

*Practice Space* emerges out of an effort to better understand the conditions of contemporary art in disparate places. Featuring all new writing in a variety of discursive forms, among them commissioned essays, conversations, and profiles, the volume constellates perspectives and approaches to “the local” from a number of art initiatives that operate outside of conventional institutional frameworks. The book is organized around three key terms—“Local Time,” “Situated Infrastructure,” and “Cotranslations”—each of which serves to underscore a crucial element in thinking non- or para-institutionally. As the authors in this volume consider place and context in terms of social, economic, political, and historical circumstances, their writings also reflect upon these notions as sites for different conceptions of the self in relation to the world. At stake within these texts are questions of registering a global visibility and forging international communions. By looking for different conceptions of “the local,” *Practice Space* hopes to provide possibilities for helping shape an art world that supports all that is small, strange, practical, and nurturing.



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PRACTICE SPACE

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# PRACTICE SPACE

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A Conversation between  
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Staying Slippery:  
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with Merv Espina  
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046 – 055

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Is a Problem  
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With Time or Air?  
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Appalshop and the Temporal  
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Planetary Stakes, Situated  
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# To Join and to Leave, *A Majlis* Abhijan Toto

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## BEGINNING AT ENDINGS

When does one decide that it is time for an institution to end? How does one imagine its dismantling, and what it leaves behind? In early 2016, as the Majlis Cultural and Legal Centres were about to celebrate their twenty-fifth year, Madhusree Dutta, the MCC's director, resigned. In an open letter that was widely circulated, Dutta candidly and scathingly shared her concerns about the impossibility of producing or inspiring real political change through certain institutional forms, and of continuing in the role of collaborator of an increasingly fascistic state. She decried how the nonprofit sector, in the neoliberal context, is not only the site to which compassion is outsourced, but worse, one that seems to lend legitimacy to state violence disguised as policy and care. The Majlis Cultural Centre thus could not continue.

The Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party government, then in its first term, had just entered its second year, but already many of the worst fears about the regime's casteist Hindutva ideology had been confirmed. Universities were severely under attack, with dissident students being arrested and branded seditious or "antinational," and mob lynching of innocent Dalits and Muslims around the country was on the rise. The Modi government had also banned foreign funding to Indian NGOs, specifically targeting entities such as the Ford Foundation, which had long supported organizations such as Majlis. At the same time, there seemed to be an upswing in resistance movements against the government—on university campuses, by anguished farmers, and in other quarters—and intellectuals, Dutta among them, returned national honors in protest of the government's policies. In her letter, Dutta advocated a need for cultural workers to turn their energies towards these movements, to stand up and be counted,



and to descend to the streets. Of course, we did not know at that time that things would get much worse very quickly.

In many ways, Majlis and its activities evolved alongside and in response to the growth of fascism in India, constantly attempting to produce a counterbalance, right up until the moment when the forces of this growth rushed in to consume those of its resistance. Started in 1990 by filmmaker and curator Madhusree Dutta and lawyer Agnes Flavin, Majlis began as an attempt to create a forum dedicated to cultural and legal activism. Its slogan, "Culture Is Right; Right As Culture," spoke to both a universalist notion of rights that needed to be expanded, and, more locally, to the right to certain cultures against already-growing communalism and Islamophobia. The name itself, *Majlis*, means a place of gathering, and is a word that, as Jo-Lene Ong remarked during our conversations around this article, exists in all contexts where Islam is present.<sup>1</sup> This was also a deliberate choice: it alluded to the long contribution of Islamic culture to the production of public spheres in India, and thus the act of naming itself became a gesture of inclusion. Over the twenty-five years of its existence, the Majlis Cultural Centre would engage with these seminal moments in the deepening of communal fractures, critically reframing its position with each turn, until such a reframing was no longer possible.

Equally, Majlis was born of the then-emergent women's movement (not yet termed "the feminist movement") in India, and thus many of its initial activities were structured around questions of gender and gender-based organizing. In 1990, they organized what would become the first festival of women's art (a term they ascribed, which was controversial even at the time), *EXPRESSION*. The form of the festival, particularly in India, in distinction to the exhibition or biennial, allows for certain encounters to occur, and maintains a

relationship with popular forms of cultural happenings. This would be a form that Majlis would return to over and over again to engage with certain situations, in an attempt to produce a mode of fluidity between disciplines, and for the articulation of multiple political positions. *EXPRESSION* brought the work of visual artists such as Nilima Sheikh, Nalini Malani, and Pushpamala N. together with that of writers such as Susie Tharu or choreographers such as Chandralekha. Drawing from Dutta's own background in theater at the National School of Drama, the festival also included works by directors such as Maya Rao and Anuradha Kapur. Significantly, while most of the works in the festival were by cis het women (most of whom were middle or upper-middle class, though not always upper caste), Majlis's engagement with popular forms broke this narrative too, with presentations by *tamashā* artists (a traditional performance form from Western India, in which both women and men dress as women and sing and dance) and a traditional Marathi women's theater (which also involved what, for reasons of brevity, I must refer to as "drag"). The performances in the festival happened in multiple languages, including English, Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi, Malayalam, and Kannada, producing encounters between otherwise linguistically divided conversations and spheres of articulation.

