

PUBLIC ART IN THE AGE OF TERROR

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Public art should offend, inspire or wake you up, reckon artists. But what if this very definition becomes a security threat?

Last week, on platform number 8 at the bustling Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST), several passengers encountered a man-made pond in the middle of the station. Titled *Incubating Love*, the piece that generated much curiosity was a work by artist Pradeep Mishra, in which he displayed volumetric glasses covered in tiny gunny bags, “almost like a secret hidden inside, unless it is revealed,” he explains.



Mishra's work, along with fellow artist Owais Husain's *You Are Forever* (a canvas video wall, which displays static objects and transportation images and Emilio Leofreddi's *Flying Carpet* (railway tickets woven onto a carpet), were part of [en]counters, an annual art festival put together by ArtOxygen, a Mumbai-based independent art initiative.

The festival's seventh edition, *Bori Bunder @ Platform 8* — featuring a diverse range of artists such as Andrea Caretto, Peggy Chan, Wong Chun Hoi, Teja Gavankar, Wong Ka Ying, Raffaella Spagna, Chun Yiu Wai and Mak Ying Tung — takes its name from Mumbai's first railway station, the Bori Bunder. As the curatorial note suggests, “Here, contemporary Indian and international artists take as their point of interrogation the Bori Bunder, their works emerging as a point of reflection and understanding of the connection between the railway, its people and the city.”



But at the heart of creating their diverse body of works at this major public site stands the security concerns that the artists met with. The organisation was provided with a long mandatory list of do's and don'ts, which had to be followed sanctimoniously.

Security above all

Mumbai's railways carry over 7.5 million commuters every day, with local trains operating every four minutes with a rest time of 90 minutes, before the first workers start to enter the city at 4.15 am. “So, from the security point of view, we have to ensure that the work shouldn't gather plenty of crowds or become an obstacle in the free movement of passengers. It becomes difficult to manage large crowds in a space like a railway platform,” explain Sachin Bhalode, senior divisional security commissioner, at Central Railway, Mumbai Division. That one can't have sharp objects, moving images displayed, or use material that's easily inflammable is a leaf from the book of common sense, he reckons. “The security is necessary in our times,” insists Bhalode. “It's a result of what the city and railways have been through. It has been a victim of the 7/11 and 26/11 attacks. The security of passengers and their lives is the most important and that comes above everything else.”



(Top to bottom): Bystanders respond to Pradeep Mishra's public artwork, Incubating Love; Prajakta Potnis's work had to be stopped halfway in 2011 after local shakas protested at the Siddheshwar lake; The line that Potnis tried to draw; A viewer looking at the work of Emilio Leofreddi's Flying Carpet

Perhaps, Bhalode's words would resonate with performance artist Nikhil Chopra. In 2010, Chopra embarked on a performance that saw him criss-cross the city of Mumbai in character (Yog Raj Chitrakar), while undertaking large-scale charcoal drawings on cloth. “On the first night, the idea was for the artist to sleep on the station floor at Mumbai Central. This was barely a-year-and-a-half after the attacks on the city, and so security was still particularly strict,” recalls Mortimer Chatterjee, whose gallery Chatterjee & Lal represents the performance artist. “The artist and the gallery quickly realised that there was no way he would be allowed to stay on the platform overnight. It was due to the quickwitted response of one of the audience, who organised a bed in the station dormitory that the artist had somewhere sheltered to sleep that night.”

Times of fear

Dr P G Jogdand, professor of sociology at University of Mumbai, blames it on the fear our society seems to be engulfed with. “A sense of insecurity has been generated in the minds of people and everybody feels insecure because we are losing trust in our faculty and our neighbours. In sociology, we define this as a risk society,” he says. “This has created various psychological effects in the collective psyche of the people. Everyone seems to be operating from super ego and seems to be easily offended and suspicious. The tight security at such public spaces is the result of our lack of ‘we’ feeling.”

Veteran scenographer and curator Rajeev Sethi seems to concur. In 1988, Sethi brought together artists such as MF Husain, KG Subramanyan, Zarina Hashmi and Bhupen Khakhar at CST (then known as Victoria Terminus) to mark The Times of India's sesquicentennial. “And at that time, this issue of fear or what is right or wrong was not such a big deal,” he says. “Times have changed because polarised politics has put in an element of fear in people and fear is the enemy of creativity.” So, how do artists navigate around this path of creating work in public spaces where security is such a concern?

