

-{CURATION}-

by Naeem Mohaiemen

At the Coed Dance



Everyone does everything, so we're reminded. We are all inside and beyond each other's spaces, the borders of disciplines increasingly porous and collapsing continuously. Propelled by this energy, there are fertile crossovers between formerly separated projects: Wrong Gallery as curator as artist; Sukhdev Sandhu moving between academia and sound installations; Amitava Kumar's text repurposed into Jee-yun Ha/Visible Collective's sculptures; Jesal Kapadia curating works into the humourless pages of *Rethinking Marxism*; 16 Beaver collating dissonant responses for October magazine; Emily Jacir, Prerana Reddy and others curating hybrid South Asian and Arab film festivals for *Alwan*, a space located blocks away from Wall Street.

In earlier, underfunded times, much of this was necessary to carve out any space to show work. At the end of the nineties, I was making videos and co-curating *3rd-i*, the South Asian underground film series (with Prerana Reddy, Shilpa Mankikar, Saba Waheed, Anandaroop Roy, etc), which rotated between *Two Boots Pizza* in Manhattan and *Galapagos* in Williamsburg. Ivan Jaigirdar had founded *3rd-i* in San Francisco and then spread it to other cities. But no one used the 'c word' back then—we were just organizing, showing, screening, selecting—pulling things together with tape. No one was asking questions like: *what exactly do you do?* There was no commercial categorization either, which freed people even more. Although we programmed experimental that seemed suitable for a gallery video loop, the crowd was always polyglot without allegiances,

many of them spillovers from the *Mutiny Asian Underground* club (started by filmmaker Vivek Bald). An audience with energy, receptiveness and very few definitional hang-ups. During this time, the Fela Kuti influenced *Jump & Funk* night (organized by Trevor Schoonmaker) was another of our destinations. Later though, once the Black President show launched, the stakes became higher. Some of the flowing, anarchic energy was lost. Everything gets discovered, eventually.

Valentin Manz of London's *Vision Machine* was very persuasive in these areas. Somehow he swayed a SoHo gallery, not previously known for political work, to host a group show in 2006. There was no curator so Valentin took over that role, inviting other artists and commandeering the space. "I don't understand," I asked, as we started installing. "On what basis did they give you the gallery? Did they see the title? *Rule of Law*...what do they think it's about?" According to Valentin, the gallerists had seen his exhibition of glass pieces in Williamsburg and that was enough. They didn't comprehend the gnarled shards as war ravage. Perhaps the labels were hazy enough to pass off as illusionist.

As we put up photocopied statements from administration officials, neatly labelling them with artist, media, year; I wondered if there would be a freak-out moment before the opening. I had been there before with the Tenement Museum, for a show called "Above Ground" with *Visible Collective*/Donna Golden. Everyone was all smiles until a few hours before the

opening when a director made the rounds and actually read the labels. Then came frantic scuffling, a furtive meeting... then the junior curator came over to us and with tortured, circuitous prose explained, "Well, you see, there's a slight problem, no nothing big, but we were just wondering if...that is, would you consider...."

But somehow, this time around, the entire install went off without a hitch. It was also August—dead time for most galleries. Everyone was in the Hamptons, which also diluted the dynamics. The opening was clearly over-representative of the activist community. The same faces I had been seeing at Action Wednesday meetings, and at Youth Solidarity Summer, were out in force. The staff at the gallery seemed nervous. Nobody coming in looked like they were buyers, nor did they manage that neo-Factory, almost-famous, fabulist manner.

The woman serving drinks grew increasingly jittery. Very soon there were no more refreshments. Valentin was puzzled—he had also bought a case of wine... that couldn't be gone too. Then one of the gallery staff informed us that because it was summer, they had to close the place early. "Sorry, the opening is not until 8 pm after all." It was all very rush rush, almost as if someone broke wind and the room needed to be cleared. As I walked towards the exit, I spotted one potential source of trouble: one of our friends had assumed—well, from the name of the show—that this was an appropriate venue and had left copies of *IndyMedia* at the front desk. This was probably too much of a reality intrusion for the gallery, like Linda



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Blair's possessed Regan walking in on the party, peeing on the carpet and blurting out: "You're going to die up there!"

Galapagos with *3rd-i*, SoHo with *Vision Machine*, *The Brecht Forum* with *Visible Collective*, *Sakhi* events with SAMAR - these were all unstructured experiments. Things were low-key, relaxed. Then, very soon, a certain seriousness drifted into the air. Lorenzo Fusi sent an invitation to co-curate a show at Palazzo Papesse in Siena. *You know I'm not a curator?* "That's ok, that's why it will be fun." Lorenzo relished the productive (he hoped) act of mixing it up. The theme was permanent war for elusive peace: *System Error* (time bomb Apple reboot screen from 1995, and Chris Hedges' recent book *War is a Force that gives us Meaning*). Liberated from making my own work, I went off to pursue a network of artists whose work I look at (up close and at a distance). From bloggers doing Net art to the *Star Trek* costume-wearing School of the Art Institute graduate who was the sole subscriber to my YouTube feed. In some cases, being a curator brought the direct benefit of having an excuse to talk to elusive people like Lebbeus Woods. (He famously prefaced a presentation with a tirade against all the creators of Photoshop, which also reminded me of Jennie C. Jones' comments, "Hi, I make works on paper, with a pen. You know, like in the old days. Paper doesn't crash.") Finally, here was Lebbeus' ravaged cityscape, being fitted into the Siena building.

But gradually, over the months of preparation, things became very serious. Galleries wanted this work.

That piece was already showing elsewhere in Italy. 'X' didn't want his video shown on a monitor. The budget was too small. The space was too big. The sound was bleeding over. This artist doesn't want to be only in the catalogue.

It's banal to list any of this; after all curators deal with this all the time, right? I certainly don't want to add to a narrative that could infantilize artists. Our experience was of the average mega-show with forty artists, and since there was only one Italian artist included, everything was being shipped from overseas. Headaches were expected and standard issue.

This is when I started to wonder if artist-as-curator was always a healthy construct. Being that close to the decision-making process, seeing up close all the calculations and permutations and equations: I worried that it would make me too conscious about my own work. Instead of messing around, you start to walk in a straight line.

Of course, no one is living in a hermetic bubble where they have no idea how decisions are made. It's about the work, it's about the budget, it's about the mandate, it's about the theme, it's about the recommendation. Sometimes it's also about the check box, and when you are in an identifiable race/nation subgenre, navigating that is a challenge. But to become overly conscious of this process is damaging to the isolation and headspace that is needed when dreaming up worlds and ideas for one's own work.

A friend sounded a contrarian note in an

email: "Well, I don't think becoming self-conscious about my own work is an unhealthy thing. The agenda for me as an artist is organizing, having a larger conversation, a research activity." So this is not a cautionary tale after all. There are many possible outcomes, no need to lament.

Raqs Media Collective is one of the best at this—at ease with hybrid forays between artistic and curatorial roles. A prolific flow between their own work and the curating of *Manifesta 7* indicates the shape of things to come: from *The Reserve Army* to *The Rest of Now*. For those who want to keep crossing the floor—to mix it up at the sock hop—that trajectory provides a hopeful example.

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