



## When Modern meets Contemporary: Venkatappa Art Gallery and Informal Art Education in Bangalore

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### Abstract:

Public spaces and institutions have often been linked when it comes to art practice in Bangalore. Whether it was the large-scale earthworks or the appropriation of heritage spaces taken on by artists, the spaces occupied by the public and the public art institutions have had a strong impact on the ways art gets produced in the city. There is also an additional element of reclaiming public spaces that is the struggle of most cities today.

Since February this year, the artist community of Bangalore has protested against the move made by the government to 'hand over' the Venkatappa Art Gallery to a private entity. This has spurred a lot of conversations about public spaces and public resources in the city, specifically, in relation to art. Art history and the 'teaching of art' have often been celebrated as an achievement of European scholarship. It is true that a number of institutions set up to teach art in India are a colonial legacy, but what emerged post-independence is a culture of rejecting European aesthetics and trying to form a national one if it were. And in our era of post-modern/post-colonial awareness, there is a fluidity in the conduct of the institutions and in the understanding of public spaces that have contributed to the aesthetic of the

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contemporary artist. In the light of the recent events, this paper will examine the ways in which the art gallery and later the freeform collectives serve as educational spaces for students and subsequently, explore the implications of the lack of such spaces in the practice of art in contemporary times.

Art Education in post-independence India reflected the uniquely Indianized, modern art-making. However, this modernist or 'formal' concept of art teaching and learning, prevalent during the prior era, still prevails in the majority of art schools in the country. Here, Modernist and formal are terms used with reference to the way art is made. A formal approach to painting would be in pure painting techniques that used oil/watercolour/acrylic paint on Canvas/paper. It also refers to form in the painting where there may be an abstract or figurative subject painted but it remains in the form of a painting, unlike contemporary art where the work of art is no longer restricted to a medium. It is important for us to note at this juncture that while the city that is now known as a font of conceptual and performance-based work, still retains institutions, such as the art schools that teach a modernist aesthetic. Therefore, one could safely assume that the spaces that exist outside of the art school feed into the art teaching-learning for students. That is to say, the culture that developed since the establishment of the early art schools, fostered an environment of experimentation. This kind of art practice led to the dematerialized artworks and research-led initiatives that have become a part of contemporary art in Bangalore.

The art school, the way we know it is a product of a colonial legacy and a nationalist need to 'encourage' all forms of education. But is there a school that can exist without an idea, or an inheritance? An ethics of knowledge is the foundation of any school in its essential definition as a gathering place but the complexity of what that knowledge should be, how its production is configured and unfolds, who translates it across the bridges of generations and time, whether its structure is rigid or limpid in its willingness to change, whether it is resistant to external mandates or longs for the imprimatur of an outside authority, and what status and success

signify for its teachers and graduates – all of these define the place of gathering, its ethical complexion, its reasons for being, and what learning means there (Madoff, 2009). It would also be good to note here that the 20th century saw significant changes in terms of artistic practice. One significant change in these years is a 'flattening' of genres/styles/discipline. Keeping this in mind, then one can ask, how do the art schools qualify teaching the traditional practices of painting, sculpture, print-making and such as 'visual art' and nothing else? How has it become, that the residencies and collectives that spring out of art school or exist outside of the art school have become incubators of what is contemporary?

In Bangalore, there has been no dearth of alternative institutional and art making spaces. Of these, the contemporary art galleries set up in the 50's and 60's were important to the construction of the contemporary aesthetic that is a signature of Bangalore-based artists and students. This aesthetic is seen in the large number of performance works as well as the collaborations and collective formations that produce art. The Venkatappa Art Gallery, due to its eminence as an art space for young artists as well as a museum commemorating a modern Master, becomes a nodal point in the construction of contemporary art history of Bangalore.

The Gallery, as seen by the artist community, is an inclusive and democratic space which can be hired at low costs by young artists and those from the provinces, and also excellent for non-commercial and experimental art projects, festivals, workshops, seminars, talks and meetings. Most of the artists who are part of the Venkatappa Art Gallery forum have had their first solo shows in the gallery. Through the years, there have been group shows, collective projects, eight state Kala Melas, retrospective of RM Hadpad, The Khoj International Artists Residency, The International Live Art Festival, Co-Lab and Ananya Drishya artist talks, and in more recent times, the IFA Public Art presentations, to name a few activities. These events have been open to the public and have been well attended. Students from local art schools, as well as those from other cities in the State, have been known to present/display here following the completion

of their studies. Presenting one's artwork in the gallery is almost like a rite of passage and therefore has evidenced work of a number of prominent artists.

