

Shalmali Shetty & Shrinjita Biswas

THROUGH THE BLACK BOX: REWRITING THE CONVERSATION WITH THE CURATORS OF THE INDIA ARCH DIALOGUE, 2018



Shalmali Shetty has a BVA in Painting and Printmaking from the Faculty of Fine Arts, MSU Baroda (2015) and a MA from the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (2017). Concurrently working in technical art capacities and writing about art, she intends to coalesce her practice and theory in the production of the curatorial. She has been the recipient of the Travel Grant for the 'Take on Writing Series' workshop titled *Critical Writing in Collaboration: Curating a Dream Project* conducted by Prof. Rustom Bharucha and organized by Take on Art in collaboration with Piramal Art Foundation in 2017. Her research interests include museum histories, changing display ethics, questions of interactivity and the contextual politics of curation.



Shrinjita Biswas has a B.A in History from Jadavpur University, Calcutta. She finished her first masters majoring in History from the Centre for Historical Studies and second in Arts and Aesthetics from the School of Arts and Aesthetics, both from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her interest lies in research, pertaining to gender, politics and technology in cinema and in theatre. She is affiliated to Sahapedia as a researcher and curator for short-term projects and is engaged as a scriptwriter for theatre productions. She is currently the Editorial coordinator at the TAKE on Art magazine.

Facing page image:
Inside the Black Box.
Image courtesy: Shrinjita Biswas

“We do not have a museum of architecture in India”. This was the definite immutable undercurrent in the conversation that followed. The four curators of the India Architecture Dialogue Verendra Wakhloo, Sudipto Ghosh, Rachit Srivastava and Madhav Raman meticulously addressed architectural concerns in a post-independent, post-colonial India- its fallout with our traditional knowledge of art and architecture constituting history books. Indeed why don't we have a museum of architecture in India?

‘The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.’ [1] Mr. Wakhloo begins with the idea of a shell, a cave: a dwelling, which is the most fundamental of spaces that one requires to think, to philosophize, before anything else. It is the private, through localization and familiarity that projects an intimacy with a space, over the personal and the public constitutions of a being. “A collection of such dwellings, form the social, the cultural, the city and largely the civilization. Architecture plays host spatially, culturally and technologically. It is the outcome of cultural forces”, explains Madhav Raman.

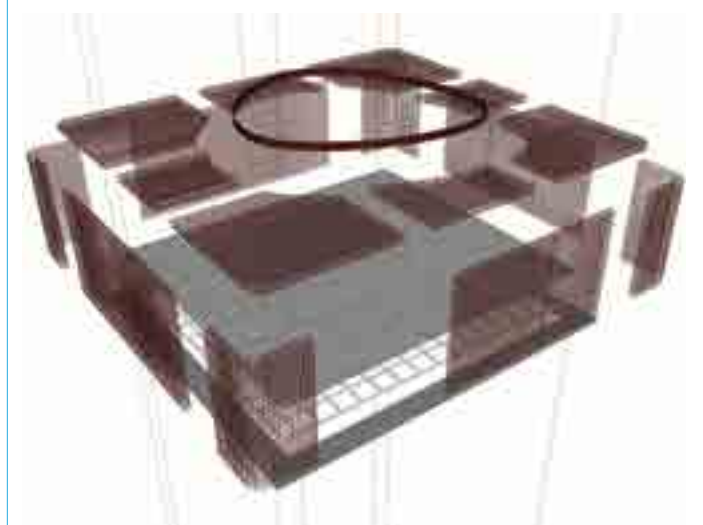
The notion of a dwelling has severed ties with and metamorphosed from the



Circumulation Model Kengo Kuma. IAD 2016.

simple to the complex edifice, from the natural carapace to elaborate imposing structures, evolving in time to suit the standards of the age. Mr. Wakhloo evinces how architecture in India has been experiencing retardation ever since independence. We know of post-independence Delhi that saw to the extensive and planned construction of a national architecture. These unarguably remain to be some of the exhausted touristic attractions today, alongside historical venues. But what epitomizes the present situation is the emerging, standard universal design, enormously typified by the modern West.

This graduation is not necessarily specific to its historical or cultural context unless it is rigorously aiming to retain a religious or political significance. Religious and political architecture of the most general model, aims to emulate former architectural standards or a pastiche of sorts, to evoke a familiarity with the conventional. At that, Mr. Wakhloo addresses a space like Akshardham as “a direct copy of the past. Scholarly architects are not happy about it. They'd rather interpret the past because if you copy the past, it means you are incompetent to deliver in the present quality. It's a major dilemma after independence because



Axonometric view.



