

Reflections on Panel Discussions | 13 May | Shared Ecologies at FICA  
by Samira Bose

The composition of the *Shared Ecologies* programme at FICA on 13 May 2024, specifically the manner in which the panel discussions were consolidated, helped me acknowledge the density of thinking around ecology within recent exhibitions and programming in India. While the sites of display discussed are primarily concentrated in urban centres, the contexts that were referenced and inhabited in the process are purposefully much wider. The re-presentation (literally) through narratives provided by institutional and independent curators provided a mode through which to access and comprehend these recent exhibitions. Rather than being descriptive, most of the panel presentations were reflective in nature. As an audience member, it was fairly apparent that the presenters were laying out their own stakes and personal preoccupations. These became entry points for listeners to view the exhibitions as making propositions, as sites where multiple references are brought together, and where situated artworks and practices are re-contextualized in dialogue.

At the onset, I want to reference Jakarta-based collective ruangrupa's conception of *documenta fifteen* which based its core values and ideas on "lumbung" (Indonesian term for communal rice barn). They attempted not to merely represent "lumbung", but embed it as an "artistic and economic model rooted in collectivity, communal resource sharing, and equal allocation" into the very structure of the event. Thus, for instance, all participants were invited to be part of collective groups that shared a "collective pot" to co-produce a project, and this engagement went on online for nearly a year prior to the exhibition. The exhibition (which has faced criticism precisely for this reason) was simply an iteration of a much longer and ongoing process of building alternative networks outside of Eurocentric nodes, and to consider collective futures and shared resources to cope with economic and ecological precarity. The exhibition was more for the participants themselves, than for the visitors. Two years hence, it continues to mutate through multiple collaborations across contexts under "lumbung continued". I will return to my evocation of *documenta fifteen* in this report.

For the sake of brevity, I will not describe the panels and the artworks discussed at length in the report, but focus on and highlight certain structural aspects that stood out to me that tied the programme together, and that I'd like to critically reflect on as an attendee of the programme. I will conclude by addressing the prompts I received about the documentation and circulation of exhibitions from the *Shared Ecologies* team.

Panel 1 | *Measures in Time*

The first panel consisted of presentations from within institutions that have focused on one or a series of exhibitions around art and ecology, an area that they prioritise within their calendar of events. I personally appreciated that the speakers were not heads of institutions, rather team members who had been deeply involved in composing and coordinating the exhibitions they spoke of, apparent in the kinds of (sometimes granular) details that they shared. The presentations were not merely describing the exhibitions or the artworks, but emphasising the process that encompassed and led up to it—it was evident that there's a concerted back-and-forth between exhibition and programming, and so the focus was not

on the display itself, but the kind of activations that happened before and through it, with exhibitions as sites where these “congeal” (Indranjan Bannerjee, KHOJ).

Madhushree Kamak of Science Gallery, Bengaluru, presented on the institution’s ongoing exhibition titled ‘CARBON’. She shared that the conceptualisation was based on the research of science historian Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, who is one of the academic advisors to the exhibition. This is an instant clarification of the priorities of an institution such as this one, and it’s interesting that an academic research paper extends into or is re-imagined in an exhibition form with an invitation to artists. Madhushree emphasised how thinking around carbon as an element today is skewed, even as it “inscribes” much of life on earth. The exhibition looks at the idea of the anthropocene and climate change, but seeks to invert the imperative placed on individual habits and to construe it in its immense scale. The purpose is to reorient to carbon rather than blaming and fearing it, and acknowledge its multiplicities of modes of existence on earth, through artistic responses and programming. I appreciated Madhushree’s articulation, and it shifted how I looked at some of the images of the exhibition that she shared through tech glitches. I had two reflections on this presentation. The first is that a significant part of the presentation was dedicated to showing the advisors, curatorial team, and logos of those involved in the display. On the one hand, this can seem like tedious institutional obligations, and at the same time can be a revealing exercise to see those invested in (and investing in) ecology at the moment. The second was Madhushree’s emphasis on the series of discussions and workshops (including a summer school) that were developed alongside the exhibition, and particularly their use of metro stations as sites showed how the institution is committed to “building communities and giving access to wider audiences”. I always wonder about such a claim towards publics, and it would have been worthwhile to know how wider audiences perceive and palate conceptual art practices when they come looking for “science”.