## **Art Education in India**

To give a short but pointed history of the influences on students and teachers in art schools (West), one could begin from the 60's, wherein amongst many other issues, two significant interventions were the overhaul of the aesthetic object and the influx of 'found objects' as method. This is attributed to Duchamp and his era of Dada. Then in the 80's there is the influence of conceptual art, which also resulted in the erasure of boundaries within disciplines in schools. In the Indian context, the art school has remained in pre-modern climates, where students are encouraged to work in the contemporary but graded on qualifiers like form and medium. While these questions and thoughts throw open the debate for what could be the art school, it is important for this paper that the idea of the art school as it is today and the ways in which 'other' spaces become art schools remains the anchor. In this, I will unpack the ways in which the artists protecting Venkatappa Art Gallery have ensured that the spaces for art schools can evolve beyond their present confines.

When art students graduate from their academies, they usually end up as "no-collar" workers in the industry by day and as artists by night in their dreams. The collectives, however, understand the phenomena as a form of temporary freedom where contemporary art can be seen as a refuge from the relentless pressures of the culture industry (Collective, 2009). Upon graduating, the young artist is faced with the problem of being unable to reflect or be critical of the contemporary and one's own practice. Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands (Agamben, 2009). Therefore being contemporary cannot afford the loss of criticality, which in itself is a rigorous practice of reflection. But before going into what it takes to be a contemporary artist, we should try to examine whether the art school allow for such reflexiveness? If not, then it is, of course, these alternative

spaces that have become the landscape of contemporary art in Bangalore that allow for the same.

The fear of irrelevance, obsolescence, and marginality haunts many younger practitioners, and the pressure to exhibit as an artist is almost as lethal as the pressure to innovate as a cultural worker or entrepreneur. The question of what then constitutes an education that can adequately prepare a practitioner for a vocation in the contemporary arts is primarily a matter of identifying the means to cultivate an attitude of negotiation with and around this kind of pressure. Learning the ropes is learning to do what it takes to maintain a semblance of the life praxis of artistic autonomy. To think about the content of such an education requires us to return to some very basic questions.

### **Bangalore and Art Practice**

Scholars have opined that in order to understand how the art schools and contemporary art spaces have evolved, a rhizomatic model can be applied. In using the metaphor of the rhizome, one sees the emergence of the alternative spaces and collectives as a network; This network, also referred to as a solidarity economy (Sawant, 2012), is the building block of contemporary art practice in Bangalore. The structure of collectives also falls into the category of Assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1995), which is essentially a cohesive structure that 'does' something. This speaks to the idea that art is produced in society and influenced by ripples and rifts in the same. Going a bit further, the collectives are a system of assemblages that affect each other in a continuous cycle.

If art practice is indeed postmodern, then the nature of practice itself is understood as a constructive process, making new meanings of power beyond the art world (Kester, 1998). Artists can, through their work, reflect the values and aspirations of their immediate milieu, the community at large, or the challenges of the human condition. While some react with cynicism and even despair, others produce an art of resistance (Turner, 2005). One of the primary differentiating factors between the collective model and the art school is that of discipline. Here discipline refers to the fluid way that collectives use various medium and the rigid

systems present in the art school which perhaps pushed students to explore working in the collective.

Laying out the context for Bangalore, the city has had a different kind of arts practice, one where the state has, if at all, a nominal role. The second concerns the way in which artists engage with the city as a site as well as subject of study. Shukla Sawant writes of Bangalore's contemporary art landscape as dotted with alternative or 'different' arts practices over the 20th century. The connections she makes with the institutions that were set up at the beginning of the 20th century and current groups or formations of artists are interesting as they point out a certain kind of pedagogy in their 'otherness'. Artists' collectives have succeeded in the city and often form the crux of many movements in the city, or support movements that stand for civic awareness.

The city has had a unique relationship with arts practice. This has particularly been manifest since the 1980's when the younger artists of the time took to using the city as site as well as subject of study. The Bangalore 'trust network' within which collectives work, comprises an extensive network of creative energies and works in diverse areas of the visual arts, performance, and film, all of which provide a rich field of experience and exchange on a regular basis. The years of working together in art school or following a model of collaboration has led to the formation of a system that thrives on collective action. While it is not uncommon for the artist community to come together over a cause/crisis, the sheer intensity with which collectives grow, break and reconnect into other formations is something to be appreciated.

