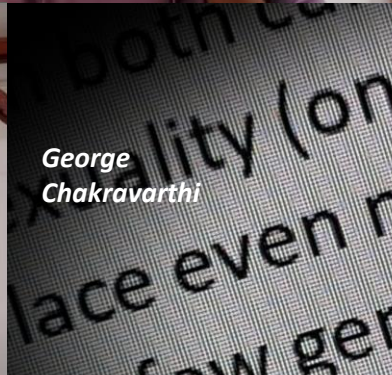
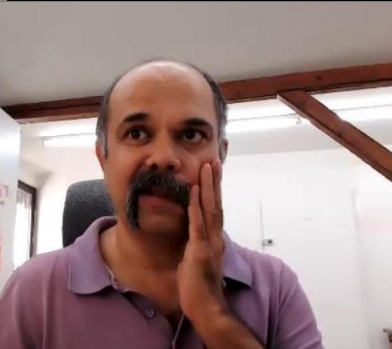
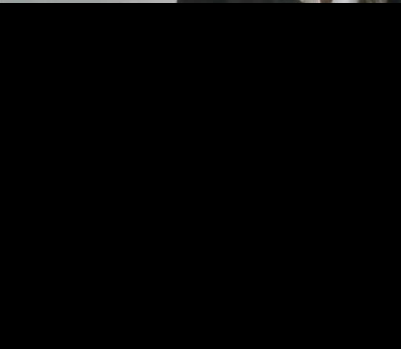
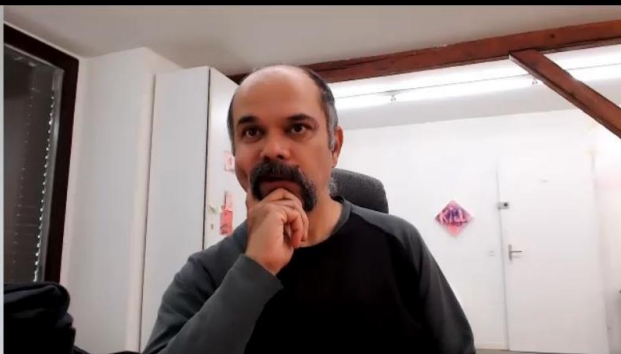


LADA Research Residency 2020/21

Report by PARVEZ



Politics does not exist because men, through the privilege of speech, place their interests in common. Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the contradiction of two worlds in a single world: the world where they are and the world where they are not, the world where there is something "between" them and those who do not acknowledge them as speaking beings who count and the world where there is nothing."

Jacques Ranciere

'Dis-agreement: Politics And Philosophy' (1999). Translated by Julie Rose. P 27

Introduction

I was quite excited about the 'LADA Research Residency 2020' and was looking forward to exploring the archive. My interest was primarily in researching the following areas:

1. Work of artists / art practitioners of color or any marginalized group to find commonalities and explore the range of subjects / issues / topics they work with; and the visual / performative language / techniques they chose for their work, to express themselves.
2. Meet and interact with contemporary artists / art practitioners in UK who work with/on the above mentioned areas to explore the possibility of a transnational discourse / dialogue.

The pandemic however changed the entire course of the residency. The excitement - of exploring the archive at the Live Art Development Agency (LADA) to go through the works of other artists - was gone, when I learnt about the decision to shift it online. However, we had waited for a year and given the circumstances, this seemed to be the most reasonable choice.

Megan Vaughan (LADA) proposed an online meeting with Shaheen Merali; a Tanzanian writer, curator, critic and artist; to discuss how to go about it. The meeting lifted my spirits in no time. It did not take long before Shaheen, (perhaps in an act of affirmation to my quest), shared some of his own experiences and memories from his early years in the UK. By the end of this meeting, we already seem to have a basic premise. So, a second meeting was scheduled to chisel it out. And, while this conversation went unrecorded, somewhere past midway both of us felt it should have been recorded. That thought later helped create the structure for the rest of the research.

In our second meet, the idea of one-to-one online meetings with art practitioners connected with Live Art/Performance Art practice was firmed up. We were now thinking of an 'archive of thoughts and memories'. Shaheen very kindly offered to draw up a list of art professionals from UK who may resonate with such an investigation. And, that's how I met some wonderful artists, curators, art interlocutors whose names I list below.

