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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,
University of Pennsylvania

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TAUSIF NOOR
One of the things I’d like to ask you is about the origin of the organization. How did the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art come about?

VIDYA SHIVADAS
The name begins with the Foundation which has a grant giving focus. When we started we were thinking about support structures for practitioners, which included artists but also researchers, educators, curators, writers and public art projects. In India, because the private gallery is such a strong institution, the mindset is always about buying artworks, but not necessarily supporting the process that went into the making of the works or developing critical thinking in the field. Initially we focused on supporting institutions as well – one of our early initiatives was to support the Indian Highway exhibition held at Serpentine Gallery, London in 2008. Since then, we’ve restructured our vision to focusing more on supporting practitioners and funding our own art education programs.

Our focus today remains on supporting practitioners across the board; not just artists but also educators, researchers, curators etc. The idea was also that this kind of support structure would kind of create something more sustained, generating a shift in terms of practice, education and research. Being a public charitable trust, we are mandated by law to support Indian practitioners only. In all these years our focus has grown stronger and we are thinking in a much more integrated way about support structures and education. These support structures generate different kinds of practices and education inputs and community engagements, and become part of a larger circle of encouraging a different kind of practitioner.
One of the things that is really interesting about FICA is the focus on the contemporary. When I was working with you, and all of the things that I’ve seen FICA do since, I’ve noticed that you really support younger artists too, or people who are just developing their practice or who have been developing their practice for a number of years and then wanted to take the next step. The idea of contemporary is really interesting to think about across Asia. So, for China, contemporary art means in the last 20 years or 1987, but India has had a period of modernism. It goes back a little further. At FICA, would you say that the emphasis is on the contemporary?

To speak firstly of our core constituency, yes some of our grants have a little bit of an emphasis on younger people, like the Emerging Artist Award, for example, but other grants don’t. For instance our Public Art Grants are not age-specific. It’s true that given our emphasis on education, I guess that does end up catering to a lot of younger people in a way. But for our workshops and events, we always try and mix people from different age groups and locations. We also look to involve practitioners from other fields as the art world tends to get insulated. We involve older practitioners as mentors.

I think the broader question for us is also how we are defining the contemporary in all its diversity and how it illuminates different urgencies, different spatialities and temporalities. The core idea is to create collective spaces and find ways of coming together and develop confidence among art practitioners about what they do and how they contribute to complex issues. We have always considered FICA as an organization that translates contemporary art practices to audiences so that we can build on the directions being proposed by artists. It is about linking contemporary practices to pedagogy and education in substantial ways – whether we are addressing children or educators or young practitioners. It is mainly pushing through this
idea of the collective while also thinking of the multiple contemporaries that are expressing themselves in different locations.

TN
You mentioned that you work with institutions, but do you see yourself as an institution too? How would you describe it?

VS
We see ourselves as a not-for-profit organization that is working to both support practitioners as well as derive new learnings from the contemporary art field. We also see ourselves as one among other institutions working in the field, so the idea is also to develop an interlinked institutional landscape.

TN
Right

VS
We do draw a lot of our energy and inspiration from artists whose methods of working are not necessarily institutionalized, but they have a certain kind of vision. So we can pick up on these cues and find ways of translating them into our work. This is the reason we have begun to showcase interactive projects at the India Art Fair every year for example. It allows us to engage with the 100,000-plus visitors that come to the fair, but also it helps us foreground the non-linear ways in which artists would mobilise thinking, action and bodily interactions through their projects. If you think about it, a lot of institutional structures in the Indian context have emerged from artists’ interventions. They have that knowledge and they have the expertise, and they have set up these institutions for some period of time. So even as we have this idea of the modern artist as an individuated figure, there are other lesser known histories of them setting up schools, and working as educators at some point, or working in the crafts sector etc. We take our cues from these kinds of initiatives and think of what kind of vision they have and what sustained institutional structures can we build around them.

TN
It’s kind of like a support network.