Though scattered over time, there was a concentration of collective formations that were seen in the 80's that were put together by the 'product' of the experimental art schools set up in the 1960's. So while Kalamandiram, which we will get into a bit later was a model for the new age art collective, it is the 60's that provides the intellectual foundations for a large tapestry of collectives in the city. What was it that distinguished the Bangalore milieu? Their work is often temporal, at times existing only in a dematerialized manner or as a web-based venture, or even as a social project involving interactive events that leave no physical residue. The artworld here was one which valorised the art object

and make the museum (very ironically) a sacred space for artworks and objects. The artists who made work in Bangalore were often more concerned about addressing the cause rather than take account of their significance in art history.

More examples of a dematerialized art practice are seen in the work of Surekha, part of the 2001 *Bengaluru Habba*, a state-supported street festival on the city's main shopping thoroughfare. In order to draw the attention of passersby (read citizens), she cleaned and inscribed an alcove on M G Road, a popular and commercial part of the city. The subtext of this work was to sketch the situation that is faced by a city that wants to be seen as developed but is unable to meet the needs of the population with limited resources. The latter, however, could be noted as a reflection of the state of a large number of South Asian cities that are reeling under the effects of the neo-liberal economy/agenda. The alcove was used by the city's homeless as a shelter and ironically points again to the neo-liberal agenda that was altering the city's landscape and pushing it towards unsustainable, overindulgent consumption (Sawant, 2012).

Between 2000 and 2012, the early efforts by artists like Surekha, Suresh Kumar and Pushpamala have become the efflorescent artist residencies across the city. Some examples include 1 Shanthi Road, a space leavened by the presence of the artist and art historian Suresh Jayaram, the 2009 Samuha Experiment by Suresh Kumar, Archana Prasad and Shivaprasad S, the JAAGA workspace, among others. What is interesting about the last two examples cited above is that they were also time bound. So while the Samuha experiment was intended to be a 441 - day project, JAAGA also was a short term planned space. 1 Shanthi Road has become a quasi-pedagogical space where artist residencies happen, and many of the visiting artists are local art school students. Therefore, these alternative spaces, specifically, their experiences and practices in these spaces have fed into the ecosystem of learning outside the art school.

What has evolved since then is a commonwealth of an art economy generating a network of possibilities through collaborations (Sawant, 2012). While the paper by Sawant speaks of this solidarity economy, how it exactly impacts an education system that is derived from what is at best a lineage of abstraction, still needs

probing (Bhagat, 2003). While Bangalore has become a centre for the expression of dematerialized form, the beginnings of modernist work in the Southern States of the subcontinent are in Madras, now Chennai. The modernist sensibility, led by KCS Paniker and S Dhanapal, was shaped by artists coming in from all four southern states (now 5, to include the recently emerged Telangana state). While this is what the art schools still teach, the work produced by contemporary artists who emerge from the same spaces is beyond the limits of abstraction. So what emerges as modernist form in school, transitions to the ephemeral once outside.

The ethos that the art institutions were built in contributed to instilling a strong sense of community participation in contemporary artists of the city. It is also seen that this artist community has come together in order to 'reclaim' a public resource. This community is functioning as a representative of the 'public,' who would benefit from the Venkatappa Art Gallery, as it would from the other heritage and cultural structures that the State is, in one sense, seizing. This paper has placed before the reader an overview of the case of the Venkatappa Art Gallery as well as a short history/background of the city's relationship with arts practice. In both these accounts, what comes to the fore is an artist community that is standing 'together' against the perceived oppression of the state.

