

Conversation with POOJA SOOD AND RADHA M, KHOJ

I is for

Institute

What's in a name? This is the question underlying our investigation into ICA: how it came to be, what it means now, and how we might imagine it in the future.

In a field so often defined by precarity, this project is grounded in a spirit of collegiality, a looking outward that aims to facilitate self-reflection. As such, we have engaged colleagues primarily from small- and mid-scale contemporary arts organizations to discuss their institutional histories and how they understand the stakes of their work. The *I is for Institute* website acts as a repository for these ongoing conversations, as well as archival material relating to ICA's history. We thank our many colleagues for their generosity, enthusiasm, and frankness. Their thinking has in turn energized our own.

— Alex Klein,
Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber
(CHE'60) Curator, Institute
of Contemporary Art,
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POOJA SOOD AND RADHA M,
KHOJ

Pooja Sood is the Director and a founding member of KHOJ; Radha M is a Program Manager and Curator at KHOJ, located in New Delhi, India.

With Tausif Noor

TAUSIF NOOR

Can you tell me a little about your roles?

POOJA SOOD

I was a founding member of KHOJ, and since 2005 the Director of KHOJ. I'd like to introduce Radha. Radha, maybe you'd like to say something.

RADHA M

I'm a Program Manager and a curator with KHOJ, and I've been with KHOJ since 2015. I come from a filmmaking background, but in particular I have been looking at KHOJ's projects which are local to the area of Khirkee, where KHOJ is located. We are thinking about what it means for KHOJ as an institution or art organization to be in a space and how it responds to its surroundings and creates some kind of energy between what can happen inside and outside its building through art.

TN

What we are interested in starting with is how do organizations or institutions get their names? So i just want to ask you about the name KHOJ. I think in Bengali, in Hindi, it means looking or searching?

PS

In Urdu, too: khoj is "to find." We were looking for that one catchy word that could define what we intended to do. What is it that we do? We are really

trying to look for things and searching. I think it was Anita Dube that came up with the word KHOJ. It symbolizes and has continued to symbolize our spirit, which is about searching, looking, and finding. KHOJ is this beautiful word that does that. That's how we got the name.

TN

How did you start out as an organization?

PS

Nancy Adajania has written a wonderful essay on artist-run spaces in India and how they started, and where we can fit in in the 1990s. It was very different, and of course as you know, the genesis is with Robert Loder, India being the first residency or workshop he ever did in Asia. At the time, we really felt 'third world.' It was the late 1990s, with the so-called liberalization had just about taken off in 1991. What did it mean for us in 1996 to be thinking about internationalism and trying to build our own networks? That was a time when the art scene was really limited in terms of infrastructure, and ecosystem. There were a couple of galleries, and a few artists went abroad. One felt that there were many gatekeepers. You had the Inlaks Foundation and the Charles Wallace Trust that sent artists abroad, but only a few and of a certain kind. Baroda's hegemony was very high, and in Delhi if you looked at the art scene there was Al-Kazi and two or three other galleries. All of them basically deal with painting and sculpture. That's it. There was no question of doing anything different. There was a little bit of photography and graphics, but very minimal.

It was within this kind of milieu that KHOJ came around. It was set up by peers, seven of us, to really say that we just needed a place to experiment. It was obvious that by the time that Artforum would come through maybe four or five years later. But information started to flow through, installation art became a big deal; site specificity was being questioned and thought through. There were artists wanting to do different things, but they had to be led by the galleries. You had to make paintings if you want to be put in to the gallery system, because we didn't have very much else. We did not have a public system, which continues to be pretty bad, but there's Lalit Kala, National Gallery of Modern Art, etc. In the not-for-profit sector there was very little that happened. There was not that kind of support for the major artists, so I think when we started out we were pretty much one of the earliest who were looking at these kinds of things after what used to happen at the Kasauli Camps. It was interdisciplinary and we got together once a year, and it happened for about three or four years. So when we started workshops it was really about connecting to the international. If you read that essay that Anita wrote, it was probably the first manifesto and our first

catalog. It was really about connecting within the Global South. Also we cannot forget about Robert Loder, who was able to bring these connections to Africa.

I had been working in Delhi, and we we had done this whole series of exhibitions called Mapping which was looking at India and Pakistan after 50 years of independence, and we had Ifthikar Dadi come and we worked with Lala Rukh. I think when Robert Loder came he got really excited, because he met them all at Ayesha Gallery. We were looking at artists across South Asia, and at that time we didn't have Internet, so you didn't get to see a range of work except at big triennials, where you don't get to see the strongest work. You'd see very state-sponsored work from Bangladesh and Pakistan, but not very contemporary work. We didn't know everything that was happening.