Floating project display structure. IAD 2017

we are not equipped or supported enough by a larger community to create a cohesive piece of work that might attract tourism or admirers.”

But Madhav Raman supposes otherwise: “People are perfectly happy with connecting the newer structures to their notions of what a temple is. Akshardham can’t be completely called a copy-paste because it has an animatronics section to it. Look at it from a modernist perspective: resolving technology into a building is very much part of what we think of as a program of innovating. Battles of innovation are picked and fought at different times.”

A museum proffers a sense of stagnation, death and degeneration. It protects memories within the framework of histories of everyday objects, selecting specimens to speak of an obscure past. The museum generates a selective history that we tend to comprehend with selective viewing. Awareness is administered with the

quality of interpretation and with a present created from the past through a language of signifiers and the signified. The aura around the object/work of art, enclosed within the glass case remains to enthrall but does not permit the spectator to use his sense of touch, smell, sound or taste. Museum display ethics encourages interactivity plainly through vision -reducing the relevance of the object to the exhibitionist value sans its primary utilitarian purpose- subtly distancing the spectator from the object and oppressing the deeper exchange of meanings and assimilation, prompting a communicative distortion between them.

What is displayed in an architecture exhibition is not the architecture itself, but a representation or a prototype in illustration, photograph or a model in 3D, unlike the authentic end-product otherwise displayed in traditional exhibition spaces.

If the conventional function of art is to serve architecture[2] what then is the purpose of displaying architecture itself within these spaces? Additionally, to what degree is the interaction experienced in an architectural museum satisfying, when it only remains to be a ‘museum experience’, reimagined, in an altered time and space.

The ritualistic motive behind the prehistoric

caves that were painted and performed manifested into a successful hunt- is still retained by the architecture in India and continues to be a space of ritual. With these practices still prevalent, we perhaps might not extensively find a structure devoid of its use. Political history has necessitated the establishment of architectural museums in the West to preserve and display accumulated artifacts of cultural value, that Partha Mitter and Craig Clunas reason as “classifying and displaying the art of non-European nations in an assertion of political control over them”[3]. India with its conglomerated, amalgamated culture, identity, traditions and architecture, baffled and stressed between a traditionalist view and a progressive modern lifestyle, tends to tweak and expand existing fabrications, not to destroy, but to promote a rhizomatic thickening. Whatever the mode of retention, because historical architecture in the subcontinent is still a living and a breathing capacity, what role will an architectural museum play, if only to stagnate, retard and dilute the still exercised aspects of this architecture? Perhaps why, we still haven’t arrived at a museum of architecture in India.

“Photography has been architecture’s aesthetic mirror since the late

Interior view: *The house concept light.*

19th century”. What has remained unexpressed by architects has been articulated and reflected upon through photography. One can say that photography has preserved the historicity of structures retaining both its objectivity, as well as its subjective existence. When museums have ceased to create a space to restore architecture’s state of being, photographs on the other hand, have retained and celebrated the same. A photograph reveals sometimes the “abstract geometries, and at others, close ups have spoken of embedded processes within architecture”.

The eternal quality of a photograph (especially in the new media age) unlike any other form of art, bestows life upon structures, which have long been demolished and has only existed through the image that has been captured through the lens of a photographer;

but it shall only exist how the photographer has intended us to see it. The IAD curators have beautifully expressed the photo-architecture phenomenon in the words of Susan Sontag, photograph “hold(s) the world” –it expresses an ethos and its history. For our curators, “when architecture becomes a monument to humanity, photography becomes its aesthetic and ideological

voice, spoken into the depths of time.”

Verendra Wakhloo, traces his association and love for photography to his childhood days. The curator states, that “photography dates back to my fascination in childhood, with cameras, lenses and certainly the prism, which would split light into a spectrum of colours, more than with the quality of pictures or the art of taken pictures.

Exterior view: *The house.*



Detail light simulation.

This very evolved instrument, that captures on a click an image, was magical and even today my association with photography remains light and light imagined conspicuously as a set of beams, penetrating through the leafy branches of trees in a forest or through cracks in a wall.”

The Black Box is structured around the principles of light, where the intention lies in capturing ‘moments in architecture’, just how photographs capture a moment with a magical click. The curators have created a black box – a dark space in order to “experience ubiquitous light”. They have

steered towards forming a ‘camera obscura’, as curators Verendra Wakhloo, Sudipto Ghosh and Madhav Raman has cumulatively agreed. Through their work, the Black Box the curators intend to capture the “duality between darkness and light that enigmatically bears images and perhaps “life”, persist metaphorically between architecture and photography at many levels, characterized by the following binaries of materiality and immateriality, permanency and transiency, three dimensional and dimensionless”.