### **Art Education and Alternative spaces of learning**

Looking at art and teaching art has shifted from an object oriented structure to a framework oriented structure. The former laid emphasis on authorship, connoisseurship, attribution and chronology while the latter shifted attention to the political, social and economic structures that under grid the production of art (Panikkar u. a., 2003). This would also mean the shifting of teaching art to include the social fabric in which it was created. This is in contrast to the art schools that are still committed to the older bastion of object-oriented studies; here material remains significant. Then how does the canvas of contemporary art in Bangalore produce work that goes beyond the medium? There was a strong desire in the artists of the 80's to be consumed by the audiences, to imbibe in the 'public gaze', the severity of the problem. If one were



to call the work happening in Bangalore as experiments, then there would be experiments premised on a desire for public comprehension, outreach, collaboration, and interactivity. In other words, going away from the modernist aesthetic of art as an oppositional practice. John Devaraj's early work in the 80's, embraces interactivity and rejected art as a self-contained aesthetic domain. In doing this, he sparked a movement of artists and practitioners using medium as a metaphor and then using these metaphors to address the public. Whether it was Shamala's *Bihisti*<sup>†</sup>, which directed public attention to a challenging environmental issue or Umesh Maddanahalli's earlier *Nelakruti*<sup>‡</sup> or *Earthwork*, this decade sparked a future of the dematerialized art object, something that was a major phenomenon in the 60's and 70's in the West.

Research on Bangalore and its relationship to contemporary art points towards the emergence and success of an autonomous artist community that runs on what has been termed solidarity economy (Sawant, 2012). One reason for such an economy to exist is traced back to the relationship that the early art schools and its artists have with the city. For instance, when examining the careers of some of the key figures who have played a vital role in the formation of Bangalore as an intercultural node reveals that many were recipients of bursaries to travel and study in institutions that fall outside the political map of present day Karnataka. K KHebbar<sup>§</sup>, K Venkatappa<sup>\*\*</sup>, both heralded as great modernists of

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<sup>†</sup>Bihisti was a set of installations by Shamala Nandesh, part of the Sthalapuraganagalu curatorial work by Pushpamala N. One set was exhibited in the Kannada Bhavan in Bangalore, where she had, on a large table displayed maps and research that went into the site specific installation at Ulsoor Lake in the city. There were also a thousand perfume vials filled with water from the lake, labeled Bihisti, available for the audience to take away.

<sup>‡</sup>Nelakruti was a site specific installation by Umesh Maddanahalli. It means Earth Work. A conceptual project, it was meant as a signifier of the hazards to the environment as well as issues concerning farmers. This time and site specific installation echoes the dematerialized art form that Bangalore was beginning to embrace.

<sup>§</sup>Kattingeri Krishna Hebbar was born in 1911 in Kattingeri near Udupi, India in a Tulu speaking Brahmin family. Coming from an

Karnataka, pursued their art education in other states, and, in the case of Hebbar, abroad. A more recent example of identity led collaboration was the formation of the Triangle Arts Trust and its attendant solidarity chain of workshops that stretches across continents. In a similar manner, collectivized efforts in Bangalore were set in motion when artists began to speak out against the strictures of colonial education.

The art schools are essentially spaces of higher education, often serving as incubators of talent and skill. What differentiates the art school from other institutions is perhaps the time spent within one, a stretched out period of four, sometimes six years, if students pursue a master's degree from the same institution. But the *kalamandiram* of Subba Rao and the Ken School of RM Hadapad were perhaps incubators of a different kind. The former was a twin to Tagore's Kala Bhavana in Santiniketan, an artist-led center that was envisaged as an educational facility and professed an adherence to Gandhian ideas. Subba Rao received his formal education from the Chamarajendra Technical Institute (CTI) at Mysore, which is now reconstituted as the Chamarajendra Academy of Visual Arts. The institution's educational curriculum remained entwined with the methods of art instruction that were followed by the art schools initiated in the late nineteenth century by the British in the trading port cities of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. What this means is that these spaces trained artists in British Academic style of 'art teaching' that was primarily realism

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artistic family background Hebbar pursued art and formally studied at the J. J. School of Art (Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy School of Art) in Mumbai between 1940-1945. Later he studied art at the Académie Julian in Paris. He is heralded as one of the great modernists of Karnataka.

\*\*K. Venkatappa (1886-1965) was a pioneer painter, sculptor and an exponent of the musical instrument - veena. He was born into a family of court painters in the princely state of Mysore, present day Karnataka. He was a pupil of Abanindranath Tagore. He was best known for his watercolors, with sensible realism. His Ootacamund watercolors reflect his independent vision. In 1974, The Government of Karnataka established a dedicated art gallery in Bengaluru in Venkatappa's name called the Venkatappa Art Gallery

and copying of portraits in studios. This is not so much a criticism of what *kalamandiram* was, but a way to understand what evolved after. The Ken school, set up almost half a century later was established with a different ideology.