Cooperation is key

The rebellion route never works. Arjun Bahl, co-founder and festival director of the ST+Art India Foundation, which organises street art festivals across the country, insists, “You have to cooperate with security agents at all times. You have to register your names. When we create work at the Delhi Metro or railways, we make it a point that our artists oblige each time to get their bags checked when they move in and out.” Likewise, Mishra says, “In case they have

any doubt, they have scanners and we, for our part, have to give them all the information,” while Leandre D’Souza adds, “We have to be present there all the time. We can’t just create a work and leave it at that.”

As far as creating one of the most talked-about public art enterprises in Mumbai’s international airport, Sethi comments: “You have to work within a certain amount of protocol because it is, after all, a functional space. You can’t pluck a flower without altering a star at the airport. Having said that, the limited restrictions are peculiarly technical issues.”

Working in tandem with the security agents responsible is another strong approach. “And that’s the only way we have managed to create two very successful projects at the Delhi Police headquarters and the Tihar Jail,” says Bahl. “Being in such close proximity with the police, for example, helps us understand what pressures they go through.”

Permissions are tricky

Then sometimes, artists also take alternative routes to achieve their work. Mishra, for instance, befriended the shopkeeper to create his work in 2010 at the Crawford Market because he was unclear on whom to seek permission from. “Sometimes, one permission is not going to give you assurance that it’s going to be alright,” says Mishra.

In the same vein, artist Prajakta Potnis continues, “It’s tricky. Whom do you really ask permission from? Who are the officials you go up to? The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), Thane Municipal Corporation (TMC), the people who live there, or the local shakas controlling the area? It’s not like going to one body and asking for permission to make public art projects will work. It’s not simple in our kind of situation; it’s quite multi-layered.”

In 2011, Potnis created a work, *Tracing a Disappearance*, at the Siddheshwar lake in Thane, “where I tried to mark the original boundary of the lake. I just wanted to draw a line on the surface of the earth and see if a line could make any difference,” she says. “There were two approaches — one was of mapping and one was of looking at the basic visual element — a line.”

Potnis negotiated with the residents who inhabit the space, explaining to them what she was trying to do over a period of 10-15 days. “I learnt from them what the original line was. There was this dialogue about how this lake needs to be kept and people were keen to participate in the project. I was drawing a line and I thought nobody would have any problems with it. I was using lime powder; the same that’s used to measure roads,” she recalls. “But when I began work, people thought I am from the TMC, probably there to measure the road to widen it.” Within 40 minutes of working on the project, which was being filmed, groups of people walked into the spot and asked if she had sought permission. “But we soon realised these people were from the local shakas and asked me to stop. They knew what I was highlighting — I was trying to check how much of the lake has been eroded — and they couldn’t have had this issue highlighted because they were going in for redevelopment,” rues Potnis.

What is public art?

D’Souza, the co-founder and curator at ArtOxygen, remarks, “Something as simple as a line became so political when it touched the ground. A line shook the very system that was running it. Does that then become the success of the work or its failure?”

These many pertinent questions force both the artists and representatives to think what characteristics define public art. Art in public space can’t be used as an artist’s own emotional outlet. “Empathy should be an overriding emotion in allowing you to make choices,” says artist Shilpa Gupta, who created her light installation, *I Live Under Your Sky Too*, in 2013 at Carter Road in Bandra. “It’s not a white cube space where a limited number of people walk in. It’s a different encounter.”

Potnis is rather suspicious of the whole approach where an artist is considered the more well-informed person. “Where s/he thinks that this is how you’re supposed to feel. When an artist interjects himself in a site and comes with the approach that s/he knows better, it is a problematic situation,” she says.

A vulnerable space

Therefore, it becomes critical to begin from the site. “The onus is on the artist to understand who’s living there, who’s passing through it, which becomes the starting research element, which then becomes realisation to the work,” says D’Souza. “The process reverses because we are not just thinking about the studio space. That’s the main difference when you’re working in a public space when the sensibility of the artist opens up to a whole different universe and complexities that are at play.”

Sethi says, “It must be communicable enough to be able to share your concerns and if it’s something offensive, so be it. If it is art in a public space, you must be prepared with all kinds of responses.”

Work is also under threat at public spaces. Mishra showed his work, *Freedom Flowing*, made of white flags embroidered with flora and fauna (using red thread birds, sea crustaceans that inhabit the mangrove forest surrounding the fort), in 2011 at the abandoned Sewri Fort, “and they were tampered with. They were used to clean the chillum. And you as an artist have to be prepared for such vandalism.”

“How much of the work is the artist then willing to sacrifice if he or she is putting his or her work out there?” asks D’Souza. What is at stake, really? In the words of Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe, who in her essay *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces* explains, “What is at stake in what I call the ‘agonistic’ struggle, which I see as the core of a vibrant democracy, is the very configuration of power relations around which a given society is structured.”

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