interaction and spontaneity rather than rehearsals, or concern the shift

from site-specific performances towards an engagement with communities. But simply labelling Kolkata's performance art as 'Western' or 'International' misses out on PI's entanglement with Kolkata's specific histories of theatre and art, most notably Badal Sircar's *Third Theatre*, and misses out on the connections made with the everyday environment of the performers. Although some elements in Taufik's *Water is a political word*, for example, speak to an international audience, as he wrote words both in Bangla and in English, there are other elements, such as his use of *alta*, that make connections with Bengal, with Kolkata, its social divisions, everyday habits, and religious festivals. This does not mean that certain aspects of PI's performance can be defined as 'local' and other as 'global'. Rather, the performances negotiate, reflect on, challenge, and play with the boundaries between established societal categories, whether they are between the 'local-global', '*ghare-baire*', or 'women-men'; the performances belong to the hyphen between these categories rather than one or the other. As stated in the beginning of this chapter the name PI ( $\pi$ ) itself indicates the *relation* between centre and periphery, not one or the other.

Next to the negative judgments that label PI's performances as 'Western' by some players in the field of art, PI's performers still have to mark their distance from other art practices such as dance and theatre. It is mostly when speaking with family and friends from the neighborhood, rather than players in the field of art, that they have to emphasize the separate identity of their performance art. Uma said she doesn't make a distinction between her dance and performance, yet her family and friends from the neighborhood see her as a dancer and are not interested in her performance art. Chirantan Mukhopadhyay, going by the name of Chimuk, is a performance artist and member of PI with a background in graphic design. His father and grandfather worked for an English tea company, but later his father worked for other firms as an accountant. His great-great-grandfather consciously stepped out of Zamindari (landowner) practices, Chimuk tells me, and was a translator of English into Bangla. His parents are free minded and don't mind him doing performance art, Chimuk says, but he often has to explain that what he is doing is not theater or street theater. But with his larger family, who are all engineers, doctors, lawyers, he is a bit more careful. When he would perform something involving nudity, for example, this is a problem, he says. Artistic conventions, as Howard Becker argues, play strong constraints on the artist because they do not exist in isolation, they are embodied within larger infrastructures of art making (Becker 1982, 29-30, see chapter 2.5). These conventions do not only belong to the art world, but are part of people's general expectations. Middle- or upper-class families in Kolkata, the city that reveres Tagore, are often happy to have a son or daughter to become a musician, a theatre player, dancer, poet, writer, or painter. But to do something that combines all these categories of art yet cannot be identified with one of them can create uncertainties.

But, besides such judgments and misunderstandings from the outside, the performers themselves sometimes fail to do what they set out to do. Attempts to dissolve the boundaries between audience and performers do not always succeed. Most of the people in the audience who join performances, rather than just observe, are performers themselves or friends of the performers. Although engagements with an outside public do regularly happen, I have seen many performances where onlookers keep a marked distance. There is usually no lack of curiosity when performing in public places in Kolkata. But gathered audiences often do not understand what is happening, and, especially young boys who are drawn to the performances out of curiosity often have a laugh and after some time walk away. Some performers take time to explain to people what is happening and answer their questions; yet I have also seen instances where artists get tired of questions from the public and say that they just should have a look.

One of the reasons for the failed dissolution between audience and performer is that people are used to watching street theatre or dance from a distance and conventionally form a circle around a performance, thereby creating a stage and reinstating the distance between audience and performer. But PI's performances might also distance curious onlookers due to what they perform. Several performances are unpleasant to look at and might be experienced as shocking. Many performances, as I pointed out above, involve elements of being bound or confined by something; with ropes, tape, clothes or bricks performers bind or confine themselves or other performers. Although these performances usually end by the artist being freed from his or her entrapment, the confinement and struggle to become free might be experienced as unpleasant to look at and distances at least parts of the public who are not used to the shocking and disturbing imagery of *contemporary* art practices.

Yet, there are many performances that do succeed in attracting and engaging with an outside public. One of the main places where performances were held during KIPAF 2016 was at the public square behind Victoria Memorial Hall.<sup>65</sup> A lot of the performances there centred on the drawings that artists were making on the ground. Pi made the paintings collectively, with around 6 to 12 artists painting without a coherent collective plan, and the ground paintings became part of their performance practices. A foreign artist participating in KIPAF did not understand why they were making these drawings: "are we now making bad art?" he stated. Yet, instead of attempting to make a skilled aesthetic work, the performers of PI intended to

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<sup>65</sup> Victoria Memorial Hall was built between 1906 and 1921 in memoriam of queen Victoria (1819-1901). It is a museum now, and both the building and its surrounding park are one of the major tourist destinations for both national and foreign tourists. In the city centre, next to the Maidan, and surrounded by a large park, it forms the green heart of Kolkata. Also Kolkatans themselves sometimes take a stroll through the park, that has a small entrance fee and can be visited separately from the museum. The park with its view on the colonial building has been used for weddings as well, not just for photo shoots, but also as a first meeting place arranged by the parents for the candidates.

create something that was open for anyone to join; and indeed, some bystanders, especially children, started to participate in making the street paintings. In contrast to their performances that discourage people to join due to its harsh bodily language, their street paintings attracted a large crowd; many of the people at the public square, some of them who just visited Victoria Memorial Hall and others who came from the adjacent park, would come and look at the paintings. Although the participation was sometimes brief, people did come and watch, maybe 5 minutes, maybe half an hour, and some joined in making the drawings. Instead of a *trompe l'oeil* that can be admired from a distance, the paintings became a platform for the artists to do their performances. Yet at the same time the platform function was disturbed as many artists walked around the platform and did performances outside of the field of paintings. The paintings thus also served to draw onlookers towards other performances.

In this happy mixture of sight seeing people, children, hawkers selling drinks, balloons, popcorn, papri chaat and much more, artists paintings on the square, and artists performing, people gave money. Uma started going round with a hat, and PI started to realize that they could make some money. Uma and Taufik told me they made around 800 to 1000 Taka each time, and as they started doing it more often, made around 30.000 Taka last year, a good enough amount to help them in the organization of performances. Now they make their floor paintings regularly at sites like Sheldah station, Victoria Memorial square and other sites that attract large crowds; it has become a source of income. And when they make these paintings there to collect money, they focus on that and do not do other performances.

An art practice introduced by a street artist from the United States who is not part of the international *contemporary* art scene, was taken up and changed into a *contemporary* art strategy of breaking out of the boundary between artists and audiences through chance encounters and participation. This practice was subsequently transformed into a source of income that can support their performances throughout the year. In chapter 2 I have outlined the ritual cycle of *contemporary* art, and in subsequent chapters I have shown the first instances by which artworks that strive to be ambiguous, without a frame of reference and without purpose, are interpreted framed and classified and slowly become part of a canonical order. Here, however the crystallization of art practices includes processes that occur outside *contemporary* art's field of cultural production. The ritual model I have presented in chapter 2.9 describes an isolated field of cultural production, but we see here how the regeneration of the cycle of *contemporary* art invites crossovers with other practices. These crossovers can both threaten the value of *contemporary* art – ‘*are we now making bad art?*’ – but they can also strengthen it; either by providing a different engagement with the public and thereby facilitating a way to break with perceived conventions of performance arts, or by providing the monetary freedom from professionalized

art institutions. I will elaborate on the crossovers with other fields of cultural production in the next chapter in relation to Durga Puja.



*Figure 5.4*

Above: Uma and Taufik performing at the square of Victoria Memorial Hall during KIPAF. Below: Left, artists are painting ‘the platform’, right Stephanie is using the space to perform, Boka makes a photograph. In the background the Victoria Memorial Hall is visible.



Another crystallization concerns the split up of PI resulting into two PIs and two KIPAFs. As mentioned before, PI did not want to have a clearly marked group of performers and focused on being in common rather than forming a community of performers. Yet, to be able to acquire funds they nevertheless registered as an official body. As Taufik says: “Pi is a body and anybody can come with his or her project and idea and we will be there with it. And [yet] we went for this Indian government registration, so we have this registration and an official body of 5 or 6, president, vice president, secretary etcetera, but that is not very important, that’s one of the tools we use for something, in fact we don’t use it as such because we haven’t gone through these [funding] things”. Although Taufik does not attach much importance to their registration,

it does create, perhaps especially for those who are not part of it, the suggestion that PI is an art community with an established hierarchy. Especially when funds do become part of the organization of KIPAF this group-formation can come under duress. Before KIPAF 2016 Taufik started a potential collaboration with *Bangla Natok* via Manas Acharya's initiative of ARTROOM, a platform that funds a variety of cultural practices in West Bengal. This prompted a discussion about whether PI could take funds or not, revealing a variety of other, partly money-related, discordances among the performers that eventually led to a split of KIPAF into two KIPAFs. I will not get into the details of this and, as Taufik told me after the breakup, he does not see it as negative for performance art in Kolkata. But it does show that a group that avoids rules and establishes a variety of strategies of 'unprofessionalism', a group that is based on inclusivity and flexibility and seems to circumvent canonization and institutionalization, can nevertheless break into factions.



### 5.7 *Alternative pathways*

In chapter 2 I have written about *contemporary* art's spatiotemporal extensions, about the way the field of *contemporary* art provides a ritual framework for both artists and artworks to travel, to acquire fame beyond their locality, and to become part of a canonical order and therefore part of history. In chapter 3 I have written about the limitations of Kolkata's art infrastructure, its disconnection from a national and international field of *contemporary* art and the entanglement of limitations that keep artists and artworks from making these spatiotemporal transformations beyond Kolkata. Abandoning the gallery, co-founding *Shunmostan* and later PI, Taufik explored a new medium, met others with similar interests, organized a festival and invited foreign performers. Through these contacts he was invited to a performance art festival in Zurich, but most of the members of PI did not get this opportunity. And, even though Taufik did get an opportunity to travel, he experienced difficulties in the process of obtaining a visa. Bureaucratic procedures can hamper artists' plans to go abroad and as many artists are not affiliated with any official institution and do not have permanent employment it can be difficult for them to obtain visas. Many young artists I talked with do not even have a passport and discussed the difficulties one has to go through to obtain one. To travel outside of India is therefore for many artists not only a matter of being able to afford the flight, it requires planning and patience.

Yet, as I have argued in this chapter, some Kolkata *contemporary* artists are not simply victims of Kolkata's marginal position vis-à-vis the national and international field of *contemporary* art, but also mistrust and evade national and international *contemporary* art, its professionalization and instrumentalization. Not only does Taufik lack organizational skills; with a range of strategies Taufik and the other members of PI purposefully frustrate professionalization and thereby reduce the possibility to make a name for themselves. But this does not translate into a lack of ambition of being an artist. When access to *contemporary* art's national and international infrastructure is barred, the focus on a different kind of border crossing comes in sight. In PI's 2016 curatorial note, in conversations I had and in interviews they gave to *Kaahon* there are fragments that describe an idea of art as extension not necessarily connected to the physical travel of the artist or the artwork, but as the extension of personhood on a different plane. From PI's curatorial note:

Our art is our expression; it is the bliss of seeing and feeling something personally and finding a way to encounter the pseudo-comfort of living under a structure. Artist's relationship with the society is always personal and political too. But the artist has a way to express it. The artist masters the way all through the life. The way provides the artist courage to cross over the boundaries and borders and partitions to reach to the other (the people) that is also the self.

When the other participates in or with the work of art the circuit is complete and a spark strikes the senses and a meaning evolves out of it. That spark may come at the moment of encounter or any time after that by recurrence of its memory. (...) Here we may emphasize the fact that no art can be impersonal. It always demands personal attention from the artist and the viewer both. Art is produced in detachment and creates a moment of detachment also in the viewer or participator. This detachment allows the self to go beyond the structure/construction to look back into it and get the energy of freedom to approach life for a better understanding.<sup>66</sup>

In Europe or America one can find artists who are working individually and finally including the language of performing arts within his repertoire. With us it didn't happen so specifically. There are people from different fields and we have worked as collective on various projects. As a result there has been an almost spiritual connect. So now if one initiates a performance the other can easily find the response in his body as to how he will belong to that space. This ethos results from carrying that extended space. We are not even very conscious about it all the time. If we are conscious, our work will have a really wide reach. I will do something here which will travel a few thousand kilometres and create a pulse. It's possible.<sup>67</sup>

Words and phrases such as 'pulse', 'consciousness', 'extended space', 'the way' or 'the self that is also the other' seemed vague to me. It was only after reading the essays on art by Rabindranath Tagore, especially *What is Art* (1916), *The Religion of an Artist* (1924-26) and *The Artist* (1930) together with Kalyan Sen Gupta's *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (2005) that I better understood PI's philosophy.<sup>68</sup> I do not argue that PI's ideas on art can be entirely traced back to Tagore, but his writings articulate a body of thought that resonates strongly with the ideas expressed by PI. Kalyan Sen Gupta writes that Tagore made a shift in his philosophy of the self. In his earlier writings Tagore, attracted by notions from the Upanishads such as the 'Eternal Self', the 'Essential Self', or the 'Self as Brahman' conceived of self-realization as the realization of the eternal or essential self that lies hidden within us. In his later writings, however, Tagore moves from what is essential within a person to the capacity that every individual has for change. Each person becomes a traveller whose path is open in all directions, on the way with no final end or destination (Sen Gupta 2005, 79). A person is without a fixed identity and needs to follow a path of self-creation. Sen Gupta quotes two verses by Tagore that illustrate this philosophy:

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<sup>66</sup> Fragment from KIPAF 2016 Curatorial note.

<sup>67</sup> Quote from one of PI's members Amitava Adikhari in an interview with *Kaahon*. April 11<sup>th</sup> 2017.

<sup>68</sup> Tagore's essays are bundled in Tagore, R. (1961) *On Art and Aesthetics: A selection of lectures, essays, and letters*. Ed. By P. Neogy. International Cultural Centre.

O great traveller!  
Your path is open on all sides  
You have no temple, no heaven  
No ultimate end.<sup>69</sup>

I am the agent, free, initiated into the light of the day  
My every step on hard ground  
Is to transcend myself.<sup>70</sup>

Tagore came to the conclusion that the best vehicle for self-creation was not to be found in social and political activity, but in art. Tagore's perspective on art comes forward in the way he contrasted art with science in his essay *What is Art?* (1926): "There is the world of science, from which the elements of personality have been carefully removed. We must not touch it with our feelings. But there is also the vast world, which is personal to us. We must not merely know it, and put it aside, but we must feel it, - because, by feeling it, we feel ourselves" (Tagore 1916, 18-19). Science is not personal, whereas art is; it is in the world of art where human beings reveal themselves as persons. By making a work of art a man "selects things from his surroundings in order to make them his own. He has his forces of attraction and repulsion by which he not only piles up things outside him, but creates himself" (Tagore 1916, 17). Tagore ends his essay *What is Art* (1916) as follows:

What is it in man that asserts its immortality in spite of the obvious fact of death? It is not his physical body or his mental organization. It is that deeper unity, that ultimate mystery in him, which, from the centre of his world, radiates towards its circumference; which is in his body, yet transcends his body; which is in his mind, yet grows beyond his mind; which, through the things belonging to him, expresses something that is not in them; which, while occupying his present, overflows its banks of the past and the future. It is the personality of man, conscious of its inexhaustible abundance; it has the paradox in it that it is more than itself; it is more than as it is seen, as it is known, as it is used. And this consciousness of the infinite, in the personal man, ever strives to make its expressions immortal and to make the whole world its own. In Art the person in us is sending its answers to the Supreme Person, who reveals Himself to us in a world of endless beauty across the lightless world of facts. (Tagore 1916, 32-33).

The artist's hunger for reputation, Tagore writes in a later essay *The Artist* (1930), comes from the desire to make objectively real that which is inwardly real. The "consciousness of the real within me" seeks for "the Real outside me" (Tagore 1930, 73). When PI speaks of

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<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Sen Gupta p79. From: 'Pantho', in *Parishesh, Rabindra Rachanabali*, 15 vols, Calcutta: West Bengal Government, 1961, vol. 2, p. 877.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Sen Gupta p79. From: 'Ratri', in the book of poems, *Nabajatak, Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 3, pp. 718-19.

“consciousness” they use it in a similar way as Tagore did, not merely as individual awareness but as the realization of the relation between man and the outside world.<sup>71</sup> When the connection between a person’s inner consciousness cannot connect with the outside world our personality becomes blurred: “When it fails the self in me is depressed (...) For we are like pictures, whose reality is helped by the background if it is sympathetic” (Ibid.). The person thus extends himself, a word that Tagore uses as well, through art. Yet it is not easy to do this. Man, according to Tagore, cannot help but revealing his personality, also in the world of use. But in everyday life, when we are mostly moved by our habits, we are economical in our expression; our “soul-consciousness” is then at its low level (Tagore 1916, 19). In *The Religion of an Artist* Tagore writes:

The *I am* in me realizes its own extension, its own infinity whenever it truly realizes something else. Unfortunately, owing to our limitations and a thousand and one preoccupations, a great part of our world, though closely surrounding us, is far away from the lamp-post of our attention: it is dim, it passes by us, a caravan of shadows, like the landscape seen in the night from the window of an illuminated railway compartment: the passenger knows that the outside world exists, that it is important, but for the time being the railway carriage for him is far more significant. (Tagore 1924-1926 (1961), 46).

Tagore’s ideas on art and personhood resonate strongly with those from anthropologist Michael Jackson in his book *The Work of Art: Rethinking the Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (2014). Jackson explores art as a technique, related to other cultural forms such as storytelling, play, dreaming, and ritual, that forms a “transitional space between interiority and exteriority.” The work of art enables us, Jackson writes, “to change the ways that our situations *appear* to us; we thereby come to feel that we possess some degree of free will, that the future is open rather than closed to us, and that our existence matters. In effect, we give birth to ourselves as proactive rather than merely passive participants in a shared world” (Jackson 2014, 3). Jackson makes a distinction between inside and outside, yet not as spheres that should be identified separately: “The work of art is an endless interplay between what we think of as lying within and what we think of as existing without” (Ibid. 32). In contrast to Alfred Gell’s notion of the extended mind (see chapter 1.6) Jackson focuses not only on the outward effect an artwork has, but on the “dynamic interplay of subjective and objective dimensions of reality” (Ibid. xiv-xv). As Jackson writes: “The mystery of the work of art arises from the indeterminate *relationship between* one’s external environment and one’s inner world. When these are integrated or balanced, one becomes at home in the world” (Ibid. 190). Art, not only *contemporary* art, but art in general, can be seen as a way to relate one’s inner experience with the surrounding world.

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<sup>71</sup> The English word consciousness can be misleading. Consciousness translates in Bangla as *cetana*, but as Tagore has pointed out, *cetana* has a more vital character and is frequently used in poetry (Tagore 1916, 22).

However, neither Tagore, nor Jackson, nor Gell, look closely at what Bourdieu called “the field of cultural production” (Bourdieu 1993), and focus instead on the artwork itself. This thesis has moved away from an approach that places the artwork between the self and the world, and argued instead that *contemporary* artworks take part in a ritual cycle (see chapter 2); it is the ritual cycle, rather than merely the artwork, that facilitates and guides the relationship between the self and the world. But what happens when the ritual framework of *contemporary* art, as an autonomous field of cultural production, diminishes, or collapses entirely? Without an infrastructure, without the possibilities to send one’s work on a path of exhibition, circulation, and preservation, artist can continue to make works of art. When the spatiotemporal extensions within the field of *contemporary* art are difficult to make, when artists do not get the opportunities to travel, and when their works or traces of their works do not become part of a canonical order, artists can still make an extension with the outside world. But it is a different kind of extension, a smaller cycle.

When Amitava says in the quote above: “I will do something here which will travel a few thousand kilometres and create a pulse”, he does not simply express the wish that their performances, the photos, texts and videos, might literally travel beyond Kolkata, but expresses, I think, a more abstract transcendental *idea* of Art. What counts perhaps more than the spatiotemporal transformations whereby a work and artist can travel beyond the artwork’s place of origin and become part of a historical and national or international canonical order, is the ‘vertical’ extension whereby a work escapes its spatial and temporal order to reach a higher order of Art. As long as an artist believes in the *idea* of Art and as long as an artist can make a living by other means, the canonization of his or her art is not necessary. Also when the performances of PI remain un-archived, when they won’t reach a wider audience beyond Kolkata, and do not provide the artists an opportunity to travel, the members of PI can create a situation where they, together, are able “to reach to the other that is also the self” as PI writes, to create an emotional experience that unites self and other. This reunion of self and other as Rappaport writes, “may reach out from the reunited individual to embrace other members of the congregation, or even the cosmos as a whole” so that “the boundary between individuals and their surroundings, especially others participating in ritual with them, may seem to dissolve” (Rappaport 1999, 220). As I have written in chapter 2.4, this numinous experience cannot be described and can only be indicated by abstract terms, such as ‘being’ or ‘Art’. PI uses terms such as ‘consciousness’, or phrases like ‘to reach to the other that is also the self’. Such terms and phrases come close to what Rappaport calls “ultimate sacred postulates” (see 2.4) – phrases that cannot be falsified, are devoid of content, and do not point to anything but themselves and are therefore beyond anything situated in time and space (Ibid. 265).

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I started this chapter with PI's origin story from Taufik's perspective, and highlighted in *Shunnostan* (5.1) the various ways in which PI attempts to break with particular established art styles, conventions, and institutes to clear the way for something new to happen. Not only do the performers of PI search for a new language of art that defies conventions, they also attempt to circumvent the professionalism of the urban *contemporary* art festival. In *Un-organization* (5.2) I focused on the messiness of PI's practices as a semi-deliberate strategy to keep their art from becoming, as Taufik says, "a career oriented thing". Yet, PI's performances do more than undermine the art scene and also address a variety of perceived societal wrongs. In *Un-organization* (5.2) and *Matter out of place* (5.3) I discussed performances that defy societal orders and focused on the way PI's performances reflect on and challenge the gendered divisions of the city. Yet, even though the performances are often politically engaged, PI nonetheless steers away from a political program. In *Nonsense* (5.4) I looked at the ways PI, inspired by the nonsense verse of Sukumar Ray, balances between political engagement on the one hand, and an avoidance of any rationale in their art, on the other. PI uses various strategies to create ambiguous situations; next to an avoidance of professionalism and their affinity with nonsense, *On the same plane of empathy* (5.5) describes formal strategies that defy the temporal sequence and spatial circumference of performances. By disrupting and confusing temporal expectations of performances and spreading the performance out on a spatial plane, PI creates something that is perceptually ambiguous, inviting the spectator to engage with the performance in different and new ways.

After discussing a variety of PI's attempts to create a new form of art, I looked in *Failures and crystallizations* (5.6) at the ways such attempts either fail or, when they succeed, yet again crystallize into (sometimes unexpected) formations. In the previous chapter I have shown how Sanchayan's artwork is pulled into an interpretative frame by means of photography and textual interpretations, and is thus slowly incorporated into a canonical order of *contemporary* art. This chapter discusses such formations of the canonical as well, but I end on a different note. In *Alternative pathways* (5.7) I introduced an alternative to the theoretical model presented in chapter 2. By avoiding and criticizing rules of established art forms and embracing chaos, PI's performances express an unwillingness to be caught up in particular artistic formations, whether it is from traditional proscenium based theatre, Badal Sircar's *Third Theatre*, or the appropriation of festival for the purpose of city branding. Furthermore, with their affinity for nonsense, their use of elements to create multivocal, perceptual, and positional ambiguities, or their strategies that change the performance's temporal sequence and spatial circumference, PI creates something without a clear-cut meaning, something that is ambiguous yet seems to be full of

meaning. With these strategies they create something that is new, something that resets *contemporary* art's ritual cycle. However, subsequent activities – this writing included – interpret, endow with meaning, compare, classify, and preserve; such ritual actions advance the canonization of PI's performances and thus restart a new ritual cycle. But what happens when PI's performances are not selected, archived, and preserved? What happens when the performers and their works are not given the opportunity to travel away from the here and now? But even when artworks are not, interpreted, circulated, classified and preserved, when there is no ritual framework that takes artists and artworks along on a spatiotemporal transformation, artists can still cross a boundary. Performing together, anticipating their various moves and their surroundings, the members of PI might create something that crosses the boundary between self and other, and unites them. Doing so they reach a higher order; although this order can be indicated with a word such as 'consciousness' or 'Art', it can only be experienced for a short period of numinous time. Perhaps when Uma adjusts Taufik's sari and applies *alta* to his feet, or when Taufik walks through the oncoming traffic that surrounds him, there might be a short moment where everything and everybody is on the same plane of empathy.

## 6. Vital Matter

When I was a child, I used to  
see the marks of wet footprints  
on the ground, the rhythm of  
human life. Crossing the rivers  
and fields one reaches here,  
where the land is dry, where  
there are no footprints. Only  
dust flies everywhere as one  
walks. What are you holding on  
to now, artist?

In this chapter I will write about the artist community of Chander Haat, an ‘artist village’ in the urbanizing semi-rural outskirts of Sarsuna in Southwest Kolkata. Like the artists of the previous chapters the artists of Chander Haat move beyond the artistic media in which they have been trained, such as sculpture and canvas painting, and explore a variety of new media, such as installation art and site-specific art. But instead of focusing on the breaks with artistic convention, I will focus in this chapter (6.1-6.3) on the engagement with ‘natural’ and ‘rough’ materials. I will argue that the artistic engagement with ‘vital materials’ contrasts with the city’s ‘materiality of progress’, described in chapter 3 as the ‘smooth surfaces’ of the city (3.6). In 6.4 I will discuss some other yet related activities practiced by the members of Chander Haat, such as holding *adda*, singing, trips to the countryside, and cooking. And in the last part of this chapter (6.5) I will discuss their involvement with Durga Puja, a large public festival that celebrates the goddess Durga. The artists from Chander Haat are one of the main producers of so-called ‘theme’ *pandals* in the city for Durga Puja. I will look at the ways *contemporary* and *pandal* art practices both contrast and intersect, discuss the financial and creative opportunities that *pandal* art has given the artists of Chander Haat, and discuss some of the frictions that arise due to the proximity of these different fields of cultural production.



## 6.1 Chander Haat

I am on my way to Chander Haat. Getting off at Thakurpukur Bazar, a chaotic and dusty crossing due to the seemingly never-ending construction of the Diamond Harbor Metro line,<sup>72</sup> I take an auto-rickshaw with four fellow passengers towards Khudiram Pally.<sup>73</sup> Soon after leaving the hectic bazar area the auto steers through a network of labyrinthine lanes along the many *pukurs* of Sarsuna.<sup>74</sup> From Khudiram Pally, the last stop, it is a five minutes' walk towards what seems to be the edge of Kolkata; the area surrounding Chander Haat is green and with its large *pukurs* and occasional paddy fields provides open spaces that are a relief from the confining urban sprawl of the city. However, with many houses under construction, iron rods sticking up from planned second or third floors, it seems that this area will soon be fully incorporated into the city as well. Behind a large open gate with a sign that reads *Environmental Art* there is a spacious garden with a large variety of trees: banana trees, coconut and date palms, water apple, hogplum, bur flower, mango trees, bamboo, bulletwood, mayflower, jackfruit, elephant apple and more. The trees flank a large open grass field, a round tinne-roof pergola, a few slowly decaying artworks placed out in the open, small horticulture fields, a scarecrow, and a sheltered storage for materials.

On the south side of the garden there is a three-story building with a large studio and a common kitchen on the ground floor, rooms used for educational programs on the second floor, and a residency on the rooftop. Just in front of the studio there is a round stone bench built around the stem of a *Krishnachura* – in English called the mayflower or flame tree due to its bright red flowers that blossom from April to July – where the artists often gather to drink tea or share food.<sup>75</sup> On the other side of the garden there is a small studio with a veranda and a large stone

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<sup>72</sup> The Joka-BBD Bag Metro project started in 2011, but has been repetitively delayed leaving Diamond Harbour Road – the main artery connecting north and south Kolkata – narrow, polluted and accident prone (*Times of India* Jan 8, 2015). See for example youthkiawaaz.com 2015/08 for a critical analysis of Kolkata's new metro projects.

<sup>73</sup> Auto-rickshaws in Kolkata commute fixed routes and are shared, like buses rather than taxis, and are allowed to take 4 passengers, but on this route the drivers usually take an extra passenger out of sight of the crossing.

<sup>74</sup> A *pukur* is a pond. *Pukurs* are an integral part urban and village life in Bengal. They are places for washing cloths and bathing, but they are also used for fish farming, socializing and rituals; often flanked by clubs or small temples the ponds are important sites for social activities and religious rituals such as the immersion of idols. The number of *pukurs* in Kolkata is rapidly falling due to urban development. In 2016 Kolkata there was an estimate amount of 3000 *pukurs* (Ray and Majumdar 2005). Especially for the urban poor, for migrant laborers and local inhabitants who have less access to civic facilities, they are an important source of water. What is more, they have ecological importance; as open green places in a crowded city they are important sites for maintaining biodiversity and serve as receptors for rainwater harvesting and maintain local ground water levels (Ibid. 2005).

<sup>75</sup> The *Krishnachura* (crown of Krishna) or *Gulmohar* in Hindi has fernlike leaves that provide a good shade. It is native to Madagascar, but is now spread across the world's tropic and sub-tropic regions. Though not native to India it is widely appreciated for its flowers and the shade that it casts and has become a

table, next to the studio there is a two-story building with a large studio and office on the ground floor and a long curving staircase leads to the home of Bhabatosh Sutar and his family; whereas the other artists live in the vicinity of Chander Haat, Bhabatosh and his wife Mallika Das Sutar, also a practicing artist, their son Sreejato, and Bhabatosh' mother, live at Chander Haat in a house Bhabatosh designed himself.



