

... of Friendship, Solidarity and Dissent

The brief for this essay is to write about my friendship and collaborative endeavors with the artist duo Merle Kröger and Philip Scheffner. The brief came earlier and I missed multiple deadlines agonising over the significance of the memoir - have we, together and independently, traversed enough to qualify for a chronicle. Meanwhile, as COVID 19 spread across the globe, the world turned inaccessible and got fragmented into the smallest of social units. All of a sudden, it began to feel urgent to look back at the earlier constellations of locations and inter-locational transactions, not as nostalgia but as a plinth to develop newer forms of solidarity and interfaces. Thus the fragility and uncertainty of the current time permeates the air around while I try to write about an earlier time of friendship and solidarity.

Solidarity: Postcolonial and International

Towards the end of the 20th century, when I first met the two fellow filmmakers from Berlin at a noisy new year day party in Mumbai, the concept of international solidarity through cultural exchange was still very strong. Nation was still considered as a pivotal context for ideology and ideological compatibility. The proposition of inter-locational or even trans-locational was somewhat accommodated within the idea of the international – thus nation still being the decisive entity. We are part of the generation that moved from one millennium to the other, from the era of internationalism to globalization, within our working years.

I was located in India, where political thinking was still being primarily framed within post-colonial discourses. Today's popular Indian brand of ultra-nationalism and right wing identity politics was still a few years distant. As political artists we believed in post-colonial nation making endeavours. Even the most radical thinking and practices were never too far from the belief in a nation that got consolidated primarily by the experience of being colonized in the recent past and constructivism was very popular in art practice and pedagogy. By now the dichotomy between nation building and resisting state power in the context of post-colonial countries has become much clearer but twenty years back this was not yet adequately articulated.

Merle and Philip were situated in Berlin - the city that was still reeling under the impact of the Berlin wall. In a way, they were part of a generation of artists that came of age around the squatters culture of the 80s and then the collapse of the wall living and working in the Kreuzberg of Berlin through the 1990s. Part of their political instinct was to bridge a path for intellectual and emotional exchanges with another urban culture. Though they had personal connections with India their query was definitely motivated by political choices, or putting it differently, by artistic curiosity. At this time many German artists were developing independent alliances, beyond state initiatives and party-based political affiliations, with groups and individuals in Istanbul, Cairo, Cape Town and so on. They were curious about the political potential of these sites but were also cautious to keep a distance from the official policy of the German state, and its economic and cultural liberalism. Yet, such people were rare and mostly, there were numerous European and American researchers, state sponsored artists and adventurous interns who used to frequent Majlis.

Majlis was a centre for art initiatives and rights discourse situated in the suburban Mumbai. I was one of the founding members of the organisation that was founded in the early '90s. It ran by intermittent funding support from international agencies operating under dubious portfolios such as gender emancipation or indigenous culture. This access to funding gave us certain autonomy from the state, that was increasingly turning autocratic and populist, and its majoritarian agenda. But the international funding agencies functioned more on the principle of benevolence than solidarity. It was essential for them to engage with selective issues that could be easily justified as the fundamental and urgent problems of a developing country reductionism associated with such an approach was considered as a sign of compassion. Constantly wading through these criterion set by some predominantly white and male members of some boards in Europe or America, and arguing for the cause of complex rights discourse and hybrid art practices created a strange ambivalence in our existence. The desire for financial and functional autonomy from the state made us vulnerable to the colonial perceptions and pattern of patronage. The choices were meagre and that created some kind of defensive aggression in us. So when Merle and Philip appeared I took them as one of those visitors to whom I need to prove our intellectual and artistic validity through aggressive post-colonial eloquence.

We met coming from two different ends - it was a personal journey that turned political for them – from a friendly encounter to an artistic collaboration, and it was a political journey that turned personal for me – from a post-colonial angst ridden agenda to developing friendship. One basic thing in common was that we liked to call ourselves political artists. My friends were part of various civil society initiatives of artists, feminists, environmentalists, rights activists etc. Majlis, a small centre at that time, was at the crossroads of actions around women's rights, documentary practices, urban cultures and anti religious fundamentalism in India. Philip and Merle dropped by to watch documentary films at Majlis library and a long journey of exchange, argument and learning began.