FCDI initiated in 2015 in collaboration with FCML, aims to address and encourage fields of reciprocal dialog and engagement between architects, designers, artists, philosophers and like-minded others with India Art Dialogue, an annually curated platform that holds exhibitions and talks to communicate, educate and explore. Having successfully orchestrated Nostalgia Revival in 2015, the following two years realized the first and second editions of India Arch Dialogue in 2016 and 2017 respectively that held exhibitions featuring architectural models and architectural drawings. A global participation was inevitable during these features, foregrounding the value of these confluences.

The IAD 2018 will yet again reiterate the importance of an avenue to encourage flow of ideas amongst communities. This year the new curatorial team is in the process of

assembling Moments in Architecture, a week-long line-up of talks, workshops and an engagement with architecture through photographic installations displayed at the architectural exhibition.

References

1. Susan M. Pearce, ed., "Objects as Meaning ; or Narrating the Past" in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, Routledge, London: 1994.
2. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston: 1994.
3. Partha Mitter and Craig Clunas, "The Empire of Things: Engagement with the Orient" in *A Grand Design: The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, Malcolm Baker and Brenda Richardson, (general editors), New York: Harry N. Abrams; Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 1997.
4. Curtis L. Carter, "Industrial Design: On Its Characteristics and Relationships to the Visual Fine Arts", *Leonardo*, Vol. 14, No. 4, MIT Press, GB: 1981

Endnotes

- 1 Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, p. 6
- 2 Partha Mitter and Craig Clunas, *The Empire of Things: Engagement with the Orient*, p. 227
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 221

All images courtesy: FCDI (except mentioned).



The Pezhumpara Diaries of C. Unnikrishnan

Anushka Rajendran

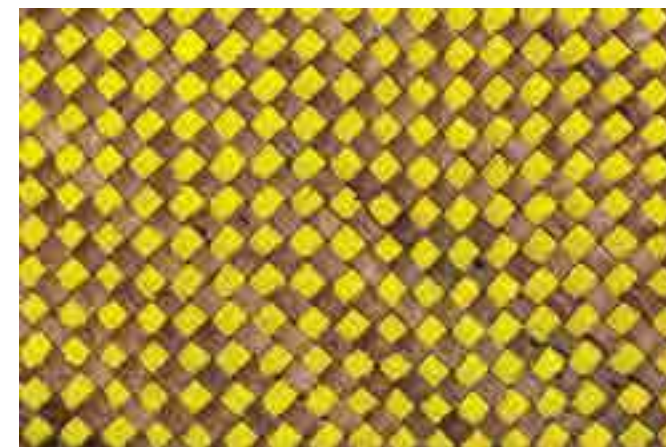
Chingamchira (Hanging Homes), Wooden houses, Dimensions variable, 2016.

In the little village of Pezhumpara in Palakkad, Kerala, local legend has it that a man they call *Thendan* (beggar) once roamed, impregnating young, virginal women of exceptional beauty with his lecherous stare. The residents of Pezhumpara, at the time, with the blessings of the local goddess caught him, beat him up and tied

him nearby the deity, where he too became fixed and venerated over time. However, since his atonement, *Thendan* has acquired a different reputation altogether. He was somewhat forgiven for his misdemeanors and worshipped for the relief he brought to the aches and pains of the land's elderly. Appeasing *Thendan* involves carving limb-like forms from the wood of trees that bleed latex, such as rubber or jackfruit. C. Unnikrishnan recalls this exercise as his earliest encounter with art — crafting arms and legs for his grandmother from dead branches of the jackfruit tree in his family garden as an offering to *Thendan*.

The curious influence that the myths and

histories of his hometown, Pezhumpara had in prompting him to attend art school, and the cohesiveness it maintained with the local flora and fauna continues in his practice to this day. Once he returned from the College of Fine Arts, Thrissur, he started maintaining a visual diary on the exposed brick wall of his childhood room — one brick for each day — recording his, thoughts, dreams, nightmares and scenes from his village life. Embedded between the bricks is a door that he calls *Portrait of Mother and Sister*. His day is peppered with inquisitive interruptions from his mother and his sister — both curious to see what he is up to and how his work is progressing. He



Mettha Paya, Woven palm leaves, 2017.