*Figure 6.1*

Photo taken from top floor residency rooftop with a view of Bhabatosh and Mallika's house. On the right the upper branches of the *Krishachura* and left the tin-roofed pergola

I came to know about Chander Haat during Khoj Kolkata's *Boithak Khana* exhibition where I met Bhabatosh, who was one of the participating artists (see chapter 3.4). Bhabatosh has envisioned Chander Haat together with Tarun Dey, an artist and teacher who helped Bhabatosh gain admission to Government Art College in 1995. Tarun lives in the neighbourhood and stays regularly in the small studio next to the house of Bhabatosh and Mallika. Tarun does not play a large role in Chander Haat's day-to-day business, but is seen as the founder of Chander Haat; Bhabatosh calls Tarun his mentor, and some others refer to him as Guru, although that is a title that Tarun himself rejects. "The most important person in Chander Haat is Tarunda" Bhabatosh told me:<sup>76</sup>

Tarunda's philosophy is what you can see now in Chander Haat. At one point in time we were all Tarunda's students. And we all lived very much below poverty level. Everybody who is now associated [with Chander Haat] they all lived below poverty level. And we didn't get any social recognition. Our economical condition was very bad. So that's why we first only were in the same place, and we all used to paint. We loved painting, so we painted. But

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common sight across India. There is a variety called Radhachura in Bangla that is native to Bengal, Southeast Asia and Northern Australia and has yellow/orange flowers.

<sup>76</sup> The suffix "-da" comes from "dada" (older brother) and is often used as an informal yet respectful form of addressing an older person.

we had very needy families. Tarunda brought us all together in one place and as a communist minded man, he said that we should stay all together, we should all live together, and we should all paint together and start a painting group, so that from every painting we can arrive in one place, we can become artists, (...) one person can help the other, and in that way it will all take flight as one whole. And from there we started to engage with various different art practices. From there our thinking started. From Tarunda we learned to paint and after that we all went to art college. Not everybody went to art college, some are self-taught artists, and learned it from Tarunda. After that they started their own art practice. After we passed out from college, we slowly started selling some paintings and did some commission work, and from this we slowly kept money savings. And after that we bought this land<sup>77</sup>, after buying the land (...) we slowly started a foundation and from this funding most of the money was coming from doing Durga Puja.<sup>78</sup>



Figure 6.2

Painting of Tarun by Ayan Saha, a young member of Chander Haat, who was following a course given by Tarun and called him his guru.

The community of Chander Haat, altogether a group of about 22 people, makes *contemporary* art, does commissioned work such as public sculptures<sup>79</sup>, and makes ‘theme *pandals*’ for Durga

<sup>77</sup> They bought the plot in 2007.

<sup>78</sup> Quote translated from Bangla, yet some art terms such as ‘self-taught artists’ are spoken in English. Bhabatosh used a simplified Bangla for me during talks and interspersed his speech with English terms, anyway a common practice in Kolkata. All the block-citations in this chapter are translations from Bangla.

<sup>79</sup> Such commissioned work often involves both private and public requests for sculptures. Next to busts and sculptures of family members or iconic figures, for a variety of institutes such as schools, or for the

Puja. Durga Puja is an enormously popular public festival celebrated throughout Bengal for 10 days in autumn. It celebrates the ‘homecoming’ of the mother goddess Durga and her victory over the buffalo demon *Mahishasura*.<sup>80</sup> During Durga Puja Kolkata transforms as millions of people throughout West Bengal and beyond come to visit the many public *pandals* erected in the city, temporary public pavilions built to house and venerate the goddess. Especially popular are the ‘theme *pandals*’ or ‘art *pandals*’, which serve not only as pavilions to house the goddess, as the traditional *pandals* do, but are exhibition sites taking on all kind of spectacular forms, and are the main attraction of a public and commercial festival that blurs the lines between the ‘secular’ and ‘religious’.<sup>81</sup> Below, I will write more about *Durga Puja* and the crossovers and differences between Chander Haat’s various art practices, but in the first part of the chapter I will write about their artworks in a broader sense and not make a clear distinction between their ‘contemporary art’ and ‘*pandal* art’. For now I merely want to point out that the making of these large theme *pandals*, which starts already half a year before the festival, is the main source of income for the artists of Chander Haat.

Chander Haat, also called *environmental art collective*, consists of a group of senior artists that have been involved with Chander Haat for a long time, such as Nirmal Malick, Anjan Das, Raju Sarkar, Pintu Sikder, Pradeep Das, and Sujit Das, Bhabatosh Sutar and Mallika Das Sutar, most of them in their late 30s or early 40s. Then there are the younger members who are in training, take courses from Tarun or, at a later age, go to art college, and help the more senior artists with their works for Durga Puja, galleries, or other commissioned work.<sup>82</sup> Technical assistants, for lack of better term, such as Chondon Mistiri and Mahadeb Bauri are with Chander Haat for a long time and usually do not produce artworks individually but assist the ‘main artists’ with their works. There is a hierarchy at Chander Haat where the senior artists, with Bhabatosh at the head, make decisions, but roles are not that clearly defined; everybody works together in busy times, and people who clean, or attend to the Chander Haat premises

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municipality, this can involve larger architectural constructions as well. For example, in 2015 Bhabatosh constructed a Ramakrishna temple at the school grounds of his son, Sreejato.

<sup>80</sup> The goddess Durga, whose name can be translated as “difficult to reach” (Doniger 2014, 101) is known for her victory over the Buffalo demon Mahishasura. She is often depicted astride a lion or tiger, trampling Mahishasura, and accompanied by her two sons Ganesh and Kattrick and two daughters Lakshmi and Saraswati who are also separate deities with their own annual pujas. As a continuation of multiple older stories she is both seen as mother and daughter and is celebrated in a ritual of ‘homecoming’ during the five days of the festival, where both as mother and married daughter Durga returns home from her husband’s home and on the last day again turns back. Rather than celebrated in large temples, Bengalis celebrate the goddess’ homecoming every autumn. Every year before the festival temporary clay images (*pratimas*) are made that after the five days festival again are immersed in the Ganges. Their temporary homes *Pandals* can be both homely altars or large public pavilions on the streets. (See Tapati Guha-Thakurta 2015).

<sup>81</sup> The name ‘theme *pandal*’ derives from the fact that the entire design of the *pandal* – the *murti*, the colours, the decoration and the music – is laid out as an integrated ‘theme’ (see Guha-Thakurta 2015).

<sup>82</sup> Such as Dhiman Sutar, Ayan Saha, Sonu Jacks and Sourav Seal who are mostly in their early 20s.

such as the garden, do not have the usual designated subordinate place cleaners often have in Bengali households. Most of the members live close by, in or near Khudiram Pally, and there is a strong family connection. When Chander Haat holds dinners or organizes trips out of the city wives and children usually join the artists.

The artists stress the equality of Chander Haat. Chander Haat means a gathering of beautiful 'shining' people. *cand* (moon) refers to the individuals, "everybody is a moon" as Bhabatosh said, and *haat* is a temporary village market that distinguishes itself from a bazar in that it is purely based on barter. As Bhabatosh says: "there is no business attitude here, there is only sharing". The artists share the studios, work together and constantly help each other by giving advice concerning the material making process. Yet, the members of Chander Haat are also individually operating artists; Durga *puja pandals*, gallery works, as well as a variety of commissioned works are one their own individual initiative. During their annual exhibition and other joint group shows, the artists usually make individual works with one artist on the art label. When somebody makes a big sale he will receive the money himself, but he will pay for a joint dinner to celebrate, and individual members can give donations to the bigger pot of Chander Haat. Together they can invest in new projects or buy new land.

In 2016 Performers Independent (PI) organized their annual performance festival KIPAF (see chapter 5) in collaboration with Chander Haat. For three days many performances were held at Chander Haat and its surroundings and Chander Haat provided the performance artists with food and accommodation. With the exceptions of Tarun, who makes theatre performances inspired by *Third Theatre* (see 5.1), the members of Chander Haat usually do not make performance art, but they are interested to see the many performances by artists from Kolkata, India, and abroad. Many people from the neighbourhood, families and children, flocked to Chander Haat to see what was happening. A bit shy and sometimes slightly uncomfortable with some performances, they were nevertheless curious and by word of mouth the crowds were increasing per day. Especially the children kept coming back and were disappointed to learn that it lasted only three days. Bhabatosh was critical of the haphazard organization of the festival by PI but pleased with the way the festival attracted the local community. He told me how important this could be for children. When he was fourteen years, he saw a *Third Theatre* play written and performed by Tarun (see also chapter 5). He was strolling through the neighbourhood with a friend and suddenly saw Tarun's play. He did not know that this existed and was overwhelmed. He started going to similar plays held in nearby 'villages' and started

painting backdrops on the walls; it inspired him to become an artist and he wants to carry this over to a new generation.<sup>83</sup>

Now Bhabatosh Sutar is arguably the most famous *Durga Puja* artist, which I only fully came to realize when Bhabatosh visited my apartment and people in the street were overwhelmed to see him. Bhabatosh and his family left Bangladesh when he was eight years old and was among the late refugee peasant migrants who crossed the border in 1981-82. The family settled in Sarsuna, which was still a rural area before the arrival of Bangladeshi migrants since the Bangladesh war of 1972. Bhabatosh made his way up the social ladder through his art practice and is acutely aware of the promises and possible disappointments the middle-class dream entails.<sup>84</sup> For a *contemporary* art exhibition at Birla Academy he made a large rust-brown iron chicken with an Bajaj M80 motorcycle in its belly.<sup>85</sup> Bhabatosh describes his work referring to a Ponzi scheme that collapsed in April 2013 (similar to a pyramid scheme), which involved prominent politicians and the Saradha Group of private corporations:

Many poor people were tricked into a money scam. That is why I was thinking I will make a chicken, an iron chicken. A dream of especially many village people is to buy a motorcycle. Also when I was young it was my first dream to buy a motorcycle, an M80. It represents a certain class, this particular bike. I bought this bike. Before that I was cycling a rickshaw. The bike is a metaphor for the dream of that class. Not so much in the city but especially the surroundings of Kolkata, the villages. A whole group of people saw that dream go up in smoke. Why a chicken? Often, we say to make murgi korlam. [Literally, I made you a chicken] He sold me a chicken. And, worldwide, the chicken is a symbol for wind measure. In the whole world they use it to point the direction of the wind. That is why I used this symbol, in which way are the political leaders taking us. It is a power game; you have to go this way. That is why I used the hand that points. It is also a gun. Pointing where to go.

The M80 bike embodies a middle-class dream. Bhabatosh clearly passed this stage; from being a rickshaw driver he now has land, a large house and two cars. He does not have the M80 bike

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<sup>83</sup> Often Bhabatosh uses the Bengali word *gram* (village) for denoting neighbourhoods in Kolkata. This makes sense because many *paras* (small neighbourhoods) like Khudiram Pally were at the outskirts of the city. These colonies of Bangladeshi migrants, built from the 70s onwards were not fully incorporated in the city, and were as a close-knit community and with rural subsistence practices in many ways closer to a village culture. Although not much farming is done in a *para* like Khudiram Pally, it has with its narrow lanes and *pukurs* a very different character from the urban city center.

<sup>84</sup> 'Middle-class' is not merely an economic category; there is no single category of middle class, as André Béteille has argued (Béteille 2001). Especially the new middle-classes, to which the artists of Chander Haat belong, are dynamic and complex and do not fit neatly into a well-defined category. As Leela Fernandes argues, it can be better approached through "middle-classness" (Fernandes 2006). It is, as Christiane Brosius argues, the intangibility of the middle classes that leaves the category open for performing 'middle-classness' through conspicuous consumption, distinguishing yourself by showing the 'right taste' (Brosius 2012, 14).

<sup>85</sup> It gave the physical appearance of rust, but Bhabatosh used a paint to give it a rust-brown color.

anymore. Together with the other artists of Chander Haat Bhabatosh has risen from poverty and they have created Chander Haat to help others to make this step as well. The artworks described in this chapter, both the *contemporary* art and the *pandal* art, attest to the changes the artists have experienced, but also reflect on the transformations of their neighbourhood and Kolkata more broadly. The artworks express not only to the upsides or downsides of urban modernity, but express the tensions between the aspirations and delusions of urban modernity. Bhabatosh M80 chicken is one example, but in this chapter, I will describe a variety of ways by which the artists reflect on these tensions.



*Figure 6.3*

Bhabatosh and the M80-chicken artwork. After the exhibition the work was placed in the garden of Chander Haat.

## 6.2 *The rough and the smooth*

In 2015 Chander Haat organized an exhibition in the Gurusaday Dutt Museum, a museum based on the Bengal folk art collection of social worker and folklorist Gurusaday Dutt (1882-1941). Preparations for the exhibition were already on their way for a couple of weeks when I got to know the people at Chander Haat a bit better and was invited to be part of the project. I suggested that I could take on a role as observer, similar as to what I had done at the *Baithak Khana* project. Probir Gupta, an artist based in Delhi, originally from Kolkata and trained at Government Art College, curated the project and asked whether I could make video interviews of the artists and present them at the exhibition. I hesitated because I do not have any filming experience, but I decided it provided a way to closely follow the artists and I made a short 10 minutes video on the making process, rather than interviews. The video was looped on a flat screen in the hallway of the exhibition space. Getting used to the camera, converting files, and editing it all, took valuable time that I could have spent asking questions about the works, but asking the artists about what these works ‘mean’ I might have overlooked a quality that characterized most of the sculptural artworks; by cutting, slashing, and burning surfaces, the artworks, many of them made of natural materials, were given rough, browned or blackened, textured surfaces.



*Figure 6.4*

Pintu Sikder scorching the wood of his clothes-iron shaped wooden artwork for the Gurusaday Dutt exhibition.



After the exhibition I asked Tarun why so many are using materials such as clay and wood: “Everyday life, *kalke ki hobe, kalke khabo?*” - What will be tomorrow, what will we eat? - He talked about Mughal and Rajasthan painting, “these artists had good patrons, but now there are no such patrons, so no bright colors, no flowers”. Wood and clay are easily available and cheap, so people often use this, he said. Proshun Ghosh, not a member of Chander Haat, but a frequent participant of their exhibitions shed some light on Chander Haat’s choice for materials. Sitting in his small studio in the south of Kolkata Proshun talks critically about the art market, about what buyers often want: “People usually don’t want to buy confronting art, they want to have something nice for their living room. Next to that people want to have nice materials. Nobody wants something made of straw or clay or so, they want nice materials”. By “nice materials” Proshun indicates durable, shiny, smooth, and costly materials such as aluminum, copper, marble and fiberglass. Such materials are durable and therefore a safe investment, but beyond their intrinsic durable and attractive qualities, the use of such materials relates to a materiality of progress, what I have referred to in chapter 3.6 as ‘smooth surfaces’. To comply with this preference for costly materials is difficult for artists, as they have to invest in the artwork without the certainty it will pay off. Sanchayan Ghosh (see chapter 4) makes a similar point. When I visited Sanchayan in Santiniketan he talked critically about the use of expensive materials in *contemporary* art and criticized a well-known artist, who told him (paraphrasing) that if you really want to make installation art, you should have money, come from a good family.<sup>86</sup> Sanchayan is critical of the use of expensive materials: “They are just symbols of experimentation. Materials that show people they are doing something new, while you can just as well experiment with cheaper materials”. Sanchayan saw students taking big bank loans of one or two lakh INR to make installation work using expensive materials: “After they have shown the work, it often is not sold and goes nowhere.”

But the preference for materials such as clay and wood cannot only be related to their cheap availability: “material makes a community, one community is stone, the other is wood”, Tarun told me, indicating that Chander Haat artists not only use certain materials out of practical choice but identify themselves with these materials. Tarun further said their materials reveal history and refer to nature, but his answers were short and in line with his view to not come up with a circumscribed philosophy. They do not want to make a manifesto, do not write their plans for the future down; this would make Chander Haat static, as Tarun said. Talking with others I did not manage to get much more specific answers on why these rough surfaces were made; soon conversations moved into many different directions; the rough surfaces and natural

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<sup>86</sup> In a few occasions I have decided to withhold the names of artists when they come up in conversations like this. Such a critical remark, spontaneously uttered in a non-recorded conversation, can lead its own life in writing and have unforeseen negative consequences for both artists.

materials seem to embody a wide realm of issues that cannot be pinned down easily, summarized into a clear-cut manifesto.

Before zooming in on the artworks I will shortly discuss some theoretical and art historical perspectives concerning the aesthetics of rough and smooth surfaces. In *A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* Edmund Burke praises “smoothness” as the defining character of beauty and criticizes the rough: “There can be no doubt that bodies which are rough and angular, rouse and vellicate the organs of feeling, causing a sense of pain, which consists in the violent tension or contraction of the muscular fibres” (Burke [1756] 1860, 188).<sup>87</sup> In *Die Errettung des Schönen* (2015) Byung-Chul Han, a philosopher with a background in metallurgy, argues against the Burkean and Kantian sublime and criticizes the contemporary obsession with smooth surfaces in art, which he exemplifies with Jeff Koons’ sculptures, and the broader societal fixation with ‘the smooth’ (*das Glatte*) expressed within a material culture of consumable objects.<sup>88</sup> Han goes against the grain and argues that the smooth reflects the contemporary optimistic society (*Positivgesellschaft*) that does not leave any room for the negativity of ‘the against’. Han sees an embrace of rough surfaces as an antidote.

Ernst Gombrich in *The Preference for the Primitive: Episodes in the History of Western Taste* (2002) looks at rough and smooth surfaces as well, yet discusses it within a broader art historical contrast between ‘refined’ and ‘primitive’ art. As Clifford Geertz surmises, the ‘primitive’ for Gombrich is everything that counters the dominant trend of artistic effort; it is a revulsion from perfection that art aims at.<sup>89</sup> Unlike Han and Burke, Gombrich looks for the opposition refined/primitive in specific, localized, stylistic traditions at a certain point in time. Gombrich describes a pendulum movement in which artists purposefully move against artistic skills: “The more the artist knows how to flatter the senses, the more he will mobilize defenses against this flattery. The very progress of his skill will lead to a longing for the appearance of less skill and more honesty” (Gombrich 2002, 27). Whereas Han sees the smooth and the rough as material

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<sup>87</sup> Burke starts his analysis on smoothness as follows: “a quality so essential to beauty, that I do not now recollect anything beautiful that is not smooth. In trees and flowers, smooth leaves are beautiful; smooth slopes of earth in gardens; smooth streams in the landscape; smooth coats of birds and beasts in animal beauties; in fine women, smooth skins; and in several sorts of ornamental furniture, smooth and polished surfaces. A very considerable part of the effect of beauty is owing to this quality; indeed the most considerable. For, take any beautiful object, and give it a broken and rugged surface; and however well formed it may be in other respects, it pleases no longer” (Burke [1756] 1860, 143).

<sup>88</sup> Han focuses on contemporary society, but Burke’s aesthetic preference of ‘smoothness’ played an important role in the historical degradation of non-European forms of art as well. As William Pietz writes: “As early as 1764 in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Immanuel Kant used the aesthetic categories of Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756) to explain the quasi-religious fetishes that supposedly characterized African culture as products of a debased aesthetic sensibility whose degraded sense of the beautiful lacked all sense of the sublime” (Pietz 2010, 307).

<sup>89</sup> Clifford Geertz: *The Last Humanist*. Review of E.H. Gombrich: *The Preference for the Primitive: Episodes in the History of Western Taste* (2002). The New York Review of Books. September 26, 2002.

properties to be found in contemporary society at large, Gombrich sees artworks as particular reactions within a certain genre and thereby denies the idea of progress in art.<sup>90</sup>

In a critical review Christopher Wood argues that Gombrich reduces modern art to little more than a series of reflexive responses and overlooks the engagement with primitivism in Europe since the sixteenth century where “every European colonial conquest, every technological triumph over nature, and every new refinement in artistic taste has been met by a self-critical primitivist response” (Wood 2003). Primitivism, according to Wood, is one of society’s underlying structures. Whether it was pastoral Arcadian poetry from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century, the taste for medieval art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the romantic cult of wilderness from Henri David Thoreau, or the interest in African art in the early twentieth century, they all belong to a “pattern of civilization’s self-criticism” (ibid.). Primitivism, from this perspective, is seen as something that opposes as well, but instead of a reaction within a particular stylistic tradition, it opposes modernity more generally.

In *Primitive Renaissance, Rethinking German Expressionism* (2001) David Pan provides yet another perspective in which he takes a broad interpretation of ‘primitive’ art and includes 20<sup>th</sup> century expressionism.<sup>91</sup> Like Wood, Pan argues that these twentieth-century aesthetic movements did not develop alongside modernity, but were a reaction and revolt against it (Pan 2001, 3). Pan however makes a distinction between romanticism and primitivism. Primitivism rejects the notion of progress, but it is not a turn towards an earlier stage, a return to nature, or a nostalgic return to tradition. It was not a revolt against the railroad, the telegraph, or the cinema, which the primitivists often admired, but a revolt against the modern worldview that accompanied these technical advances (Ibid. 15). Instead, primitivism was a revolt against the linear time of modernity (Ibid. 4). Pan focuses on ‘German expressionism’ and points out that this was not an overall tradition, but consisted of separate centers such as Berlin, Dresden, Munich, Vienna, and Prague. There is no interconnected European category of ‘primitive’ art, because ‘primitive’ art is local, according to Pan, and one of the main characteristics of ‘primitive’ art is the elimination of a unifying “imperialist” or “nationalist” perspective (Ibid. 5). Pan thus distinguishes primitivism from a viewpoint that regards ‘folk art’ as the soul of a nation and argues that primitivism cannot be associated with a particular political program. The aesthetic multiplicity of primitivism corresponds to a political heterogeneity where the political

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<sup>90</sup> As Gombrich writes “later art (...) is not better than the earlier phase, it is only different” (Gombrich 2002, 29).

<sup>91</sup> Pan widens the category of ‘primitive art’ beyond its associations with ethnographic objects brought to Europe by missionaries and anthropologists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, or the ‘modernist’ art objects that have stylistic ‘affinities’ with them. Primitivism, Pan states, did not enter the European cultural tradition from outside but developed out of the critique of a Renaissance-oriented aesthetic: “The primitive does not designate something foreign but familiar, though perhaps repressed” (Ibid. 4). See also Sebastian Zeidler *Form as Revolt: Carl Einstein and the Ground of Modern Art* (2015).

allegiances of expressionist writers and artists are difficult to pin down. How, Pan asks, can we define a primitivist perspective, if it has such an aesthetic and social variety? His answer is that all ‘primitive’ art shares one thing: “it excludes the idea of progress, along with the aesthetic forms based on it” (Pan 2001, 6).

Just as there is no overarching European ‘primitivism’, there is no Indian ‘primitivism’. The rejection against the narrative of progressive modernism can be found in Indian Modern art history as well, but needs to be placed within India’s various and fragmented entanglements with modernity.<sup>92</sup> I will focus on a Bengal perspective, but this is merely a quick view, based mainly on Sanjukta Sunderason’s writing on post-war Bengali modern art. Sunderason points out that after the second world war, the Bengal Famine of 1943 and the partition of 1947, a surge in figuration and images of the famished and the displaced came up in Indian Modern art that provided a sharp contrast with both the Bengal School’s Indian spiritualism, the use of folk motifs, and the focus on the idyllic village of and its aftermath (Sunderason 2011). In addition to the rejection of the Bengal School, Kolkata artists came to reject abstract formalism as well. Sunderason states that while some artists, caught up in the euphoria of the new nation-state of post-independence India, leaned towards formalist modernism, this soon changed in the political turbulences of the 1960s-70s, particularly in West Bengal. The Naxalbari uprising, the student protests, and the agrarian revolt, brought back an emphasis of “iconographies of violence and wounds” (Ibid. 254). And on a national level, The Sino-India War, the national emergency of 1974, laid bare, as Sunderason argues, “the fissures in the postcolonial state, striking at the root of the modernist dream of nationhood.” A wider continued economic decline and urban chaos in post-independence Calcutta prompted a rejection of individual formalism in favor of an engagement with the social context. “The search for form became entwined with the crisis of the everyday”, Sunderason states, and artists in Calcutta turned towards “the grotesque, the surreal, and the existential” (Ibid. 255).<sup>93</sup> Sunderason focuses on a material language of “rough realism”, where a preference for the rough, for cuts and dents, what she calls wounds, was combined with a preference for figuration. To describe these ‘wounds’ Sunderason focuses on the work by Somnath Hore, who’s works – lithographs, etchings, intaglio prints, paper pulp series and bronze sculptures – “reflect the corporeality of violence” (Ibid. 249). Hore’s sharp incisions and gashes on the surface work towards an expressionist abstraction

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<sup>92</sup> Partha Mitter has pointed out that the Bengal School’s primitivism was essentially different from Europe’s variety of primitivisms. Whereas western artists were primarily concerned with the predicament of urban existence, Indian artists used strategies of primitivism against colonial culture (Mitter 2007, 12).

<sup>93</sup> Parish Sen (1918-2008) and Jogen Choudhury (1939) made satirical works through caricature and fantastic exaggerations of the human form. In the work of Somnath Hore (1921-2006) the abstract became “a text for the wounded corporeality of violence”, and artists like Bijon Chowdhury (1931), Nikhil Biswas (1930-66), and Robin Mondol (1929), distorted and dislocated figures in a “motif of struggle and conflict, creating once more physiognomies of pain and alienation” (Sunderason 2011, 255).

of trauma, Sunderason quotes Hore: “I remember seeing the metal plate in nitric acid, and the bubbles of anger, making wounds on the metal. I thought this was a most appropriate means to express my own ideas, by this etching process” (Hore in Ibid. 248-249).

The theories and histories discussed above provide some context, but I found it difficult to make clear connections with Chander Haat’s art practices. The works of an artist like Somnath Hore does bear some resemblances, applied to a different medium, to Chander Haat’s installations of cut and burned surfaces, but the artists did not explain their material practice with words such as “anger” and “wounds” of which Hore speaks. What is more, the artists of Chander Haat neither place themselves within nor against a particular tradition. Talking with them about their works a wide variety of topics came up, ranging from class struggle, the decay and transformation of the city, the environment, public and private space, and the condition of the urban poor.

Instead of tracing a historical line from Bengal modern art practices to the works of Chander Haat, I will take a perspective that places rough and smooth surfaces within the current social context of Kolkata. The use of labels such as ‘primitivism’, ‘rough’, ‘smooth’, or ‘realist’ risk placing artworks into a stylistic category rather than describe the ways artworks are part of a social context and a ritual process of transformation (see chapter 2). Han’s and Burke’s preferences for respectively ‘rough’ and ‘smooth’ surfaces can be seen as divergent, but they have more in common as might at first sight appears; they both make a binary opposition between the smooth and the rough. Han and Burke both attach intrinsic properties to rough and smooth surfaces and treat them as universal ideal types, thereby dividing rough and smooth surfaces from their social context. After making this opposition they choose the one they prefer, Burke the smooth and Han the rough. Instead of seeing the smooth and the rough as gradual or, making more than two categories, they treat them as a binary opposition. I am not arguing against the emphasis of particular binary oppositions within the cultural practices of a given society and throughout the thesis I have highlighted several binary oppositions within works of art such as heavy/light (chapter 4.5) or *ghare/baire* (chapter 3.4, 5.2, 7.5) and I will use the smooth-rough contrast as well. Yet, I will argue that the artworks below embody the relation between the two and do not represent a preference for one or the other. Pan’s notion of primitivism as a reaction against the linear narrative of modern time and Sunderason’s discussion of rough etchings and ‘wounds’ as reactions to the struggles of everyday reality tainting the dream of modern India do inform the works described below, but I will argue that Chander Haat’s works are not only a critique of linear time and the aspirations of modernity, but reflect on the tensions of linear aspirational time by embodying a temporal transformation.

### 6.3 “An intangible web of maya”

Although the rough surfaces in Chander Haat’s artworks resonate with earlier art traditions in Bengal, India and abroad, the artists do not mark out a defined position within the field of art; there are no manifestoes written, they do not express a particular political affiliation nor follow a singular circumscribed philosophy. The avoidance of political affiliations or ideologies is, as seen in previous chapters, quite common among *contemporary* artists in Kolkata, but in addition to this relative ideological non-commitment the artists of Chander Haat do not stress their choice of medium. Like the artists discussed in the previous chapters the artists of Chander Haat explore a variety of new media such as installation art and site-specific art, yet unlike several other artists described in the thesis (See chapter 3, 4 and 5), the artists from Chander Haat do not position themselves clearly against a particular tradition and seem less concerned with breaking out of established art practices. When I asked Bhabatosh the question by what he is influenced – a leading question that assumes an art-historical line of influence – he referred to his migrant background, and his general experiences in life:

A lot of what I have learned, I learned from nature, from life. I have seen life from very close by. [...] I was in Bangladesh and from there I received a lot of anger/rage, from there I got inspiration, not that much from the outside I saw, I didn’t come from contemporary art practice, but all the time my practice came from myself. Really in my own way I did all of the practice. Therefore, for me there is not any artistic icon by whom I am influenced, I’m actually not influenced, nobody made a big influence on me.

Although Bhabatosh was trained in ‘western painting’ at Government Art College, and has seen ‘international *contemporary* art’, during his visit to the Venice Biennale with Probir and Pradeep, he also stresses his detachment from the field of *contemporary* art. Next to his emphasis on being an outsider, he stresses spontaneity and change in his work: “I often make what comes up from myself. Therefore, there is change happening (...) you take any connection there is no fixation.” Pradeep, who paints, makes small sculptures, large installations and site-specific works, and makes *pandals*, makes a similar argument; in his private studio close to Chander Haat, which he uses mainly for small sculptural works and paintings, Pradeep talks about the work he made for the Gurusaday Dutt exhibition:

I think our practice, the medium, is not a barrier. Actually we have learned from anywhere, explored ourselves what is our own medium. In that way we can say that installation art is not only western, maybe it is a western medium but (...) when I made a public toilet in last project that time I didn’t think it is any kind of influence of a European style or American style, I think it is very common, common Kolkata, it is typical Kolkata style, the texture and color. Even though

the green, I think it is from the British, maybe British or any other part of Europe. I put some phone numbers on it I put some drawings on it and I allow everybody their desire, whatever they want to.



*Figure 6.5*

Above: the interior of the Pradeep's artwork "public toilet", or "restroom." Below: a façade at Rabindra Sarani, formerly Chitpur Road, in North Kolkata.