From Khoj, Alina Tiphagne and Indranjan Bannerjee presented on *28° North and Parallel Weathers*, a recent exhibition by Khoj in New Delhi drawing from their participation in the World Weather Network. Their sharing opened with a video of artist Atul Bhalla communicating through rain in the middle of a desert, akin to a weatherman sharing a dispatch. At this point there was a murmur among the audience about whether this was live, which leaned well into the speakers’ question: How do you bring such site specific work into spaces of showing? Through anecdotes, stories, and poetic descriptions, they spoke about “dispatches” or weather reports shared by artists who worked over two years, disparately, with affects of moisture or water (and what it means to them). Alina and Indranjan alluded to the some of the logistical constraints they had in translating these multifarious engagements in the form of an exhibition that they claimed “congealed” these in a display. The use of this term struck me, because it speaks of the shift from a liquid or semi-liquid state into a solid one, and therefore the exhibition is a *site of solidification*. However, instead of showing documentation from the exhibition itself, they told us about the processes of the artists involved by moving through (zooming in, out) an interactive map that explicated their terrains and locations. The core of the project was about bodies as sites for “attuned sensing” of weather. I had attended the opening of the exhibition personally, and observed the effort that was put in into the display to produce these affects. However, as is often the case with Delhi exhibitions, it was packed to the brim and then serendipitously rained, and it was poetic and chaotic at once. I have to admit that listening to them describe the process

enhanced my own understanding of the project considerably, and shifted what may have been more sensorial/based on impressions into the discursive.

I want to emphasise their focus on Karachi LaJamia's display which drew from the course they ran in 2021 titled *Hamare Siyal Rishte* (Our Watery Relations) on connecting with the coastal and riverine geography of Karachi as a resistance against state mandated destruction. The pedagogical materials, which are somewhat the afterlife of the course and syllabus, became the showcase at Khoj. I want to pin this in relation to what I raised at the beginning about *documenta fifteen*: the exhibition is simply a mode to communicate a much longer process located in multiple elsewheres.

This leads me directly to Annalisa Mansukhani's presentation on FICA's *AgriForum* series. Annalisa spoke of the use of "fieldnotes" as a format (reminiscent of Khoj's dispatches), where artists and participants involved imaged the field through many interpretations, and immediately shared and populated a WhatsApp group. The primary mode of the programme was about "reading" the field of agriculture across India, and was activated through Zoom gatherings alongside social media chats. The exhibition showcased "excerpts" from the programme, and through a "fluid exhibition design", it travelled to different sites including Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi; Dakshinachitra Museum, Chennai; Serendipity Arts Festival, Goa. The fieldnotes were sent by artists that were fostering site specific instigations, or attuning to situated knowledge systems of farmers and indigenous communities that tilled the land. Through reading, the intention appeared to be to pay attention to (and perhaps make sense of) these agricultural systems and their relationship with the environment. Annalisa spoke of the decision to showcase tools in the exhibition, and consider them as physical and social agents, even as "interlocutors". Their material presence in the exhibition is purposeful to invoke the sites they come from, and from utilitarian they became evocations. Annalisa structured her sharing around the idea of the almanac which holds the various methodologies and vocabularies that evolved during the programme. The almanac, like the syllabus, serves as an afterlife of the programme and exhibition, and at the same time both produce something different on their own terms.