VS
Yes, we are definitely not thinking of an institution in isolation. All of us are working together especially in a city like Delhi given the range of institutions from universities to museums, galleries to NGOs and foreign cultural
organizations. That’s what’s nice, where you collaborate. I think we are also taking cognizance of the fact that work is happening and to acknowledge and build on our initiatives together.

**TN**

Something I’ve always found that was really interesting about FICA is that you work both locally and globally, right? You’ve worked with lots of places in Delhi, and across India, for instance, for the Students’ Biennale. There are dialogues with Pro Helvetia and other organizations to really have an exchange with Indian art and artists in a lot of different contexts.

**VS**

On one hand, we are very clear that we want to work deeply in our own location. And Delhi itself is such an interesting city. It’s the world’s second most populated city and we have a lot of migrants streaming into the city every day. So many young artists come here looking for work and an art market so we have a rather large canvas even as we keep our close focus on Delhi. We also have incredible resources from people and visiting artists that we can tap into.

The other reason we focus on work in Delhi is because we are looking to qualitatively develop these projects whether it is a workshop module or a project of building a network of invested individuals. We want to closely monitor each of these projects and so it makes sense to develop them in front of us.

Having said that, our grants are not Delhi-centric and we ensure that we are supporting artists from all over the country. Our Public Art Grant has gone to urban and rural centers across the country. And then like you said we have more national projects like the Students’ Biennale in Kochi, where we have worked with 55 schools across the country, many located in far flung places. That kind of scale is also an incredible learning experience.

**TN**

Definitely. Who do you think your audience is? You mentioned art students. Are there other people who come besides practitioners
We work with young artists, with educators, writers, curators, with children and also with practitioners in other disciplines like performance and music. Each program we develop is meant for a specific audience group, keeping in mind their needs. We don’t think of audience as homogenous. Given that our core space is the FICA Reading Room, which is an intimate space where we can do events and workshops for 40-50 people, we have many informal discussions where people share their works in progress.

Of course we also do select larger programs like seminars and lectures and there are plenty of partners that we can reach out to. Our annual Ila Dalmia Memorial Lecture, where we invite a senior scholar to share their research, is done in collaboration with India International Centre, which is a reputed cultural space in the city. At the Reading Room it is about discussions, where people can speak about projects in the making as opposed to something very final. Or even coming together and trying to ask questions together. It’s not like one person is only thinking. It’s kind of a group activity. We have developed a certain reputation for these kinds of discussions in the city.

The other thing that was nice was when we were working with the students from Kashmir was that it’s a space where everyone feels free to share their ideas even if they’re not experts. I think it’s really important to have a space where dialogue can happen, where you don’t have to feel like a professional.

Yes, it is that kind of collective ideating which isn’t necessarily led by an expert, but which allows for different points of view to emerge. At the moment it seems to be working, perhaps it is also the stage of our institution which is around 10 or 11 years old, and maybe we still retain that flexibility and haven’t become hardened into something more formal.

How many people are working at FICA now?
We’re a team of four. We also have a very active advisory board and our trustees, who support and ideate with us very actively. We also have educators who work with us on different projects, so they come in and out.

TN
Is the funding through a trust?
How does the funding work?

VS
The funding is basically through collaborations, through fundraisers and also private philanthropy through our Patrons Program.

TN
FICA occupies a unique space in the landscape of arts organizations, but who do you see as your peer groups within the work that you do in India? Is there anything similar in size or anything like that?

VS
We feel affinities to institutions around us even though our areas of interest might differ somewhat. We learn constantly from Khoj, which is an older visionary institution in our midst. We feel aligned to work Asia Art Archive does, to the vision of a new art school like School of Cultures and Creative Expression, Ambedkar University Delhi, to the strong commitment of a museum like Kiran Ndar Museum of Art that in a short period of time has produced outstanding exhibitions. We are of course always buffered by the support of Vadehra Art Gallery. We are also excited by the prospects of foundations that artists are setting up more recently. Two such institutions that we are associated with include Mrinalini Mukherjee Foundation and Sher Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation. And of course there is Kochi Biennale Foundation that has radically altered the art landscape when it comes to exhibition practices, audience engagement and educational potential of art.