[Shaheen Merali](#)

[Ansuman Biswas](#)

[George Chakravarthi](#)

[Bhajan Hunjan](#)

[Cecilia Wee](#)

[Femi Dawkins](#)

*[Catherine Wood](#)

Joseph Schofield (LADA) reached out to everyone on the list with a short contextual text on my enquiry (*in box below*) and a short synoptic portfolio of my work to set the ball rolling.

**My only addition to this list was Catherine Wood, the curator of Contemporary Art/Performance at Tate Modern.*

Research Residency, LADA

Context

In 2015, I moved to Switzerland for personal reasons. Having no prior knowledge of German, this meant that I was now often surrounded by sounds that I could not decipher. While others indulged in mutual laughter and followed the conversation, I was often left looking around silently. It did, however, give me more time to mull over the unenviable situation I found myself in.

For the first time in my life, I also became aware of a yearning in my stomach: a yearning for the nostalgic tastes and smells that had been my staple and routine for more than four decades. My gaze would wander around the local supermarkets, brightly lit and delightfully overflowing with what I began to call 'migrant food'. In conspicuous contrast to these items were the actual migrants, of course, not even half as welcome in the First World as the coveted produce of their home countries. And so, 'migrant food' found its way into my work as I sat atop neo-colonialism trying to look at its roots, buried deep in imperialism as they are, alongside a skewed global economic system that seems determined to maintain the status quo.

The more I dwelt upon and researched these questions, the more I felt the need to articulate them. However, articulating a position contrary to the ones deeply embedded in the system is not an easy task. Nor is articulation through anger, frustration or desperation.

During my residency, I had hoped to explore the LADA archive, as well as meet other artists, curators and experts engaged with similar questions. Needless to say, current circumstances do not allow me to travel to London. LADA, however, introduced me to Shaheen Merali who, over two very engrossing online meetings, helped me figure out another way of approaching the required research. The idea that emerged was that in the end, the archive of our own memories and experiences—which we always carry within us and live with—can still be explored and exchanged through online meetings over digital platforms.

The Enquiry

I now intend to have a free-flowing discussion around questions like: How to deal with anger or frustration when working with issues of systemic discrimination through one's art practice? **How does one navigate through these emotions and articulate them?** What kind of issues / direction does one choose and why? Is there a commonality or pattern in our articulations? Can such articulations be sharpened or better grounded through an exchange of some kind?

These being just some of the starting points of an exploration that remains open to more questions and ideas.

I shall be very grateful if you join me in this online exchange of thoughts and experiences.

Parvez
Basel
June 2021

Approach

I met each person in a one-to-one meeting. The idea was to allow a personal and focused interaction. In hind sight, this did allow each interaction to develop and ground itself distinctly.

While a short profile of my work was already shared with each of them, I researched each person on the internet and marked out areas of interest in their work. The interactions were kept quite open to allow us to drift in any direction. Either of us could ask questions and investigate the other person's works / thoughts etc. I derive the 'no-specific-direction' approach from the concept of 'free association' (in psychology). It allows one to move freely without any expectations or a push in a preconceived space and it did seem to open up a lot this time too.

With the range of practices and the depth of experiences of each participant, each meeting was a sheer delight. I was left with much food-for-thought after each session, to mull over the exchanges and the stories that were shared.

Almost every meeting went way beyond the planned time of one hour, which I feel points not only to the engagement, but also to the accommodating and welcoming nature of each of these amazing people I came across. I am grateful to them for this generosity and openness.

Method / Technicality

All participants were asked for their permission to record the sessions.

George Chakravarthi, specified his wish not to be recorded. So, I noted down some points during this interaction. All other sessions were allowed to be recorded.

Zoom platform was chosen for the meetings. It was possible to record HD video up to 720p resolution on that. I picked up a high-end HD Streamcam (Logitech) and connected it to the Desktop computer in my studio.

However, the online world and platforms come with their own technical issues. Some of the things that influenced these interactions, and their recordings, are as follows:

1. The internet bandwidth and speed variations may affect the quality of video and audio.
2. Slow internet speed at either of the two ends can affect the quality.
3. Internet disruptions do happen and affect the interactions / recording.

4. Zoom meetings work better if both the parties are using the 'App'. Opening the link in a browser, even at one end, may lead to a lot of interruptions and glitches.
5. To avoid disruptions/glitches (e.g. in case of slow internet speed), switching off the video may allow at least the audio call to continue.