The framing of this panel was based on time, which became evident in that several of the artists were concerned with time, and carbon was also positioned in terms of deep geological time. However, the conceptual focus was lost, and instead what stood out much more clearly were institutional imperatives to develop artistic methods, lexicons, syllabi, and almanacs to *think with* and *reorient to* ecology in the contemporary. The Q&A went in a stimulating direction with the core thread being, "Why be an artist when you can be an ecologist?" I will not delve into this as it is an immense topic in and of itself, but I appreciated that Ravi Aggarwal, apart from organising the programme with colleagues, was also acting as an interlocutor and posing provocative questions about what's at stake (for instance, institutions inviting artists thinking about ecology conceptually versus making direct interventions). The responses veered towards how the artists were bringing forth the stakes from their sites to new audiences (AgriForum) or how the artist's role is to enhance thinking through creative means (Rashmi Kaleka).

## Panel 2 | *Confronting Nature*

The second panel opened with an invitation from the moderator (Indranjan) to talk about

exhibitions that confront our contemporary ecological conditions in unique ways, and that I believe provided expanded imaginaries towards nature. Drawing from some of the discussions in the previous panel, Indranjan stated that the panel would open up terminologies, concepts, vocabularies around *nature* (interesting that this term was used more than *ecology*), and how definitions have morphed, nuanced, and undergone shifts.

Premjish Achari presented on the *Chaos Trilogy*, a tripart exhibition he curated for The Guild gallery. Before jumping into the exhibitions, Premjish spent time laying out his stakes and at the same time mapping the field. He emphasized that what art history cannot do, exhibition histories can do in the way that they gather a variety of sources, make propositions, and create direct engagements with publics in the present. He invoked figures like Franz Kafka, Mao Zedong and Walter Benjamin to make a case for the enigmatic character of chaos, and how upheavals hold revolutionary potential for transformation. He then went on to set the stage for ecology as one of the major ideological battlefields today, and the urgency to re-examine cultural assumptions rooted in Eurocentric and Brahmanical conceptions. Premjish and other panelists were clear about this: nature is an ideological construct. Premjish then moved through the artists that had displayed in his show, with close-up shots, and spoke further about how the artistic responses were sensitive to location-specific ecological problems and proposed ways of engaging with the environment that do not simply square blame on modern individual consumptions (reminiscent of Madhushree's argument), and the urgent need to understand the specific material contexts of the global south vis-à-vis the environment. As research for this report, I went to the Guild Gallery website to look at images of the exhibition, and found the experience to be flat, versus Premjish's own extrapolations as well as the way he has written about the exhibition on his own Instagram posts. It warrants some thinking about how exhibitions circulate, and where we may be able to comprehend them more deeply.

Arushi Vats spoke of an ambitious group show she curated titled 'Naya Anjor' during her time as Curator at Anant Art gallery. Similar to how Premjish had a set of references that informed his thinking, Arushi invoked Édouard Glissant's push away from finding "roots" which have totalitarian tendencies, and instead turn towards the rhizomatic, and to extend that into language. She shared the inspiration behind the show—a song by Faguram Yadav, a poet at the heart of Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha—and that her attempt was to display "approaches that are keeping vigil against the extractive occupations of mountains, forests and rivers in South Asia." Arushi reflexively mentioned that in the display at Bikaner House, New Delhi, "some of the cadences were muted." It felt like a poignant push towards how we may remember exhibitions. It isn't simply about understanding the intentionality of the curator, institution, or even the artist, but also about the critical reflexivity that emerges as an afterthought. However, in the presentation, I appreciated that Arushi instead used her own poetic cadences to highlight some of the works, for instance her narration of Ravi Aggarwal's work *Bhatti Mines* that inscribed public wall surfaces through authorless writing, or Navjot Altaf's work with seeds and un-milled red rice (which she spoke through the artist's solo show at Ishara Art Foundation in Dubai), and how Sabih Ahmed of Ishara's framework was that artists are visualising environmental urgencies, and cognizing climate crisis through form and materiality. It is here that I felt that the exhibition as a mode was explicated clearly.