Instead of opposing his work against an earlier generation or a particular style Pradeep looks at Kolkata as his main point of reference. The materials the artists of Chander Haat use for their artworks are not just rough; often they are local and natural materials or otherwise mimic such materials. This might indicate a deliberate emphasis on a local identity combined with an environmental awareness and an avoidance of materials that are considered to be 'un-natural'. Tarun told me that an important reason is that natural materials, like clay or bamboo, are cheaply available and furthermore stressed the importance of the environment. The label "environmental art" they use to describe their art practices, the location of Chander Haat with its beautiful garden on the edge of the city, and their use of natural materials suggest a pronounced critique and distance from the urban environment and seem to resonate with the philosophy Tagore materialized with his art department in Santiniketan. However, even if most of the materials the artists are working with are organic, such as wood and bamboo, hemp, or straw, or otherwise materials that are unprocessed natural materials, such as unfired clay, there are many artworks that are at least partly made with iron or fiberglass and other materials that would contradict a purely environmental approach.

This concern for the environment combined with a flexibility with regard to the use of 'natural materials' can be seen in other art groups as well. It is for example expressed in PI's attitude towards the use of vinyl. Taufik says he does not like the strict limitation to natural materials practiced in Badal Sarkar's 'third theatre' (see chapter 5), yet does stress that they (PI) prefer to use organic materials. Taufik:

We never wanted to use much of vinyl, in posters. Because, we are concerned with this, that now you find that every political parties, almost every theatre group, film, even in art exhibitions, they do massive huge posters printed out on vinyl sheet, but somehow, we try to resist that vinyl thing (...) In the last few years its becoming a problem these vinyl hoardings and boards that come up barring your sights (...) So much vinyl, it has become an environmental hazard, its changing the environment of the city. The air gets barred, its turning into rubbish, into garbage, choking the river. So, we try to avoid these plastic materials unless some artist really wants to use it, makes a point. That is the way for us, like that we try to negotiate with the material.

PI's avoidance of vinyl does not mean an outright dismissal. At the third *Kipaf* (Kolkata International Performance Art Festival) a visiting artist used a vinyl printout with a poem of Tagore printed on it. As Taufik recalls: "she used this vinyl print out, she had a poem from Tagore, printed on it. And she performed one thing. She said she was using vinyl because these vinyl print outs, after the use of it, they become the property of the people on the street and they use that for their roofs. So, she has that angle that vinyl is basically for poor people". Taufik is not against this use and told me that they are not as strict on materials as *Crack*, an art group



in Kushtia, Bangladesh “They are very specific that they won’t allow any material to be brought from the outside (...) they will use rural materials only. So that situation is different in *Kīpaf*, or in Kolkata, it’s a city (...) we had this gallop going on with *Crack*, what is this rural thing, how can you isolate the rural condition from the present condition, overall condition?”

Both Taufik and the artists of Chander Haat avoid a strict separation between ‘culture’ and ‘nature’. The artworks discussed in this chapter do not so much express a search for a local identity, such as an Indian or Bengali essence, or a romantic return to nature. The works express a more associative engagement with the contemporary local environment of the artists, that is, with present-day Kolkata. Pradeep’s restroom, for example, is made out of a variety of materials, such as wood, textile, paper and a ceramic found object (a toilet bowl) and Pradeep does not seem to emphasize natural materials. Instead of searching for an escape from the urban his work and the materials he uses in his work engage with the specific urban environment of Kolkata. Although Pradeep uses a lot of wood, his ‘restroom’ does not stress the ‘natural character’ of wood; he uses a green painted wood that is part of the urban environment of Kolkata. This can be seen in Raju’s work of a column he made for the Gurusaday Dutt exhibition as well. Raju used clay to make the body for a fiberglass mold, with visible pleasure he throws lumps of clay against the pillar. The column is painted red and given the appearance of an old column; the smooth plaster of the column is almost entirely eroded and reveals the red bricks underneath. During the exhibition the column was hung horizontally on the museum’s façade near the entrance of the exhibition together with a fabricated crane hook and chains to suggest the demolition of colonial heritage. After the exhibition the column was hung on the outer wall of the Chander Haat studio where it was initially made.



*Figure 6.6*

Above left: Raju (right) adding clay to his column, in the background Mallika's iron and clay work for the same exhibition. Above right: making a fiberglass mold of the column. Below left. view of the column before painting in the garden of Chander Haat. Below right: the column hanging on the outer wall of the studio after the exhibition.

Pradeep's colonial green restroom or Raju's redbrick column resonate with the green woodwork and red bricks of colonial era buildings in Kolkata. Many of these building's façades, also the ones in the administrative center of the city, are partially overgrown with weeds and in a bad state of preservation. Pradeep's restroom, Raju's hanging column, and Bhabatosh's M80 chicken speak to middle-class aspirations, the promises and failures of modernity, and to modernity as a waiting room (see Chakrabarty 2008; Jeffrey 2010). But, next to the use of elements that signify aspirational modernity – M80, column, restroom - the works are made of materials that have become part of Kolkata's lived environment; immersed in the yearly monsoons, covered with weeds, rusting, eroding and rotting, surfaces that once were part of the materiality of progress, of Calcutta's 'smooth surfaces', have become part of Kolkata's natural

lifecycles. Materials used in Chander Haat that are not in the strict sense ‘natural’ are nonetheless in various ways incorporated in the lifecycles of Kolkata and express a materiality of both progress and decay. The use of ‘natural’ materials, such as clay, and bamboo, are on a par with materials such as colonial green and rust, as these materials are all part of Kolkata’s lifecycles; they are all, as I will argue below, vital materials.



*Figure 6.7*

Left: demolition works in the city centre. Right: partly overgrown colonial building at B.B.D. Bagh (Dalhousie square), the administrative centre of the State Government.

In chapter 1 I have discussed two approaches for understanding the making of a new artwork as part of the wider ritual cycle of *contemporary* art.<sup>94</sup> I have discussed the making of new artworks as a negation of canonical orders by means of a criticism of conventional art forms and the creation of something ambiguous; by negating canonical orders and creating something that does not have a circumscribed meaning artists reach for a higher order of Art. For all the artworks described thus far I have followed this approach. In *Bite! Bite! Bite!* (2.8) I have described the making of new artworks as a return to ‘the here and now’ or ‘the everyday’. Following

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<sup>94</sup> See 2.9 for a summary of the ritual cycle of *contemporary* art.

Maurice Bloch's description of the Orokaiva initiation ritual and his theory of vitality I have suggested that the making of *contemporary* art can, in addition to a reaching for a sacred higher order, also be seen as return to the here and now, what Hubert and Mauss called "desacralization" (Hubert and Mauss 1899, 57). Although these two approaches are difficult to untangle in practice as they are both ritual renewals, the artworks described in this chapter lend themselves better to an emphasis on vitality instead of ambiguity. Rather than attempting to make something that is new, something that has not been made before, the artists engage with the sources of renewal in their surroundings. This does not mean that the artworks are less '*contemporary*', but rather it means that they have a different approach to accomplish ritual renewal. Instead of focusing on the disruption of a canonical order and on the creation of ambiguity, I will focus on the renewal of art through an engagement with vitality.

Although Chander Haat emphasizes the importance of "environmental art" their artworks do not simply engage with a natural environment. Instead of a return towards 'nature' their artworks express a return towards vitality. The return towards vitality is not a return to an origin or a state of pristine nature, but rather, as Bloch has argued, a ritual return to life. As I have argued in chapter 2, rituals accomplish a movement away from the here and now, from the vitality of life, and make a relation to a higher order by a symbolic act of violence. Yet this sacralization is followed by a desacralization; the things or people that undergo these spatiotemporal transformations cannot stay in this sacred sphere and have to make a return to the reproductive sources of life (see chapter 2.8). Whereas the source of reproductive vitality in the Orokaiva initiation ritual is clearly situated in domestic pigs, the sources of vitality are much less clearly defined in the works of art under consideration; I will not write a comprehensive account of the potential sources of vitality in Kolkata, but instead will unfold some ways by which Chander Haat's artworks are physically part of the lifecycles that connect the city with ecologies and cosmologies that extend beyond the city. The river, Ganga, is of central importance here; many materials used in the artworks grow close to the river, are gathered from the riverbanks, such as clay, or arrive by river. I will focus on two of the most common materials used by the artist of Chander Haat, bamboo and unfired clay.

Bamboo and clay cannot be simply regarded as belonging to 'nature'; they are part of particular ecosystems in which humans play a large role. The use of unfired clay in the works of *contemporary* art should not be seen as a mere convenient and 'natural' material, but has to be seen in the context of the wide variety of usages and connotations of unfired clay in Kolkata and Bengal. As Moumita Sen writes, clay is ubiquitous in Bengal and is used in a wide range of economic, social and religious practices (Sen 2015, 13; See also Glassie 1997). Although unfired clay products are not as widespread as they used to be, they are still part of everyday life in Kolkata.

An example is the use of unfired clay for teacups that you throw away after use. Although they are now partly displaced by plastic and paper cups, the use of clay cups (*bhaar*) at the many tea stalls in the city is still pervasive. Another widespread use of unfired clay in Kolkata is the making of sculptures (*murtis*) for the many religious festivals held in the city. The *murtis* of a wide variety of gods and goddesses such as Kali, Saraswati, or Durga crowd the city's markets before their festivals start and will form the centerpiece of the many private and public shrines in the city for the duration of the festivals. The *murtis* are made by applying layers of unfired clay combined with straw on an armature of bamboo, wood and rope. All these materials are biodegradable and the *murtis* are not built to last. As Sen points out, the ephemerality of unfired clay is an important factor in their omission from art historical discourse, a topic I will discuss below. What is more, the ephemerality of unfired clay is crucial for its function within the wide ritual framework of the religious festivals. As Stephen Inglis writes: 'Clay is the medium of the worship of the ephemeral' (In Doniger 2014, 516). This becomes apparent in the festival of the most popular goddess of Kolkata; on the last day of Durga Puja, the many *Durga murtis* of Kolkata are put in the back of a truck, driven round in the *para* (neighbourhood), and taken to the river where the clay and straw of which she is made return to their place of origin. Much has changed in the rituals of immersion yet despite such changes the cyclical ritual of immersion has been strongly defended and continues on a large scale (Sen 2015; Guha-Thakurta 2015).<sup>95</sup>

Unfired clay from the Ganga is not only a cheap and recyclable material for the construction of *murtis*, but draws its significance from the life-giving and life-taking force of Ganga itself. As Diana Eck writes, the Ganga - flowing from the Himalayas, gathering tributaries, streaming across the fertile plains of north India - is beyond her topological width regarded as the source of all sacred waters everywhere in India and is referred to as *Ganga Mata* (Mother Ganga) or *Ganga Devi* (goddess Ganga). The waters of Ganga Mata are not just coming from the highest mountains, but are said to be from the highest heaven, emerging from the foot of Vishnu and caught in the hairs of Shiva, before crashing onto earth. Ganga gives life, but as the many *ghats* along the river demonstrate, Ganga is the entryway into heaven as well.<sup>96</sup> As Eck writes: "The Ganga, having made the crossing from heaven to earth, has become a place of crossing from earth to heaven, both for the living and the dead" (Eck 2012, 140). Unfired clay - gathered from the riverbanks, molded into a lifelike shape, and given back to the river after the festival - is not only vital because of its moldable quality; it is vital because it embodies the river's powers of creation and dissolution of life. The use of unfired clay in an artwork does not simply refer to

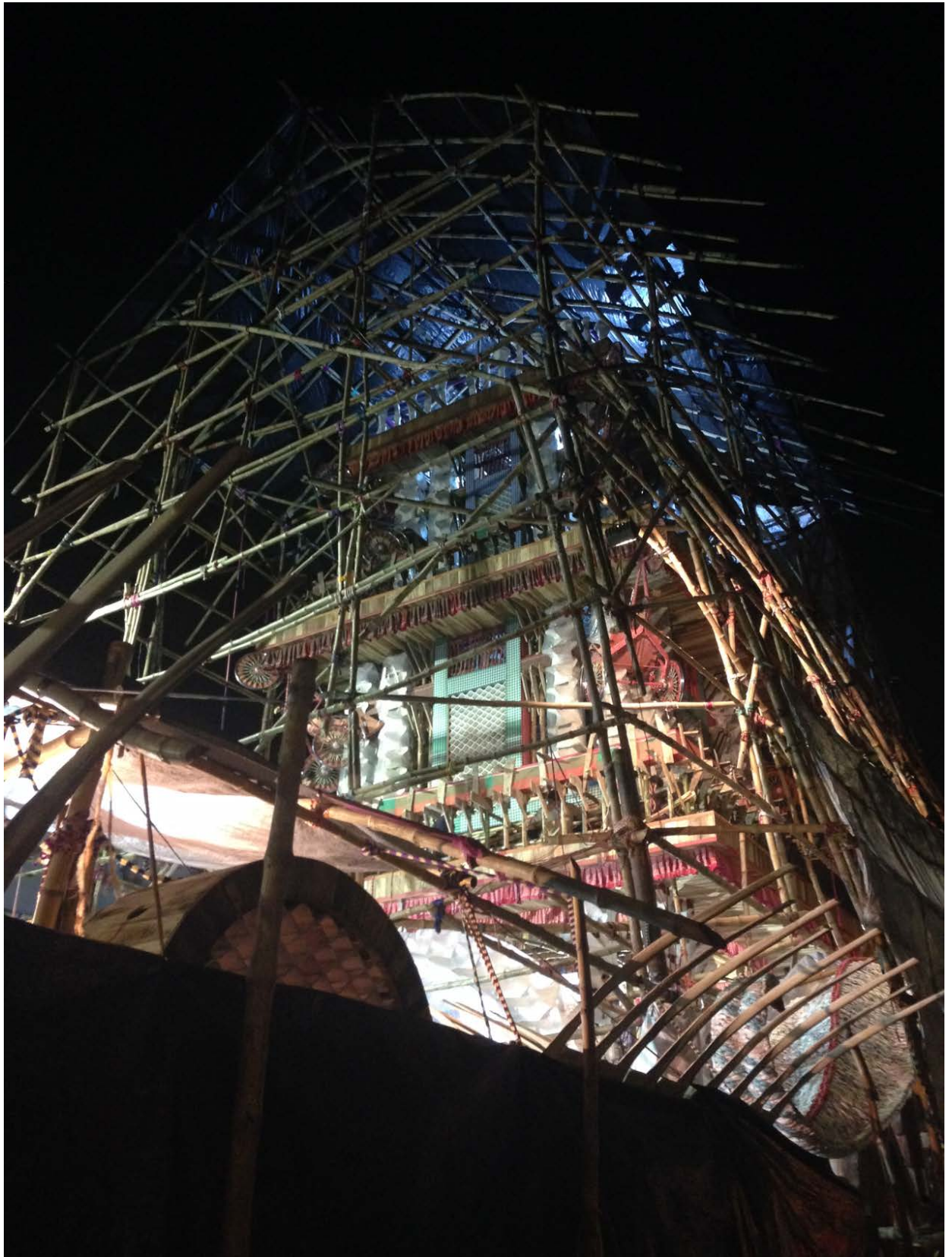
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<sup>95</sup> The most prominent change is the use of large cranes to merely dip the goddess in the river, take her out quickly again, and place her on a pile of waste, to protect the Ganga from pollution.

<sup>96</sup> A *ghat* is a landing place or bank along a river or coast, with steps descending into the water. They are used for bathing, washing, and a variety of religious rituals; places where worshippers can relate to the divine, while living at the bathing *ghats*, or after death when people are cremated in the burning *ghats*.

nature or Ganga Mata, or the importance of clay in Kolkata's economy; it sediments a variety of potential meanings that are part of both ecological and cosmological lifecycles. Although not everyone has to make such associations when viewing a *contemporary* artwork partly made from unfired clay, the artists from Chander Haat, who make *murtis* of unfired clay for Durga Puja, are not only aware of the richness of unfired clay, their livelihoods depend on it.

Bamboo is another material used by Chander Haat artists that, more than simply a 'natural' material, is entangled in the Kolkata's economy and infrastructure in various ways. Dipankar Ghorai and Himadri Sekhar Sen have made an analysis of the post-harvest distribution of a type of bamboo (*Bambusa tulda* or Bengal Bamboo) in Bengal. This bamboo is used in Kolkata for a wide variety of temporary constructions; such as the *pandals* made for religious festivals and the scaffolding for all kinds of buildings, including newly built high-rise buildings. The bamboo used in Kolkata comes mainly from the districts of Murshidabad, Midnapore and Nadia. After harvest around 10 to 15 thousand bamboo poles are tied together in a pattern called *chali*, placed in the river, and towed with a boat. A one-way journey from Murshidabad district via the river Jalangi or Churni and the Hooghly that leads to Kolkata (all branches of Ganga) can take as long as one and a half month (Ghorai and Sen 2014, 328). The bamboo is prone to degradation and needs to be treated. There are various mechanical and chemical treatments, but the cheapest and traditional method is soaking it in running water; by placing it in the river for 90 to 100 days the starch oozes out and dissolves in the water, making it less prone to mite attack and fungi rot (Ibid.). After this treatment bamboo is used in a wide variety of construction uses.



*Figure 6.8*

*Pandal* by Bhabatosh at Thakurpukur under construction; a few days before the opening, with the bamboo scaffolding still in place.

Clay and bamboo play a fundamental role in the construction of buildings, from apartment blocks to smooth surfaced shopping malls. But both clay and bamboo have to be worked upon before they can be used as such; clay has to be baked into bricks, and bamboo can be used for scaffolding and a variety of other purposes only after treatment. It is this relationship and transformation between the raw materials and the construction of the city that forms the core of Bhabatosh's large Durga Puja theme *pandal* at Thakurpukur. The theme *pandal*, built on the side of the road, had the shape of a large chariot temple, resembling the Konarak temple of *Surya* in Odisha, which is built in the form of chariot drawn by seven horses. The *pandal* chariot did not have horses, but the six large wheels of the chariot, two in front and four at the back, resembled the 24 stone wheels of the Konarak temple. The ground plan of the *pandal* roughly followed the general Hindu temple design, starting low with a gallery (*mandapa*) an inner sanctum (*garbagriha*) and a tower (*viamana* and *shikhara*) built on top of the inner sanctum. For those not familiar with the *pandals* of Kolkata this might sound obvious, but the theme *pandals* of Kolkata take a wide variety of designs – such as palaces, forts, craft villages, prehistoric cave sites, an Egyptian Sphinx, or an imagined replica of the planned Tata Nano factory that never came to Bengal - and though the Durga *murti* is always placed in the back of the *pandal* in what can be regarded as the inner sanctum, the *pandal* designs do not generally simulate traditional temple architecture (Ghuha-Thakurta 2015, 51).

Explaining his work Bhabatosh told me that the construction of the city depends on laborers. The city depends on the poor people and the spine symbolizes that, it carries the weight of progress.<sup>97</sup> A large spine made of textile vertebrates ran lengthwise over the installation and a wide variety of materials expressed the relation to the labor force: within the chariot there were hoes, cement bags, iron rods, workers' towels (*gamcha*), bamboo, textile rags, and bricks - all materials used in construction labor. Bhabatosh's Durga, as always in the back of the *pandal*, contrasted with many other Durga *murtis* across the city, including the Durga of his other *pandal* of the same year at the Chetla Agrani Club; instead of being portrayed as a richly adorned superior goddess, she was portrayed as a village woman, carrying water from the river with two buckets attached to a pole on her shoulders, wearing sandals and a simple blue and green sari.

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<sup>97</sup> This idea of the people carrying the weight of the chariot also resonates with the idea of the common people as described by Sudipta Kaviraj: "Finally, when they pull the rope of the chariot of Lord Jagannath, the act itself, of pulling the chariot and making it move in the wanted direction, could not be accomplished except by a collective act that fuses their distinct individual efforts. None of these acts would closely and unproblematically fit the idea of the public in the strictly bourgeois modern Western sense" (Kaviraj 1997, 90).



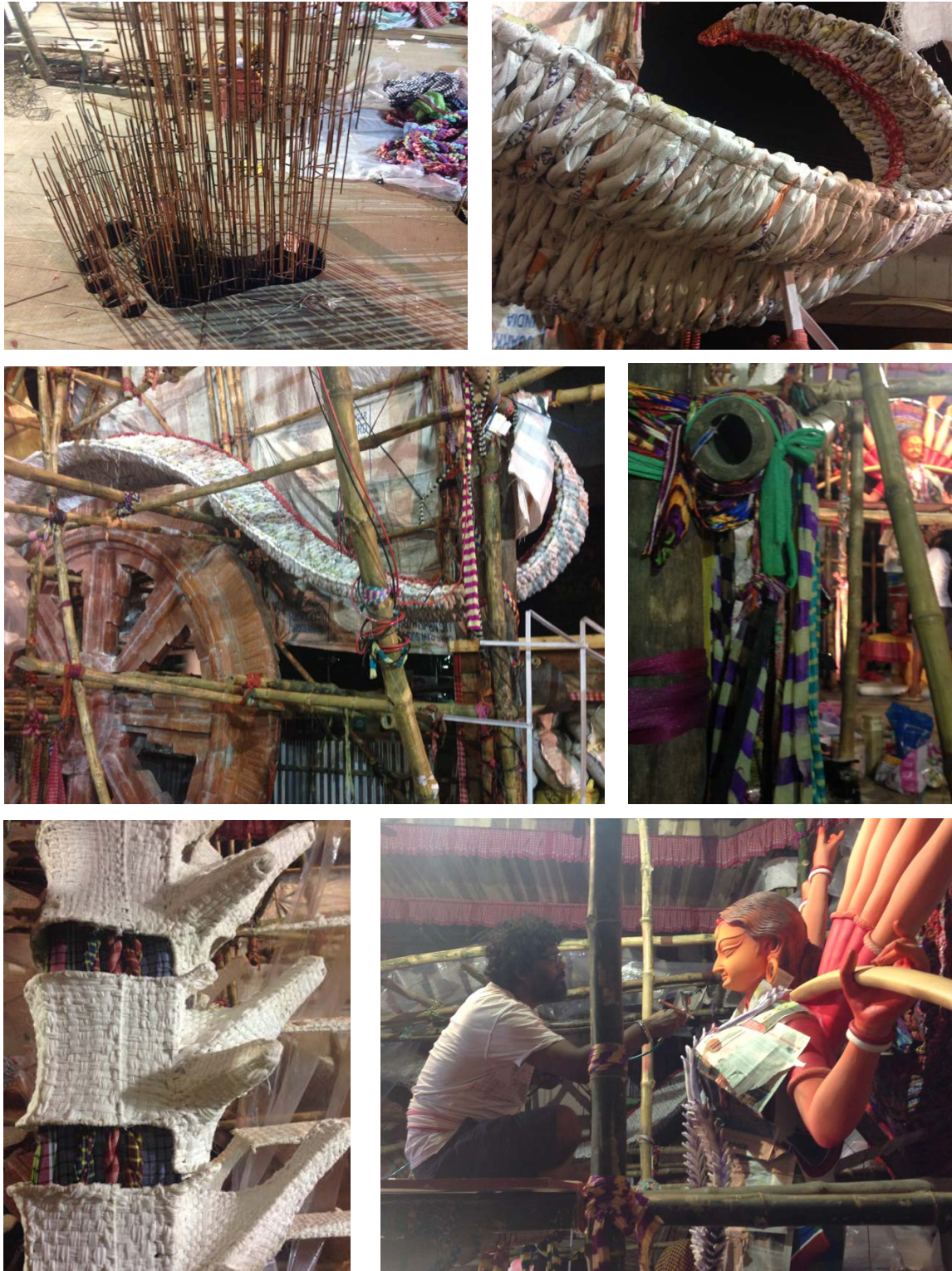
Bhabatosh made a difference between two *pandals* he made in 2016; the *pandal* at Chetla park club, headed by politician Firhad ‘Bobby’ Hakim<sup>98</sup>, was for him a normal *pandal*. He makes a split between puja *pandals* as they have been done before (such as the Chetla *Pandal*) and the possibility of a new kind of *pandal*, “this is not the end, but the beginning”. He asked me which *pandal* I liked more and was pleased to hear I preferred the Thakurpukur *pandal*: “I have been working for 17 long years. Doing the same thing, this way or that, have a look at the puja at Chetla Park, a *puja* is always like that. But parallelly people are accepting a new space. The way people acknowledged S.B. Park [Thakurpukur], some even said that they were having goosebumps, it can touch people’s hearts”.

In the middle of the *pandal*, cut out in the wooden floor, two footprints with on both sides of them two buckets, made from bamboo and connected to the spine with heavy ropes, echoed the image of the goddess carrying water. Inside the footprints and buckets there were red rusted iron-building rods pointing upwards; some of them singular rods, others welded into architectural shapes, drawing a relation between the soft soil and urban construction. The fiberglass of the chariot’s wheels was made to resemble clay bricks and their axes consisted of a bundle of real bamboo poles. Above the wheels there were large frames in the shape of buffalo horns – a reference to the buffalo demon (*Mahishasura*) killed by Durga - made from braided strokes of cement bags.

Next to the *pandal*’s various connotations with clay Bhabatosh used a lot of bamboo, as he does in many other works, both in his *contemporary* art works and his *pandals*. The bamboo is first of all needed for the larger framework of the *pandal*. Although part of the bamboo is used for scaffolding and is removed before the opening of the *pandal*, much bamboo stays as part of the structure of the *pandal*. Next to the structural required bamboo, Bhabatosh placed on top of the chariot single sticks of bamboo surrounded by a row fiberglass bones. The bamboo sticks seemed to grow out of the ceiling, reminiscent of the iron rods sticking out of buildings in the city awaiting a potential additional floor. Another play on bamboo and bones could be seen in the use of colourful textile rags connecting the vertebrates. Bamboo poles used for scaffolding are usually bound together with textile rags, leftovers from used saris or other clothes. The vertebrates that formed the spine were white but between the vertebrates Bhabatosh wrapped textile rags, making a visual parallel between bones and bamboo.

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<sup>98</sup> Member of the Trinamul Congress party. Currently mayor of Kolkata and West-Bengal minister of urban development and municipal affairs. The *pandal* was inaugurated by Mamata Banerjee, chief ministers of West-Bengal.



*Figure 6.9*

Thakurpukur *pandal*. Above left: a footprint cut in the wooden floor panel with red rusted iron rods. Right: braided cement bags in the shape of buffalo horns. Middle left: one wheel of the chariot, made of fiberglass bricks, topped by the buffalo horns. Right: detail of a bamboo joint connection tied with textile pieces. Below left: detail of the textile white vertebrates and braided sheets of colourful textile running underneath. Right: Bhabatosh working on the Durga *murti* a few days before the opening.

On the corners of the second and third floor of the temple tower Bhabatosh hung eight bicycle rickshaws. I interpreted this as a more personal touch, a reference to Bhabatosh's days pedaling a rickshaw, to his own journey towards becoming a famous maker of *pandals* in the city. But Bhabatosh's labor theme is not just a personal artistic choice, but relates to the infrastructure of the *pandal* in different ways. First, the surrounding area of the *pandal*, the southern neighbourhood Behala and the adjacent neighbourhood Sarsuna further away from the city, are rapidly changing; from the peripheral edge of the city into fully incorporated urban neighbourhoods. The choice for this theme therefore resonates with the urban change the wider southwest Kolkata area is going through. Second, a theme *pandal* is an artistic project, but it is a workforce project as well; a big *puja* artist, like Bhabatosh, employs for several months approximately 30 workers with a variety of skills for a single *pandal*, and he sometimes makes two or three *pandals* a year. And third, as Guha-Thakurta points out, the patronage of *pandal* making by the various small neighbourhoods (*paras*) in Kolkata is connected to the building industry, municipal regulation and governance in various ways (Guha-Thakurta 2015,17). The patrons of the Thakurpukur *pandal*, for example, own a real estate business and a successful prize winning *pandal* promotes their business and the development of their neighbourhood.

I will not explore these avenues, but instead move to a *contemporary* artwork in which Bhabatosh expressed a similar labor theme emphasizing lower-class laborers as the backbone for urban progress.<sup>99</sup> For the Gurusaday Dutt exhibition Bhabatosh made a large approximately life-sized sculpture of a horse, mostly of wood, with some iron bolts and rods. In place of the stallion's head there were iron bars sticking out of its neck and the horse had 6 wooden legs, four in the front and two at the back, and a long bronze painted branch reaching the floor as a seventh leg or phallus. On the back of the horse Bhabatosh placed a line of upstanding squares, each made out of four sticks. By repeatedly hacking them with large knives, the sticks' surfaces became cut and dented and looked, as Bhabatosh pointed out, like the sticks used for cutting fish by fishmongers. At Bengal markets fish is often cut with a upstanding curved blade rising out of a flat wooden base that is placed on the ground (*ansh-bonti*); the fish is placed against it and when the bones make it difficult to push the fish through the blade, a stick is used to hit the fish against the blade, cutting the fish including the bones, in pieces.<sup>100</sup> After regular use these fish hammers become cut and dented.

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<sup>99</sup> See Guha-Thakurta (2015) for the relationships between Durga Puja and real estate. Bhabatosh told me that his engagement with these patrons might also give him a good opportunity for finding good real-estate in the future.

<sup>100</sup> The *bonti* is commonly used kitchen tool used to cut herbs, vegetables, fish and meat and is traditionally used instead of knives. Often people use one *bonti* for herbs, fruit, and vegetables, and one for meat and fish. The *ansh* (fish scale) *bonti* is used for fish. Although the large *ansh-bonti* at fish markets are used by men, usually the *bonti*, as Chitrita Banerji (2006) writes, is used by woman in the household. Banerji writes that the *bonti* is generally associated with women.



*Figure 6.10*  
Bhabatosh and Chondon working on the horse sculpture.