There are so many more and this is just to name a few. India Foundation for Arts is another important organization that has really raised the bar for supporting art projects. And of course foreign cultural organizations like Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Arts Council and Goethe Institut–Max Mueller Bhavan who have really worked steadily to support the local scene. The future of all of these organizations are important to us. We are invested in them and are in continuous dialogue with them.
TN
Do you think with the kind of work you do, FICA could work, even if FICA didn’t have the space that it has in Defense Colony? Do you think you could still work in the same way?

VS
Space was something we gave a lot of thought to. When we started our intention was to mobilize available art spaces, whether galleries or museums and push them in the direction of education and outreach. To really help them think about access and inclusiveness. So instead of setting up a big residency space, we opted for a modest Reading Room and we wanted that to be the meeting ground, a space where people could read and ideate on an individual or collective basis, as per their needs.

I think there is some value of having the space for the public to feel comfortable to come to. The thing of building stakeholders and creating a sense of ownership happens when there is a physical space they can own and call their own.

TN
The reading room too, especially, it’s a gathering place where people can use the library.

VS
It’s also good that we have been open about how to shape this space. So for example in our first space where we were for eight years we shared the space with a bookstore and were in close proximity to the Vadehra Art Gallery. That had its own energy and momentum and it was interesting to see how much we impacted and changed the Gallery’s engagement with audiences as much as how the space shaped us. Given the Gallery’s engagement with us I think it was a very good exercise in trying to understand the role and mandates of the two institutions and also at the same time thinking of the synergies between them.

Last year we moved to Khirkee neighborhood, an urban village in south Delhi. We shared the space with a contemporary dance studio called Gati Dance Forum and that meant we have been engaging with practitioners from other disciplines like performance. So a lot of our discussions have been around Body and performance and collating interdisciplinary perspectives. Most recently we moved to the Lado Sarai neighborhood, which has other galleries and we will see how this pans out.
Last summer we also conducted an interesting experiment of working out of a soon-to-be demolished house in Pamposh Enclave. We set up a temporary library on the ground floor while inviting other artists to occupy the other rooms and work there. And for a period of three weeks we held discussions and found ways to activate the space. It was really interesting to see how many people came for these events.

All these experiences have enriched us. They have given us so many insights into how spaces get shaped and how they shape us. We like being open to these processes.

TN
I thought we could talk about where you think in the future what you would like to see for FICA and how you imagine it. Do you want to continue this kind of work, or is there something you would like to change?

VS
I think the work we do is very qualitative and suggesting directions that can be taken to integrate contemporary art with society around us. The projects we have undertaken are being closely monitored and we are keen to assimilate the outcome of these kinds of learning experiments. We have become more conscious of this process of collating and reflecting this process, whether by documenting our events closely and also working on publications. So we will definitely look to circulate publications, whether online or printed, that bring together our experiences.

The second would be to link up with other organizations internationally. So much can be shared and learnt from the work being done on the ground. I am currently sitting in Germany, on a curatorial residency at the Kunstsammlung Museum in Dusseldorf and ideating on the Expanded Education Programme for Students’ Beinnale 2018. Here at the Kunstsammlung library there is so much material on the enormous amount of work being done by institutions and artists in the field of pedagogy. Our initiative in mapping new directions for Indian art education in the 21st century would be greatly enriched by linking to all these wonderful initiatives. So that's just one example, but yes, while working locally and deeply in the Indian context it would be crucial to build solidarities across the world.

Finally, the third thing would be to link art practitioners to social action projects. There is a need to empower and educate creative practitioners to work freely and strongly in political and social movements today. And we want to nurture this potential and create a mutually enriched process. We
have different ways we’re structuring research. It’s nice to participate in these conversations as well.