Material collected

In spite of the technical hitches, the following audio-visual and textual material was collected during these interactions:

SHAHEEN MERALI

Meet 1 - Notes.

Meet 2 - Video recording (41 min)

Call ended abruptly a few minutes before we were to end the meet, due to internet disruption.

ANSUMAN BISWAS

Meet 1 - Video recording (1 hr. 07 min)

Meet 2 - Video recording (1 hr. 51 min)

GEORGE CHAKRAVARTHI

Meet 1 - Notes (approx. 1 hr.+)

Meet 2 - Notes (approx. 1 hr.+)

BHAJAN HUNJAN

Meet 1 - Video recording (1 hr. 28 min)

CECILIA WEE

Meet 1 - Video recording (10 min + 1 hr. 06 min)

Meet 2 - Video recording (7 min + 1 hr. 09 min)

FEMI DAWKINS

Meet 1 - Audio recording only (2 hr. 13 min)

Video call was not possible due to technical problems.

CATHERINE WOOD

Meet 1 - Audio recording (1 hr. 32 min)

Began with a video call but disruptions forced us to switch the cameras off after a few minutes.

Meet 2 - Video recording (14 min) + more than 1 hour of unrecorded conversation.

Call dropped after a few minutes. No recording on re-connection, until the last 14 min.

Content

Each meeting turned out to be a warm and open-hearted session of sharing.

We often dived deep into memories and fished out stories that helped us evolve the thread of our conversation, which revolved mostly around the art practice. In this process, our personal stories that we had carried within us all along, were turning into a sort of an archive of oral history. I borrow here from Femi Dawkins to say, that in the process, we 'bore witness' to each other and to what perhaps may not have been shared otherwise.

It is not easy to sum up the richness of this experience for two main reasons. One, the sheer size and depth of the material is such that it may require another project to examine, edit, put together and shape it all in some form. And two, the power of the experience: that includes a sense of connect, reaffirmation, reassurance, respect and trust - that allowed us to share the thoughts that one may often self-censor, doubt or even consider insignificant or irrelevant.

The release that I felt through these exchanges – unexpectedly so, online - is difficult to capture in words. However, I try. For, the report will be incomplete without at least a taste of that.

Below is a recollection of a few of the threads as pointers, that emerged from our interactions.

- A person's entire identity/existence as a 'flaw' because of an identity marker (e.g. language, origin, color etc. etc.)

A 'flawed identity' may need to perform all the time (to 'integrate', to fit into an 'acceptable' mold that is mostly defined by the continuing imperial/colonial ideas and gaze)

- One's 'culture/cultural expressions' as a 'blind spot' in the dominant thought/conventions
- Undemocratic Art processes versus Performance art as a possibility to open up
- Acknowledging and accepting anger / discomfort against discrimination
- Who has the luxury to NOT feel angry about the obvious 'wrongs'

- Experiencing or witnessing discrimination / racism and its effect on one's art practice
 - The 'need' to express and speak out' versus creating art in vacuum or beautiful wall papers
 - Co-option and subversion of imagery/history whose context the audience already knows
 - Using of one's art practice to remember and re-affirm what one may be nudged to forget
 - Fractured narratives to mend what has been broken
 - Falling back on one's culture (idioms, imagery, expressions etc.) to find one's feet
-

EXCERPTS

Shaheen Merali

"... There is an 'us and them' scenario which has been a part of the art world for a very long time. And the fact of the matter is that culture is not produced necessarily in 'us and them'. It is what value you place on anybody. If you want to place a value or dis-value, something which comes because he can speak another language or can eat certain



other food or has been part of the universe longer than you have or whatever..., you can. But, it doesn't necessarily mean that it's right. And, I think all this needs to be challenged, wherever one can."

Ansuman Biswas

"... There was probably an Indian society at Manchester University where I went, but I never felt like I needed to join it. I didn't realize that I was Indian until I was surrounded by white people and, also during this Drama degree which was completely white. No one seems to have heard about the decolonization of the academia in the 80s...



some people may be. It was all about dead, white, male dramatists - the roots of western theatre, which is what I was studying... Aristotle, Aristophanes and Socrates and then basically leapt to Shakespeare and... kind of white western canon. That was what I was surrounded with

in academia. And, I suddenly had this feeling of like, 'oh what about all this other stuff'. It's like no one seems to realize that there's a whole another world that exists. No one mentions it. No one is talking about it. I don't hear anything else that I recognize as my own culture. But, I never thought I had any culture until I saw that it wasn't there. ... I dropped out of the university eventually..."