In thinking about the centrality of theater to this moment in Indian cultural practice: it could be argued that the last decade of the twentieth century began with the murder of theater director and activist Safdar Hashmi, in 1989. Hashmi was a prominent voice during the Emergency (1975–77), India's period of dictatorship under Indira Gandhi, when poor communities were sterilized en masse, and leftist students and activists were tortured and killed across the country. He established the Jana Natya Manch (the People's Theater Front) and was known for producing critical plays performed



by often amateur actors in public spaces, as guerilla actions. He was performing *Halla Bol* in Ghaziabad, on the outskirts of Delhi, when union-busting activists affiliated with Gandhi's Congress party attacked and killed him. Upon his death, the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT—which also means “to be in agreement with”) was established by his wife, Moloyshee. It became, and continues to be, a significant organizer of what we can now speak of as traditional leftist political actions centered around New Delhi. SAHMAT and Majlis, set up around the same time and linked through engagements and common practice—with theater being a significant thread between them—provide us with two models of articulation in conceiving the nation, and the role of cultural organizations in shaping it.

#### NATION, CITY

Majlis continued a certain trajectory of cultural practice as nation building and to produce new audiences for this philosophy, along with an ideology of critiquing the state but attempting to produce a nation that may be traced to the then-radical pedagogies of institutions such as the Film and Television Institute of India, the National School of Drama, and the Faculty of Fine Arts of Baroda. However, in a gesture against both the Gandhian and Naxalite politics of the previous decades, which advocated for intellectuals and cultural workers to “return to the villages” to work in the “real India,” Majlis emphasized the metropolis as its space of operation. It emphasized the contingent adjacencies, assemblages, and fragments produced by the city—particularly Mumbai. The figure of the migrant also became an important node of engagement, both speaking to Dutta's own position as an “immigrant” to the city and becoming a counteraction against the particular brand of Marathi nationalism that was taking hold and gaining ground during this

time. The city of Mumbai thus remained an active collaborator, a point of reference, and a space of engagement across Majlis's activities. It is this intimacy, perhaps, that produced Majlis's deeper investment in Dalit politics. The work of figures such as Tharu or the poet Namdeo Dhasal informed Majlis's perspective, enabling the center to embrace an approach that had remained largely outside the framework of traditional leftist discourse in India, which preferred (and often still does) to reduce these questions to merely those of class analysis.

The 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid, in which members of far right Hindu groups traveled from across the country to destroy a sixteenth-century mosque in Ayodhya, was a significant moment for the emergence of contemporary Hindu nationalism, and a turning point in both Majlis's practice and cultural practice in India in general. This incident led to anti-Muslim riots across the country, including in Behrampada in Mumbai, where approximately nine hundred people were killed. The decade between the Babri Masjid violence in 1992 and the Gujarat riots in 2002 saw multiple experiments in producing discourse of imagining a nation otherwise. Thus, in 1994, Dutta and Flavin, together with Neera Adarkar, co-edited a volume of essays entitled *The Nation, The State, and Indian Identity*, which attempted to lay out the stakes of the current spates of violence, and to imagine another trajectory for these debates.

In keeping with the tradition of radical pedagogy as a key element of cultural practice, Majlis began an annual course program in 1996, which would take place during the Diwali vacations. Aimed at art, film, and architecture students in the first or second year of their undergraduate degrees, the program invited senior or mid-career practitioners to conduct courses on subjects outside of their immediate



disciplines. Here, for instance, filmmaker Kumar Shahani was invited to lecture to architecture students, and environmentalist Vandana Shiva was invited to talk about language and literary practice. The aim was to produce a space where radical, interdisciplinary thinking formed the foundations of practice, rather than its being a late addition, and to provide a form of critical pedagogy that the state no longer could or was unwilling to support.

This program eventually evolved into a two-pronged fellowship program that ran from 1998 to 2007. Through this initiative, Majlis provided year-long fellowships to artists and to women lawyers from smaller towns. Five fellowships were awarded each year to support research and the production of art, performance, and film works, which often had a public dimension to them. Projects supported included Shai Heredia and Shaina Anand's travelogue project; Pushpamala N.'s work on food; Tushar Joag's interventions into public space, which presented impossible objects designed to help the user survive the city of Bombay; and Archana Hande's *Arrange Your Own Marriage*, many of which became seminal works of Indian contemporary art.

When the 2002 Gujarat riots, which implicated now Prime Minister Narendra Modi, occurred, Majlis returned again to the form of the festival, and to a wider call to imagine the nation otherwise. Combining the experiments of the annual course and the fellowship program, they initiated the India Sabka Festival (India for All). They involved one hundred colleges from Bombay and nearby Pune, and invited proposals to create public interventions around the theme of inclusion. Here, architecture students were invited to propose interventions benefitting the inhabitants of riot-ravaged slums, and painting students were asked to design a giant hoarding outside Bombay's historic Victoria Terminus train

station. India Sabka was an attempt to create an investment in these processes of nation and community building via the city with a new generation of practitioners.