Advait Singh, like the two speakers, also put forth their set of references, specifically a proclivity towards neo-materialist and animist frameworks. After a brief (and perhaps necessary) background to the rise of the Anthropocene as a construct, Advait elaborated on the trope of Gaia as nurturing mother, and its refutation that she has many guises that are vengeful and destructive (which Premjish referred to as well). I was quite sure that this text would be mentioned at some point in the panel discussions, and Advait raised Donna Haraway's *Situated Knowledge* which unravels scientific objectivity and instead makes a case for attuning to knowledge systems that arise from the location. Advait stated that their projects "perform scale switching" and that a similar set of preoccupations are pursued across exhibitions in varied sites— independent art spaces, galleries, or biennales. With a baseline that "queer worlds as always already under apocalypse" the artists Advait mentions, such as Priyanka D'Souza or Imaad Majeed, attempt "magical thinking" to counter defeatism and cynicism, and perhaps even embrace the trope of eco-horror and weirdness in nature, which "make us face the weirdness of our own nature, our own alien, leaky constitutions."

I would like to (as briefly as possible) summarise one question by Indranjan after the presentations, which, like with the earlier Q&A posed a very essential question: Is the site and form of the exhibition good enough to uphold all that has been raised and is at stake in the discussions? Arushi believed that exhibitions, but also museums and archives can be wielded in minor cadences and therefore the question is not so much *why* an exhibition, but rather *which* exhibition. Reflecting on her own show which was housed at Bikaner House, she acknowledged its limitations but found it an opportunity to map certain intergenerational shifts and transfers, and assemble practices that are brushed under categories such as "India" but are actually bristling against the containment of borders. Advait claimed the exhibition as a "site par excellence" for how it can hold the playful and the performative, how it is a symbolic space, a space for decisively identifying problems and audiences. It provides an impetus for formulations that are new. Premjish resonated with Arushi's conundrums in that exhibitions may be miniscule relative to political resistance, but play a huge role in cultural resistance, particularly in the way that it can accommodate the plurivocal or the polyphonous. Their role, he feels, is to "allow the imagination of an alternate social reality and relationality", which he finds is still very much aspirational for him for his own practice.

These insightful responses bring me to my conclusion for the report. Two of the prompts I received for the report were "[exhibitions as a discursive site](#)" as well as "[afterlives of exhibitions](#)". Working in an archive, and also performing a curatorial role and making exhibitions within it, I've been interested in the many methodologies of documenting or capturing exhibitions. This pursuit has made me acutely aware of the basic mode of exhibition documentation which includes wide and close photographs, list of artists, and curatorial notes/texts, which provide basic primary sources for art historical research. More recently, exhibitions have a wider circulation which include recorded walkthroughs, interviews that are shared on social media, and reflective publications. I believe that the narrative and performative styles adopted by the speakers of panel discussions for this programme also provide a way for the exhibition to continue to serve its discursive function beyond its spatial and temporal limits. In fact, the speakers did not need to show documents from the exhibitions to be able to expand their own concerns. While several of the

exhibitions repeated the artists, each time their articulation shifted, which is fascinating and brings me back to what Arushi mentioned (but I approach it differently) – rather than *which* exhibition, I'm interested in *how* it is articulated beyond its site. These panel discussions indeed provided one interesting mode for that to happen.

The third prompt I received for the report was about how “[art and ecology can be in conversation and produce new knowledge](#)”. This is a very big question, which I hope I managed to somewhat address via the speakers and through some of my limited summaries. I want to return here to the introductory reference to *documenta fifteen* and “lumbung”. I feel that all the presentations in the panel gave illuminating insights into the processes that undergird the artistic work and curatorial research in the exhibitions, and also the communities and beings (human and otherwise) that artists are engaging with. It was interesting that there was not much talk of audience—perhaps the base assumption being that all the sites of display discussed were for art milieus. Or, like with ruangrupa, the exhibition is an iteration of, or even an excuse, for experimentation and knowledge exchange that are much more expansive and continuous. In that sense, while the processes may “congeal” or solidify for the duration of the exhibition, they continue afterwards in liquid and semi-liquid states. This *Shared Ecologies* programme gave a glimpse of this, and I said at the beginning, made me acknowledge the rigour of work happening in the art field in around ecology in the region, with a lot of responsive thinking from *within*.