Working in his studio Bhabatosh asked me if I understand what his work is about, I had to pass. A friend of Bhabatosh said that the *bonti* represents femininity and the hammer masculinity, but Bhabatosh didn't see it like that. As with the chariot *pandal* described above, Bhabatosh stressed the importance of the labor force for the development of the city. "The hammers are like joints", he said, "they symbolize the community" and the fish hammers made by Bhabatosh and his colleagues indeed resemble bones. Bhabatosh' exhibition explanation of his artwork, however points at something more than the toil of laborers:

The history of civilization is ever flowing. Nothing stops here. No restrooms are available here. There is no day or night. When I was a child, I used to see the marks of wet footprints on the ground, the rhythm of human life. Crossing the rivers and fields one reaches here, where the land is dry, where there are

no footprints. Only dust flies everywhere as one walks. What are you holding on to now, artist? I don't know, I can hear the sound of hooves of many horses, with a few extra legs after birth. Horses of eternity, I rode on them, felt happy, felt afraid. We shared stories, he told me how I could not stop, how walking forever is my only work to do, heard him talking about the other side of the horizon, I felt terrified, I stopped riding. Got down at the middle of the field. I just gave him a piece of time to carry, the cruel history of life, and few pair of extra legs to use when necessary.<sup>101</sup>

This writing seems to refer to his personal journey from a village in Bangladesh to Kolkata, from a place where he could see his wet footprints on the ground to the dry dusty streets of the city. This journey from the village to the city is not only a spatial change, but involves a shift of a perception of time as well. From a village, where people's futures are much more bound by caste and class, to an urban environment that not only provides opportunities to escape social confinements, but also expresses a narrative of progress and upward mobility. Bhabatosh has not only made the journey from a village to the city, but has largely overcome the limitations of his class. The move towards the city, as Ashish Nandy has argued (2001), is accompanied by both nostalgia for the village and a delusion of the progress of urban modernity. As Nandy makes clear, the difference between village and city is not simply about the village or city as different topological and political entities, but concerns the imagination of both the city and the village as ideal types. I will elaborate on the journey from the village to the city and the subsequent imagination of the village below, but first I will argue that Bhabatosh artwork, more than concerning manual labor as the backbone of urban progress, expresses a tension between the ideal types of the village and the city, between on the one hand being stagnant and stuck in time, yet close to home, and on the other hand being mobile and free yet with the risk of losing one's footing in the turbulent times of urban society. Such tensions can be verbally expressed by dichotomies such as the village and the city, the home and the world, or tradition and modernity, but the making of artworks involves an expression of the tension and transformation of the ideal types rather than siding with one or the other.

Key to the expression of this tension in Bhabatosh's work is the horse as a symbol of expansion and foreignness and the transformation from wet riverine land to dry land. I asked Bhabatosh whether his work resonates with the importance of the horse in Hindu mythology, but he said that it is not so much taken from mythology but more from his own personal feeling. The historical and mythological importance of the chariot and the horse in India might nevertheless

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<sup>101</sup> Translated from Bangla by Churni Bhaumik.

shed light on his work. As Wendy Doniger writes, horses in India represent political, military and economic power and are often associated with Kshatriyas or other rulers, particularly foreign rulers: “the tax-collector, or the punitive military expedition, rode into the village on horseback” (Doniger 2014, 443).<sup>102</sup> Horses are not native to India and are usually imported, generally from western and Central Asia. The horse is uncomfortable in the humid heat of the Indian plains; swampy in one season, hard and parched in another. And during the monsoon rains the horse’s hooves soften in the wet soil so that pieces break off resulting in painful sores. What is more, the grazing season lasts only from September to May and the best soil is usually reserved for the cultivation of grains and vegetables. Without extensive pasturage horses spend their lives in stables, are unable to exercise or develop strength and fitness, and have therefore always been imported into India (Doniger 2014, 440; 2009, 42).<sup>103</sup> For these reasons the horse “is always the foreigner in India, the invader and conqueror, and the history of the horse in India is the history of those who came to India and took power” (Doniger 2009, 42). Notwithstanding or perhaps due their foreignness, horses have played a central cultural role in India: “The paradox of the Hindu horse lies in its persistence as an image of glamour and power among people who could not afford to own horses” (Doniger 2014, 439). Despite the negative political associations, the religious symbol of the horse became embedded in folk traditions which remained also after the horses left the scene of political domination (Ibid. 448). Horses are worshipped all over India and in West Bengal clay horses used to be offered to all the village gods and particularly to the sun god (*Dharma Thakur*).<sup>104</sup>

The horse is not simply a straightforward symbol of foreign power from the perspective of Indian villagers, but represented an otherness that could be admired and coveted as well; the people who “recognize that the horse belongs to those who have political power may be worshipping the horse in order to gain some of the power for themselves” (Ibid. 450). More than a symbol of subjugation the horse is associated with going beyond boundaries. The symbolic significance of the horse as the crosser of boundaries is probably most clearly visible in the horse sacrifice of Vedic times.<sup>105</sup> But also without taking Vedic rituals into account, the

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<sup>102</sup>As Wendy Doniger writes: “Most of the peoples who entered India rode in on horseback and then continued to import horses into India: the people formerly known as Indo-Europeans (who brought their horses with them), the Turkish people who became the Mughals (who imported Arabian horses from Central Asia and Persia, overland and by sea) and the British (who imported thoroughbreds and hunters from England at first, and then Walers from Australia)” (Doniger 2014, 439).

<sup>103</sup> As Doniger points out, unlike cows, horses pull up the roots of the grass or eat it right down to the ground so that it doesn’t grow back quickly; the horse therefore has to search for new land (Doniger 2014, 439).

<sup>104</sup> Bengali parents used to offer clay horses when a child first crawled steadily on its hand and feet like a horse (Doniger 2010, 680; see also Kramrisch 1968, 57).

<sup>105</sup> In the Vedic horse sacrifice (*ashwamedha*) a consecrated white stallion was “set free” to wander for a year before he was brought back home and killed; a ritual enactment, Doniger writes, of the actual equine wandering typical of Vedic culture (Doniger 2010, 143). During that year the horse was guarded by an army that “followed” him and claimed for the king any land on which he grazed (Ibid. 144) As Doniger

horse appears in a wide variety of Hindu myths in which the horse is a mediator. Further allusions could be made to the Vedic myth of King Sagara's horse, which narrates a resolution of the opposing creative forces of fire and water, or to the seven-headed horse *Uchchaihshravas* that was created during the churning of the milk ocean, often described as the vehicle of *Surya* the sun god.<sup>106</sup>

Although these are all possible interpretations for those familiar with Hindu mythology, Bhabatosh creates an opposition between wetness and dryness, between interior and exterior that is more intuitive. As I wrote in chapter 1 and 2, art writing is never a mere objective description but does something with the artwork; it selects certain elements, embeds the work within an interpretative context, and enables the work's classification into art historical and societal narratives that transcend the work itself. By associating Bhabatosh's horse with mythological themes I attempt to show that his work resonates with a variety of narrative traditions, but such associations also form an interpretation that hovers above his work, bypasses its materiality, and ignores Bhabatosh's own assertion that his work is less concerned with mythology than his personal feeling. I will try to move a bit closer to the material aspects of the work.

With a gas burner Bhabatosh singed the wood of the horse, which, in combination with the multiple cuts and dents in of the horse's legs and the fish hammers, gave the wood an overall scorched and dry appearance. This involves not only a drying of the wood, but also a transformation from fish to horse. There is an interesting reversal taking place where the bones of the fish are cut by using the fish hammer and the fish hammers in the artwork come to symbolize the bones of the community. Fish is the most important source of protein for Bengalis and both West Bengal and Bangladesh are known for their rich variety of river fish recipes. Fish in Bengal is usually served with bones, and Bengalis do not seem bothered to eat bony fish, such as the popular hilsa (*ilish*), and can impressively chew through and swallow the smaller bones. A very popular saga in Bengal, the story of the snake goddess Manasa, on which I will elaborate in the next chapter, tells of Behula who wants to bring her husband Lakshmindar, bitten by a snake, back to life. But to do this she has to collect his bones, and a large boal fish (a type of catfish) has swallowed some of his bones. The fish is cut open and with twigs and bones

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points out the Vedic Indian horse owners used the word *amhas* ('constriction') from which our word 'anxiety' comes, to express the terror of being hemmed in or trapped, unable to roam around with their horses in foreign lands and used the word *prithu* (broad and wide) for earth (*prithivi*, feminine form) and the name of the first king whose job it was to widen the boundaries of his territory (Doniger 2014, 439-440 *Shatapatha Brahmana of the White Yajur Veda* 3.8.1.15)

<sup>106</sup>The disappearance of King Sagara's horse in the ocean, the quest to find the horse by Sagara's sons, who were subsequently burned to ashes by the sage Kapila, and the ultimately successful attempt to bring Ganga to earth by his grandson Anghsuman to save Sagara's sons present the horse, according to Doniger, as a central mediating force between the elements of water and fire.

Lakshmindar is brought back to life; reunited they go to heaven. In a similar way Bhabatosh's play with fish hammers and bones treats fish as a local source of vitality, not merely nutritious, but the source of the regeneration of life. Similar to the Orokaiva's transformation from domestic pigs into birds (see 2.8), a transformation is made from fish to horse; the killing of fish and the consumption of its bones contributes to the building of the horse that extends beyond the here and now. Bhabatosh creates an opposition and transformation from wetness to dryness, from wood to iron bolts and bars, from a local source of vitality to a supra-local association of the horse, a spatiotemporal transformation from a local source of vitality extending outwards. The act of cutting and burning is not just to create an aesthetic outcome; it is the acting out of a transformation between a selected vital source within society and a selected element of otherness beyond the here and now, in this case the "Horses of eternity" extending outwards, "where there are no footprints".

In my analysis of Bhabatosh's artwork and many other artworks in this thesis I extract and highlight oppositional pairs. These pairs are however not always clearly marked by the artist and relying on them too much risks simplifying complex artistic practices. However, applying a structuralist method that focuses on binary oppositions, as practiced by Claude Lévi-Strauss, can be useful; as long as the binary oppositions are not treated as universals, but are studied within a particular social and ritual context and given meaning within this context. Lévi-Strauss's writings on the opposition and transformation from honey to tobacco or from raw to cooked in his mythology series (Lévi-Strauss 1967 and 1973) should not be seen as essential binary pairs that can be taken out of context and applied somewhere else, neither do they correspond to a universal separation between nature and culture. The question I want to pose is not whether there is a more universally applicable truth to particular binary oppositions, but rather how artists choose certain materials from their surroundings, place them in opposition with each other, and play with such oppositions through inversions and transformations.<sup>107</sup> As Descola writes "there is nothing automatic or predictable in the way that a society selects certain aspects of its habitat and endows them with a particular meaning" (Descola 2004, 104).

The oppositions found in the artworks do not 'stand for' one issue; it is too simple to say that the horse 'stands for' urban civilization and the fish hammers for the village or the home. It is not the case that, for example, rough surfaces represent the lower classes and smooth surfaces

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<sup>107</sup> Lévi-Strauss is sometimes accused of creating a dichotomy between nature and culture. However, as Descola points out, Lévi-Strauss wrote in the second edition of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* that the opposition between nature and culture is "neither a primeval fact, nor a concrete aspect of universal order. Rather it should be seen as an artificial creation of culture" (1969b: 29 in Descola 2009, 109).



the aspirations of the middle-classes. Rather, the tension between rough and smooth surfaces within an artwork resonates with the urban tension between the weathered and crumbling buildings of the city on the one hand, and the smooth AC environments with white painted facades of concrete, glass and steel promising yet again a better tomorrow, on the other. As Boris Wiseman writes, “the key insight [concerning the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss] is that differences apprehended in the sensible world, for example between one kind of bird and another, are used to ‘think’ differences of another kind: religious, ideological, social, etc.” (Wiseman 2009, 299). The oppositions within the artworks described above are used to ‘think through’ tensions within a variety of fields, such as the tensions between the village and the city, the local and the global, tradition and modernity, low class and middle class, or nature and urban development. In the hand of an artist the oppositions between rough/smooth, inside/outside or wet/dry turn into playful material oppositions by which the artist connects with various layers of the world, rather than represents ‘the world’.

This cultural play, what Lévi-Strauss called *pensée sauvage* (wild thought), involves the varied selection of materials from the surroundings of the cultural actors, the binary opposition of such selections within a cultural medium such as myths or artworks, but also a potential superseding of the binary character of such oppositions through transformation, inversion, or adding a third act or element. By choosing something from the sensible surroundings that has an intrinsic potency for transformation, artists can facilitate the transformation of a binary pair. Because materials such as bamboo and clay have two different states – unfired and baked, untreated and treated - they lend themselves well for artworks that express a transformation. Fire plays an important role in catalyzing this transformation. In many rituals fire is used to assist a transformation from living to death, or to a state beyond the cycles of life and death, and makes a connection with the above as smoke rises up to heaven.<sup>108</sup> The frequent use of fire by the artists of Chander Haat enacts such a transformation as well; by cutting and burning they transform raw, vital and perishable materials associated with water, and more specifically with the live giving water of the Ganga, into dry materials that are permanent and void of life, beyond process and ageing. Whereas the Orokaiva initiation ritual accomplished a transformation from mortal pigs to bird spirits that are considered beyond life and death (2.8), the works of Bhabatosh described above accomplish a transformation that points to a place where as Bhabatosh writes, “the land is dry”. This transformation resonates with the

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<sup>108</sup> Such rituals are commonly known as rituals of sacrifice, but I do not see the making of artworks a ‘rituals of sacrifice’. The category of rituals of ‘sacrifice’ is just like ‘initiation’ or ‘possession’ rituals an invention of anthropologists studying rituals in particular contexts and is not a useful tool for a cross-cultural analysis of rituals. As Bloch writes: “Such definitions are always rooted in a specific cultural tradition, whether that of the author or of the people he writes about, and are therefore inadequate for cross-cultural analysis. They may be used provisionally, as convenient pointers, but if their application is stretched beyond that they become arbitrary” (Bloch 1991, 2).

transformation of unfired clay into baked clay bricks and the harvest and treatment of bamboo for the support of more permanent structures of the city, but the transformation hints at something that goes beyond the city as well “on the other side of the horizon.”

Next to such transformations from one element to another element in an oppositional pair, adding a third act or element can supersede the binary pair. Pradeep’s ‘restroom’ with its colonial green wooden panels that are partly burned and plastered and adorned with torn pictures of women and political caricatures looks weathered and dirty, the toilet pot itself however is a shiny white ceramic toilet decorated with red velvet cushions. The text accompanying Pradeep’s ‘restroom’ artwork, reads as follows:

Public toilet is a common space where a person possesses oneself personally for a brief period of time. The space gives birth to the language of a new space as the person starts engaging with his wishes (fantasies), searching his suppressed desires. The outer and the inner gets interconnected in an intangible web of maya. In this work I tried to create a third space where these two spaces transform into a comfort zone, thereby giving birth to a new language....<sup>109</sup>



Figure 6.11

Left: Visitor at the Gurusaday Dutt exhibition trying out the restroom of Pradeep. Middle: During KIPAF a performer used Pradeep’s work for his performances. After the Gurusaday exhibition several of the artworks were placed in the garden of Chander Haat. Right: A street dog named *Kalo* (black) who has been adopted by the members of Chander Haat. *Kalo* inspects the artwork

The opposition between the rough and parched colonial-green panels and the smooth shining white ceramic resonates, as I see it, with the tensions between the aspirations and delusions of ‘India shining’, it expresses the hopes and desires of the aspiring lower-classes to enjoy the

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<sup>109</sup> Translated from Bangla by Churni Bhaumik.

comforts of a middle-class life, contrasted with an everyday corrupt and flawed reality. Yet, the work entails more than this opposition. This opposition, presented as the restroom of modernity, is covered by a *mandap* and the text mentions an interconnection of the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’. The *mandap* above the toilet cabin is a textile awning, normally used as to protect deities against the sun or the rain, generally associated with the roof of a temple hall or shrine and used in a variety of Hindu rituals. The work places something literally above the oppositions expressed in the artwork. What does Pradeep mean by “the inner and the outer that gets interconnected in an intangible web of *maya*”? *Maya*, as Heinrich Zimmer writes, is a creation or display of forms, and can be seen as an illusion, trick, an illusionary image or apparition, it can also be a diplomatic trick or political artifice designed to deceive. But more generally *maya* refers to the changing reality of the world, the world in flux. The *maya* of the gods is their power to take on different forms, “aspects of their subtle essence”. Yet this *maya* is part of a greater *maya* that produces the gods as well as the entire universe (Zimmer 1972, 24-25). This greater *maya* is not so much the appearance of reality but that which gives appearance to reality, the eternal and changeless creative power (*maya-shakti*) that creates the elusive, ever-changing, ever-returning cycles (*samsara*) of reality. *Maya* is, as Zimmer writes, “at once effect (the cosmic flux), and cause (the creative power)” (ibid. 25).<sup>110</sup> In my reading, Pradeep’s reference to the “intangible web of *maya*”, concerns the *maya* as creative power, the *maya-shakti*, that cannot be touched, the creative force behind the apparent opposites of *maya* of illusion. Pradeep’s ‘restroom’ creates a third space to reflect on the illusory oppositional appearance of reality, a place where people can briefly escape from their desires and despairs that accompany the linear temporality of modernity. A similar idea is expressed in Bhabatosh’s text accompanying his horse artwork. Although the work itself presents a transformation from wet to dry, vital to permanent, his accompanying text speaks of getting off the horse “at the middle of the field”, and letting the horse graze for a moment giving him “a piece of time to carry.”

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<sup>110</sup> Zimmer writes: “Maya is Existence: both the world of which we are aware, and ourselves who are contained in the growing and dissolving environment, growing and dissolving in our turn. At the same time, Maya is the supreme power that generates and animates the display: the dynamic aspect of the universal Substance. Thus it is at once, effect (the cosmic flux), and cause (the creative power). In the latter regard it is known as Shakti, ‘Cosmic Energy’” (Zimmer 1972, 25).

#### 6.4 Nostalgic sidesteps

When work is done, people gather under the *Krishnachura* tree or on the veranda, smoke a *biri*, drink a tea and chat. In the evenings some artists, usually the senior artists, gather in Bhabatosh's office to play chess, talk, and drink whiskey. When not making art the members of Chander Haat take their time to cook together, hold *adda*<sup>111</sup>, sing songs, and every year they go all together to the countryside to have a picnic. Staying for some weeks at their residency I came to realize that for them as a community their pastime activities are as important as their art. Their joint meals at Chander Haat, their picnics in the countryside, their *adda* evenings filled with banter, discussions and singing, are pastime activities that seemed more than separated leisure activities that provide an escape from daily urban life. Singing, for example, is for many Bengalis, especially in cultural circles, a cherished pastime practice. Several *contemporary* artists in Kolkata, such as Nirmal Malick (Chander Haat), Saumik Chakraborty (Khoj Kolata) and Manash Acharya (Studio21), are good singers and spending an evening with artists in Kolkata often ends with one or several people singing Bengali songs. The songs - many of them composed by Rabindranath Tagore and referred to as *Rabindra sangeet* - frequently chant the love of the Bengali countryside. The idealization of village life and Bengal's riverine landscapes expressed in *Rabindra sangeet* is echoed in trips of Kolkata's inhabitants to the countryside. To go out into countryside and muse about the landscape is a pastime pleasure for many Bengalis. In 2016 I joined the artists of Chander Haat - with a group of around 20 people, the artists their wives and children - on a picnic. All together on a rented bus we drove for three hours and found, close to a roadside restaurant, a good open place to sit in the planted eucalyptus forest - a species introduced into Bengal relatively recently<sup>112</sup> - where everybody sat down to prepare the meal together. What struck me was not so much the scenery itself, but the group's exaltation of nature and the nostalgic and romantic portrayal of the countryside.

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<sup>111</sup> *Adda* is a get-together of friends for long and informal discussions; a mixture of leisurely intellectual conversation and local gossip seen as a typical Bengali phenomenon that emerged in Calcutta in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. See Dipesh Chakrabarty *Adda: A history of Sociality* in *Provincializing Europe* (2008).

<sup>112</sup> *Eucalyptus* has been cultivated in India for more than a century and has been planted in West Bengal since the 1960s. *Eucalyptus*, R.W Boden writes, has become "so much an integral part of the life of the people that in some regions it is no longer regarded as an exotic" (Boden 1964, 234). As Jo Lawbuary writes, the preference for *Eucalyptus* in India has given rise to a debate, particularly between environmentalists on the one hand and foresters / policy makers on the other: "Foresters maintain that *Eucalyptus* can help meet increasing wood demands from dwindling natural forests, supplying local communities and industry alike (Shyam Sunder and Parameswarappa, 1989). Environmentalists, however, are opposed to *Eucalyptus* due to perceived ecological hazards and the charge that the choice of species is fundamentally flawed; that *Eucalyptus* is ill equipped to serve the variety of diverse end uses demanded of tree species in India for community use" ([www.ganesha.co.uk/Articles/Eucalyptus.htm](http://www.ganesha.co.uk/Articles/Eucalyptus.htm).)



Figure 6.12

Above, left: photo of a small village on a trip to the countryside with Chander Haat, photo made by Mallika. Middle: Picnic in the forest. Right: Bhabatosh and Pradeep cooking at Chander Haat with Pradeep's "restroom" artwork in the background. Below, left: Raju and Bhabatosh playing chess in the office. Right: Nirmal (third from left) is singing among a group of Chander Haat artists and friends.

In "An Ambiguous Journey to the City" Ashis Nandy writes not only of the journey to the city, but of the journey back to the village as well. The mythic status of this second journey from the city to the village is relatively recent and more uncertain, Nandy writes, but has been gaining more importance in the Indian imagination after independence (Nandy 2007, 73). The imagination of the village as backward and conservative has partly given way for an imagination of the village as an escape from the city, as a positive rather than negative polar opposite: "If the journey to the city was once an escape from oppressive sectarian and community ties, the demands of ascribed status, and the denial of individuality, the attempts to escape from the city are often powered by dream of an idyllic community and escape from hyper-competitive, atomized individualism" (Ibid. 24-25). The Bengali love for *Rabindra Sangeet* and trips to the countryside evoke an imagined elsewhere that cannot be found in existing villages, and the interaction with villagers during such trips is usually minimal. Eating together, going for picnics, singing songs, enjoying the Bengal landscape without engaging too much with it, are part of a

nostalgic ‘return to the village’. Svetlana Boym argues that while nostalgia appears to be a longing for place, it is more a longing for a different time “the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams”, not merely an expression of individual longing, nostalgia is the mirror image of modernity’s linear temporality “a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress” (Boym 2007, 8). Boym furthermore makes an insightful distinction between restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* (home) and attempts to recover the lost home, whereas reflective nostalgia stresses *algia* (the longing itself) and delays the homecoming (Ibid. 13). Restorative nostalgia usually presents itself as tradition and truth and tries to rebuild a homeland whereas reflective nostalgia is full of ambiguity and doubt; it longs but knows it cannot return. There should not be too much ‘reality’ involved for that would break the magic. It is a nostalgia that does not seek to engage too much with restoring a past time or place. This nostalgia is more distant and fleeting than a conservative adherence to tradition, it longs for a place and time without its realization. Instead of recreating the lost home, it meditates on history and the passage of time; reflective nostalgia takes a sidestep and fosters the creation of aesthetic individuality (Ibid. 15). Boym calls this sidestep the “off-modern”; it is not a straightforward move against modernity but a strategy that “allows us to take a detour from the deterministic narratives of history” (Ibid. 8-9). “Off-modernism is a critique of both the modern fascination with newness and the no-less-modern reinvention of tradition” (Ibid. 9). This nostalgia has a utopian dimension, but instead of futuristic utopias it is not directed towards the future, but also not to the past, it takes a sidestep.

Chander Haat’s rough-surfaced artworks and their pastime pleasures of singing and picnics are both strategies that address modernity’s narrative of progress, but they are different strategies altogether. Whereas Chander Haat’s *contemporary* and *pandal* artworks criticize and reflect on the aspirations and setbacks of urban modernity, as described above, their pastimes instead take a sidestep into an unreachable imaginative elsewhere. The use of both strategies alongside each other resonates with the divide Rabindranath Tagore made between his prose and his poetry. In *Provincializing Europe* (2000) Dipesh Chakrabarty writes about the double position Tagore (initially) took including both a beautiful romantic view and a realist critical view. On the one hand, in his prose, Tagore documented social problems, a critical view that “sought out the defects in the nation for the purpose of reform and improvement” (Chakrabarty 2008, 153). Chakrabarty points out that in the prose pieces, and particularly the short *Galpaguchha* stories about rural life, Tagore expressed a critique of society and a clear political will for reform. He was always critical of village life and “contributed to a realist, and negative, stereotype of the Bengali village” (Ibid. 151-152).<sup>113</sup> On the other hand, however, Tagore’s songs and poems

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<sup>113</sup> Chakrabarty writes that in the 1920s and 1930s Tagore made several references to his realistic view of village life: “I have spent a long time in villages, I do not want to say anything simply to please. The

express something entirely different. The subject matter is the same, the Bengali village, yet instead of an emphasis on all that is wrong and could be improved, the village life is depicted as a land of Arcadian and pastoral beauty, The “golden Bengal” (Ibid. 153). According to Chakrabarty Tagore created “a division of labor between prose and poetry or, more accurately, between the prosaic and the poetic” to cater to two different ways of seeing the nation: a sharp critical eye focused on reform, a modern desire for improvement with rational and realist methods, and an adoring eye that saw the nation as already beautiful, outside of history (Ibid. 153).<sup>114</sup>

This division of labor also differentiates Chander Haat’s ‘pastime’ practices like cooking, singing, and trips to the countryside on the one hand and their art practices on the other. Although Chander Haat’s artworks do not always express a pointed societal criticism, the use of rough surfaces through burning and cutting nevertheless mark a difference with the soft tones of imagined landscapes. The use of both strategies by the members of Chander Haat, like Tagore’s double vocation as a poet and critical reformer, might be regarded as complementary rather than contradictory; by temporally sidestepping the split character of modern time, the artists can return to a critical reflection and re-imagination of modern time. At first sight it might seem that this division of labor between the poetic and prosaic aligns with Chander Haat’s *contemporary* art practices and the beautiful bright Durga Puja installations as well. However, although it is true that direct political criticism is avoided in *pandals*, as they are (in)directly funded and encapsulated by politicians, this does not mean that there is no freedom for the artists to materialize a critical perspective in Durga Puja, as I have shown above in Bhabatosh’s chariot *pandal*. Yet, in the discussions about art in Kolkata, *pandal* art is sometimes considered as uncritical, as entertainment rather than ‘Art’. In the next section I will write about the differences between *pandal* art and *contemporary* art and the frictions between them.

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image I have seen of villages is extremely ugly. Jealousy, rivalry, fraudulence, and trickery between people find a variety of manifestations.... I have seen with my own eyes how deep the roots of corruption have gone there.” From *Grambashider proti* (c.1930) in his *Palliprakriti in Rabindrachanabali*, vol. 13, p. 524 quoted in Chakrabarty 2008, 152).

<sup>114</sup> Notwithstanding “this division of labor”, around the time that Tagore won the Nobel prize (1913) Tagore was more and more criticized for his poetic view that according to some ignored the struggles everyday city life and lacked a sense of the real (*bastab*) (Ibid. 156).

## 6.5 Pandal art and contemporary art

Above I described artworks from the field of *contemporary* art and the field of *Durga Puja* art interchangeably and did not make the differences between the two forms of artistic production explicit. I am not able to dive too deeply into *Durga Puja*,<sup>115</sup> yet to ignore *Durga Puja* in a study of *contemporary* art in Kolkata would be to ignore the considerable economic and artistic influence of *pandal* construction, especially the ‘theme’ or ‘art’ *pandal*, on *contemporary art* practices. What is more, even if I would choose not to make a comparison, questions concerning the relative position of the two fields are prevalent among artists in Kolkata.

These two fields of cultural production cannot be distinguished along the lines of ‘religion’ versus ‘art’. ‘Religion’ is a historically constructed Eurocentric concept that might be best avoided as an anthropological category altogether (Asad 1993). The label ‘religion’, with its connotations of institutionalized monotheistic belief sits awkwardly with the wide variety of practices that fall under the umbrella term ‘Hinduism’ and becomes especially a misnomer when applied to large spectacular festivals like *Durga Puja*. *Durga Puja*, as Tapati Guha-Thakurta points out, is a festival with so many shifting social, commercial and political dimensions that it would be misleading to define it as ‘religion’ (Guha-Thakurta 2015).<sup>116</sup> What is more, as I have argued in chapter 2 the field of *contemporary* art constitutes a ritual process that unfolds the same ritual dynamic as rituals commonly described as ‘religious’; just as it is misleading to label *Durga Puja* as ‘religious’, it is misleading to label art as ‘non-religious’.<sup>117</sup> Instead of comparing the two fields along the lines of the ‘religious’ or the ‘secular’, or labeling one ‘religion’ and the other ‘art’, I will look at some ways in which the material practices of both fields differ and intersect. How do artists who make both *pandal* art and *contemporary* art apply their skills and use their networks in both fields? What are the differences of techniques of preservation and dismantling of objects in both fields? What are the possible future developments? Focusing on material

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<sup>115</sup> For a comprehensive understanding of contemporary *Durga Puja* Tapati Guha-Thakurta’s recent book *In the Name of the Goddess* (2015) is essential. See also Guha-Thakurta: *The blurring of distinctions: The artwork and the religious icon in contemporary India* (2010) and Sen, M. *Clay-modelling in West Bengal, Between art religion and politics* (unpublished dissertation Oslo Univeristy).

<sup>116</sup> In line with India’s economic liberalization, the commercialization of the festival through advertising and sponsoring increased dramatically since the 2000s when the theme pujas came up. By 2007 *Durga Puja* had ‘gone corporate’, Guha-Thakurta writes. (Guha-Thakurta 2015, 33). Much of the organizational work such as the award campaigns, contests and ceremonies, are now done by event management firms, and many pujas are now funded by sponsors. Yet, despite the entry of corporate funds in the growing post-liberalization consumer economy of Kolkata, much of *Durga Puja* still revolves around a largely unreconstructed economy of labor and depends on a network of neighbourhood organizations (*para* clubs) (Ibid. 35).