Crucially, it must be said that the process of imagining the nation during this time was not an irredentist or nativist gesture, but rather a movement towards thinking of the nation as a space from which to produce and cultivate internationalist, Third World solidarities. Thus, in 2004, Majlis played a key role in the organization of the World Social Forum, which was being held outside of Brazil for the first time. The World Social Forum (WSF) was an important node in the post-Seattle anti-/alter-globalization movement, which attempted to create forms of international solidarity outside of neoliberal capitalism.

The late 1990s and early 2000s in India, as elsewhere, was a period of intense "liberalization," where the public sector was at every stage being dismantled and sold for parts. Anti-Iraq War sentiments were also a key concern for the 2004 WSF. In this moment, its convening in Mumbai produced a coming together of many strands of energy, bringing traditional-left organizations in India, such as the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or the Democratic Youth Federation of India, together with tribal rights organizations from India, Brazil, and other places; women's rights groups; striking members of a Korean transport workers' union; farmers; trans\* and sex workers' groups; and artists and performers. A mammoth gathering, the meeting included up to 130,000 people. Majlis organized performances, symposia, screenings, and interventions, advocating strongly for the position of culture in leftist activism and eventually producing a manifesto on the subject. The World Social Forum was, as Dutta put it, one of the last romantic initiatives, made possible by a particular moment in history.



Mumbai is a city whose long, narrow railway system is its spine. Responding to this urban formation, Dutta conceived of Majlis as a train station, a space of transit where people and ideas could move freely. Transit, however, was not conceived in opposition to stopping or storing, and it is this approach that represents a final strand in Majlis's trajectory.

#### ARCHIVING A VANISHING PRESENT

When the 2002 riots took place, Dutta realized that public, interventionist tactics in the traditional sense were no longer an adequate response, and that interventions needed to be made in the production of public memory. Archiving would thus be political work. Already, a decade on in 2002, there was a public amnesia about the Babri Masjid demolition, and no public archive contained any footage of the incident—the only place Dutta was able to find such footage was in a scene from her own film *I Live In Behrampada*. This film itself was born out of archival footage that the Majlis Cultural and Legal Centres compiled for the investigation committee led by Justice B. N. Srikrishna. Similarly, in the aftermath of the Gujarat riots, the Legal Centre produced a volume of first-person reports of the riots.

From this impulse, Majlis initiated and produced a number of archival projects, such as *Godaam* (a colloquial term for a warehouse), the Pad.ma archive, and the Kashmir archive. *Godaam* compiled contemporary images pertaining to conflict zones and cities taken between 1996 and 2007 to be used as a resource for scholars, activists, and legal professionals alike. Pad.ma (Public Access Digital Media Archive) was developed with CAMP, the Alternative Law Forum, Point of View, and other organizations, and consisted of heavily annotated films and videos, including unfinished works, rushes, and primary footage. The Kashmir archive compiled

first-person videos pertaining to the violence in the ongoing occupation of Kashmir. Often taken by citizens and amateurs, the videos were deposited anonymously in drop-off boxes around the state and then digitized by Majlis.

*Cinema City* was perhaps the largest project that emerged out of this archival moment. It began with an engagement with the particular working-class history of Bombay's single-screen movie theaters and developed into a larger inquiry into the entanglement between cinema and the city of Bombay, focusing on labor, neighborhoods and theaters. It recorded narratives of extras, stunt persons, and make-up artists, as well as studied the architecture and urban space around the theater. The project resulted in exhibitions, including one at the National Gallery of Modern Art; three publications—*dates.sites*, *Project Cinema City*, and *Cinema Theatres Around Bombay/Mumbai*—as well as an online archive and resource repository. It also produced a number of artworks, most significantly *The Calendar Project*, wherein artists such as Archana Hande, Gulammohammed and Nilima Sheikh, Tushar Joag, Shilpa Gupta, and Arpita Singh, among others, produced calendar images (a popular form in India) for the preceding fifty years, focusing on historic events for each year and often dealing with the rise of fascism.

To write about Majlis today is not to mourn or to indulge in nostalgia: it is an attempt to participate in this archiving of the recent past, as these pasts, and the futures that they hoped for, become rapidly distant. Majlis proposes to us not only certain models for action—many of which are no longer viable—but also the maneuvers a space or a site of transit is able and unable to make. On a Sunday afternoon, speaking to me over Skype from Cologne, where she has been the Artistic Director of the Akademie der Kunst der Welt for the last two years, Madhusree Dutta reflected on one of the key problematics of her practice

with Majlis: "Ours was a nationalist generation, and today that has come back to haunt us. Ironically, before we die, today we are branded as antinational, *desh-drohi*."<sup>2</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 Jo-Lene Ong, in conversation with the author, July 9, 2019.
- 2 Madhusree Dutta, in conversation with the author, July 14, 2019.