Catherine Wood

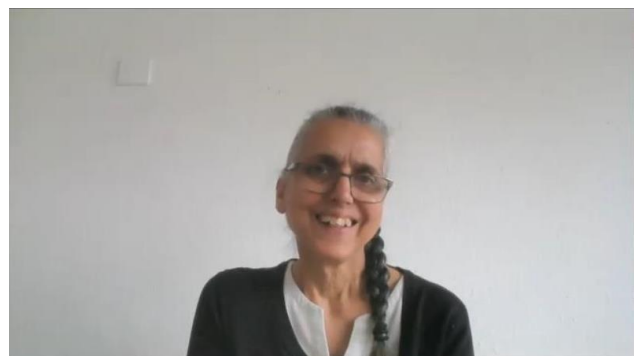
"Consciousness of race issues has become pronounced recently. But those issues have always been there in different ways. And, I think good artists often have anger with the way things are and their art has often been about imagining ways to channel that anger to change it.



"... We are still beginning, in fact, the process of really thinking how to tell these stories. How to let the works speak / artist speak because; when you still got a framework built on enlightenment model museum with white cube gallery spaces, opening hours between ten till six, bright lights, no natural light, you know; certain ritual behavior in museum... about being silent and not touching things, there's such a dominant regime of how your body behaves, how you look, how you relate socially to time and space that you encounter art in...; kind of reinforces a certain logic and belief system."

Bhajan Hunjan

"I think I have a right to be in between (cultures). I feel that you can exist in-between. You don't have to belong, because... You are what you are. Where you belong is within your own body, I think. And, if you can feel totally at ease within that, then you can deal with any situation out there."



"The art world has always been elitist and snobbish. It still is. ... Although the northern public galleries were much more open... So, I think that was the reason. We were not only showing

(our) works for the larger community, we were showing works to our own community of artists. We could see each other's works in those spaces."

(-On connecting with other art practitioners in similar situation in UK in the 80s)

Cecilia Wee:

"I did my A-levels in French, Music and Politics. And, I still feel that kinds of sums up (the music and politics aspect) how I situate myself. So, in that kind of intersection, between Art and Politics, and actually believing that there is power (which goes by the assumed role of creativity) through artistic practice, that can potentially say things and can potentially change the world... although obviously I also really doubt it."



"Art does what it does: which is that sometimes it can do a lot and sometimes it can't."

Femi Dawkins

"... I think the articulation, it is necessary simply because one, being who you are - being black, is performative. Every day in your life you get out, especially in spaces like Europe... "



"... It's like if you are a cat, and for every year you lived in a space ... they pull out a nail. So every year a nail... By the time you have lived in that space, all your toe nails, will be gone and you will just skate across the floor, saying catch phrases to people all the time. The idea is to be in this sort of ice skating rink with white ice underneath you, white ice around you and not saying anything of substance and not staying in place. There's a kind of grounding that one needs to have, and that's what I talk about, in order to get to the meat of everything... "

"... We are chanting for this wall to fall down... we are all awake together... waiting for the next move... the next move in 'change'. "

George Chakravarthi (*Paraphrased from the notes*)

“ ... Experienced racism for the first time around the age of 10. That instilled a sense of fear and also a resistance to fear – that I will not be pushed... I was finding ways to express those things without out. “

“Art was an internal space, a safe, private space where one could draw things out that one can't speak otherwise.”

“... I don't think much change at the root is happening. We are the change. What we do is important, irrespective of whether the discourse is going on or not. One must not become a slave of those...”

“Do not want to become a colony of angry brown and black artists, I think we've exhausted that emotion, we need to now move in a different direction.”



Gratitude

I am extremely grateful to LADA and Pro Helvetia for this opportunity.

Heartfelt thanks to Lois Keidan, Megan Vaughan and Joseph Schofield who ensured such a meaningful experience through this residency, in spite of the difficult situation.

Thank you, Ansuman Biswas, Bhajan Hunjan, Catherine Wood, Cecilia Wee, Femi Dawkins, George Chakravarthi and Shaheen Merali. Without you this would not have been possible.

I am also indebted to Janine Schmutz for her support and Shavez Imam, my younger brother, who has been a continuous source of extremely valuable information and his honest critique. Thanks also to Andrea Saemann and PANCH (Performance Art Network CH).

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