<sup>117</sup> Yet, this does not mean that the term ‘religion’ should be ignored for it is often used by *contemporary* artists from India as a rhetorical opposite of ‘the secular’. As Karen Zitzewitz points out, the inhabitants of the Indian art world, both artists and “art lovers” tend to hold on to a secular disposition (Zitzewitz 2014, 4), and this is no different in Kolkata.



practices, skills, infrastructures and networks, shows the ways the institutional frameworks of both fields change and avoids a limited binary comparison between ‘religion’ and ‘art’. I will look mostly at the perspective from Chander Haat and discuss some of the shared material practices of *pandal* and *contemporary* art that point out or at least hint at a narrowing of the distance between the two fields. Instead of trying to find out what exactly *contemporary* art or *Durga Puja* is, to arrive at a comparison based on definition, I will merely lay out some of the questions concerning the crossovers, differences, and frictions between the two fields.<sup>118</sup>

Besides the artists of Chander Haat, there is a considerable group of artists in Kolkata who see and present themselves as artists making *contemporary* art, but make *Durga Puja pandals* as well. Saumik Chakraborty and Piyali Sadhukhan, Proshun Ghosh, and Debashis Barui, for example (all artists connected to Khoj Kolkata, see chapter 3) make or have made *pandals*. And besides them there are *contemporary* artists who do not make *pandals* themselves, but might still be involved in various segments of their construction.<sup>119</sup> One obvious reason for artists to make *pandals* is the money that is involved. For Chander Haat *Durga Puja* is by far the main source of income; by making *pandals* they are able to make *contemporary* art the rest of the year. The amounts of money the artist gets for the large *pandals* can go up to 60 lakhs. Even the medium *pandals* can catch 30 to 40 lakhs. “It is not a joke!” says Proshun “you can buy a flat for that”. Although this money has to be divided among all the people working for the *pandal* artist, the artisanal team as Guha-Thakurta calls it, it is still a considerably larger source of income for most than can be generated from *contemporary* art. The construction of the large *pandals* takes approximately two months but the talks for the next year’s *puja*, discussing themes and negotiating contracts can already start after merely a couple of months after *Durga Puja*, if not earlier. The payment by the club to the artists does not always happen as promised, but compared to the uncertainty of selling a *contemporary* artwork, *Durga Puja* provides a much more stable yearly guarantee. Proshun says that Khoj Kolkata wanted to provide the monetary support for collaborative projects, but the possibility for funding became less and less; this was

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<sup>118</sup> Durga Puja is not the only Hindu festival that has a hold on *contemporary* art in Kolkata. Rathin Barman, a *contemporary* artist represented by *Experimenter* gallery who works and lives in North Kolkata invited me to attend a *Viswakarma Puja*. *Viswakarma*, a *Puranic* epithet of *Brahma*, is the ‘all-maker’, the architect and artisan of the gods, and is worshipped widely in Kolkata by craftsmen and mechanics. Together with his wife, Sangeeta Barman, also a *contemporary* artist, Rathin arranged a *puja* in his studio and invited a priest who led the main ceremony, bought the offerings and helped accommodating the priest. Within the studio stood an installation sculpture that was under construction for the Singapore Biennale, and a corner of it was used as a frame for the *puja*. Barman told me he did the *Viswakarma Puja* for his employees, carpenters and welders who work in his studio yet do not really know what it is they are helping to construct. By holding a *puja* the gap between the workers’ knowledge about what they make and the artist who oversees the work and ships the work to venues beyond Kolkata was bridged. This was the only time I have seen this interesting intersection between *contemporary* art and *Viswakarma Puja* and it cannot be compared to the wider discussion of Durga Puja in this chapter.

<sup>119</sup> Suman Samajapati and Sourav Roy (TAXI), for example, helped a friend with the lighting for his *pandal* in 2016.

a problem and meant the decline of Khoj even before Abhijit passed away (see chapter 3). Durga Puja thus provides an alternative opportunity for *contemporary* artists to continue their practice.

Bhabatosh started to work on Durga Puja after 2000 when he graduated from Government Art College. Sitting in the garden of Chander Haat he recalls this period:

First I thought, why would I do Durga Puja? I am an artist, I make contemporary art, but I thought about making a Durga Puja pandal for one year, I thought that there is no communication (...), a gap between art and the common people (...). Today, if I can bring contemporary art to the common people, through Durga Puja, then that would be a big project. I painted paintings in my studio. After that I bring it into an AC gallery. Then the gallery owner and the buyer [take it further], in this way the thing becomes a chain, but it is not for people, for common people. So therefore we try to bring a contemporary art appearance to Durga Puja.

Bhabatosh stresses the commonalities of the two fields rather than their differences: “I can sing classical music or folk music, but music is music, (...) when I sing then I try to feel the audience, [depending on] which audience listens to my music, I sing folk music or classical music. That makes sense, doesn’t it? So it’s a bit different, but music is music, folk and classical, they are both music”. Although some of the materials and handling of materials overlap, Bhabatosh puts more emphasis on the conceptual continuity between the two fields for him as an artist. Behind his works in both fields there is the same idea, they both originated from a conceptual space, he says, “the thought process is the same”. He is a conceptual artist, he stresses, and he learned to work as a conceptual artist through *Durga Puja*, not the other way around: “I came in this conceptual space through *Durga Puja*, I came from the space of *Durga Puja*. *Durga Puja* is a huge matter. In the gallery however that kind of limitless is not there, neither is the space there in the gallery.” The word “conceptual” used by Bhabatosh in English refers loosely to the fact that his works express an idea. By using such terms Bhabatosh refers to an international *contemporary* art scene without indicating the specific tradition of Euro-American conceptual art. Terms such as ‘conceptual’, ‘installation’, ‘multi-media’, or ‘site-specific’ are rid of their historical traces, appropriated and given a broader scope to be applied both to *pandal* art and *contemporary* art.

Not only do the two fields interact and share certain material practices, they are also, as Bhabatosh says, gradually coming closer together: “You can say that we pioneered in *Durga Puja*, the *Durga Puja* that you can see today comes for a large part from Chander Haat, I believe. Before there was Durga *puja*, but not a theme *puja*, we were among the first who got involved in that, and after that we had this idea that when we make Durga *puja* we can make a relationship between *Durga Puja* and *contemporary* art.” Bhabatosh wants to build a bridge between *Durga Puja*

and *contemporary* art. Some artists, however, question whether *pandals* and *contemporary art* can be compared as such. Sanchayan Ghosh for example (see chapter 4), who is not involved with *Durga Puja*, is critical and says that *Durga Puja* lacks contemplation and critical thinking. And some artists who are involved in both fields, like Saumik and Piyali, stress that *Durga Puja* is just a way for them to make money, “it is commission work” Piyali said. Others, like Bhabatosh, who is arguable the most famous *pandal* artist, and Proshun, whose work is centered within the *contemporary* art field but has made *pandals*, emphasize that “gallery art” is commissioned work as well.

Proshun points out that the separation between ‘pure art’ and ‘commissioned art’ does not hold ground. He was sceptical at first, but now sees the huge potential of *Durga Puja*. *Durga Puja* has restrictions, he admits, “the idol has to be there, you have to deal with the public, and the rituals. But, it is slowly evolving and becoming more and more free”. Proshun sees *Durga Puja* as commissioned work, but clarifies why *contemporary* art can also be seen as commissioned work: “Galleries prefer paintings to sculptures and also the size of the work should be small (...) They prefer certain materials over the others for selling purposes (...) Canvases are more accepted than paper and oil paintings are preferred (...). And artists should follow a certain theme, such as anti-war.” Whether it involves the material or the concept, there are always certain “bindings”, Proshun says, “artists have to do that in order to survive.”

Bhabatosh argues that notwithstanding the differences between the two fields of *contemporary* art and *pandal* art, they are both art and he does not make an essential difference between the two: “Artists do not make such strict classifications”, he told me, indicating that artists are free thinkers who do not or should not think in rigid categories. Yet, now that both fields seem to come closer together in terms of material practice, networks and skills, frictions arise that increase and sharpen the stress on secular artist subjectivities and the performance of class positions. As Kajri Jain pointed out with respect to calendar print makers, debunking commissioned work in comparison to ‘pure’ art is also a way to distinguish oneself in an intricate field of class (re)production (Jain 2007, 176). Especially when people distinguish *pandal* art and *contemporary* along caste or class lines and confine Bhabatosh and other artists from Chander Haat to the cultural resonances of their surnames, the pronounced difference between the two fields can cause tensions. Artistic freedom involves an escape from fixed social identities; it concerns, as I have argued in chapter 2, an escape from the here and now, a way to become part of something that transcends an artist’s individual background. By labeling Chander Haat’s artists as ‘artisans’ or ‘craftsmen’, instead of artists, and by aligning this identification to class and caste, they are thrown back; their social and economic transition towards urban middle-class life is

disregarded, but perhaps more importantly their identity as artists, their capability for extending beyond the here and now and their claim to the universality of Art is taken away from them.

Although artists in Kolkata might disagree about the relative value of *pandal* and *contemporary* art, nobody denies that there are big differences between the two fields of cultural productions of *Durga Puja* and *contemporary* art. They are two fields that have entirely different histories, economies, different publics and a partly overlapping, but overall different material culture. The most obvious difference between the two fields is the amount of people it attracts; every year *Durga Puja* attracts millions of people from Kolkata and West Bengal from all layers of society to see the *pandals*, whereas *contemporary* art even in its broadest definition caters to a relatively small educated urban minority. *Durga Puja* is a holiday, people are free and the city transforms into a massive festival site and the only way to avoid it is to flee the city. Curator, architect and artist Sayantan Maitra (nickname Boka) (see chapter 3) points out that the engagement on such a scale is unprecedented and is a far cry from the public engagement with the gallery: “One has to understand why people are not going to gallery spaces in Kolkata, but everyone has a critical comment on *Durga Puja*, it could be a beggar on the street, everyone has something to say about it. That is very enlightening in certain ways. Perceiving their ways of understanding, no one has told them, they are doing it, it’s a very interesting conversation, but the same conversation is missing in the gallery, or in the museum”.

Another difference between the two fields of productions concerns the lifecycle of the work of art. As already pointed out above, the ephemerality of *Durga Puja* is most evident in the lifecycle of the goddess. On the last day of the festival, the many *Durga murti* of Kolkata are taken to the river where she returns to the alluvial clay of which she is made. This cycle of construction and destruction, of creation and return, seems at first sight diametrically opposed to the rituals of *modern* and *contemporary* art, largely made to be circulated, preserved, and re-exhibited after the first exhibition. However, as I have argued in chapter 2, *contemporary* art is part of a ritual cycle of renewal as well; although both ritual processes of *contemporary* art and *Durga Puja* enact a different form of revitalization, the underlying ritual pattern is the same (see chapter 2.9). This does not mean that the rituals can be simply equated, as they have both wholly different histories, but it does mean that the differences between them reside less in the relatively superficial differences between so-called material permanency versus ephemerality, and more in what the participants of the rituals believe is represented. Following Pierre Bourdieu (1993, 1996), I have argued that the belief in the *idea* of Art, which as Bourdieu has shown is often rooted in a person’s habitus since childhood, is key to the existence and regeneration of Art (see

chapter 1.6). The belief that *Durga Puja* concerns the goddess or, more generally *shakti*,<sup>120</sup> the belief that *contemporary art* concerns Art, and the belief that these two *ideas* are different and incompatible, might be more important than the material differences between both rituals. However, when someone believes in *shakti*, abstracted as the creative force behind *maya*, and believes in Art, abstracted as an *idea* that transcends specific artworks, and believes these two *ideas* are one and the same, the differences between the two rituals become merely a matter of form, materials, and publics; they are not seen as unbridgeable.



Figure 6.13

Left: Durga tableaux before painting at Bhabatosh's *pandal* at the Chetla Agrani club. Right: At the same *pandal*; working in front of a fiberglass sculpture, cutting bamboo sticks. Blue tarpaulins are used to protect the *pandal* from rainfall.

The relative 'superficial differences' of the rituals' lifecycles nevertheless translate in very different material and sensible outcomes. The given that a theme *pandal* can only be visited once a year, the knowledge that a *pandal* will be destroyed afterwards, and the crowd concentration due to these time restrictions, lead to an entirely different visiting experience and result in different aesthetic criteria. Looking at the different elements separately, for example is not something that can be done easily when visiting a *pandal*. The lighting, the music, the limited amount of time does not allow for much contemplation of material detail. On a rooftop

<sup>120</sup> *Shakti*, creative power or cosmic energy, is usually associated with female power or more particularly a goddess or the wife of a god. But it can also be more abstractly associated with the creative power behind the continuous flux of the world, as *maya-shakti*. See for example (Zimmer 1972, 24-25).

overseeing his *pandal* in North Kolkata I asked Pradeep about the differences for him as a maker of both *contemporary* art and *pandal* art. He told me that in *contemporary* art visitors have a trained eye; the work can have many layers and you can expect the visitor to give your work time, to contemplate it. *Pandals* are different, people have only a couple of minutes time to see the work so you have to catch their attention by less subtle means “it needs to be very big, very colorful. It has to have a festive spirit because it is a complete festival”. For Piyali (see chapter 3.4) it is exactly this festive spirit that makes up the difference: “some people call it [the *pandal*] installation work, but for me it is not installation: “At *Durga Puja* it has to be beautiful while in *contemporary* art the art does not have to be beautiful, it can be but it’s not necessary. Also, *puja* art is not site-specific, it takes place at a specific locality, but it does not study that place, it is not related to the history of the place or the social context.”

Notwithstanding these differences, Guha-Thakurta (2015) argues that the division between ‘permanent’ art made for the gallery and ‘ephemeral’ art made for *Durga puja* is not straightforward. Not only are there many *contemporary* art practices that attempt to frustrate processes of circulation and preservation or otherwise do not manage to become part of these processes, there are also attempts to circulate and preserve *pandals*, or at least parts of them. Although the goddess is traditionally immersed in the river, there have been numerous attempts to preserve the *Durga* tableaux.<sup>121</sup> Guha-Thakurta, who has written in detail about Bhabatosh’s *pandals*, points out that Bhabatosh has made some *Durga murtis* with more durable materials such as metal, cement, concrete, wood, or baked and lacquered clay as well, and made his work detachable and transportable for potential buyers to turn the ephemerals to collectables. Bhabatosh managed to sell some *Durga* tableaux, one to a five star hotel, another to a private art collector, and a third to a state craft museum, but the infrastructure to preserve and display large *Durga* tableaux has proven to be challenging (Guha-Thakurta 2015, 264).<sup>122</sup> The difficulty in preserving parts of the *pandal* work is not only due to a lack of infrastructure, but also due to authorship; even when the *pandal* is entirely conceived and conceptualized by the *pandal* artist, the artist usually has no authorial rights over what happens with it after the festival. (Ibid. 265).<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> The tableaux is the *pandal* platform carrying *Durga* that usually consists of the goddess accompanied by Ganesh, Katrick, Lakshmi and Saraswati, the lion and the buffalo demon *mahishasura*.

<sup>122</sup> As Guha-Thakurta writes: “Even the most successful of *Durga Puja* designers, Bhabatosh Sutar, stands disillusioned about the prospects of his *Puja* productions (...) finding their deserved place in art collections or corporate spaces. He is also disappointed by the lack of adequate attention and care given to his terracotta *Durga Puja* ensemble from 2003 that stands largely ignored behind glittering wedding party tableaux on the plush lawns of the ITC Sonar Bangla Hotel in Calcutta (Guha-Thakurta 2015, 264).

<sup>123</sup> The club committee usually organizes the supply of the raw material before the festival and sells it of in parts quickly after the festival. The *pandal* installation is the property of the club and the artist is paid the contracted commission fee. See Tapati Guha-Thakurta (2015) for more detail concerning the infrastructural arrangements of *pandals*.



Figure 6.14

Baitu is dismantling textile structures of a *pandal* for re-use under the pergola in the garden of Chander Haat. On the right Pintu's artwork, which he exhibited at the Gurusaday Dutt exhibition two years before. (See figure 6.4)

When I met Bhabatosh in 2014 he had seen many years of *pandal* making, won many prizes, and took a laid-back stance concerning the potential for preservation and the use of material in both fields: “The materials are a bit different”, Bhabatosh says, “the *pandal* will be dismantled after the festival so we don't use much permanent material”.<sup>124</sup> For gallery work Bhabatosh uses more permanent material: “for the gallery work I use metal, fiberglass, and wood (...) If anybody wants to keep it in their house, then it would be possible to keep it (...) but for the field of *Durga Puja* it is obvious, it will be dismantled, therefore we don't use permanent materials”. While recording the interview with Bhabatosh, Baitu and Chondon and some younger helpers at Chander Haat were dismantling a work used for an older *pandal*, which consisted of shreds of clothes. These strips of clothes are used to bind together bamboo poles and are therefore useful, Bhabatosh told me. I asked Bhabatosh about the recycling of materials for *Durga puja*: “Some material we recycle. But generally we don't do it, because for *Durga Puja* every year they [the club] demand something new. [And] every viewer expects something new from me. So therefore we don't reuse or recycle materials.” But this does not mean he will not use permanent material for *Durga Puja* in the future, “there are no rules, there is no idea of this I can make and this I can't. I have also used video (...) there is not material limits. *Durga Puja* is huge, and because *puja* is so big there is space for experiment, there is one limitation, that our idol has to

<sup>124</sup> Bhabatosh refers to the entire material production of the *pandal*, but there is a difference between the structure of the *pandal* and the residing *Durga murti*. Whereas the tableaux with the goddess might be preserved, the *pandal* is always dismantled.

be made, but beyond that there is a limitless space for material practice, [and also] because the budget is so big (...) many new materials can be invented”.

Next to the material differences between the two fields there are many shared material practices, skills and networks of people as well. As I have described above artists from Chander Haat make rough surfaces with a lot of natural materials both in their *contemporary* artworks and their *pandal* art. Even if the overall effect of ‘end product’ might be different, the skills for handling certain materials and the infrastructure needed to work with these materials intersect. There is such a big budget, and *Durga Puja* is done on such a large scale, stresses Bhabatosh, that there are lot of material possibilities and making a *pandal* involves hiring many people who have different skills and can work with different materials, from architecture to music. Proshun says that not everyone can be a *puja* artist: “Being one is extremely difficult as one has to handle large spaces, different kind of materials, worry about light and sound. Also directing the people, putting people to work. It's massive and these artists are much more versatile than *contemporary* gallery artists. One needs a lot of experience to execute that kind of work”. The scale and variety of *pandal* making provides the *pandal* artists with a wide network of skilled workers, a network they can use when making a *contemporary* artwork or other commissioned work. What is more, they pick up skills from a variety of workers as well; artists that prefer to make *contemporary* art and see *pandal* art more as commissioned work, like Saumik and Piyali, nevertheless stress that they learn a lot of skills through *Durga Puja*.



Figure 6.15

Saumik (left) at the *pandal* site he is constructing together with Piyali.



Boka, who co-curated several *contemporary* art exhibitions with Chander Haat, is enthusiast about the work he sees at Chander Haat and the potentials for creative work emerging from the proximity of the two fields. Yet he points out that the crossovers between *pandal* art and *contemporary* art are not always working and says that Chander Haat artists sometimes overdid things:

I think that as they are less exposed to [contemporary] artworks, they overdo things. So, at times I had to stop them [and say] this is it, this is perfect (...) I remember Pintu did a wonderful work. (...) he was looking at this transformation of this new building which is going to be changed very soon. So he put these mirror strips (...) but then again he started adding things up. That's what kills it at a certain level, because you have to know where to stop. (...) Also Pradeep's work was very interesting if he had just kept that sound piece as such. But again, he added some images you know. That gown was perfectly fine, it was extremely well positioned in terms of that space. But with that, in the entry he added a couple of images. He framed some small photographs, so that kind of overdid, overkilled it."

There is a very thin line, Boka says, "where you can just cross it and it becomes something else". Boka argues that it can be out of insecurity that artists add, but also that they are used to elaborate in their *Puja pandals*. Yet Boka is not trying to bring their works more into the fold of *contemporary* art conventions and looks for new ways of making art in conjunction with *pandal* art. Bhabatosh can do many new things, Boka says, "he has got that aura now, I am going to do whatever I want (...) whereas other people could not get that space". Boka sees many possibilities: "I was having this conversation with Bhabatosh and he told me, why don't you look at the *pandals*, after Durga is gone." Boka elaborates on the future possibilities this would open up: "there are so many materials, so much of whatever that is already there, (...) What if some international artists (...) [would come in and] deconstruct this entire space, if they can. That is a possibility and that's what I am looking at, in the future. That's why I left Delhi and came to the *Puja* scene to see [what is possible], it's a very difficult complex situation [but] the friction has already started (...) this friction will start in the artists' minds themselves." The two fields of cultural production surely will not merge in Kolkata. *Contemporary* art in Kolkata will not be taking over *pandal* practices, nor the other way around, but together with Boka, Chander Haat is organizing new projects (initiated after my fieldwork period), from which a new field of art practices might emerge that cannot be defined clearly as either *contemporary* art or *pandal* art.

Whichever direction Chander Haat's art practices will take, a clear sign that the two fields rub shoulders in Kolkata is that there are heated discussions about it. Now that *Durga Puja* is labelled 'public art', and *contemporary* art is moving out of the gallery and is therefore labelled 'public art'

as well, the question arises what the differences are between the two forms of ‘public art’. It is simply by talking about these two fields, as I am doing now, that a comparison, and therefore a difference, is made and remade. In a lively discussion on this issue with Sourav, Suman, Sujit, Bhabatosh and Proshun in the office of Chander Haat, Sourav discusses the different meanings of public art:<sup>125</sup>

The word public art has two meanings. One, you are doing something for the public. So, it is there in your mind even while doing your work that this should be accepted by say 1 lakh people easily. There is the other kind where the public is coming to you to understand you. Maybe 1 lakh is not coming only 10.000 are turning up. Both are public. It is very difficult to define these things (...) differences are there, but the question is where is the contradiction? (...) Suppose Martijn [referring to me] is writing his PhD paper on Kolkata art practice and there is a separate chapter there, it’s all well and good. If Martijn wants to see Puja differently, if he wants to say that Durga Puja meets contemporary art, what is wrong about that? Especially if the people doing Puja, like Bhabo [Bhabatosh], are doing Puja as well as the Chander Haat Annual program. How can we say for sure that his works in Chander Haat are completely absent when he is doing Puja art?

Bhabatosh replied that he does not see the necessity to constantly make this comparison: “[I have] nothing to complain about. The participation here is very willing and just because I do Durga Puja, I am neither saying that it is art nor saying that it is not. I am merely pointing out, let’s not compare the two”. Bhabatosh suggests the following:

The full cycle of art is artist, art and viewer. There is a power game there. The power game is that, me as an artist I am making art, creating something, and when someone is seeing it, the circle is completed, otherwise it is valueless (...) I mean, I consider the artist or myself as a unit, the art is a unit too, but the viewer is not a unit, it is a mass. What maximum amount of mass can we reach? And this is a power game. What is your demand as an artist? You have nothing but communication.

The others agree but Suman says that also when people do not see the work, it can still be art: “many artists do land art, maybe they do it inside a forest where in five years only two people will go and see it. They merely document the work and leave it there”. Proshun:

Whether it gets public or not, maybe you do your work in your own bubble, maybe it even gets destroyed and doesn’t get public. But one thing is very

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<sup>125</sup> Sourav Roy and Suman Samajpati (TAXI) and Proshun Ghosh (see chapter 3) are not members of Chander Haat. This discussion was recorded by me, transcribed by Churni Bhaumik, and translated by me.

important; you are a human being who is working (...). The desire for self-extension is maybe expressed through my offspring. The one is leading a simple family life, going to the office, going to the market, they try to see this extension through their children. You are an artist so you have a different way of seeing that. This can be either conscious or unconscious, [but] this is always there.

Bhabatosh argues that *Durga Puja* gives him much better opportunities to reach a public:

I am getting the opportunity, and the progress of Kolkata people every year is at my fingertips, that is enough. I am never claiming that this thing that I am doing is the ultimate form of public art. (...) One should not attach words like public art or installation art with Puja, because we have worked really hard. We made immense efforts and now you come with your bunch of words and try to attach them with it and extract personal benefit? (...). I made a market built a shop and am selling now. I don't care whether you call it Durga Puja art or not". (...) "I have a different objection. This is objectionable, we all are sitting together. (...) It is not that the galleries never called us. They did ask for us at times. But I always got this feeling that in reality... we came to Kolkata and I felt that the galleries lacked something majorly. A strange feeling. They took my work twice, the works didn't get sold, it was written in the terms and conditions that the unsold ones will be returned, they asked me to take back my huge work, I remember feeling humiliated. I don't know what art is, what tradition is what Durga Puja is, what public art is and it's not even important to me. But for Durga Puja they have told me in the very beginning of the year, they will pay me 60 lakhs, in any way I want. There is no bigger art investment in India, simple as that. They also told me that I am free, free to think and do whatever I want. So naturally I don't get this kind of freedom anywhere else, I have done gallery projects twice or thrice, I don't mean to demean anyone by this. 60 lakhs! I consider this to be my freedom as an artist".

...

*Durga Puja* for Bhabatosh not only provides a better financial return but gives him a much better and more certain opportunity to reach people. In Chapter 2 I have described *contemporary* art as a field for making spatiotemporal extensions; both artists and artworks travel, acquire fame, move beyond their locality and become part of history. *Durga Puja*, in different ways, forms a framework by which artworks and artists do the same. Although the publics, the ways of seeing, and the processes of preservation and circulation differ, *Durga Puja* gives artists and artworks a stage. Confined mostly to West Bengal the spatial extension might be more regional than international, but the names of big *pandal* artists are known to young and old, in the villages and

the city, and resound throughout Bengal. Bhabatosh and the other artists at Chander Haat might still want to exhibit works in a gallery and sell their *contemporary* artworks, but they do not need the infrastructure of *contemporary* art.

The artists of Chander Haat have found and created a way to experiment with new artforms in their theme *pandals* and used these skills and economic benefits to engage with *contemporary* art practices as well. Although these fields of production are different, the themes and the material practices in both their *contemporary* art works and their theme *pandals* address and reflect on, *think through*, the same tensions of urban progress and decline. I have argued in this chapter that their works, whatever label attached to them, provide an alternative to a linear narrative of progress. By creating contrasts between vital materials and eternal forms, between rough and smooth surfaces, and by placing them alongside each other the artists reflect on the aspirations and delusions of contemporary urban life. Instead of placing tradition and modernity, the local and the global, or the village and the city on two opposite sides of a spectrum, they collapse these notions within their works; by selecting vital materials that are part of the life-cycles of the city, by making rough surfaces, and by occasionally taking nostalgic side-steps, the artists reflect on their own journeys from ‘the village’ to ‘the city’, address the aspirations of a larger community in Sarsuna, and more widely engage with Kolkata’s two faces of progress and decline, expressed in the city’s ‘smooth’ and ‘rough’ surfaces.



*Figure 6.16*  
Fiberglass brick ‘Konarak’ wheels that were made for the 2016 *pandal* discussed above. See figure 6.8 and 6.9. This photo is taken in 2022. The wheels are standing against the studio building of Chander Haat – partly overgrown by a creeper and inside there is a large hornet nest.

## 7. Pots, Seeds, Snakes and Crows

In this chapter I will discuss the artistic practice of Mallika Das Sutar. Mallika lives at Chander Haat with her husband Bhabatosh, her son, and her mother-in-law. She graduated in Visual Arts at Rabindra Bharati University in 2004, makes mixed media installations, community and site-specific works, collages, paper drawings and paintings. The emphasis in this chapter does not lie on criticism and the subsequent breaking out of established art practices; although Mallika frequently experiments with new media, she does not describe such experiments as a way to escape from artistic conventions or institutes. Instead, in line with the previous chapter, I will describe Mallika's works in relation to her engagement with the city and social surroundings. But, unlike the previous chapter's focus on vitality, I will focus in this chapter on storytelling, and especially on the role of various forms of containers as transformative narrative elements. Mallika's works express a transformation, a state in-between, as if her works show an episode in a story of which we do not know the beginning or the end. As Mallika told me: "There is always a storytelling in my work. This story is not exactly the story we tell, a story as we know it, not like that, not detailed nor a description but it has a story-like flow. A flow from one space to another, one incidence to another, or one object to another, a series of transformations coming sequentially one after another. That is what I mean when I say storytelling."

In his ethnography *The Pot-king* (2007) and other publications (e.g. 2006) Jean-Pierre Warnier has shown the importance of containers as a way to symbolize power: "Making use of containers amounts to working with and on containment, that is, putting together the things, substances and people that are introduced into a common container. It also amounts to separating things that belong together from those that do not, (...)" (Warnier 2006, 193). Containers create a division between an inside and an outside and as such are used by various communities to express, contain, or transcend societal divisions. But, as Warnier writes, containment in itself is of little value; what is important is the movement between inside and outside; the opening of containers must be narrow enough to keep things inside and broad enough to allow for passage. The theme of the container is not only about placing things together and separating things, but also about passage and transformation. This is why, Warnier writes, "the opening of the body, of pots, houses and cities are so important and receive so much attention (...) and why the

surface of the containers is usually treated with much care” (Warnier 2006 193-194).

In this chapter I will write about containers as central elements in the tension between order and transformation. I will start in 7.1 with the importance of containers in Mallika’s work and discuss the ways these containers express a dynamic tension between inside and outside and what she refers to as the “cycle of life”.

### 7.1 *Three childhood memories*

I asked Mallika about the theme of rain falling in a pot, a regularly recurring theme in her artworks. “This is transformation” she said, “the lifecycle which comes back again and again in my works in various ways, [it is a] coming and going (...), we are inside them. A revolving wheel which I am calling the cycle of life, the cycle in different ways”. Whatever form the pot-like containers take in Mallika’s work, there is always a dynamic between inside and outside; this could be rain falling in, steam coming out, or shapes resembling snakes or plant shoots moving and growing out. This movement between inside and outside expresses a “cycle of life”, as Mallika says, “They stay together, these two are opposite, poles apart, [but] a dialectic between them is always working”. In many of Mallika’s works there is a dividing line between the inside - a pot or other kind of container - and the outside; sometimes this divide is explicitly marked by a red line, but the divide can be marked in various ways, such as by an umbrella above a pot. Mallika: “there is a red line, there is a tension between these two”.