Our first big initiative was the KHOJ Workshop and had Ifthikhar and we had people who connected us to Sri Lankan artists. We didn't know anyone in Bangladesh, so the first workshop didn't have anyone from Bangladesh – it was Pakistan and Sri Lanka. That was because we just had individual connections. That is how this program of connecting with the Global South and focusing on South Asia began. We couldn't connect very far, yet — we couldn't connect, for instance to Latin America. We started strategically; it was just logical to look at our part of the world. It was almost this discovery of contemporary art. It was never to undermine the fact that as a group, as an organization — which wasn't an organization at the time, it was an annual Workshop of two people, and we worked throughout the year to fundraise. Robert did give us some money to start, to try and bring artists from the Commonwealth countries. We also got excited about the fact that we were doing it on our own — it was peer-reviewed because it was really artists who would select other artists. It was peer curated. It was very generous. An artist would say, "Hey, I know this artist in the South who's really good. Let's call them." And they would know someone else. In India, there was a North/South divide, and people didn't know what was going on in other parts of the country. That's how it began and I think it began very much as a peer group, and we would add two or three artists every year to work on the Workshop.

The Workshops ended up being a catalyst. For the first five years, we held them in Delhi, and then it moved to Mysore and Bangalore, which we supported to build their own network. Thereafter, the Workshop has been a very core part of KHOJ, but it's part of KHOJ as a program now. It's really about being a catalytic moment for building a group of artists in a city and saying, "Here, you can do it this way." Whether it's Patna or Pune or Goa, we've done about fifteen workshops.

In 2002, when we got the building, we became more anchored in brick-and-mortar. That's where we had a kind of shift. That's when we started looking at the residency model and for five-seven years we did just residencies and then we started the Peers program because we felt

we needed to do things locally. Being where we were in Khirkee, we were the newbies. How do we get people to trust us? How do you get people to engage, and talk to us? We still think of that term community art, and we really work with the people. What is this community? We needed to understand and we needed people to trust us, because here you have these big international artists working, and doing what? Who are we? We felt that we had to do that. That was our first step in working with the community. From 2005 onwards, we really started pushing a more curatorial framework. In 2007, we started looking at art and ecology. What we have today is our three verticals. One is looking at different kinds of mediums, from 2004 onward, so in 2004 we looked at performance art, which culminated in a performance art festival. One vertical was a more thematic focus, that being ecology, which we looked at for 10 years; intersections between art and science, or looking at migrations between India and Africa. And then the third was always something we felt we needed to push, like a pilot or new idea. Our way of working has always been collaborative but also willing to take risks. I have to say that as we've grown, it's really to fill a lack, more than "This is what we are." I don't think we ever started with an idea of what KHOJ was going to be. Even today, twenty years hence, we are also thinking: What should KHOJ look like? What is it that we need to do that is valuable or for the local scene, which is also globally informed?

I think the fact that we started in 1997, having international artists is informed by so-called globalization. Every artist was on a plane in 2004. Between 2004-5, there was a crisis, because we started wondering: Are we even relevant? Are we building networks between international artists? And if every artist is travelling, then what are we doing? That is the time when a lot of the galleries began to be much more adventurous. They started taking part in various art fairs, they began to understand the value of conceptual art, or installation art, and they began to support artists. What were we doing? That is when we really pushed the focus to more experimental practices: performance art, community art, socially engaged practices, participatory art, new media art, like sound. Galleries were not going to go that far. They might push video art, or installations with photographs to sell, but they wouldn't push that sort of start.

I think we're always trying to be ahead of the curve, and trying to think: What is it that artists are doing, and how do we build an understanding of it for ourselves? It's never prescriptive, it's always open-ended. We're looking at art and gaming, because the gaming industry is going and artists are looking at it. We've done three years of gaming research, plus an exhibition. We've invited artists and game designers to work together, and it's fantastic, and we did an exhibition with that and part of it traveled to the South Bank. We've looked at art and science and we've just come out with a book over many years. I think we're constantly looking at that thing that's on the edge,

where artists have begun to look at it. How can we support them? What we started in art and science was in 2008–9, and we were thinking that not enough artists were really looking at the history of art and science, the relationship between the biological sciences and art. In the last two residencies, we've gone back to this and it's been great. I think that's the way we've always functioned: trying to fill the gaps of what we think is happening or going to happen. We've started doing exhibitions, which we never used to do, and that's because we have a beautiful building. In 2013, we renovated: we have an apartment, and galleries. We felt that we had the scope to do exhibitions, but the exhibitions offered are not just curated exhibitions. Either they are something that's been co-curated, like we did with the Tate as well as Kadist; or it's a culmination or showing of a project, like the gaming and ecology projects.