One of our regular arguments was connected to issues around migration and diaspora. German progressive politics at that time was very focused on issues of rights of "guest workers" and other migrants. The rhetoric of 'diversity' that is quite common these days in all official circulars in Germany, was not formulated then. So it was only the civil society campaigns that were clearly pointed towards citizenship rights for those who had been invited as so called "guest workers" and towards the protection from deportation for migrants who arrived later. The reason behind our disagreement was simply located in our biographies. Migrants came to countries like Germany from the cluster that was called 'Third World' at that time, even if some of them came from other areas of the same continent. Migrants in Germany were simply measured by the yardstick of economic migration; instances of political refuge were less common in the 1990s. But in those days diaspora in the Indian context meant only Indians living outside India and who were perceived as people from the higher echelons who left their own countries for a richer land, mainly moving to 'the West'. This section of people, popularly and slightly derogatively called NRI (non residential Indians), enjoyed special status in Indian society due to their improved economic capacity. Some of them had to struggle for citizenship benefits in their adopted countries and thus got marginally politicized. But a large part of that populace used their hard currency to support right wing revivalist politics in India, or

back home, as they call it. The more the currency exchange rate fluctuated in favour of \$, £, € the more powerful the Indian diaspora became in Indian politics. The golden memory of an era of pre-colonial, anti-modern 'original culture' pertaining to an imaginary homeland was manufactured by them as a remedy for the slurs and wounds received as people of colour in their adopted countries of colonialists. This diasporic 'original culture', then, became the touchstone of revivalist and majoritarian politics. While things were not so simple and linear I am making these sweeping generalisations only to provide a backdrop for our trans-locational interactions. Hence for Merle and Philip it was a matter of aligning with the rights of the vulnerable people, the migrants in Germany and for me it was a matter of resisting a design of neo-colonialism in the garb of post-colonial assertion, Indian diaspora in Western countries. We were learning new political vocabularies from each other.

In the year 2002 Pong, the new production platform that Merle and Philip founded the previous year, invited some members of Majlis to Berlin to take part in a project called Substitute City. This was meant to be a large and durational project focused on city-to-city exchanges. The project could never materialize fully but we met for an initial brainstorming event and for that a tour of Berlin was planned together with the activist group Kanak Attack. A video still exists that documents the tour through the snow clad Berlin. We were a van full of assorted people: the facilitators - German activists with migrant background (Kanak Attack), eager to show the niches and cracks in the cityscape; the hosts - German filmmakers (Pong), trying to facilitate and document certain moments of cultural and political interface, and the Indian guests (Majlis) simply trying to withstand the cold wind of February in Berlin. However, after a day long tour through hidden mosques in the basement, squatted buildings at Kottbusser Tor, Turkish supermarkets, socialist housing schemes for workers, the Tempelhof airport, b-Books, telephone booths for cheap international calls etc. we were finally on our way back to the warmth of the home. What was presented as examples of subculture appeared quite normative and regular to our Indian eyes.

More unusual was maybe the ending of this tour. While I cannot recall the exact context, I remember a member of Kanak Attack asking me, 'Are you a nationalist?' We were inside the van, passing through the colourful Oranienstrasse as the evening was setting in and I am sure I had no clue about the gravity of that question, but after a few seconds pause I replied - Yes. Interestingly, Merle and Philip, who edited the documentation video, decided to make this the final moment. It was provocative as well as an overstatement and they must have felt ill at ease with the seemingly political incorrectness of it, but they were respectful of the historical specificity behind such a statement. While this video was not a significant part of their oeuvre, it was vital for me to understand the way they think through, their alertness to keep the channels of discussion and exchange open. This way the end of a project turned to be the beginning of the next project - a pattern that can be traced, if studied carefully, in their creative journey through the years. I still remember this video partly because it ended with that statement - it became a kind of core of many further discussions and debates on ever-emerging configurations between nations, peoples, sovereignty and borders, and its impact on the construction of the self and the other.

