

music, gods, and suburban art centres

transcript of an encounter between
Balamohan Shingade and Chris Berthelsen
on a shore in Howick

(this is the transcript of an off-the-cuff talk, nothing less, nothing more)

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B: It occurred to me that there are two types of audiences that lay claim to an art space. A double public. There is always a double public regardless of whether you are in a high flying museum, a much smaller regional gallery, or even an artist-run space.

The double public has to do first with where you are physically. So for us it is Howick, but it is also the Eastern Suburbs which also includes places like Flatbush, Mellons Bay and Botany. We are physically located here so our obligations on the one hand are to people who live and work here.

But then there is a way that we are situated that doesn't have to do with space but maybe with time, and also something that transcends space.

This second public is something like the trajectory of art in general. Perhaps this could be called the art and culture audience. This includes a time-bound obligation to the artists, curators, researchers and so on. This helps us align ourselves in thinking about how to

carry forward that tradition and to “carry forward” can mean that we choose to be a little antagonistic to certain parts of that tradition but it still means that we retain that lineage.

So when I was thinking about creating programmes I was always conscious of having programmes that clearly function to serve both publics. And sometimes the publics overlap, obviously and clearly, so it's not really a dichotomy but it is a working model to remind you that you have obligations in diverse directions; not just to the people that live here and not just to the people who are the usual art audience.

This model can take some of the edge off being “too sure”. It keeps you feeling a little bit tentative.

So, in that sense the current show (*Isobel Thom: ILK*) identifies someone who is very much from Howick, having grown up here, gone to Cockle Bay Primary, Howick Intermediate, and Howick College, but at the

same time who has made such useful contributions to art, design and culture in general.

Then there is that responsibility to try to communicate in both directions - on behalf of the lay audience or general public the concerns around walking into galleries and going to art shows and responding to that in terms of exhibition design and so on. And then there is the other way which is concerned with communicating to a general audience what the use of something that may look silly and absurd might be.

I think the second aspect is focused on a lot.

You have an exhibition and then you try to convince people that it is important. But with the first one it's about convincing the art audience that there is a real disconnect between what is being presented and what is being received. So it's not just about trying to convince the everyday public about what it is important it's also about trying to convey to

the art audience that there is a communication gap.

So when I was writing the policies for the gallery during the redevelopment it was important for me to try to identify that without ever compromising the artist's practice, interests and vision it is also important to try to make the gallery the most approachable, warm and open space - that people could come in and be comfortable with art that makes them feel uncomfortable; to be open to being unsettled.

C: You talk about "convincing" but also that it's not about trying to persuade someone that you are right. I get the feeling that you come from this place where, and I'm not sure how it is changing over your time at Uxbridge, there is a valuing of the uncertain and the improvised. You have talked about the concept of adda (pronounced ud-dah)¹ and it fits well with how I feel about living and doing and making... (B: Yes, I wrote that last year and it came out of my experiences here) ... so

¹ <https://balamohanshingade.com/2015/10/18/the-adda-community/>

I'm interested in that aspect of improvisation and uncertainty and also the fact that the way you talk about it gives it quite a spatial quality...

B: Well, there are two ways that I can talk about improvisation. The first one is, very simply, that improvisation in terms of music has been such an important part of my life. From when I was six until three or four years ago I was an Indian classical musician and improvisation is the backbone of this music. Everything that an Indian classical musician performs in an concert/khayal setting is improvised but improvised around a certain structure which is called a rāga. Rāga is a very different word to translate but it is colour, mood, environment... it is meant to be an atmosphere that you are in and you are meant to be communicating that atmosphere through improvisation. So in this context I started to think about basic questions to do with belonging, community, and identity.

The simple facts are that I am not from Howick or even from East Auckland. I live in

the city and my relationship to East Auckland began when I took up the job. The question is, then, how do you belong to a space that you weren't part of to begin with, and this is where adda becomes useful. Adda is a word from Hindi or Urdu which talks about a practice but also a place. The kind of thing that we are doing now, if we do it often enough, you could call it adda. And also this place, by this bench, with these specific rock formations, can become our adda as long as it is something that we do repeatedly. And what is it that we do repeatedly? Well, adda is improvised conversations. We don't bring anything to the table but it is a place where we meet to nut out ideas or to think about what is going on, and as soon as we have a plan then it stops being an adda. As soon as we decide that we can proceed with a particular project from all the questions that we have been asking then it changes from an adda to a project. So, adda is that place where people come together to plot and scheme, to discuss and improvise.

But also, in the way that it is used in India adda is a place where gangsters hang out. You can create addas in alleyways but you can also create them (when it is used informally) around the watercooler in the office or the local tea shop. But, it does carry in it a sense of the uncertain, the improvised and the conversational, and that it is open. The most important aspect is that one's relationship to a community or other people is always open, and not bound to any particular aspects. In this way adda was a way for me to think about community when you didn't have anything in common. How do I come to communion with someone else when I don't share the same views, when I don't share the same priorities or political leanings, when they are not Indian and I am not whatever, but despite all this we still belong together or alongside each other?