Talking about her work at Chander Haat Mallika brings up memories from her childhood. During *Kali puja* in her village in Hooghly district everyone would gather in a field to prepare food. Every family brought a pot, a *hari*, with rice, ghee, and vegetables, and after the *puja* was over they made temporary ovens in the field (*matir unun* – earthen oven). Mallika remembers that she and the other children of the locality were always hungrily and happily waiting for the food to be ready. When the rice boiled the lids of the *hari* jumped and Mallika joyfully recollects the entire field with jumping lids “as if the pots are talking to each other”. In another childhood memory Mallika remembers *Itu puja*: “In my village unmarried women do a *puja* called *Itu puja* in which they worship fertility. Five grains [*Pancho shosso*] are put in a clay *sora* [shallow and round clay vessel] or *ghot* [larger pot] and grown over a period of one month. The plants grow gradually and flourish (...) big enough to cover up the whole *sora*. A month of worshipping is done and every day the plants are watered and mantras are chanted. This was known as *Itu puja*, a *puja* for fertility.” The third childhood memory concerns a *kulungi*; a *kulungi* is a small triangular door-shaped compartment dug in the clay wall of a Bengal village house, which is

used as a shelf to store any kind of objects or food and can be used as a ritual altar as well. “When I was a child”, Mallika recollects, “the mud house I lived in had many *kulungi*. There were many *kulungi*, 10 to 12 in a single wall. Some of these *kulungi* were low some were high and others in the middle [one foot by two feet] and my mother kept many things inside them (...). I could not reach the higher shelves so my mother used to hide things from me by keeping them in the higher *kulungi* at that time”. Mallika associates this memory with not being able to reach some of the ‘*kulungi*’ within life: “We all have *kulungi* like this inside ourselves. We don’t know about them. Back then I could reach some *kulungi* and was not able to touch others. Similarly inside myself I have many *kulungi*, I know about some of them but have no idea about the others.

All three memories revolve around different types of containers: *Ghot*, *hari*, *shora*, and *kulungi*. Mallika does not depict above-mentioned memories literally, but instead has painted, drawn, worked into a collage, sculpted and installed a variety of containers. Sometimes Mallika depicts above-mentioned vessels more specifically, but in many works the containers take on miscellaneous shapes such as bodies, bottles, cups, or tubes. Why does Mallika depict such containers and how do they relate to the idea of lifecycles? Her artworks can be seen as an expression of her childhood memories, but then, why are these memories so important for her?



Figure 7.1 Two works by Mallika with various containers.

Together with Bhabatosh, Mallika has made an economic transition from lower class towards (upper) middle class and, like the other artists at Chander Haat, Mallika balances her position between the aspirations of a new middle-class life style and the ideals of both an imagined and remembered village life. In line with works by Bhabatosh and other members of Chander Haat Mallika’s work might be seen as an expression of the contradictions of class and caste formations through an emphasis on folklore themes and the use of vital materials (see chapter 6). Among



the traditional crafts clay pottery is, despite its crucial role in both daily life and ritual practices, often considered as marginal.<sup>126</sup> As Moumita Sen writes, the traditional pottery caste in Bengal, *khumbakars*, preferred to become *patua* painters, as pottery was seen as less important (M. Sen 2017). Mallika’s incorporation of pottery in her *contemporary* artworks could be seen as a reevaluation of objects that are considered to be low in the hierarchy of crafts.



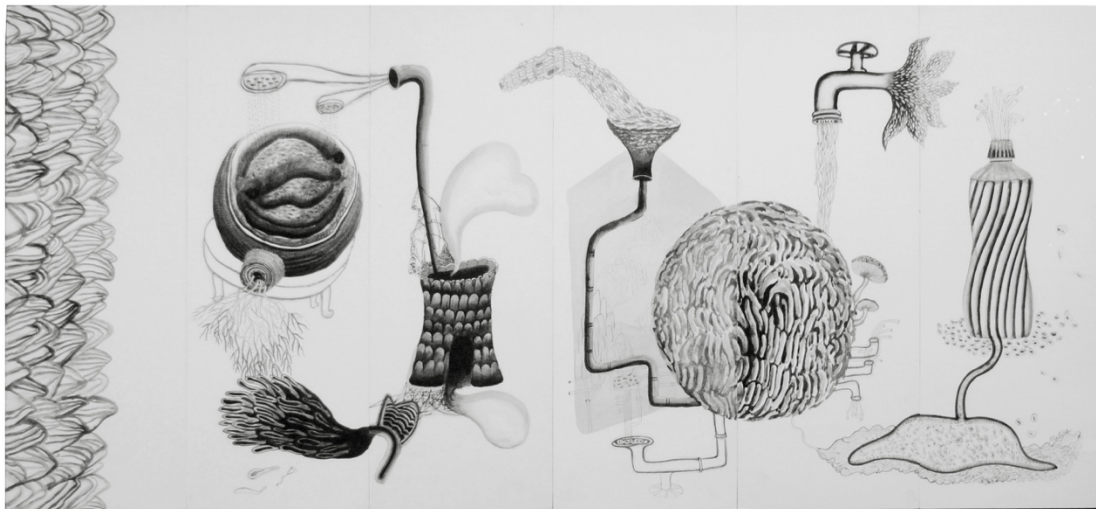
Figure 7.2 Work with piglets, by Mallika. Ink and pastel on paper collage.

This would resonate with Mallika’s depictions of pigs and piglets, which are in India generally associated with low caste and impurity; by taking those elements that are low in esteem and placing them centre stage Mallika reflects on caste, class and the changing social landscapes of the village and the city, as Bhabatosh does with his artworks as well. And, as earthenware pottery embodies the transformation from natural unfired clay to baked clay, Mallika’s works could also be fitted within a theory (outlined in 5.3) that concerns the opposition and transformation between vital materials and permanent forms. However, although Mallika

<sup>126</sup> Pottery in India is not straightforwardly associated with low caste or class. In her analysis of the different varieties of pottery techniques in South Asia Marie-Claude Mahias points out that social identification of pottery depends strongly on the variety of techniques used by different groups of potters. In Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Assam, for example, potters have a low status because they “cut the throat of the pot” while taking it off the wheel. Yet in the domain of mythology the potter’s status is often elevated: “Material features, when transposed into the domain of mythology, take on additional meanings and become, for anyone who knows how to see and interpret them, so many signs of social status (Mahias 1993, 176). At Draupadi’s wedding in the *Mahabharata* the potter is, as Biardeau writes (1971), “not only the man who shapes clay to give it the required form. He is also the one who, by the firing, changes the earthenware from red to black, an operation which, for Hindus, entails bringing together earth and fire” (Mahias 1993, 176). According to Mahias this act signifies the marriage of earth and sacrificial fire, connects royal power to priesthood, and holds a promise of prosperity (Ibid.). In sum, there is no clear demarcated identification of pottery in India.

works regularly with clay in her artworks she does not use fire as the other artists of Chander Haat do and therefore does not seem to highlight the transformation from unfired to baked clay.

Another interpretation could be that pots, used for cooking and storing food, are in many cultures associated with women, fertility and pregnancy. In Bengal the work of pottery is sometimes compared with the job of a midwife; as Saraswati writes, the potter “cuts the pot with an iron instrument in the manner the midwife cuts the umbilical cord” (Saraswati 1978, 49 in Mahias 1993, 176). But the cultural connotations of pots in India and Bengal are too elaborate and complex for making straightforward associations between pots and women. And, even if this would be an interesting perspective to explore, Mallika did not express such direct connotations and instead emphasized the importance of tension, transformation, coming and going, lifecycles, and storytelling in her work. What is more, although the above interpretations might not be entirely wrong, they do not explain the variety of other containers in Mallika’s works that do not resemble traditional pottery. To understand Mallika’s emphasis on storytelling and her depictions of containers I will discuss two storytelling traditions of Bengal, I will begin with the story of the two sisters Umno and Jhumno (7.2), then discuss the well-known story of Behula and the snake Goddess Manasa (7.3) and subsequently look for parallels between these stories and Mallika’s work (7.4).



*Figure 7.3* Charcoal on paper, depicting a variety of containers.

## 7.2 Umno and Jhumno

The worship of Itu in Bengal, as Suschismita Sen writes, used to be a formal religious ceremony in praise of the sun god Surya; it required the participation and guidance of a male Brahmin priest who offered prayers to a grain filled pot.<sup>127</sup> Nowadays, in Kolkata, the ritual has lost its official stature, but the worship of Itu is continued as a *brata* that involves the abstinence from meat and fish and participation in the storytelling session (Sen 1995, 70-71).<sup>128</sup> As a storytelling session and an abstinence of food Itu puja is performed every Sunday of the Bengali months of *Kartik* and *Agrahayan*, in the dry season.<sup>129</sup> Below I have summarized the stories of Umno and Jhumno told during Itu puja:<sup>130</sup>

There lived a poor and lazy Brahmin who had two daughters, the older one named Umno and the younger Jhumno. One day he told his wife that he had a craving for pancakes. Being a mean old man, he strictly forbade her to give any of them to his daughters. The wife gave a cake to each, hoping that their father would not miss a couple, but the Brahmin found out and decided to punish them by abandoning them in the forest. The next morning he went with them into the forest, as if he was taking them for a walk. They walked for a long time, until the two girls got tired and asked to rest for a while. Exhausted they fell asleep the moment they lay down. The Brahmin, waiting for this opportunity, poured some red *alta* on the ground, scattered some sticks nearby, and quickly left. Umno, noticing the *alta* and sticks, started to cry, assuming that a tiger had eaten their father. But Jhumno wasn't fooled so easily and said: "It's only some *alta* and sticks that father scattered to fool us. Let's see if we can find our way home." After walking through the woods for a while they came to a clearing near a spring where they saw several women washing themselves and getting ready for something. The girls were curious and the women explained they were going to worship Itu and invited the girls to join them. Umno and Jhumno agreed and they all worshipped together. After the ritual was over the women disappeared.

Coincidentally, the king of the land and his minister, who were on a hunt, crossed the path of the sisters. Attracted by their beauty the king decided to marry Umno

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<sup>127</sup> Suchismita Sen has written an insightful article on the practices, and especially the narrative tradition, of Itu puja. But Sen's knowledge on Itu comes from personal experience growing up in Calcutta and did not, during the 70's, encounter any formal ritual as described by Mallika. Itu puja entails now mostly, especially in the city, an abstinence from meat and fish and participation in a storytelling session (Sen 1995, 70). But Mallika's personal account shows that at least in Hooghly the grain ritual of Itu Puja is still, or at least in the 90s, practiced. See also Bhattacharya (1978, 26-28) and Bhattacharya and Mitra (1924, 27).

<sup>128</sup> A *brata* involving rules of conduct in which the senses are controlled and choices are made between good and bad. The Sanskrit word *vrata* derives from the root *vr*, meaning "to choose" or "to will" (Sen 1995, 70).

<sup>129</sup> *Kartik* is from mid-october to mid-november. *Agrahayan* from mid-november to mid-december. These two months are part of Hemonto, the dry season.

<sup>130</sup> See Suchismita Sen, *The Tale of Itu: Structure of a Ritual Tale in Context* (1995) for longer and various versions of the story of Umno and Jhumno. This is a shortened version of one of her written down variations.

and the minister agreed to marry Jhumno. On the journey back to the palace Jhumno remembered that the date for another Itu ritual had arrived and reminded her older sister, but Umno replied, “I don’t need to perform any more rituals! I’m going to be the queen soon” Jhumno was disappointed but kept the fast by herself. When they arrived at the palace the king’s mother brought out her best gold platter and filled it with spices and food in welcome of her daughter-in-law-to-be. The minister’s mother did likewise with her best silverware. But what a surprise! As soon as the elder queen touched Umno’s forehead with the golden platter, the gold turned into silver and when the minister’s mother touched Jhumno with her silver platter, the silver turned into gold. The king was very upset with this turn of events and ordered his minister to kill Umno at once. The minister’s family was very happy with Jhumno, however, and she became the minister’s wife. Jhumno implored her husband not to kill her sister. The minister could not refuse his bride and they decided to hide Umno in their house.

Another day of Itu arrived and to make sure that Umno would not miss the ritual, Jhumno put her sister in a huge earthen pot the night before. The next morning Umno told her that she had felt hungry and had eaten a few grains of cereal that were lying in the pot. The next time Jhumno slept in the same bed with her and tied a lock of her hair to one of her sister’s, so that she would be able to stop Umno from eating anything during the night. Finally, the two sisters were able to perform the ritual successfully. The king began feeling remorseful for his decision and asked his minister if he could bring Umno back. The minister replied, “Where shall I find Umno now? You yourself ordered me to kill her some time ago!” But the king threatened the minister if he did not restore Umno to him. The next day, he brought Umno back to the palace and the king married her with great splendor.

When the Brahmin heard about his daughters’ prosperity he set out with his wife towards the royal palace. But the guards did not believe him and shooed him away. Then they went to the spring from which the royal maids fetched bath water. When the maids came the Brahmin told them he was the father of the queen and wished to meet her. To make sure that the maids wouldn’t forget, he wove a ring of grass and dropped it into one of their pitchers. Later, as his daughters poured out the water, the grass ring fell out. “Oh we forgot to mention”, the maids said, “a ragged old couple is waiting for you by the spring. They claim to be your parents.” The sisters rushed to the spring, received their parents with great honor, described how the grace of Itu had brought them such good fortune and persuaded their father to observe the ritual fast. As a result he became quite learned and was appointed by the king to become his pundit and they all lived happily ever after with the blessings of Itu.

Pots are not simply fertility symbols; they are narrative elements that highlight important events in the lives of Bengali women. As narrative elements they highlight the moment in which women change from girls to married women and move into a new home. Sen points out that while European fairy tales often end with the wedding, indicating a new family order, in South

Asia the wedding does not necessarily indicate a conclusive establishment of a new order. The bride must first acquire kinship status in her new home before the new family order can begin and only becomes mistress of the household when her mother-in-law passes away or retires voluntarily. The patrilocal kinship system in Bengal requires that women take on a new identity after marriage in which the newly wed has to show tact and discipline. The bride is therefore, at least in the first few years, under intense pressure not to change the old order (Sen 1995, 95-96). This traumatic event is expressed in multiple ways in Bengali society; Durga Puja, for example, is, among many other things, a ritual of homecoming, celebrating the temporary return of the married daughter to her paternal home.<sup>131</sup>

The story of Umno and Jhumno focuses on the journey from the paternal home to the new marital home and represents the trauma of the event by the theme of abandonment in the forest. It is a narrative to guide and prepare young women through the journey they have to make from the family home to a new home. As Sen argues, it is a story that helps women cope with an inherently unfair situation and the participants of the storytelling occasion are mostly women (Ibid. 72). Aside from the reference of the women performing the ritual of *Itu puja*, there are telling episodes in which containers play a crucial role. Older Bengali women, Sen points out, often compare the move towards the husband's home with that of rebirth. It is here where the significance of containers comes in, which do not necessarily have to be pots. In another version also written down by Sen the sisters hide in a tree after their father abandoned them in the forest:

Meanwhile, as evening drew on, the two girls awoke and found themselves alone. They searched for their father with no success, and finally the younger girl said, "Since we ate father's cakes, he must have punished us by leaving us in the forest. However, come along, we may find shelter for the night somewhere." As they walked, they saw a very big tree in front of them. Going up close, they implored, "Oh Tree, if we are the virtuous daughters of a virtuous mother, then please divide in two and shelter us." Straightaway the tree trunk divided itself, the girls stepped inside, and the tree closed up around them.

The enclosure and re-emergence from the tree can be seen as a rebirth that girls must undergo to become wives, a motif that is repeated when Umno is placed in a large earthen pot by her sister (Ibid. 83). Umno cannot become a proper housewife in her new family as she keeps on breaking the fast, eats the seeds before they are given time to grow and thereby puts her own needs before that of her family and jeopardizes the auspiciousness of her new household. This episode echoes the *Itu puja* with five seeds in a pot, described by Mallika; the pot contains,

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<sup>131</sup> Also the story of the goddess Sasthi focuses on the tensed relation between the daughter and the mother-in-law and resonates strongly with the story of (Jh)umno; the mother-in-law wants to perform a puja for Sasthi, but the offerings are eaten by one of her daughters-in-law (Dimock 1971, xi).

preserves, but is also a symbol for growth, for change, yet this change has to be nurtured through a disciplined ritual repetition of giving water. The scene in which their father puts a grass ring in the water pitcher can be interpreted to be a sign of the resolution, the seeds have grown into a plant and the journey of the daughters to their new home as married women is completed.



*Figure 7.4*  
Mixed media painting of a pot on a tripod. The inner vessel resembles both an upper body and a watering can.

### 7.3 Manasa, the snake goddess

Together with the Delhi based and Kolkata born artist and curator Sayantan Maitra (Boka) (see 3.4), Chander Haat organized a site/community-specific exhibition. The exhibition, titled *Sarsuna Theke Jana: Insights from the Metropolis*,<sup>132</sup> took place in Chander Haat's surrounding neighborhood Sarsuna, a neighborhood on the southern semi-urban outskirts of Kolkata (see chapter 6). For this exhibition, which I did not attend myself, Mallika organized a workshop with a group of women from the neighbourhood who sing songs in praise of the snake goddess Manasa. Before discussing the artwork, I will shortly elaborate on the rich oral-literary tradition of *Manasamangal*, poems in praise of the Goddess Manasa.<sup>133</sup> These stories and their many variants have recently been collected, translated, and worked into one composite version by Kaiser Haq in *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess* (2015). The main story line goes as follows:<sup>134</sup>

Manasa, or Padma as she is often called, is the custodian of all the snake venom and ruler of all snakes. She was born out of the semen of Shiva that landed on a lotus leaf (in some versions) and was brought up by Kadru, the queen mother of the nagas, or serpents. As Shiva's unwanted daughter she is on a tensed foot with Shiva's wife Parvati (also known as Uma, Gauri, Chandi, or Durga). Parvati at first thinks Manasa is Shiva's mistress and pokes out one of Manasa's eyes after which Manasa knocks her unconscious with her gaze. To alleviate the tensions Shiva takes Manasa away to set up her own home and fashions from his tears a sister for her, Neta, who becomes Manasa's wise adviser. After Viswakarma has built a city for them on mount Sijuya, Manasa wants to be worshipped on earth and comes down from the divine realm to the human world in her swan-drawn chariot.

With relative ease Manasa wins over cowherds and other 'lower order' communities, but she has more difficulty with the Muslim rulers Hassan and his brother Hossein. Yet, calling upon her army of snakes Manasa she also forces them into submission. Only the stubborn merchant prince Chand, who obtained a boon of occult power from Shiva and is protected by the *ojha* Shankha-Dhanvantari (a healer specialized in snakebites), refuses to worship her. Manasa steals Chand's secret Mantra and kills the *ohja* and his disciples. Chand still does

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<sup>132</sup> *Sarsuna Theke Jana* translates as knowledge from Sarsuna.

<sup>133</sup> The Manasa tales belong to the literary tradition of *mangalkavya*, which means (narrative) poetry (*kavya*) written and recited to celebrate deities and obtain their blessings (*mangal*) (Haq, 2015, 31). *Mangalkavyas* differ from the *Puranas* as they pay more attention to social reality; they are more like folk stories that use vulgar language comedy and farce. Shiva for example, as Haq points out, is not any longer an austere ascetic god from the *Puranas* but a "cannabis-addicted rustic strongman" (Ibid. 42).

<sup>134</sup> This is a short summary that I have distilled from Kaiser Haq's composite version of Manasa's tales. I did not include the creation myths and puranic myths that feature in many East Bengal versions. Haq argues that comprehensiveness and continuity is achieved in the way by which the narrative progresses smoothly from mythic time to a time with clear historical resonances. "The inclusion of preliminary episodes turns a drama into an epic" (Haq 2015, 42).

not want to worship her, and Manasa kills Chand's six sons. This only increases Chand's hatred for Manasa, but his wife Sonaka continues to worship her and is promised another son, but on one condition: if he marries he will die on his wedding night. While Sonaka is pregnant Chand embarks on a trading voyage to (Sri) Lanka. The trading mission is successful but on his way back Manasa destroys Chand's fleet with the help of Hanuman and Ganga. After a series of misfortunes Chand returns home to find he has a healthy son, Lakshmindar, who is of marriageable age. Despite Manasa's prophecy Chand and Sonaka decide to marry Lakshmindar to Behula, the daughter of a neighboring kingdom, and build a steel airtight bridal chamber for the wedding night. However, the architect, who is, like everybody else by now, a Manasa devotee, leaves a tiny hole in the chamber. A *kali naga* (black cobra) sneaks in and bites Lakshmindar in his toe.

Lakshmindar dies, but instead of cremating him Behula puts him on a raft made of banana trees and, as she does not want to leave her husband, joins Lakshmindar on the raft. Floating downstream she faces many dangers at various river bends; a tiger, a hunchbacked cripple, a gambler, vultures and others either try to steal Lakshmindar's corpse or try to steal/seduce Behula, but she passes all the trials. Manasa answers Behula's prayers and by collecting his bones, chanting mantras, using twigs of flowering plants and water from the seven seas, she restores Lakshmindar to life. The goddess, who is now accepted in the pantheon, also restores Chand's six sons, Shankha-Dhanvantari, and Chand's fourteen ships and crew and finally Chand agrees to worship her.

Manasa is a non-puranic indigenous goddess who, just like Chandī (Durga), had to find a place in the Brahminical order.<sup>135</sup> According to Haq (2015, 31) and Seely (2008) these narrative poems show how a particular deity establishes power over humans and acquires a place within the pantheon: “ (...) deities, like people, are political creatures and must compete for status and respect” (Seely 2008, 7). After the Muslim conquest the Brahminical Shiva-Shakti cult tried to appropriate Manasa and other indigenous goddess cults by identifying them with the Shakti aspect of Shiva. Kinship ties established this relation; Chandī (Durga) became Shiva's wife, and Manasa and Neta became his daughters (conceived by Shiva himself, not Chandī). But, as the story of Manasa tells, “the new kid on the celestial block”, as Haq calls her (Haq 2015, 43), had difficulties to assimilate into the Brahminical establishment, represented by the merchant king Chand. Chandī is the stepmother of Manasa and is jealous of her and she does not want Manasa to establish herself (Ibid. 42). These stories reflect a reality of Manasa's current popularity; Manasa remained a minor Goddess compared to Durga. However, Haq points out that in many Bengali homes, whether Hindu, Muslim, or Buddhist, a child grows up hearing the stories of Manasa, Chand, Behula and Lahshmindar and there are still travelling professional performers

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<sup>135</sup> Kaiser Haq writes that the Manasa cult evolved from around 500 C.E. to roughly 1000 C.E. (Haq 2015).



who enact the stories in markets and fairs in the Bengal countryside (Ibid. 51).<sup>136</sup> The snake is not as great a threat as it used to be, not even in the Bengal countryside, but that does not necessarily mean that the goddess will disappear.<sup>137</sup>

Before the Sarsuna exhibition Mallika got in touch with a group of women from the neighborhood who regularly come together to sing the songs of Manasa.<sup>138</sup> During Manasa *puja* in the Bengali month *sraban* (from mid-July to mid-August) the women go from door to door to the houses where Manasa *puja* is held to sing the songs and earn some money or food donations, whereas the *puja* itself is done by a priest. Mallika started a workshop with the women in the week leading up to the Sarsuna exhibition and asked them to make clay objects related to the Manasa stories. They made idols of Manasa, of her holy pot (*ghot*), a bed for Lakhsmindar, the iron bridal chamber of Lakhsmindar and Behula, Shiva, different types of fruit and trees that appear in the stories, snakes, the ship of Chand, and much more. On the two days of the Sarsuna exhibition, Mallika exhibited these small clay objects in the temple where they usually sing *Manasamangal* and made small ‘rooms’ from paper with the names of the women written on them. Mallika installed the clay objects in a circle in the temple and added a clay form that resembled a *ghot* with a coconut and the twig of the *sija* plant and added (real) mango leaves, painted clay objects resembling fruit as offering, and the book containing the *Manasamangal*.<sup>139</sup> During the exhibition the women sat around the clay sculptures and sang the story of Manasa and Behula.

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<sup>136</sup> It is especially in Bangladesh that the story of Manasa is very well known. As Sukumar Sen notes: “The worship of the goddess of snakes [in East Bengal] has been as popular as almost an item of domestic routine, and so verses or ballads recounting the greatness of the goddess obtained a familiarity unknown in the western part of the country (Haq 2015, 33). Muhammad Shahjahan Mian, states that *Manasamangal*, is the national epic of Bangladesh – “one should perhaps add that it is in that case an unacknowledged national epic” (Haq 2015, 51).

<sup>137</sup> Sitala, for example, is getting more popular despite the decrease of small pox (Uuksulainen 2013).

<sup>138</sup> I was not in Kolkata during the Sarsuna exhibition and my description of Mallika’s artwork are based on conversations with Mallika after the exhibition. I have nevertheless incorporated this work in this chapter as it makes an interesting contrast with the relations between *pandal* art and contemporary art described in chapter 6, and because Mallika considered it to be one of her most important works.

<sup>139</sup> Haq points out that traditionally the altar for Manasa worship is occupied by an earthen *ghot* with a twig of the *sija* plant, or a fully blossomed lotus (Haq 2015, 41).



Figure 7.5

Top: Detail of Mallika's exhibition installation in the Manasa temple with the clay objects made during the workshop. Below the circle lies the book containing *Manasamangal*, the painted fruit, and the 'ghot with coconut' and mango leaves. Bottom left: Mallika's exhibition installation in the temple with the clay objects made during the workshop on the floor and the women sitting around it. The paper 'rooms' hang from the ceiling. In the background Manasa flanked by two swans. Right: detail of two paper rooms with photos and names of the individual singers. Photo courtesy by Moushumi Bhowmik of The Travelling Archive.

See: [thetravellingarchive.org](http://thetravellingarchive.org)



Meeting them for the first time, as Mallika recalls, the women introduced themselves with their sons' or husbands' names and often did not know each other's birth names.<sup>140</sup> The women have a marginal position in society, according to Mallika, both as women and as migrants who moved from Bangladesh to the outskirts of Kolkata. Mallika's artworks focuses on this double marginal position; the women suffer anonymity in a patriarchal society, and they endure social and economic marginalization as migrants. The story of Manasa, which they know from childhood living in Bangladesh (Barisal), gives them relief from their marginal position in society, says Mallika.<sup>141</sup> The women hugely enjoyed the making of small clay idols, and Mallika recalls one woman saying: "I haven't made clay idols before (...) I never knew I can build idols". As Mallika writes in her art note for the exhibition:

They sang while making the idols. The idols were unfinished but they were innocent and beautiful. I saw with astonishment their sense of space. They are habituated in singing in temple courtyards, but that day they sang at Chander Haat. They miraculously converted the space into their own environment. It seemed the courtyard of Chander Haat had become a temple. They sang from "Manasamangal", but left out many songs and dances. I believe, had it been a temple then they would have sung the whole of "Manasamangal".

A general association could be made between Manasa and marginal communities; the first devotees of the snake goddess are from the lowest segments of society and the Brahmin establishment disregards her. Although the rich oral /scriptural tradition of Manasa is known by many Bengalis, in terms of visibility she is, and always has been, a marginal deity. But the emphasis of the workshop did not lie on the acceptance of Manasa and instead focused on the journey of Behula. According to Mallika it makes sense that the women focused on Behula; Behula's long riverine journey in which she confronts a range of challenges echoes their migration from Bangladesh. Instead of focusing on her violent attempts of converting Chand, the emphasis lies on the regenerative powers of Behula and Sonaka; their attempts to safeguard the home, their husband and son, beautifully portrayed in the episode of the hole in the bridal chamber, and the struggles that follow when this boundary is crossed.

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<sup>140</sup> Chandrakala Roy, Malati Majumdar, Parul Sheel and Parul Halder were the lead singers of Manasamangal.

<sup>141</sup> I will not dwell here on the social histories of migrant communities and gender dynamics in such migrant communities of Kolkata. Instead I will describe the ways Mallika approaches the topic and the intended and unintended consequences brought about by her workshop and related artworks. My focus is not on the community of Manasa devotees, but on the relation between Manasa and Mallika's contemporary art production.

However, as Mallika said, the women did not look at it from that angle. When Mallika told them about the parallels between their lives and that of Behula some understood, but they did not look at it from that perspective: “They have unknowingly become all these mythological characters. The struggle of Behula, Manasa, and Sonaka is their struggle which has slowly imbibed in their lives.”, Mallika writes in the art text accompanying the exhibition.



Figure 7.6

Left: Women singing *Manasamangal* during the workshop. Right: Small statue of Manasa made by a woman during the workshop. Photo courtesy by Moushumi Bhowmik of The Travelling Archive. See: <http://thetravellingarchive.org>

Aside from Mallika’s own interpretation, her artwork is placed in the interpretative framework of the writings on the entire Sarsuna exhibition. In Boka’s writing about the exhibition in the Houston based magazine *Voices Breaking Boundaries*, Boka emphasizes the humanitarian and environmental consequences of migration, in South Asia and more generally. The artworks are grouped together as expressions of partition and the festival as an occasion for dialogue: “I worked with a group of artists, and our project was aimed to increase dialogue within and between communities about the impact of cultural differences, migration, climate chaos, biodiversity loss and the destruction of habitat, to break down negative cultural stereotypes and strengthen intercultural understanding”.<sup>142</sup>

The exhibition did indeed bring people from different social background together. The artworks were framed within a site/community specific exhibition of *contemporary* art curated by an artist/curator with connections in the wider Indian *contemporary* art scene. Yet, the event was organized by the art community of Chander Haat and took place in and around Chander Haat. Due to this organization the exhibition could attract people living close by in Sarsuna as well as

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<sup>142</sup> [www.vbbarts.org](http://www.vbbarts.org); *Borderlines* Vol. 3 Fall 2015 – Spring 2016.

send out invitations to an audience acquainted with *contemporary* art in Kolkata and other cities in India. Furthermore, Boka practices a curatorial style where he does not intervene too much, as he told me, and attempts to avoid a definitive reading of the event. The public festival was open to everyone and free of charge and brought people together from different backgrounds interpreting the same cultural event in different ways. According to Boka and artists from Chander Haat there was a large interest and open attitude to the exhibition. The collaboration with artist-curator Boka and Chander Haat thus resulted in a varied audience from different Indian cities with different socio-economic backgrounds and varying knowledge of *contemporary* art practices.