Cityscape and Urbanity

Our friendship got marinated through numerous midnight drives through Berlin and Mumbai. Driving became a bonding activity between us, besides pub hopping and cinema. The nighttime cityscape was of course a common fascination for the filmmakers in us. We believed in the potential of edgy urbanity and where else to find this than in Berlin and Mumbai. The bars and clubs, the bylanes and the seaside, the hookers and beggars, the graffities and the traffic jams also provided a headiness that was required for this new alliance. Thinking about it now I suspect that we unconsciously or maybe consciously played a game on each other – as soon as the visiting friend assumed that the city had become accessible for them, the host would upset their comfort level by presenting yet another riddle, another difficult site. *Mirror mirror, on the wall, who was the most urban amongst us all?*

Merle and Philip introduced me to Kreuzberg – I was fascinated, like everyone else, by its audacious and robust alternative-ness. But I was also suspicious of its seemingly self conscious pose of anarchy. In the bars and basement clubs of Kreuzberg I was still looking for clear signs of political actions, an accessible grid of commitment. For me opting out was not a substantial political act nor could lifestyle be powerful as resistance. My sense of politics, for the reasons mentioned above, had a sense of urgency and usefulness. I found it difficult to relate to the attitude of Kreuzberg of refusing a manifesto, staying put, being in perpetual dissent instead of being proactive, walking instead of marching. Kreuzberg is a locality, it is not the city of Berlin and it certainly does not represent Germany. Yet, it was a manifesto by itself - not as an agent of change but in denial of change. It took me a long time to realize how deeply related that position was to the recent history of Western Europe through wars, industrialisation, migrations, exodus, cinema, literature, science and memorials. That it was not a replicable model nor was it an utopian imagination but it was simply a *char* (a word in Bangla broadly means silt island that surfaces after the sea water reduces, mainly around Bay of Bengal) ¹ - that is capable of harbouring a no-state community for a certain time.

I remember being frustrated at a Mayday rally in Berlin. I was taken aback by what I perceived as a juvenile festive mood of the rally. The police were over prepared, stationed at every bylane and forming some kind of sculptural installation as well as driving vehicular spectacles. Against this scenario the rallyists were joyful and playing a hide and seek game on the streets. Philip tried to explain the ritual where the police were performing a drill and the people were trying to puncture the relevance of such a drill by another rhythm, a different body language. Many years later when I watched Philip's film *The Day of the Sparrow* (2010) I remembered the politics of body rhythm that he was trying to explain. The film itself has nothing to do with Kreuzberg or urbanity. It is (very cursorily put) about German military contribution in the siege of Afghanistan. Philip used a metaphor of bird watching for political alertness – of being still, observant, and yet supple to see through the opacity of state agenda and military installations. My friends were extremely patient with my impatience about Kreuzberg, they allowed and facilitated enough space for me to negotiate a different idea of relevance in the context of Kreuzberg.

¹ I would like to acknowledge filmmaker Sourav Sarangi's articulation on what *Char* is in his acclaimed documentary *Char... the No-man's Island*.

Merle and Philip were, in turn, in awe of the energy and smart wit that was in abundance in the mega metropolis of Mumbai. Mumbai was post modern in the sense of an acute urbanity which had a post-nation, off-state, quasi-autonomous quality to it. It was agile, footloose, cunning, and ruthless. That city sustained through the mantra of survival strategies. Nothing was still in that city, not even memory. The cityscape changed by the night, its demography was altered by the season, its desire escalated in abstraction and living at the edge was the standard norm. Merle and Philip looked for signs of subculture while hanging out with me and other friends in Mumbai. But Mumbai did not have a subculture in the sense that existed in Berlin. A kind of anonymity prevailed in that city – primarily because of its size, population density and innumerable class divisions. But almost everything and everyone was geared towards change, mobility. Here I would like to quote a protagonist from my film *7 Islands and a Metro* (2006). She was a stunt artist in Bombay cinema, who acted as a body double for female stars in action scenes and occasionally played some minor characters. She said, 'We get 2000 rupees (Indian currency) for hiding our faces and 1000 rupees for showing our faces'. This means that when she performed as a faceless body then she got paid double of what she would get for a role that could be called original. This stands for invisibility as a survival strategy or even as an opportunity. Transient practices of impersonation, invisibility, improvisation etc. worked as impetus for the city and hence it did not preserve any memory, nor did it have a subculture to protect. Hence all the sites and practices that could be considered as subcultural were actually struggling to become non-subculture. And this was true of the lifestyle of individuals as well as of artistic and political agendas.