We work in three registers. I think we work very locally in the community. Over the last few years we've really pushed socially engaged practices, and we want to push it more. I don't think many organizations allow for that and support it. Then we have the middle bit, which is about supporting emerging artists and emerging practices. It's not just for young artists. We're often pigeonholed as an arts organization that supports emerging artists which upsets us, because we're really for emerging practices and emerging ideas. If we feel that Navjot Altaf, who's very senior, wants to come and work with us, great. We've been able to get many excellent artists to work with us. Zulekha's come five times, many such examples. The third is the international. We've had longish partnerships which we're trying to build, but that's not always the focus. We work in all three registers and we want a conversation between all three.

There is a sense of new internationalism, and I think Charles Esche said, "part academy, part community, and part laboratory." We see ourselves as part of that, and for the last 10 years, we've also been running an arts management program. Last year we started a curatorial program, so there's a lot of pedagogy and training involved, a lot of seminars. We're also focusing on building discourse, and I think that comes really to fill the gaps. It's not that we do this because everyone else is doing fantastic stuff. It's because there is no arts management here, there is no curatorial training course. It's always focused on South Asia: how do we continue? After building SANA, which is the South Asian Network for the Arts, how do we continue building this discourse and network? How do we keep those relationships alive, because it's so important — look at what's going on around us, across borders? This is our way of saying that we will continue to support our network, and this is how arts managers and curators will talk to each other and work across borders. A curator from Bangladesh will also want to research in India and Pakistan, and that's what we should be pushing. I think it's also about constantly looking at things that we can do in a tiny organization with huge ambitions. We just did this huge project called Asia

Assembled.

RM

In November 2017, we did this huge three-day seminar called Asia Assembled which was trying to think about the idea of Asia, if it exists, and to critique it, thinking about the politics of this region which in some ways, finds resonance across all of the Asias that exist, from the Middle East to South Asia and beyond. We're thinking about it all through the arts, so we got incredible artists and arts practitioners and thinkers to come together on curated panels. They covered topics from migration to labor to censorship and more. It was a very interesting experience and I think what was interesting was that KHOJ has only started to identify itself as an institution after being identified as one by people who interact with KHOJ. It's taken a while to acknowledge that yes, we might perhaps have an institutional role to play in this landscape. This is responding to what has been articulated by people who have come through KHOJ, are working with KHOJ, have worked with us in the past.

KHOJ is an example of one of the strongest points that came out of Asia Assembled: that institutions in Asia don't play just one specific role, they fulfill multiple needs in multiple capacities. KHOJ's three verticals happened in hindsight. Only after being around for 10 years did we realize what we were doing. Once that happened, there was a more conscious effort to impact those spaces. These were conscious ways of impacting pedagogy and entering discursive spaces because we recognized what KHOJ was doing for this ecosystem. I think in some ways, that has been our biggest power. If you ask anyone, I think the broadest definition of KHOJ is a non-profit organization that supports art and artists and pushes the boundaries of what art is and promotes interdisciplinarity. We haven't tried to cubbyhole ourselves, which has left us free to try and do things, whatever we felt was part of this larger mandate. Therefore, we work on these different registers and are able to experiment with our residency models. While a lot of people define us incorrectly as a residency space, we try to modify the way we work within that idea of a residency. Last year, we had our fourth Art and Science residency, which was awarded to three projects. They had a four month research period that culminated into a one month residency at KHOJ and it was a far more intensified effort to connect them with scientists and technologists who could then work in a more meaningful collaborative manner. We recognized the limitations that a one-month residency had on people working on art and science. We also have our Peers Share program, an offshoot to the Peers program. This year we had 300 applications to the Peers program, which only takes in five artists per cycle. The Peers Share program was started five years ago for the next 10 shortlisted candidates for the Peers program. They're invited to come to Delhi, given a small per diem, and we organize a closed-room crit for them, where they would present

their work to the senior artists of the city. It's been incredible in its own way. This year, we further extended it by having a two-day writing workshop based on the feedback that we've been getting on how these young artists struggle with artist statements and grant applications.

TN

It seems that KHOJ is really pushing for a research-driven and an artist-centered approach. How do the research topics get defined for the year?

RM

Our curatorial team is really small, and we're constantly bouncing ideas off each other, and the artists we're regularly in touch with. Our first Art and Science residency happened in 2012 or 2014. This was when Rohini Devasher was still working at KHOJ, and she was interested in it, and she found contemporary artists who were interested in this idea and did the first residency in Art and Science, and that's how it grew. "Landscape as Evidence, Artist as Witness" was a function of looking at the last 20 years of KHOJ. KHOJ had done a lot of work in the space of art and ecology and it developed as a self-critique: what does art really do? It was really magnified because the state of the Anthropocene was so much severe, and when KHOJ initially started thinking about art and ecology, it was still very niche.