Most people living in Sarsuna do not speak English, or only poorly, and do not have much, if any, familiarity with installation, site-specific or community art. Overall the people living in Sarsuna were curious and open to see something new, but occasionally it instigated offence or doubts of trust. Suman and Sourav (TAXI) (see chapter 3.4 and 6.5) participated as artists in the Sarsuna exhibition and spoke of a misunderstanding of their work. On a *pukur* (pond) next to Chander Haat they placed clothes and kitchen utensils floating on the surface of the water, a way, as Suman told me, to think about the ‘floating lives’ of the migrants of the area. From their art note: “More often than not, the dream of a better life is shattered as such families find themselves, on the one hand, barely making ends meet, and on the other, torn between the memory of their homelands and the hope of a new life elsewhere. As time runs out, such lives drift precariously with no certain end or existence”. However, a woman living at the edge of the pond was critical of the artwork by TAXI. “She took it literally”, Suman says, she took offence as it referred to flooding, homes washed away, people who drowned.



*Figure 7.7*

Artwork by TAXI, clothes and other household objects floating on the *pukur* next to Chander Haat.

Mallika’s work initially prompted some friction as well. People living close by do know that Chander Haat attracts people outside Kolkata and outside India, not only during this exhibition, but do not know exactly what for. This became explicit in matters of trust. During

the workshop there was some hesitancy in trusting Mallika; someone told the women who participated in the workshop that Mallika would sell the objects abroad. However, this fear was overcome, says Mallika; the women asked her directly and soon trusted her.<sup>143</sup> After the exhibition some women went back to Chander Haat to ask for clay so that they could make more sculptures and, as they did not know where to place them, brought them back to Mallika who keeps them in her studio. The gaps of understanding between the different groups of people attending the exhibition could be seen as a problem. But, a cultural event that allows for multiple interpretations and opens up to a variety of practices both before and after the exhibition might lead to unexpected outcomes as well. It might be exactly this gap of understanding that makes it possible for Hindu ritual practices and storytelling traditions on the one hand and *contemporary* art ritual practices on the other to intermingle and produce unexpected outcomes.

One way the story of Manasa continues, Haq writes, is through its adaptation in the cultural mainstream; theater, film, and television have adopted the stories of Manasa. These adaptations take place in a different medium involving a different public and different way of seeing; transposed to the realm of public cultural entertainment it loses for example the more intimate and personal involvement with the storytelling tradition. Mallika's Manasa installation, embedded in the sphere of *contemporary* art and circulated for a *contemporary* art public, can be seen as an adaptation as well. Yet, as Mallika collaborates with *Manasamangal* performers she has created something very close to what they were already doing; the site, materials and performers are so close to *Manasamangal* and *Manasa puja* that it seems not so much an adaptation to another medium and public, but a continuation of the ritual and storytelling practices of Manasa.

Is Mallika's artwork similar to the already existing ritual practices of Manasa or is it something different entirely? The singing by the women was done, as usual, in celebration of Manasa and the exhibition in the Manasa temple with the Manasa idol was made to resemble a *puja* offering; especially due to the placement of fruit and a *sija* twig, the exhibition visually resembled a *puja* aesthetics. Yet at the same time it was not a *puja*; the fruit and twig were painted clay objects and the circle of clay objects did not resemble a *puja*-offering, which is usually smaller and placed closer to the feet of the goddess. What is more, the workshop held at Chander Haat before the exhibition differed from Manasa puja. "It seemed the courtyard of Chander Haat had become a temple", Mallika writes (see quote above); "it seemed" is crucial here. And, "Had it been a

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<sup>143</sup> Mallika would not sell the objects, and if she would, not without sharing the profits. Yet, this mistrust is not completely without ground. When this kind of work by Mallika would, for example through this writing, enter the frame of the Indian and International *contemporary* art scene, her other works could increase in monetary value substantially.

temple”, she writes, making clear that it is not. Moreover, when she moved the sculptures to the Manasa temple, Mallika’s installation was made without strict regulations of the caretaker of the temple and without a priest and did not follow any formal regulations.<sup>144</sup> Perhaps most significantly, the exhibition was held in April whereas Manasa *puja* is celebrated in July-August. That Mallika’s artwork looks like Manasa *puja*, is no reason to regard it as a similar cultural practice. As Michael Taussig has argued in *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993), practices might do something entirely different from that what they are mimicking; mimesis has never been the reproduction of the “same”, but a mechanism for producing difference and transformation: “the ability to mime, and mime well, in other words, is the capacity to Other” (Taussig 1993, 19; see also W.J.T Mitchell 2005, 24-25).<sup>145</sup> To draw the conclusion that both practices are similar based on visual resemblances is thus problematic.

In the case of Mallika’s Manasa installation the different spheres of *Hindu* ritual practices and *contemporary* art ritual practices do not so much come together but merely allow each other’s proximity. Held for only two days, and several months before Manasa *puja*, the exhibition did not interfere with Manasa *puja*. And, although Mallika does interpret the event in her art note, the event itself allowed different participants to retain their own interpretation of the event. Mallika distances her work from religion and did not interfere with the Brahminic priestly authority of Manasa *puja*. She did not attempt to forge a link or cause friction between established priestly practices and *contemporary* art. “I am interested in rituals, not religion”, she told me when asking her about religion and her art practice. But this does not mean there is no communication between the two fields of ritual production. When asking the simplistic question, is it religious? The answer will be no. But when the religious is seen as a range of ritual practices, instead of a determined field of institutions and beliefs, the different practices of both fields of cultural production might entangle or at least, influence each other. Because Mallika does not force a comparison or confrontation with institutionalized priestly practices, new forms can emerge.

By putting Manasa in the spotlight and adding a material production to her presence, Manasa, guardian of the marginal, grows a little. It is the visibility of the deity that determines his or her popularity, as Kajri Jain writes (Jain 2007). Although Mallika did not mention it, her clay modeling workshop with the women can be seen as an effort to sustain and revive Manasa in a rapidly urbanizing environment where snakes are becoming a rare sight and where other female deities, especially Durga, Lakshmi, Kali and Saraswati, demand most of the attention. Mallika

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<sup>144</sup> This however does not mean Mallika could make whatever she wanted in the temple.

<sup>145</sup> To mimic is to change, to appropriate. What this transformation consists of can vary; it can express a need to become the other, but it can also render the other passive, unharmed, as Taussig shows with respect to the Cuna of Central America (Taussig 1993).

told me in her studio that her workshop and exhibition are just the beginning and it remains to be seen in which way these confluences of practices might lead. For now, it is too early to draw any conclusions; to claim that the economy and infrastructure of *contemporary* art could give new life to a goddess at the margins is suggestive. It is unclear in which direction this confluence of practices will go, but the making of small clay statues of a goddess does have a significance that extends beyond the sphere of *contemporary* art. The quantitative effect that a *contemporary* artwork might have on the visual spread of a goddess pales in comparison to the profusion of calendar art, *puja* billboard advertising and the construction of temples across the city. But the significance attributed to a god or goddess does not merely depend on how large or frequent their material manifestations are; it also depends on their positional and material manifestation.

With her workshop Mallika has instigated a practice in which Manasa enters the home. To show the significance of this positional change I have to return to the story of Manasa. The Manasa story contains a wide variety of story elements that express inside-outside, container-contained relationships and the crossing of the boundary of the container. Manasa's efforts to be worshipped concentrate on the presence of a pitcher (*ghot*); as snakes often reside in pots the *ghot* does not just represent Manasa, but contains her.<sup>146</sup> Manasa's demand for worship does not merely involve a verbal confession of belief, she wants that people give her a *puja*; the first act Manasa requests of her new converts is setting up an altar and installing the *ghot*,<sup>147</sup> and Chand's biggest insult is that he repeatedly breaks the *ghot* with his *hintala* staff.<sup>148</sup> Chand is later punished when a snake enters the small crevice in the sealed-off bridal chamber and kills his son Lakshmindar. Besides the *ghot* and the bridal chamber there are many other story elements that express container-contained relationships and a crossing of boundaries. These boundaries

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<sup>146</sup> *Ghot* (also called *mangal ghot*) is a pitcher-shaped painted pot, worshipped as a ritual object during Durga puja, and often immersed along with or in place of the figure of the Goddess (Guha-Thakurta 2015, glossary, 367). The *ghot* plays an important role in the story of Manasa as well. In Haq's *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess* (2015) the *ghot* is made of clay or more expensive materials depending on the social background of the devotee. As Wendy Doniger writes, "The association of snake and pot is perhaps a very immediate one: it seems likely that snakes were caught and imprisoned in pots; there is a Tamilian belief that snakes seek out pots in the summertime because they are cool. One may then speculate about the possible relationships between these facts and the very ancient beliefs in the pot of poison and the pot of soma, the panacea. There is no reason to speak further about the well-attested relationship of snake to women-fertility-vegetation" (Doniger and Haq 2015, 26-27). See also Warnier 2006.

<sup>147</sup> In *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess* (Haq 2015) there is a section describing how to do the puja: "What do we know of puja rituals?" the cowherd bewailed. "But if you tell me what needs to be done I will do it." "Steady your mind and listen carefully," said Neta. "Prepare a plot of land and build a roofed structure; then make an attractive platform to serve as the altar. Draw *alpana* designs on the platform and place on it a pitcher, which you should stuff with mango leaves and twigs. Then you need sweet-smelling flowers, sandalwood, incense, votive lamps, clothes, and ornaments. Shower the pitcher with petals, with fresh milk and ripe bananas, for these are great favorites of the goddess. After making the offerings you should complete the puja with songs and dances. After that a ritual sacrifice will greatly please the goddess and induce her to grant a boon to her worshippers. Do as I say and I can assure you the goddess will restore your cattle by way of a boon" (Haq 2015 168-169).

<sup>148</sup> From a plant, a palm variety, believed to be able to scare away snakes (Haq 2015, glossary, 348).



in the Manasa story are not, as is the case in many initiation rituals, a controlled and phased movement from youth to adulthood, but are sudden and uncertain; the unexpected bite from a snake and the uncertain voyage of Behula. It is this uncertainty of life that plays an important role in both *Manasamangal* and Mallika's artwork.

Manasa is often regarded as a violent goddess who cannot be worshipped at home, only outside the home, in a temple or a small shrine. As Riika Uuksulainen states in her dissertation *Mothering Rituals: A Study on Low Caste Women in Kolkata* (2013), Manasa is not welcome inside the house. One of Uuksulainen's respondents said: "We do not do Manasa at home, because Manasa is the goddess of snakes. She is an angry type of god". Instead, Manasa is often worshipped in a nearby temple (Uuksulainen 2013, 121). In contrast with *Lakshmi* or *Sasthi*, the common protectors of the household, Manasa is kept outside. But the workshop was held at the Chander Haat grounds, neither fully inside nor outside, and the post-exhibition statues were made at home and stored in Mallika's home studio. Doing so Manasa has entered the domain of *ghare*.

To my knowledge there is no tradition of making clay statues of Manasa or other characters or objects of *Manasamangal*. However, it is common that small statues are made of another goddess, Sasthi. Sasthi, goddess of motherhood, protector of children, is often worshipped after marriage following calendric regularity, at childbirth, or voluntarily for particular requests (Uuksulainen 2013, 128). The visualization and materialization of Ma Sasthi are rich and varied but often without an anthropomorphic image or form, though not always.<sup>149</sup> Many of Sasthi's representations in Kolkata are self-made by individual women and each Sasthi therefore has special features (Ibid. 120). Women either make a temporary idol, small articles and figurines from clay, or draw *alpanas*.<sup>150</sup> And everyday objects can represent *Sasthi* as well, which, according to Uuksulainen, expresses an intimacy between women and the Goddess (Ibid. 129).<sup>151</sup> In the Bengali context Sasthi is often associated with Manasa and they are often

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<sup>149</sup> Among the women interviewed by Uuksulainen in Kolkata the clay pot was transformed into the goddess *Sasthi* when a mark of vermilion was placed on the pot. And during some *Sasthi* pujas women prepared sweets and put them around the pot. In her anthropomorphic form she is often depicted with her mount, the cat *marjara*. An anthropomorphic image, as Uuksulainen writes, often indicates a rise in the status of the deity. "When originally tribal folk goddesses ascend to the category of more 'important' deities, they are usually allowed an anthropomorphic shape" (Uuksulainen 2013, 129).

<sup>150</sup> *Alpanas* are floor patterns made usually with rice flour mixed with water. *Alpanas* are traditionally made before sunset by women and are usually applied on the evened earthen floors of inner courtyards of villages, but are also applied on wooden surfaces, and terracotta objects. Chitrita Banerji emphasizes the spontaneous character of these drawings: "there is no template to refer to, nor any previous documented pattern to copy – only the knowledge of patterns seen in the past and a community memory of motifs developed through the ages. Among the many common motifs are the flowers, leaves, fruits, and vegetables that are a part of the landscape. Ears of rice (...) show up often, as do rice storage containers (*dhaner morai*) as symbols of plenty (Banerji 2006, 130).

<sup>151</sup> She can, for example, be present in water that rises from a tank or in a clay pot (Stewart 1998, 353). Furthermore, she can be expressed as soft clay, a bamboo branch, betel leaves and nuts or plantains placed on a small wooden board, wrapped in yellow cloth and tied together by a thread (Mahapatra 1972, 142-143), a cow skull, a bamboo churning stick, or millstone (McDaniel 2004, 65), or a *sil nora*

represented together in the same shrines.<sup>152</sup> Also Manasa is associated with the bearing and protection of children and has regenerating powers, yet, Manasa is a more malevolent and demanding character, as Uuksulainen writes: “Manasa is thought to take and restore life with seeming arbitrariness whereas Sasthi is never considered as malevolent but always graceful and merciful” (Ibid. 133-134). The protective and destructive powers of Sasthi and Manasa can, according to Uuksulainen, be understood as complementary (Ibid.).

Mallika’s workshop and artwork seem to instigate a change in Manasa’s position that leans towards the character of Sasthi; from a violent goddess who has to be kept far from the household to a more intimate one lingering among everyday objects. *Manasamangal* provides a narrative framework to cope with the uncertainty of the household and Manasa is addressed to ward off danger. Whether the threat comes as a snake, or something else, by turning to Manasa and pleading to her gentle aspect, the home might be protected. *Manasa* is interesting because she is implored when the home is uncertain, threatened for example by migration or the bite of a snake. But whereas Lakshmi protects the home, Manasa shows that the boundaries between the ordered home and the unpredictable outside world are porous. By taking her inside the home, by making clay figures of her, Mallika highlights her gentle aspects, but also creates a

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(grinding stone and pestle); a *sil nora* is required in preparing spices for cooking. The *sil* is a flat stone and *nora* a kind of cylinder. The fresh spices are placed on the *sil*, and the *nora* is used for crushing the spices and for making a paste used in cooking curries (Fruzzetti 1982, 158).

<sup>152</sup> Sasthi is also often associated with the small pox goddess Sitala, with Lakshmi, and sometimes regarded as an aspect of Durga or the male god Karitkeya.

#### 7.4 *Two stories, two sisters*

I will not compare the stories of Manasa and (Jh)umno in detail, but merely want to highlight a similar theme.<sup>153</sup> One of the shared themes in the stories of Manasa and (Jh)umno is sisterhood. Although Manasa and Neta are gods, and Umno and Jhumno are not, in both stories the older sisters, Manasa and Umno, are naïve and irresponsible and need help from their more disciplined and wiser younger sisters. The key to both Umno and Manasa's success is the help they get from their better halves; Umno finally manages to keep the fast only because Jhumno has tied her sister's hair to hers, in one version, or tied their saris together in another. And Manasa is eventually successful thanks to the wise advice given by Neta. As Haq observes, "It is Neta who provides the strategies and tactics that eventually results in her triumph. In a sense, indeed, Manasa and Neta are twin goddesses, perfect partners, always together, sometimes even on the pitcher that marks the altar of the Manasa worship" (Haq 2015, 47). Not only are Jhumno and Neta wiser, they are also more benevolent. Neta, for example, convinces Manasa repeatedly to spare the lives of unwilling converts. And Jhumno marries the minister, instead of the king, but through her good behaviour turns silver into gold and at the same time patiently tries to help her older sister. As Suschismita Sen points out, the difference between Umno and Jhumno is expressed in their names. Jhumno can be broken down into "Jh + Umno" and Jhumno therefore is more complete than her older sister (Sen 1995).

Wendy Doniger in her book *Splitting the Difference* (1999) discusses a wide variety of myths in both Indian and Greek mythology to understand the reasons for splitting persons in myths. Doniger focuses on the splitting as a means to a cause in a power relation; some of the women in the myths Doniger talks about are split by men "in order to contain the evil that the men perceive in them" (Doniger 1999, 307). And in some other examples, such as in the case of Sita, women split themselves as a precaution or reaction to abuse by others (usually men). Sita is doubled and there is a shadow Sita, an exact copy to fool the demon king Ravana. But in the stories of Manasa and (Jh)umno there is not a clear split into a twin. There is an older and a younger sister and the younger sister Jhumno is presented as wiser and more disciplined than the older sister Umno. Manasa and Neta are twins, yet they are not identical copies. As Michael E. Harkin writes, reflecting on Lévi-Strauss' *The Story of the Lynx*, "siblings, including twins, are

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<sup>153</sup> As we have already seen, the pot is of crucial importance in the mythology of Manasa as well. And associated with water, the lotus, the swan and the color white, Manasa has like Laksmi, Shasthi and Parvati/Chandi, and to a lesser extent, Saraswati, the characteristics of regeneration and is a goddesses that women turn to for fertility, husband-finding and the protection of husbands. (Dimock and Ramanujan in Haq 2015, 26). Unique to Manasa as Doniger points out, is "the complex of associations snake-gold-pot, and that of death by bite or glance and revival by water fertility." (ibid). The story of Jhumno and Umno misses the snake, instead a plant grows out of the pot, but has the reference to gold as well.

always differentiated in some way through the events of the myth” (Harkin 2009), and this is true for both Manasa/Neta and Umno/Jhumno. The difference between the siblings provides a tension, and, especially in the story of (Jh)umno, this tension involves morality. What is more, (Jh)umno is not simply a story of two sisters, one good one bad, but expresses the transformation from daughter to wife and the expectations that go along with being a wife and mother. More than ethical guidelines, or a way of coping with the traumatic experience of marriage in a patrilocal kinship system, both stories provide ways for reflecting on the split positions Bengali women finds themselves.



*Figure 7.8* Two twins and two trees. My interpretation.

These stories resonate with Mallika’s artworks in multiple ways, but that does not mean she refers to these stories directly or that her works and the narrative traditions are two sides of the same coin. Mallika’s artworks, to name just one difference, do not teach the right way a woman should behave; they are neither didactic nor moralistic. Her work does not so much as echo specific stories, but a similar pattern of storytelling underlie both her work and the stories described above. One of the main elements in this storytelling pattern is the dynamic between inside and outside. The inside outside dynamic, expressed in (Jh)umno with a pot or a tree, and in Manasa mainly with pots and snakes, is expressed in Mallika’s work with a variety of container-like forms.

Mallika’s container figures could express a variety of inside-outside relations. They might be a

metaphor for the tension between the conscious and unconscious or sub-conscious mind; as Mallika said in her childhood memory “inside myself I have many *kulungi*, I know about some of them but have not idea about the others” (see above). The containers might also express the relation between the self and the other, or more specifically to the giving of birth. But I will focus on the containers as expressions of an important sociological divide of the position of women in Bengali society. Similar to the stories of Manasa and (Jh)umno, Mallika’s works reflect on the position of the expectations that accompany the transformation and journey from girl to wife/mother. And her works seems to resonate with her social balancing between her position as a ‘worldly artist’ and ‘homely wife’.

The divide between *ghare* and *baire*, the home and the world – similar but not the same as the divide between private and public (see chapter 3.5 and 5.2) – is perhaps most strongly experienced by married women; mothers are not simply assigned the role of taking care of the children and cleaning the household; housekeeping is, as Dipesh Chakrabarty writes (2002, 69-70), meant to express the auspicious qualities of the mistress of the household. As outsiders moving into the patrilineal and patriarchal family women are expected to become a *gharer lakshmi* (Lakshmi of the home), to maintain good fortune for the family into which she has married.<sup>154</sup> The role of Bengali women after marriage does not merely involve a socio-economic restriction to the labor market but involves the reproductive, architectural and urban-spatial demarcation as *gharer Lakshmi*. According to Rohner and Chaki-Sarkar (1988), despite the increased participation of women in the work force, many women still aspire or are expected to fulfil the traditional role of *gharer Lakshmi*. Until recently, Sen writes in 1995 women of middle-class household rarely worked outside the home; they only took jobs if absolutely necessary. The prime responsibility lay in bringing up the children. If the husband was capable of supporting the family the women should not work, if they did they were often accused of neglecting their duties (Sen 1995, 71). Now, in 2017, the possibilities for middle class women to work outside the house have increased, but the expectation of married woman to raise children and her responsibility at home have not decreased (Donner 2008, 131). As Donner writes in *Domestic Goddesses* (2008):

Becoming a parent and bringing up children are among the most important markers of gendered personhood in Bengal, and although men and women in middle-class families can, of course, lead very fulfilled lives without ever being married or having children, cultural ideas of gender and personhood are framed in terms of reproductive processes. Notions of status, individual fulfilment and happiness are inevitably linked to men’s roles as fathers and grandfathers and

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<sup>154</sup> In Bengal marriages, as Fruzzetti writes, “a new wife (*stri*) is introduced to her husband’s house as a deity, wife, and future mother” and is “called *Lakshmi bou* – a model of Lakshmi, the embodiment of her qualities (Fruzzetti 1990, 123).

women's roles as mothers and grandmothers. To become a parent is considered to be an essential stage in the life cycle of men and women across class boundaries, and parenthood and family life provide the grounds for everyday communication and interaction between people from very different backgrounds. (Donner 2008, 131)

In addition to her socio-economic position, Mallika, a married mother, brought up in a village in Hoogly district and now living on the other side of the city in Sarsuna, has to balance her double role of 'Bengali housewife' and individual *contemporary* artist. Mallika wants to have her own income and works in the mornings as a schoolteacher, yet she also underlines the importance of being married. Mallika's combined roles as *contemporary* artist, independent earner, and mother is not an unbridgeable contradiction, and living in the premises of Chander Haat, which serves as an in-between space that is neither fully 'inside' nor 'outside' gives her ample possibilities to meet other people, practice her art and care for the home. Yet, especially when leaving the Chander Haat premises, Mallika has to negotiate and balance this boundary more carefully. Because she has more freedom and can aspire to the role of an individual artist, the contradiction between the two roles of homemaker and *contemporary* artist come to the surface.

This does not mean that Mallika's works are outspokenly 'feminist'. I asked her what the difference is between her work and the works by the other artists of Chander Haat. There is a difference, she said, yet she did not make that difference very explicit and she emphasized that her work is not feminist: "There is a feminine line in my work, not feminist". Whereas the performance of Kalyani Uday, Rituparna Banerjee, and Piya Brar demonstrated a feminist strategy in which, by cutting their hair, they cut themselves loose from family expectations of becoming a wife and a mother (see chapter 5.2), Mallika's work expresses a balance between finding a freedom to be an individual artist and fulfilling the role of mother and wife as well.

"There is always an order that comes inside my work", Mallika says, "There is a construction". But this is not a hard order, but a soft one, she says. "The tension is always working. Between these two [opposites] I belong, I am. I am not occupying a static point. I feel that I am continuously balancing. I am balancing between the right and the left, balancing is my only job." Mallika exemplifies this balance between structure and movement with a video-installation she made for an exhibition. Before the exhibition she stumbled upon a scene where several children were climbing in a bamboo structure, a leftover construction of a *pandal* or event as can be seen frequently in Kolkata. The children climbed up and down the structure for a long time and she filmed it. This video she later projected in an exhibition and created a bamboo structure in front and around the video. This play within the bamboo structure, which she calls crisscross, she herself did in her childhood as well. It is this playful movement within a

given structure that she sees as a metaphor for her work: “A space opens up, a joyfulness is opened within the rectangle, I give a bit of myself, I receive a bit”.



Figure 7.9 Various balancing postures.

## 7.5 House crows

Kolkata without the crows –  
can you imagine the silent city!!<sup>155</sup>

Mallika's artworks are not just personal metaphors for her position as a female artist. Next to the connections between her work and Bengal's storytelling traditions, Mallika uses a variety of elements from her everyday surroundings that relate her work to the city in which she lives. I will for the remainder of the chapter focus on one such element, the crow. Several of Mallika's paintings show drawings of crows or crow-like birds. Crows are often associated with death and seeing the painting *Day light dream* (see below) I interpreted it loosely as such. The birds of the *Corvus* family - including birds like crows, ravens, rooks and jackdaws – play a cultural role in a wide variety of societies; sometimes they are seen harbingers of death, as keepers of good fortune, or are presented as tricksters outsmarting other animals.<sup>156</sup> In Hindu mythological and ritual traditions as well, as Xenia Zeiler shows in *Dark Shades of Power: The Crow in Hindu and Tantric Religious Traditions* (2013), crows are ambiguous – expressing both good and bad qualities. The crow, *kaka* in Hindi, *kak* in Bengali, is sometimes a revered divine companion and ritual assistant and sometimes it is seen as an inauspicious omen and bearer of bad luck or evil (Zeiler 2013, 212-213). As Axel Michaels points out in *Perfection and Mishaps in Vedic Rituals*, crows flying into the sacrificial arena risk polluting the ritual (Michaels 2007, 123).<sup>157</sup> The crow is a companion or vehicle of gods or goddesses such as Sani, Nirṛti, Jyestha and Yama; all deities which are, as Zeiler points out, dangerous, inauspicious and associated with death. The crow is furthermore related to ancestor worship and seen as the embodiment of a recently departed soul; funerary rituals, for example, might involve the feeding of a crow with a ball of rice to support the deceased during their passage (Zeiler 2013, 214).<sup>158</sup>

As messengers of death crows can be helpful as well. Behula had a pet crow; after Lakshmindar was bitten by a snake in his toe in the steel bridal chamber Behula summoned her pet crow and said: “My beautiful gem of a bird, fly at once and tell my parents that my lord has died inside the steel chamber”. The crow replied: “Last night I had two babies. They neither know their parents nor can they eat by themselves. How can I leave them, they will die.” To which Behula

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<sup>155</sup> Last line of a poem from *kaakera aschorjo pakhi* by Partha Bandyopadhyay. Poem translated by Churni Bhaumik.

<sup>156</sup> See for example Armstrong, E. A. (1958). *The folklore of birds: an enquiry into the origin & distribution of some magico-religious traditions* (p.77-88).

<sup>157</sup> Yet, if the crow immediately flies away, no ritual atonement had to be made (Michaels 2007, 126).

<sup>158</sup> See also Knipe (2005, 67-68).



replied: “Don’t worry, I’ll look after them with motherly affection, and when they grow up I’ll gild their beaks and decorate their wings with pearls. Now take wing, I beg you, and fly with the speed of the wind.” And the crow flew to Sahé and Sumitra’s palace and reported the bad news (Haq 2015, 316); still a messenger of death, but aiding the protagonist of the story.



Figure 7.10 “Day light Dream”. Watercolour, pastel & pencil.

Whereas crows play a secondary role in classic Hindu mythology, they play a more prominent role in Tantric narratives and rituals, writes Zeiler (2013, 212). The crow, in tantric practices, has two connotations. Firstly, the crow is the vehicle of goddess Dhumavati, and not of other deities. Dhumavati is a pale fickle and angry goddess with a high potential of roughness, cruelty, deceitfulness, horror and conflict. McDaniel (2004) describes her with color:

She is angry and coarse, her robes dirty, and she has few remaining teeth. She is elderly and tall with pendulous breasts, harsh eyes, and a big nose. She is always hungry and thirsty, and quarrelsome. She holds a winnowing fan, and a crow pulls her chariot. She is haughty, shrewd, and quick tempered. Her mantras are used in war. Called the Smoky One, she has the power of poverty, and as a widow she has no consort. She is surrounded by smoke from the burning and destruction of the universe. She is associated with Alakshmi, goddess of misfortune, and seen in beggars, lepers, the diseased, in hunger and thirst, in mourning, and in scenes of destruction (McDaniel 2004, 259).

And secondly, as Zeiler writes, tantric sources show that crows - or parts of it, such as its blood, feather or its ashes – were used in ritual contexts to ward off evil (Zeiler 2013, 220). This “crow potency”, as Zeiler calls it, is associated with evil, but exactly because of this association, it is used for protection following the logic that “evil counters evil” (Ibid. 221-222). The ambiguous position of the crow, as a harbinger of death, but also a helper and aid to ward off evil, is not something of the past and Zeiler draws interesting connections between past and current practices. But this does not explain why Mallika specifically paints crows for there are other ambiguous animals in these traditions, such as vultures or jackals, which do not feature in her work. The crows in Mallika’s work can surely be aligned with a variety of mythological and tantric traditions, yet, as Gregory Bateson said: “To translate the art object into mythology and then examine the mythology would be only a neat way of dodging or negating the problem of ‘what is art?’” (Bateson 1972, 130). Connecting current cultural uses of crows to past traditions sidelines the question why crows are given a role in cultural practices in the first place. By labeling all crows as ‘ambiguous’ or associate them loosely with death, one attaches a quasi-universal symbolic meaning to crows. Instead of pinpointing Mallika’s crows to a wider field of Hindu traditions or to a generalist association with death I will argue that the depiction of crows by Mallika can be better understood by looking at the distribution and behavioural patterns of crows and their relations with humans in the urban landscape of Kolkata.

