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ART ATTACK

A public art festival in Mumbai is open to viewers scorning its exhibits

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[en]counters is trying to get the people of the city to engage with art in their everyday lives, even if the dialogue is not always successful.



Image credit: Bori Bunder @ platform 8 | Courtesy: [en]counters

Imagine a stack of steel trunks 9-feet high at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus in Mumbai. The trunks are chrome-veneered, and arranged in a way that they make two “walls” at a 100-degree angle to each other. These walls are then used as a screen to project a video installation about three rivers incarnated as sisters. How would the harried commuters at CST, rushing to catch trains and keep appointments, negotiate these “walls”?

There are four possibilities. First, commuters could ignore the walls and go about their business as usual. Second: they might give the wall a cursory glance, wondering what they were about, before moving on with their day. Third, they might engage with the walls: the steel trunks might trigger thoughts about the storage of possessions, memories, movement and displacement. Lead them to the story of the three sisters.

Finally, the trunks might inspire comment. In each scenario, the passerby’s reflection on the chrome surface of the trunks, would momentarily make them part of the sculpture.

The trunks are part of artist Owais Husain's installation *You are Forever*, featured in a multiple-venue public art festival, [en]counters, at the CST, Sir JJ School of Art and Palladium Mall in October.



Started in 2009, [en]counters is organised annually in Mumbai by the art collective ArtOxygen. It invites Indian and international artists to create works that respond to a space, and involve the people that typically occupy such a space. The works are often site-specific installations, that almost always include an element of audience engagement. This year, ArtOxygen asked 11 Indian and Hong Kong-based artists to respond to Bori Bunder in Mumbai.

“Mumbai is seeing a lot more public art now,” said ArtOxygen co-founder Leandre D’Souza. Examples abound. Some of the more popular public art installations are Sudarshan Shetty’s *Flying Bus* – a replica of the BEST double-decker bus with huge cantilevered wings, now permanently parked at Maker Maxity, and Shilpa Gupta’s writing in the sky, at Bandra, which reads – “I Live Under Your Sky Too”.

“In the traditional context, public art reflects the neighbourhood,” D’Souza added, “we are trying a more experimental form of it.”.

D’Souza hopes the festival will stretch the paradigm of aesthetics, as it lets the works be affected by the people who view it. This central idea is based on Umberto Eco’s concept of the “open work”, or work that remains fluid, and constantly evolves as people respond to it.

Public art like this might also encourage people to re-view a space that they inhabit or pass through daily, without giving much thought to its history, or architectural and cultural importance.



According to D'Souza, this kind of engagement with the everyday is inspired by French philosopher Jacques Rancière's argument about art's autonomy on the one hand, and its link to life and the promise of a better world on the other.

Pradeep L Mishra, one of the artists participating in this year's [en]counters, said these ideas translated into a very real challenge.

"As artists, we have to give out what we have thought of, but on site, minor changes do happen." he said. So the work must be complete in a sense and convey the artist's thought, even before it leaves the studio, while simultaneously remaining open to change, when viewers respond to it.

Mishra's *Incubating Love* is a sculptural installation that comprises roses wrapped individually in jute packaging, fish and a water lily plant at its centre. People can take the roses with them, and the jute packaging is a nod to Bori Bunder's past as a warehousing facility, where goods were stored in jute bags or boris.



Owais Husain, film still from 'You Are Forever', 2016

[en]counters encourages audience participation in the creative process along a broad spectrum, from works like Husain's, to those that cannot be realised without active contribution by the audience. One work in this year's programme that relies on audience participation is Teja Gavankar's Rangoli-inspired art. On October 8, for a day, Gavankar set up a small booth between platforms 7 and 8 of CST. She invited passersby to connect any four dots on a piece of paper, which was covered in a grid of multiple dots. The only condition was they couldn't make a square.

"People were hesitant at first," said Gavankar, who has a master's in visual arts from the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. "They thought about what to draw. I had given them sketch pens, there was some hesitation to draw in pen also. Sometimes people would make something and come back again later, saying they had thought of something else to make. That was surprising to me."



Gavankar's work, made in collaboration with the travellers of CST, will show in three forms, as part of the festival's "Bori Bunder @ Platform 8" exhibition at the Sir JJ College of Art. Gavankar turned 100 of the paper drawings made at CST into three-dimensional metal sculptures. The metal

installations form the second section of her show. The third is a video that she made, to capture audience reaction to and participation in the work.

Engendering involvement and a sense of ownership in an artwork by audiences, is the key aspiration of the [en]counters. It is great when it works, but D'Souza says the team at [en]counters are open to the rejection of works, too. Even when the audience rejects a work, it is a dialogue, a doorway into understanding why, and how to make it resonate with them.

Teja Gavankar at the CST.

Venues, dates and timings for [en]counters vary. For the full schedule, visit [here](#).

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