

A Renewed Bibliography of Sensations: Gauri Gill's Collaborations with Person, Place, and Community

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As any of us who have engaged in artistic collaboration would attest, the coming together of two or more sensibilities, with the aim of exploring and articulating a common quest or shared experiment in making, is a project rich in promise yet also one that is potentially vexed and problematic. Self and other come together through the pleasures of dialogue and disclosure, yet also the risks of uncertainty and anxiety. Collaborations gesture towards a shared abundance of insight and adventure that neither or none of the participants might have achieved by themselves; yet such enterprises remain haunted by the thought that they might simply cover the traces of deficits that will remain ever after the moment of communion. Speaking of his own engagements in this direction, the cultural theorist Nikos Papastergiadis writes of the time, space and outcomes he shared with the artists Kathy Temin and Constanze Zikos, “The collaborations were turbulent experiences, inspiring and confronting in equal measure. ... Yet [it] did provoke a set of unanticipated questions. Should one expect that collaboration yield a new body of work? Does an encounter with another artist encourage a departure in style or use of materials? ... Who is witness to the fluid and loose processes of exchange?” [1]

Such disquietudes are especially pronounced when two artists attempt to find common ground across the very distinct and different economies of production, modes of circulation and social milieux. I am, accordingly, more than usually concerned with the question of possible asymmetries within the collaborative situation when a metropolitan artist – attuned to the global gallery, museum and biennial systems; a beneficiary of sophisticated processes of education and self-refinement – works together with an artist who works in a specific locale and belongs to what have misleadingly, indeed pejoratively been described as ‘folk’, ‘tribal’ or ‘crafts’ contexts (the cultural theorist Nancy Adajania has, in a remedial move, more accurately nuanced such cultural producers as ‘subaltern artists’, rigorously marking the disadvantages of location with which they start, but also emphasising a political basis of criticality from which to exert a claim to self-assertion). [2]

Against this contested backdrop, it is profoundly reassuring to bear witness to the palimpsest-like forms of collaboration that have been evolved by Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad in the series, *Fields of Sight* (2014-2016). Gill, who lives and works in New Delhi, is a photographer who has already achieved distinction through her thoughtful, conceptually rich projects, which combine social orientation, political awareness and aesthetic delight. Vangad, who lives and works in Ganjad, Dahanu – a

district that has a predominantly Adivasi population, among them Warlis and Katkaris – practises the art of the Warli community to which he belongs.

Originally a ritual and seasonal form, rendered in ephemeral media on the walls of Warli huts, this art made the transition to paper and other, relatively more permanent materials – and thus to emporium-based circulation – through the intervention of crafts activists during the 1960s and 1970s. Through the work of such pioneers as Jivya Soma Mashe, Warli art also expanded its formal means and conceptual scope, to engage with the turbulence of contemporary experience, including references to labour, migration, and deforestation. As Vangad and Gill approached the landscape of Dahanu, insider and outsider became equally participants and observers: each supplied the other with a renewed bibliography of sensations.

With *Fields of Sight*, Gill has engaged in an act of collaboration with a person. In *Places, Traces* (2016), I would suggest that she has entered into a process of collaboration with a place. Admittedly, this is a pantheistic, perhaps animistic suggestion; so be it. These images, culled from her ongoing exploration of the Barmer and Bikaner districts, ‘Notes from the Desert’, are not merely eloquent in a conventional manner; rather, they establish a compelling non-discursive communication with us, in the way that totems, symbols, reliquaries, ruins and other seemingly mute witnesses to history, myth, despoliation and exaltation can do. Absence, departure, vigil, hope: all are invoked by such telling details as the concertina wire of a frontier between warring nation-states, the boundaries of a settlement, sources of water viewed through a heat haze, clothes without a body to wear them. These are memoranda of nature marked by the human presence, its lavish gift for creativity and its deplorable talent for defiling itself and its environment with psychic and physical waste. These are memoirs that particular places have deposited, as “brief and abstract chronicles”, in Shakespeare’s phrase, in the imagination of the photographer.

The third suite from Gill’s oeuvre that is represented here, and which gives this exhibition its title, *The Mark on the Wall* (2016), embodies the widest aperture towards sociality among the three projects under review. Here, Gill – who began her career as a photo-journalist, exposed to the rough-and-tumble of investigative expeditions, unpredictable circumstances, and subjects arrayed along a spectrum from invasive enthusiasm to exasperating reluctance – collaborates, in my view, with a community. Or rather: with the phantom of a community. She acts as a documentarian of traces, of that which remains as evidentiary material: in this case, drawings made on the walls of rural classrooms by children and teachers under the now defunct *Leher Kaksha* programme in Western Rajasthan.

The creators of these drawings may be thought of as “local artists”, a term fraught with the melancholia of the provincial, the thought that these marks made in distant hamlets carry the desires and aspirations of their makers – but will go nowhere,

except through the evocations of “non-local artists”, more mobile, more privileged than themselves, but who might use their mobility and privilege to draw attention to what is invisible, lost in bulky files in cavernous government departments. *The Mark on the Wall* suggests the artist’s collaboration in – even her complicity in – an afterlife defiant of the fluctuations of policy, the shifting emphases of bureaucracy. Like the doomed heroine in Ritwik Ghatak’s 1960 cinematic masterpiece, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, these forlorn drawings resonate with the survivor’s sky-shattering cry: “*Dada, aami baachte chai!*”, “Brother, I want to live!”

Notes and References

1. Nikos Papastergiadis, *Metaphor and Tension: On Collaboration and Its Discontent* (Sydney: Artspace, 2004), p. 9.

2. See Nancy Adajania, *The Thirteenth Place: Positionality as Critique in the Art of Navjot Altaf* (Bombay: The Guild, 2016), pp. 199-200. See, also, Adajania, ‘Coomaraswamy to Ambedkar: Tracing the Vanished Horizons of the Vernacular in the Contemporary,’ in Annapurna Garimella ed., *Vernacular, in the Contemporary 2* (Gurgaon: The Devi Art Foundation, 2011), pp. 97-105.

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