The crows in Kolkata are *house crows* also called *Indian crows* (*Corvus splendens*).<sup>159</sup> The *house crow* is ubiquitous in Kolkata; on the streets near food stalls, at garbage sites, perched on the telephone wires and park fences, they are by far the dominating birds in Kolkata. Recent research on *house crows*, native to South Asia, has focused on its distribution towards areas where they are not native (e.g. Ryall 2003). According to Wilson, Sarim and Rahman (2015) the *house crow* is “particularly successful in invading the urban landscape”, while far less effective in “penetrating rural landscapes”. These “highly successful emigrants from the Indian subcontinent”, the

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<sup>159</sup> *House crows* are a different species of the corvid family that I am familiar with in the Netherlands, such as the *carrion crow* (*Corvus corone*) and the *jackdaw* (*Corvus monedula*).

authors write, “have colonized urban and rural habitats in many locations in Asia” (ibid.).<sup>160</sup> Like other corvids the *house crow* is a generalist, omnivorous, opportunistic and intelligent. But more so than other corvids, it is an “obligate human commensal” (Van Dooren 2016, 195), which means there are no populations known to live independently of humans. As Van Dooren says “in so far as these birds have a ‘natural environment,’ we’re it” (Ibid.). The *house crows* are also unique for their ability to travel long distances on board of ships and by this means have now established breeding populations in 24 countries outside its native range and has earned a place on the *Invasive Species Specialist Group* (IUCN) alert list.

To understand why the *house crow* is so successful in urban areas Wilson, Sarim and Rahman (2015) analyzed five factors that might affect the population growth on the west coast of peninsular Malaysia; people, traffic, cleanliness, sound, and trees. Both in urban and rural landscapes a higher abundance of trees had a negative effect on the population size, the other factors had a positive effect. This is contrary to most species of birds; traffic noise, for example, disturbs important information, such as birdsong, and most bird species avoid traffic-congested areas (Parris and Schneider 2008). Not only is the *house crow* not bothered by traffic, it seems to be attracted by it. Wilson et al argue, that *house crows* may respond to increased levels of human produced sound, such as traffic, for the availability of food found in rubbish (primarily food scraps) (Wilson, Sarim, Rahman 2015). “Cleanliness”, defined negatively, relating to the quantity of plastic food containers, food wastes, and overflowing rubbish bins, was positively correlated with the number of birds. Traffic, food stalls, overflowing rubbish bins, the abundance of it in Kolkata explains why the *house crows* thrive in Kolkata. But they are not ‘invasive’, they are ‘native’ and people living in Kolkata are used to them. As Churni Bhaumik said: “Crows are so familiar, it doesn’t even seem like a bird anymore”.

The reason that I dwell so extensively on *house crow* behaviour in connection with Mallika’s work is that artists, through their material practices, think *with* instead of merely *about* their environment. Kolkata is not merely a passive backdrop; as argued in the previous chapter, artists use the city’s source materials, such as bamboo and clay, to think with the city. This involves living things as well, non-humans that can look back. “How other kinds of beings see us matters”, Eduardo Kohn writes in his book *How Forests Think: Towards an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (2013): “Seeing, representing, and perhaps knowing, even thinking, are not exclusively human affairs.” (Kohn 2013, 1). Kohn has taken a part of the upper Amazon Ecuadorian rainforest as his site of enquiry and traces the multiple connections between humans

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<sup>160</sup> They are considered as a pest in the countries where it has recently been introduced, such as the urban coastal areas of the Arabian Peninsula, the gulf, Southeast Asia, and East Africa, such as Zanzibar, Mauritius, Malaysia, Singapore and Yemen. In Singapore, for example, the population of the house crow grew more than 30-fold in a period of 15 years from the mid 1980s (Wilson, Sarim and Rahman, 2015).

and other life forms: “Attending to our relations with those beings that exist in some way beyond the human”, Kohn writes “forces us to question our tidy answers about the human. The goal here is neither to do away with the human nor to reinscribe it but to open it. In rethinking the human we must also rethink the kind of anthropology that would be adequate to this task.”<sup>161</sup> Surely ‘more human’ than the Amazonian forest, Kolkata, like any other large city, is nevertheless a complex environment that involves a range of non-human life forms such as trees, street dogs, crows, mosquitos, and mosses, that make it into something more than simply a human habitat.

The *house crows* in Kolkata not only share the same urban environment with humans, they pay close attention to humans as well; they see and hear their Kolkata co-inhabitants and interpret their behaviour. And this is my experience as well, watching the crows from my balcony, perched on the telephone wires they return my gaze and follow my movements, while keeping an eye on the rubbish below. The crows show a high tolerance of human presence and often stay put even when within a meter’s range. Sitting on a street stall’s bench eating a chicken roll or chowmein, there are usually one or more crows carefully following my movements hoping, or knowing, that I will drop something; Kolkata’s crows are constantly looking and interpreting human behaviour. Kolkata’s human inhabitants’ everyday proximity to *house crows* is therefore not merely an issue of coincidental co-existing yet separate lives. Crows are more than a bothersome consequence of Kolkata’s urban congestion, of its waste management, or of its food stalls; crows and people live together, they do not only share the same urban environment but see and hear each other as well, a mutual recognition that has led to a rich range of expressions in literature, poetry, the visual arts and in Bengali proverbs and children’s rhymes.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Kohn writes that sociocultural anthropology “takes those attributes that are distinctive to humans—language, culture, society, and history—and uses them to fashion the tools to understand humans. In this process the analytical object becomes isomorphic with the analytics. As a result we are not able to see the myriad ways in which people are connected to a broader world of life, or how this fundamental connection changes what it might mean to be human. And this is why expanding ethnography to reach beyond the human is so important” (Kohn 2013, 6) Artistic practices can help an anthropology to look beyond ‘the cultural’ as artists make connections with their environment, use their surroundings not just for reflection but as material for their artworks, and thereby go beyond marked off cultural categories.

<sup>162</sup> Some examples: If a *house crow* caws while a person is speaking, that person lies, if the common house gecko makes a noise, the person is right; a saying that seems to emphasize the untrustworthiness of *baire* and the good qualities of *ghare*. The common house gecko, a very common sight in Kolkata, especially inside the house, has the onomatopoeic name *tiktiki* as it makes repetitive high pitching sound, *tik tik tik* resembling the Bengali affirmation when somebody or something is right “*thik thik thik*” – (you are/it is) right right right. Yet, crows are also described as good. As Churni Bhaumik points out, who teaches in an elementary school, they ask the children during writing skill exercises to write about the crow (next to cats and dogs). Children often write that the crow is a good bird as it helps cleaning the garbage. Another proverb *Bel pakle kaaker ki?* (What is a ripe stone apple to a crow?) is said when something good happening somewhere or to someone, is of no concern to the speaker uttering the proverb. The skin of the stone apple is hard and is difficult for the crow to penetrate, also when it is ripe. A ripe stone apple is thus of no use to the crow.

Yet, the crows do not stay at the same places as humans; besides the crows' obvious mastery of the sky, crows and humans are caught up in the logic of the city's *ghare-baire* divisions (see also chapter 2.4 and 4.2). One of the ways by which the divide between *ghare* and *baire* is marked is in home garbage disposal. Sudipta Kaviraj describes the Bengali household as an ordered space that meticulously wards off 'the outside'. Brahmin homes in particular, but Bengali homes in general as well, are kept clean with systematic, and in some cases ritualistic, regularity. Garbage does not belong to this ordered household and is thrown out of the window, where it cannot do harm. As Kaviraj writes: "It is thrown over a conceptual boundary" (Kaviraj 1997, 98). Dipesh Chakrabarty, writing about garbage as well, points out that this boundary does not simply mark out a hygienic space; housekeeping is part of the auspicious "Lakshmi-like" behaviour expected from the mistress of the household that projects the household from the "undue exposure to the malevolence of the outside" (Chakrabarty 2002, 69-70).

This "symbolic enclosure" (ibid. 75), a cultural performance enclosing and producing *ghare*, where everything is in the right place, marks a stark contrast with 'the outside' *baire*. This is not to say that an ordered public space does not exist in Kolkata and that the streets are simply the polar opposite of *ghare*, far from it. Although there are areas with waste disposal problems, many areas in the city are regularly kept and swept clean (See chapter 3.6). Yet despite municipal and community efforts that keep the streets clean, many residents carelessly throw garbage on the pavements, at any time a day. This careless disposal of household garbage on the streets is not simply a result of inefficient waste collection, but also a result of residents who see the streets as the negative of *ghare*, and less as a civic public space. What happens to the garbage on the street is therefore of lesser concern. Crows, who work together with street dogs to rip open the garbage bags, benefit from this type of random waste disposal and it might be one of the reasons that *house crows* thrive in Kolkata.

To what extent the crow population depends on household disposal practices and Kolkata's *ghare/baire* divide is open for further analysis, but crows are in any case associated with the streets, markets, food stalls, and garbage; they have become markers of the city's divide and belong unambiguously to *baire*. Yet, this divide is not airtight; many of the houses in Kolkata have iron bars instead of glass windows, especially in the old city center.<sup>163</sup> Crows, accustomed to the presence of humans, daringly hop through the bars to take away any food lying around in the kitchen or on the balcony. From the areas that are 'very *baire*', rubbish heaps and food stalls, they enter into the domain of the home. As Kolkata poet Partho Bandopadhyay writes in his poem:

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<sup>163</sup> Slowly but surely these open windows are being replaced by glass windows.

A crow knows all about the office-goer;  
where the bag of fishes is kept in the kitchen  
when the sire eats, how long it will take to bring the dirty dishes to the *koltola*,<sup>164</sup>  
where beside the window in sunlight a jar of pickles made by bubun's aunt is kept,  
it has the urban habit of knowing all the current affairs.<sup>165</sup>

Though the mythological connotations of crows are rich, it is only after having witnessed the behaviour of *house crows* within the urban landscape of Kolkata that I came to understand Mallika's works more fully. Besides the crows' culturally ambiguous roles as tricksters, or inauspicious messengers, the *house crows* of Kolkata take on a particular positional ambiguity in Kolkata's everyday urban life. The *house crows* come dangerously close to, or step over a boundary that should not be crossed by them. Crows are not ambiguous by default, they are ambiguous because they daily, hesitatingly, try to cross the boundary between a social and ecological divide of *ghare* and *baire*. As I wrote in chapter 2.6, that which by a society is regarded as being in-between and ambiguous, such as the pangolin among the Lele, is given a central place in ritual (Douglas 1966, 210). Kolkata's *house crows* do not just belong to *baire* but can, at certain moments, become a mediator between two important classificatory categories of Bengal society. Instead of an association with one thing or another, it is this ambiguous position that makes it a central element in some of Mallika's artworks. The crows in her works are not just harbingers of death, as so many myths convey, but indicate a crossing and mixing of boundaries, hopping through the bars that separate the home and the world, the self and the other, or life and death. With a variety of elements - pots, seeds, snakes, and crows — from her childhood memories, to her current home, from the stories of migrant women, to the stories of grieve and transformation of Behula – Mallika creates pathways that connect and weave different landscapes together. As Mallika said: “everything in my artwork - conscious, subconscious – all is woven.”

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I started this chapter discussing the presence of containers in Mallika's work and elaborated on the ways these containers express a dynamic tension between inside and outside. In 7.2 and 7.3 I related Mallika's imagery of containers to two storytelling traditions in Bengal; one of Jhumno and Umno – a tale of two sisters told during *Itu Puja* – and the other of Manasa, the snake goddess, who played a big role in one of Mallika's recent artworks. Then, in 7.4, I compared

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<sup>164</sup> *Koltola* is the platform below a tube well usually outside the house, in the courtyard or on the pavements, used by people to wash clothes and dishes, or wash themselves.

<sup>165</sup> From *kaakera aschorjo pakhi* by Partha Bandyopadhyay. Translated by Churni Bhaumik.

the theme of sisterhood in both stories, elaborated on the tension created by mythological doubles, and connected such mythological tales of doubles to Mallika's double role as an individual *contemporary* artist and a wife and mother in a Bengali social context. But perhaps this interpretation was too narrow. Mallika's works surely reflect on her own life, and on her position within a social context, but by drawing connections between her work, her life, and traditional Bengali narratives, I risk placing her work within a limited interpretative frame. Mallika's engagement with containers and storytelling traditions do not just concern her personal social position, nor can they be squarely framed within particular historical Bengali context. That is also why, in 7.5, I moved from a description of crows in Hindu mythology, towards a description of the ambiguous behaviour of crows in the city and its human inhabitants. I have argued that Mallika's artworks not only form a continuation of a variety of storytelling traditions, but also create a bridge that connects these stories with her life and the lives of others in present-day Kolkata.

As I have argued in chapter 2, writing about art inevitably places works within an interpretative frame, and this writing is no exception. Yet, artists and the people who enjoy art might feel something is missing. As Gregory Bateson writes: "In general, artists are very unwilling to accept interpretations of this sort" (1972, 151). In his analysis of Balinese painting Gregory Bateson writes that these paintings deal with sex, death, and social organization, but that they are not *about* sex, death, social organization: "(...) it seems that rigid focusing upon any single set of relata destroys for the artist the more profound significance of the work. If the picture were only about sex or only about social organization, it would be trivial. It is nontrivial or profound precisely because it is about sex and social organization and cremation, and other things. In a word, it is only about relationship and not about any identifiable relata" (Ibid.). Bateson argues that art depends on the integrative capacity to perceive patterns and relationships (Bateson 1972). In writing various layers of an artwork can be identified. But such language-based analyses cannot express the relations between these layers, the way an artwork can. Mallika's works are multivocal; they might address and reflect on the precarious position of migrant women in Bengali society, concern her own balancing acts between her position as an artist and her role as a wife and mother, or provide a way to think about the relations between the home and the world, within a Bengali context, and beyond. But her works are not *about* such separate domains. The artworks of Mallika are not *about* Manasa, or crows, or pots, or the position of Bengali women; they are about the relational pattern manifest in these things, and other things.

## Conclusion

Sometimes I went to the School of Fine Arts, Kala Bhavan, notebook in hand, to speak to the famous artist Nandalal Bose. He drew me pictures of four animals. A cow and a leopard were drawn with a pencil; and with water colours, he drew a bear and a tiger. He finished drawing the tiger by putting a dark patch on the tip of its tail. 'What's that patch for?' I asked. 'This tiger', Nandalal Bose explained, 'is very greedy. He walked into someone's kitchen to steal a piece of meat. That's when his tail got caught in a hot stove, and the tip was burnt!'

*Childhood Days, a Memoir*, Satyajit Ray (1998)

Creation, Martin Buber wrote in *The Legend of The Baal-Shem* (1905), is the externalizing of that which is within. Applied to the field of arts this does not just concern the agency of the artist that extends outwards to influence others, nor does it merely describe a quest for fame; it concerns a range of spatiotemporal transformations by which an artist and communities of artists reflect on, connect with, and create the world around them. In chapter 2 I have outlined a cyclical ritual process in which artworks and artists make a passage; artworks are selected and circulated, they are 're-membered' as members of collections and preserved for posterity – in this process artworks become part of a canonical order that transcends the 'here and now' and reproduces the orders of society by making them unquestionable. But some artworks, often designated as 'masterpieces', become part of a higher order of Art. This sacred order goes beyond the canonical order, but through sanctification, affirms the canonical as well. This complicated rite of passage is accomplished through various ritual strategies, but crucially depends on the creation of something new that undermines yet reinvigorates this ritual process; a restart of the ritual cycle enacted by two interrelated mechanisms: the confusion or momentary absence of meaning through ambiguity and criticism and, on the other hand, a 'consumption' of the vital sources of everyday life.<sup>355</sup>

As I have argued in chapter 3 *Hollow Times*, this ritual process takes place within a specific internationally oriented asymmetrical field that creates insiders and outsiders; most artists in Kolkata are outsiders,

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<sup>355</sup> See chapter 2.9 for an overview of the ritual cycle of *contemporary* art.



disconnected from the national and international hubs of *contemporary* art. I have described a range of art practices throughout the thesis by which artists in Kolkata nonetheless find ways to exhibit their works and make a living. There is a local art market and there are local exhibition venues that make up for the disconnection from the national and international field of art; artists might even prefer such venues. Yet, as these local art scene options are limited, artists find creative alternatives to continue making art. In the absence of selling opportunities through galleries and Art fairs, artists might make *pandals* for the festival of Durga Puja, which concerns an economy that financially and in terms of employment surpasses Kolkata's *contemporary* art economy significantly. Artists might also engage with a variety of 'commissioned jobs', or simply collect money during street performances. Doing so artists not only find alternative sponsors, but also expose the non-commercial pretensions of the *contemporary* art scene and create new forms of making art in the city.

But this thesis does not revolve around the search for local or regional distribution channels to make up for the absence of national and international opportunities; it is not a story of 'local' rejections and alternatives to a 'global' phenomenon. Rather, I have demonstrated that even if art practices do not lead to an incorporation within the ritual cycle of *contemporary* art, even if works go unnoticed or are regarded as belated, even if they are barely circulated, interpreted, and preserved, the art practices described in this thesis *nonetheless* provide situations in which the world can be thought anew. The fieldwork chapters describe the ways artists defy artistic conventions, create works that are ambiguous, carry the sacred idea of Art back towards the vital sources of everyday life, and challenge a variety of societal orders – with his hollow works Abhijit's ridicules the pretensions of the art scene and opens up the way for a new form of art; Anuradha creates a space for women to move out of the constrained access of 'the home'; with strategies of lightness and reversal Sanchayan counters ingrained epistemologies of representation; with their messy tactics the performers of PI circumvent professionalization; the artists of Chander Haat engage with rough vital materials and address the tensions of mobility and progress; and Mallika tells a story of an ambiguous goddess, reflects on the position of migrant women, and creates her own stories that connect her life to the city and the world. All these practices establish new beginnings that give both the artist and the beholder a moment and a place to address societal wrongs, to become part of a community, and to feel something that cannot be put into words.

Besides a celebration of new works of art, I have tried show how new and ambiguous artworks are selected, interpreted, framed, circulated, preserved and turned into 'objects of art'. The breaks from established frames and conventions, and the creation of something new, only describe a moment within the ritual process, a moment where head and tail of the ritual cycle meet. After this moment, unstable practices are framed yet again as stable works of art; for instance, as described in chapter 4, the practice of artwork photography frames a work, cuts it out from its environment, and turns multivocal

‘conjunctions’ into singular ‘works of art’. And in chapter 5 I have described a performance art community that strived to avoid the establishment of a bounded art group, strived for a ‘being in common’, yet saw the seemingly inevitable crystallization and fracture of an amorphous group into two separate factions. More than mere description, this writing takes part in such crystallization processes as well. As I wrote in the *The flight from meaning* (1.4), art writing cannot avoid interpretation. Yet, writing about art does not only concern an epistemological gap between language and physical and material acts. Art writing is not simply inadequate translation, but can stress the ambiguity of artworks, can enable their circulation, or place them within a classification that forms part of a canonical order – art writing is inextricably tied to the ritual process of *contemporary* art. Describing the artworks I have tried to steer away from narrow interpretations of art and focused instead on the creation of ambiguity in artworks. Yet, to make the ambiguity of art practices verbally explicit, I had to mention that from which it differs, that which it is not, and thereby unintentionally related it to that what it does not want to be. By writing, for example, about the ways Sanchayan’s artwork is *not* about Birbhum, I made it about Birbhum.

Elaborating on theories of agency and materiality, the anthropology of art has moved away from an approach that treats culture as a system of meaning. This on-going shift from what artworks ‘stand for’ to what artworks ‘do’ is part of a crucial material and sensual ‘turn’ unfolding across the humanities and social sciences. Yet, I have proposed that the anthropology of art can benefit from a reconciliation of both strands; instead of asking ‘what does an artwork mean?’ or inversely arguing that an artwork doesn’t *mean* anything, but *affects* the beholder, I have discussed the ways affect and meaning combine and oscillate depending on the position of the artwork within a field of art. To focus just on the materiality, agency, ambiguity or liminality of an artwork without drawing connections to artistic categories or societal orders, risks mystifying the work of art. To speak of the ambiguity or agency *of* the artwork is misleading as it suggests that there is something inside the work, something that acts or that is ambiguous. Ambiguity and agency are not intrinsic attributes of an artwork, but instead concern the relationships between an artwork, its environment, and the beholder. Artworks and the sites or substances that form part of artworks, such as *alta* in Taufik’s performance, the crows in Mallika’s works, or the *boithak khana* of Khoj Kolkata, are not intrinsically ambiguous or potent, but can be perceived as ambiguous because they create a difference with respect to the way one perceives and understands the world.

The potency of an artwork cannot be placed inside artworks, but neither can it be reverted back to humans. In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972) Gregory Bateson writes that art, in the widest sense, is not the expression of the unconscious, nor an expression of society, but rather is concerned with the relation between different levels of mental process. Instead of creating a bounded description of object or self, Bateson proposes an “ecology of mind” in which the human mind does not stop where the skin ends,

but extends outwards connecting with a wider context of thought processes in nature – a mental ecology or ‘mind’ that involves all lifeforms and aggregates of lifeforms, including microbes, forests, human families, nation states, spirits and gods.<sup>356</sup> Aesthetics, Bateson argues, is a way to bridge the various nested layers of this mental ecology: “Artistic skill is the combining of many levels of mind – unconscious, conscious, and external – to make a statement of their combination” (Bateson 1972, 470). I have described *contemporary* artworks within a ritual process of *contemporary* art, but also as part of an urban ecology, as embedded within lifecycles of a riverine ecology, or as extensions of Bengal storytelling traditions. Artworks cannot be fully explained by focusing on such fields separately; artworks do not just form relations between things within particular contexts, but make connections between various layers that operate on different scales.

The ritual cycle of *contemporary* art makes up only one particular ritual framework by which such connections within an ecology of mind can be made; facilitating the spatiotemporal transformations of artworks and guiding them back to the vital sources of everyday life, the ritual cycle of *contemporary* art connects the individual artist, as well as other ritual participants, to the canonical, the societal, the sacred, and to the vitality of the world. But, also when works do not become part of the ritual cycle of *contemporary* art, when works are barely circulated, interpreted, and preserved – when their spatiotemporal transformations are impeded – artists can still make such connections. In moments of “numinous experience” the self, as Rappaport writes, reaches out from the individual “to embrace other members of the congregation, or even the cosmos as a whole” so that “the boundary between individuals and their surroundings (...) may seem to dissolve” (Rappaport 1999, 220). By making and thus experiencing a work of art, the artist momentarily makes a connection between the self and the other, between the home and world, and creates a moment where everything and everybody is ‘on the same plane of empathy’. Bateson has taken a further step and suggested that artworks can be seen as “external pathways of the mind” (Bateson 1972,470). Artworks do not only make connections between different levels of mind, they might momentarily show us a glimpse of the fabric of life itself, what Bateson calls ‘the pattern that connects’. Artworks – of any kind – not only reunite ‘the self’ within an ecology of mind, but by doing so can perhaps shed light on the pattern that connects. Footsteps set out a path through the world, they sing the song of the road, and leave wet footprints on the soil.

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<sup>356</sup> See the appendix for a short discussion of adaptive systems.

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## Appendix: *Contemporary* art as an adaptive system

Gregory Bateson proposed an “ecology of mind” in which the human mind does not stop where the skin ends, but extends outwards connecting with a wider context of thought processes beyond the human. Bateson’s work, which is much more complex as I can account for here, does not just concern humans placed within a social context or a natural environment, but describes the interweaving of various circulatory self-regulating feedback systems (Bateson 1972). Although there are non-living systems that are self-regulatory, such as a thermostat, Bateson focused on living systems, combining his insights from biology, anthropology and psychotherapy. Self-regulating feedback systems can be found throughout the organic world and operate at different levels of organization, including the level of cells, organs, single organisms, associations of organisms such as human societies, and at the level of wider ecosystems involving various associations of various organisms.

Feedback systems or adaptive systems, as Rappaport calls them, are not simply part of living systems; it is more accurate to say that adaptive processes define living systems (Rappaport 1999, 408-409). The adaptive system of a tree, for example, is not a strategy or a function of the tree. A tree can be better described as the result of constantly changing structures of various adaptive processes that connect the tree with an environment, such as a forest, which consist of yet other adaptive systems. Rappaport, who has incorporated Bateson’s work in his theory of rituals, points out that adaptive systems continuously strive to maintain themselves, to persist, in the face of perturbations from their environment or from themselves (Ibid. 408). Adaptive systems are conservative and can be described as homeostatic, but homeostasis does not mean changelessness. An adaptive system in Bateson’s view is a self-regulating circulatory system that is in continual movement; it is not in balance, but continually self-correcting for imbalance. As Rappaport writes: “In an ever-changing world the maintenance of homeostasis requires constant change of state and less frequent and discontinuous changes in structure as well. If the maintenance of homeostasis is not synonymous with adaptive processes it is the goal of adaptive processes” (Ibid 410).

Rappaport distinguishes four ways – that I see as essentially two ways – in which adaptive systems achieve this goal.<sup>357</sup> First, an adaptive system can insulate itself from perturbations. Rappaport argues that insulation occurs in organisms, such as heavy-shelled mollusks, but restrictions of access in human rituals, for example, are also insulations; for example, when only ritual experts, such as priests, have access to certain parts of the ritual and the authority to change ritual procedures. Rappaport emphasizes the armory that protects and insulates an adaptive system from its environment, but it also important

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<sup>357</sup> See Rappaport (1999, 411-413).

to emphasize that adaptive systems create permeable boundaries that regulate between insides and outsides, rather than just protect an inside from an outside. From cellular membranes, to animal skins, city walls or complicated procedures that regulate and constrain ritual access, adaptive systems have various surfaces that create an asymmetry between inside and outside. Jesper Hoffmeyer, a proponent of semiotic biology, argues that life concerns the formation of a basic asymmetry between organism and environment and as well as the regulated exchange of signs between exteriors and interiors (Hoffmeyer 2008a, see also Harries-Jones 2016, 205).

The second way in which adaptive systems maintain homeostasis is through oscillation. Adaptive systems oscillate between two or more states and revolve in cyclical or more complex patterns to compensate for changes within and outside the system. These changes of state can occur at regular temporal intervals, such as in circadian rhythms (the daily sleep-wake cycle) or seasonal rituals. But it can also occur irregularly, whenever the ideal state of the system is perturbed. Systematic flexibility is a fundamental feature of the stability of adaptive systems. The striving for stability within a feedback system might give the impression that the pendulum movement or cycle is static, constantly repeating itself, however, as Bateson argues, a feedback system is also a learning system that changes over time to maintain its existence within a changing environment. Because an adaptive system is partially insulated and has an internal regulating system, it can be thought of as a “whole” or a “context”; what occurs within this system should first be understood as being part of this context. Like the meaning of a letter depends on its position in a word, and the meaning of word depends on the meaning in a sentence (Bateson 1991, 166).

The ritual process of *contemporary* art can be seen as an adaptive system; it is a self-corrective oscillating system in which every action only makes sense as part of the entire circulatory process. The adaptive system of *contemporary* art is insulated and protected by boundaries such as the art museum’s preservation protocols and other practices described in chapter 2 that guard the separation between objects of art from those things that do not have to be preserved; thereby creating an inside and an outside. Yet the boundaries are permeable and the ritual allows for change by opening up to its environment, otherwise it would ossify. The main way the ritual of *contemporary* art enables its continued existence as an adaptive system is by allowing for new artworks to enter the system. The correction for imbalance within the ritual process of *contemporary* art does not involve the making of a new work that completely substitutes older artworks, as can be seen in many other human rituals where older works of art are thrown away, burned or given back to the river; rather the correction of imbalance in the ritual cycle of *contemporary* art concerns a verbal (and only rarely physical) critical act that undermines but does not destroy the canonical order, and a subsequent addition of a new artwork to the older collection that reinvigorates the canonical order. The act of creating something new accomplishes an oscillation between a canonical

order and the temporal disruption of this order through criticism and the confusion of meaning (see 2.5 and 2.6).

By presenting *contemporary* art as an adaptive system, I do not argue that ritual processes are similar to living organisms. An organism such as a tree and associations of organisms, such as a human community, are both loci of adaptive processes, but this is not to say that they are the same; they are both subclasses of a larger class, namely adaptive systems (Rappaport 1999, 409). What is more, adaptive systems are not separate entities that can be isolated from other adaptive systems; one adaptive system, such as a ritual process, should be seen as part of larger adaptive systems, such as a human society. Bateson took further steps beyond the description of singular adaptive systems towards an exploration of the nature of the relation between adaptive systems, ‘the pattern that connects’. The whole, or context, of an adaptive system is connected to other contexts; one context is part of a meta-context and a meta-meta-context and so forth, “a ladder of contextual nesting which is best conceived of as an intransitive part-whole relationship” (Harries-Jones 2016, 104). One adaptive system is a whole that is nested in other wholes, not in a strict chain of hierarchy – from small to big, from cell to society – but what Bateson calls a “heterarchy”, a relationship based on an “intransitive” order (Harries-Jones 2016, 104). An ecology of mind cannot be represented with a map of concentric circles extending outwards in a transitive order – as Gell suggested in his discussions of Rurutu carvings and South Asian idols (Gell 1998, 137) – where “if A is greater than B and C is greater than B, then C is greater than A” (Harries-Jones 2016, 81).

Chapter 2 is limited to a description of the ritual of *contemporary* art as a whole, and does not look into the ways this whole is part of other wholes, other adaptive systems. Although I do contextualize *contemporary* art practices in the ethnographic chapters, mainly by focusing on the relation with the city, I do not explore the pattern behind such relations. What is more, I have limited myself to a description of a single loop of the ritual cycle, and do not look at the change that occurs in the sequence of cycles. Yet these limitations have allowed me to focus on the intricacy of one ritual cycle of *contemporary* art. A thorough comparison between the ritual cycle of *contemporary* art in Kolkata, the ritual cycle of Durga Puja, and the seasonal cycle of the riverine ecosystem of Bengal could be an interesting avenue for further research.

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