So through exploring adda I was trying to give form to what the question of being together with other people was. This was at a time when I wasn't sure about using the word 'community' because I wasn't sure exactly

what it meant. When we use the word we have a sense that we know what it means but it is a sense that it has something to do with people being together because they have something in common. But can you still have a community when you don't have things in common?

C: And it's important and interesting that a community arts centre is almost always based on having physical location in common, at least in its funding form.

B: It is. It's important because space is so important for the congregation of people. The fact that we have a space means that we have a space to come together. This means that there is a responsibility to keep it an open space, and to keep it a space where the unknown people will feel comfortable. Note that I use 'comfortable' in a very specific way which means 'to be OK with'. This implies that the art presented can be uncomfortable or that it can be the critic and conscience of society in the way that the university is. At the

same time it can give a lot of pleasure and joy through its programmes.

So space, and where a gallery is, are very important but there is also the other side of the double public which concerns time, and which is something that is unhinged from location. Because space becomes especially important when you can use it to be productive, or to give a voice to people that might not have access to a large audience, for example. So in my own projects I am interested in how to embody a 'minor' politics, and here too I borrow the concept of 'minor' from music - minor keys, minor modes. The minor always exists with and in relationship to the major.

C: Is the minor/major dichotomy present in Indian music too? Or is it something that is only salient in Western music?

B: It comes from Western music but it is not only Western. I think that there is a way of talking about the minor in Indian classical music as well but it is not dichotomous, compared to the very clear distinction that is

present in Western music. In Indian music there are minor shades within a rāga. When singing or playing a series of notes there is a kind of quality which could be a minor or major shade. The environment can have a quality which is majoritarian or minoritarian. There is a way of singing that feels discrete, maybe a little unsettled, maybe questioning, or maybe it could be more overt and 'standard'.

C: It's interesting that when the piano is being taught it is often the major chords that are taught first - "C Major!" here it is. (B: It's the easiest one to play because with C Minor you have to contend with the black notes...). Yeah, and that's dangerous...

I like to watch a child (or someone with small hands, like myself) working out and playing chords on the piano. It is often the case when learning the piano that people are taught to play simple melodies first. But when you start with chords you are starting with thinking about three or five different notes and how they relate in the same instance or space,

sounding together, not in sequence or in response but intermeshed. And if you do not have the training or flexibility to play the chords as they are written with separate hands - the dichotomy of the “Right and Left” - then you start to contend with the chords in your mind and both hands become intertwined in executing them on the keyboard. It is meditative. They get congealed. The “two hands” become in these times the “one” and you start to realise their functions and how you may use them in ways different to how you usually do. It’s interesting to think about how this disrupts the distinction between the “strong” hand and the “weak” hand.

Of course, a trained outsider will observe this and they’ll shout “Oh my God! No! You can’t do it like that”

I’m reminded of a discussion we² had with Kyohei Sakaguchi about how people communicate, why people make stuff, and the transmission of creativity. In some cases it’s just like you’re swinging through the jungle

² With Xin Cheng <http://xin-cheng.info>

and all you need are vines, branches, and the spaces between the trees to get to one another, whether you are a monkey or a bird or whatever. So maybe when we are talking we are OK with the branches. But maybe in a different setting or with different people you will need to construct a bridge. You might need to think about solid foundations. In other times or environments, or with certain people, you might just need the wind.

I guess that brings back to mind what you were saying about communities and adda. It's not simply about connections, it's about the conjunctions. Not just the peg and the hole or writing the code for the particular programming language, or debugging, but dealing with and taking pleasure in the hairs and cracks and meshes.

B: Yes, these things are not straightforward.

There is not a plug that we can just put into the socket. It's not a simple question that can be answered.

What is interesting is that while there are major and minor modes in Western music, there are no chords in Indian classical music. The music just didn't develop that way. It developed through melodies and because of the emphasis on melody it is often the case that they cannot be replicated on a piano. There are quarter tones and specific ways of treating the notes which can only be vocalised or played on an instrument that can go between notes. So, this is a way of talking about something that is 'minor' within something like a piano - the minor sensibilities in terms of what the piano can't do. So you need to adjust the piano.

This occurs to me as a useful analogy for noting that there are some constraints, frameworks or structures that don't allow for minor sensibilities just like a piano doesn't allow for notes in gamak or sliding, or a specific way of hitting the note. In order to let these minor sensibilities shine through you might need to alter the piano.