Zulekha has been an artist who has come through KHOJ in different times in her career, and she was really interested in performativity in art, specifically the idea of the artist as an expert witness. It's through one of our many conversation that we came to develop this project. The three artists who were the witnesses in this project are people who have had longstanding relationships with KHOJ and have been dedicatedly working in ecology in their own specific ways. It was a lot of different strains of work and that's how most of our projects develop.

Another example is Coriolis Effect, which is our residency that looks at migration and the relationship between India and Africa through historical trade routes, geography, current politics, etc. In 2014, there was an infamous racist incident in Khirkee, about four houses down from KHOJ. Somnath Bharthi conducted an illegal raid on two Ugandan women, accusing them of being prostitutes and drug dealers. It was a huge uproar, and KHOJ became the center of it and we were constantly badgered by journalists to make comments, and that's why the institution decided to disengage from that immediate conversation and reflect on what it means for an arts organization to be embedded in this neighborhood. How does it respond? We first had a two-week research residency where we invited

a few people, among them Gabriel Dattatreyan, who is an anthropologist who was already working in this field and was working for a year in Khirkee, looking at African cultures and how they manifest in the diaspora. He was living in the neighborhood and had met some Somali refugees and that's when the Somnath Bharthi incident happened. We invited him to come back for a research residency, fleshed out the idea, and developed the value proposition of doing it. Parallel to that, we paused and thought about what our socially engaged practice was and what it meant for KHOJ to be this permanent space and the artists who come through it to be transient. We were reassessing what responsibility we had as an institution, as a space of some kind of power. How do we use that power to our advantage and make direct impact on the neighborhood? That's when we had a reinvigorated socially engaged projects that were more focused on the long-term.

TN

How many people work at KHOJ currently?

RM

We're a three-person curatorial team. I joined in 2015 with the idea of rethinking KHOJ's socially engaged practice. Then we have Mario D'Souza, who joined two and a half years ago, and we have Mila who joined us last year, though he was a fellow before that and was an intern with KHOJ I believe five years ago. We have a two-member admin and finance team, one media and archive person, and we have maintenance staff.

TN

It's still a very small organization, even though you're working very broadly and taking on a lot of new projects. Do you think KHOJ could exist as a conceptual idea without the space? For a long time, you didn't have a permanent space, right? So the building has changed things a little bit?

RM

I would still say that KHOJ is its people and its ethos and the legacy it carries, and it still shapes the way that we as an organization think through things. The building has allowed for a certain embeddedness and a permanency of infrastructure which only adds to it. A small example of this

would from one of our long-term sustained projects that we began in 2015. In 2016, when one of them ended, we had a group of young Afghani girls who had participated and kept coming back to KHOJ because by this time it was a familiar third space outside of their home and their school where their family — very conservative — felt comfortable sending them. Through that we began, now in its almost third year, these twice a week informal classes where we have an artist who comes and does creative classes with them. We've offered our space to a group of young hip hop artists and beboppers, they use the terrace or project space, whatever is available. Every time the Somali or Afghani refugees working at the UNHCR nearby need a space, they turn to KHOJ. So there is an immediate value which we're harnessing. We have our studio spaces that can be used by artists even when they don't have a residency. Two days ago we had a book launch for an anthology of nonfiction narratives by a very small independent publishing house called YODA. The space offers us to expand that idea in many more ways. I think KHOJ can exist outside of the space though it's much better to have the space.

TN

It's an interesting conversation because during my time in India, I spent a lot of time at 1 Shanthi Road in Bangalore, which functions in a very similar way.

RM

They were a part of our Workshop.

TN

There are all of these spaces that aren't only gallery spaces, but function as real sites of public discourse. It's more than just art, it's a public forum of sorts.

RM

I think that's the biggest benefit of being a not-for-profit space, you're instantly rid of any need to be commercially viable. Once you're rid of that, there's a huge lacuna for so many other things, at the very least discourse and enough informal space for conversations and collaborations, networks, etc. Whatever you do is welcome, and not enough at the same time. On the flipside, I would say that one of the struggles of being a not-for-profit arts organization, not only because of the current political climate where funding

for the arts is slashed world over, but especially in this part of the world, is that your sustainability is constantly dependent on grant-making cycles. Most grants come from a very Western understanding of what a successful project undertaken in a certain part of the world is. It comes with its own parameters, and reports, and metrics for assessment. While KHOJ has been actively one of the few places trying to raise a corpus of alternate ways for sustainability, sustainability is something that's especially critical for institutions in South Asia to think about.