Amidst the other important figures, in the visual arts genre, are great modernists like KK Hebbar and Venkatappa who have become symbols of modernity in the art historical landscape of Karnataka. While regional affiliation held one end of the spectrum, the tendency to align with the global inheritance of contemporary art practice pulled the other end. This aesthetic so developed is what can be evidenced through the innumerable examples of contemporary art in the city. Going back to the idea that the spaces in Bangalore, the collaborative formations, are pedagogical spaces, it would be good to acknowledge that the first voices against colonial education were seen through their interventions in the city. The consolidation of colonial education in the nearby city of Mysore and its institutional critique (through a parallel formation of localized institutions) in Bangalore are near simultaneous events. This is important because the worlds of the Bengal school and Southern Indian artists met in the courts of the Mysore Maharaja. An inspiration for this paper (not so much because the name matches) is Janaki Nair's paper on K Venkatappa and his relationship with the Mysore court (Nair, 1992). In this paper, Nair looks at the way in which an artist who was 'sent' to gain an education in Bengal, comes back to enjoy many years of court patronage. In this, he also enjoys a certain degree of being a celebrity, in being a favored court painter. Further, the Venkatappa Art Gallery is named after this modernist and also becomes an icon for the upcoming artists who would graduate from art school and display their first works here. It also feeds nicely into that narrative of a 'nationalist' aesthetic of the galleries and museums that were set up in the 40's and 50's. But this is a subject of another debate. Here, we are concerned with the ways in which spaces outside of the art school can foster an energy of creating non-medium specific and ephemeral artwork that addresses public and issues of civic injustice.

The case for Bangalore has been that of a separation from state support. The differentiating element is that the larger context of

Indian contemporary art has used or has relied on state support from time to time. In our post-critical, contemporary times, it is important to interrogate this relationship that contemporary art has with the state. If the state can, without being transparent, take away the public resources and spaces that art occupies, then one will have to go into the ways in which the state sees art. In this climate, one cannot exclude or ignore the effect/influence of neo-liberalisation or post-liberalization on the way the state functions. A standard understanding of neo-liberalism is the emphasis on slashing of public expenditure and not on increasing public outlays to enable people to meet basic needs (Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan, 2011). In this light, a cost conscious government is also looking to save money on protecting cultural and historical property. Therefore, the way the government of Karnataka sees this issue is that the cost of maintaining and/or developing a cultural site has been handed over.

So far the examples presented for Bangalore as a creative city was that of autonomous collectives and collaborations that interrogated the city and therefore its history and spaces. Artists have managed to use this and return to the community. They now possess a strength to critically evaluate the way in which the Government is dealing with cultural spaces. In this light, the way they see artistic/cultural space is through the 'local.' As mentioned before, the public is 'local,' a body that would appreciate 'Kannada' culture and therefore a space that projected figures of this culture, like KK Hebbar and Venkatappa. So in answer to what or who the public is to the artist community, it is themselves - the local artists and therefore the people around them/local communities who are also seen as part of a 'Kannada' culture.

Looking at the way in which art practice has evolved, perhaps the art education in Bangalore can be identified as both a socio - cultural experience as well as a series of disciplinary transgressions (Sharma, 2016). In connecting the environment that was fostered in the art schools of the city during the turn of the century till independence, an important connection was made, that of fostering collaborations and the interdisciplinary nature of arts practice. These two points resonate strongly in the art produced by practitioners till date. Whether it is the series of festivals curated

by the media art collective, Maraa, or the small interventions by artists that speak of both art and activism in the same breath, the interdisciplinarity is what defines contemporary art. As a concluding note, this paper presents the case for an 'alternative' reading of the significance of collective spaces and collaboration to students, highlighted by the recent tug of war between the State and Public spaces. Bangalore is a city that has already engaged with arts practice in a different way, the emergence and influence of collaborative spaces/collective models serves as incubators for a reflexive and dynamic arts practice. Therefore, the ways in which artists used collaboration and formed collectives is the result of the older practices. It is only a natural evolution from free-form non-hierarchical institutions to the rather amorphous collectives that exist today. Spaces like Venkatappa Art Gallery have nurtured a sense of making available and keeping public space as sites of interrogation and exploration of the contemporary. One more line is required to state, therefore, with the lack of that, this, this, this will happen.

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