There was a guy in India in the late 1800's who took the harmonium, which is a traditional French instrument with a foot pedal that acts as a pump and thus allows you to play with both hands. But in Indian music you sit on the floor, which meant that the foot pump became a single hand pump and the other hand played the melody. And then there was the problem of what we do about the quarter tones and the gliding. This meant that there was a harmonium developed that tried to include three other shades of every note. This was a very weird looking piano. So the problem of quarter tones was solved, but then how should we do meends? A whole way of playing the harmonium developed that *alludes* to meends and *alludes* to all of these things in a way that crunches and crushes all of the notes together but it still can't do it.

So now, if the musician really wants to have the instrument shadow and compete with the singer then they opt to have a sarangi instead, an instrument that has the natural capacity to do all those things.

I'm not sure what that says about structures that you can keep reforming and reforming and reforming but until you just take the keys out and have a slide there instead you can only reform so much.

So what keys might we take out or add?
Where do we reform?

Change is interesting and change is the point where I joined Uxbridge. A redevelopment implies that you are rethinking not only the building, but how you are positioned in your local area, in arts and culture and what questions you would like to ask of both your local area and arts and culture. And for those who feel that they know *exactly* what it is that we should do there is also an equally compelling answer in the opposite direction.

So, mediating through that is the real job.

C: I'm in awe of you. Because when you talk about those instruments or ways that have the ability to be so loose, to produce such an array that is so different from the discrete

notes of the piano and not at all like the plug and socket, that feeling of not knowing is something that I love. The not knowing of what might happen, sliding loosely, being hypnotised or mesmerised.

So, thinking about being at home, taking a walk, or being in the park and being an 'individual' who is kind of like a 'vagrant' with no fixed abode, no titles, no formal position... those situations feel more like the instruments and musicality you have been talking about, rather than the suburban art centre. And of course, you can still work in many modes and a piano still has strings and you can still rearrange and alter a piano, and you can also play a piano very well of course and I love that but...

So, when you go to a local school you can go there as the Art Teacher with a Classroom and a Programme, and you can do a module on 'clay modelling', for example. But I am more comfortable with just being the weird guy in the school who is sitting somewhere off to the side with some clay. The aspect of the

weirdo is not aggressive, it's more of an invitation to play and an introduction of uncertain elements into very formal institutions. I love the feel of that and I'm interested in how that can work - not just in schools or art galleries or centres, but in daily life too.

I was talking to some people from the council about various 'community' aspects and especially about the role of the private dwelling, which in Mairangi Bay is perhaps not sacred but it is definitely more of a piano. More discrete in its modes of use. You may have a home and possibly some home-based business but you cannot 'play' it in any kind of sliding way at all. It's not a mucus-y thing with hairs and cracks that it might be in other places. I would place it in opposition to what Matias Echanove describes as the tool house which is a place of rest, shelter and privacy but also community and production. It's much more porous and slippery and slimey than a 'residence'. It has seeping qualities, whereas in Mairangi Bay it is very clean, delineated and defined. It is very difficult to get people

you don't know into your house (B: And most would be suspicious of you anyway...).

Exactly, what are you even doing at the park if you're not picnicking or playing sport? You almost need a permit.

B: Very true.

So, talking about uncertainty and ambivalence, my master's research project was an interpretative project of one specific god in Hindu mythology called Śiva, and the way that he embodies ambivalence and uncertainty. He always functions at the periphery of things. He is the god that embodies oppositions and extremes. At the same time that he is an ascetic who lives away from society in the mountains he is also the household god of the erotic. At the same that he is the destroyer of things he is the creator of things. Through my research I discovered that this was the myth maker's way of making sense of oppositions and extremes. The thesis itself was divided into five chapters dealing the ways in which five binary phenomena are thought about and for each binary phenomena Śiva

simultaneously makes it ambivalent, uncertain and vague.

For example, the section on either/or focuses on Daksha who is the progenitor and is the god who didn't know whether he existed or not. He was the beginning of things, you could say, and when he was creating things he had very strict distinctions between good and bad creations - and he allocated all of the bad things to Śiva. And the resolution of this story is that Śiva makes that ambivalent. He destroys Daksha's sacrifice ritual and finds himself in a position where he is a malevolent god who is also the creator of things. He assumes the form of Daksha and becomes a creator of good things while he himself is bad. This is a simple story but it tries to think through something very beautiful... this concept of divisions.

In another chapter we find that one way to reconcile oppositions is to say that they are two different shades of the same thing. Śiva upsets that too.

Another way to understand it is to say that we should have a compromise, and Śiva upsets that as well.

So he upsets them all, while at the same time embodying them all.

I like this because being uncertain or having an ambivalent way of going about things can also be the most useful position. Not useful in a pragmatic, practical sense of greater revenue generation but useful in that it offers more multiplicity. More heterodoxy. It offers a bit of grit against certainty.

He would be the god that is that weirdo in the park who, just by the fact of him being there, shows that there is something beautiful going on. So, what I am implying is that you are Śiva. You are a god.

C: Fantastic. Let's leave it at that!

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