There cannot be a locality like Kreuzberg in Mumbai - no one there wishes to keep living in the same place but dreams of moving closer to a hypothetical centre – from artisanal practice to popular culture, from vernacular language to lingua franca, from ghetto to gated community, from an impersonator to a star... Philip and Merle told me on their first visit that they were very happy to find a site of subculture in Majlis. I was almost offended. I did not think it was complimentary to be called subcultural. I felt it was being relegated to being minor, feeble, being non-effective as an agent of change. We were clearly coming from two different ends of the spectrum of urbanity Berlin, the European capital city that still finds centuries old urban relics and World war II bombs in its cellars and labyrinths, and Mumbai, the city that was founded by filling up lands between islands for the purpose of colonial trade only 300 years back. The former is a city of hidden archives and the latter washes away its own footprints.

We discussed these issues so intensely and for so long that we never really produced any substantial work on the city of the other in the period of 2000-2005 when we traveled a lot to and fro. Though Philip made an audio album and later a video titled *A/C* (2003) on the acoustic of Bombay and I photographed the u-bahn stations of Berlin extensively. Only Merle worked out a more legible marker of this period in her literary works that were produced a few years later. The city of Bombay keeps coming back in different avatars in her novels².

² The city has many nomenclatures - owing their allegiance to various governing forces and living cultures. Most commonly used is Bombay, after one of the seven islands that the city is made of - it was formalised by British colonial state and later followed by the independent state. The other one is Mumbai - declared as official name by the parochial state Govt. of the time in 1995 as an assertion of

Popular / Public / Political Art

Despite deep ideological compatibility our preferred choice of form has been very distinct from each other. Even the practices of Merle and Philip are diverse in this regard. Though they had earlier made films and curated shows together, since the last few years Merle has been working more on literature and radio, and Philip on cinema – often on the same or similar themes. But what I am trying to touch upon here is not of disciplinary choice but more about artistic strategies. Artistic strategies are like architectural forms - it marks the entry and exit points into the building, and also invokes and heightens emotional responses, which are often multiple and conflicting, of the visitors / residents to the atmosphere they are envired by. Artistic strategies can also deliberate the degree of tension between engagement and critical distance for the producer of the work, for its protagonists as well as for its readers / viewers. It is not only about the design and the material texture but also about laying the plinth - the crucial decision to choose one of the many conventions of making the foundation on which the structure can be built.

Philip has always been very focused on his interest in the avant garde. His artistic span from punk music to experimental sound projects to non-narrative cinema gave this commitment a complex formal base. Merle has been more interested in narrative formats. Her engagement with the feminist movement had provided a specific depth and expanse to her take on narrativising. But her writing also got enriched by the particular story telling style that prevailed in popular culture on the Indian subcontinent, Bollywood being the primary example of that and Indian writings in English being on the other end of the spectrum. Some of her novels can easily be placed within the repertoire of Indian writings in English, though she is a German writer by all measures. And that is not only in terms of choice of characters and locations – Indian writings in English are not necessarily bound to any specific temporality nor does Merle write only about people from Indian subcontinent – but related to a narrative format and linguistic style that are commonly associated with post-coloniality. My observation, though, is based only on those of her writings that are translated into English. Her script writing works with Indian filmmaker Onir and long term research project on the Indian diva of German news world, Navina Sundaram, too are examples in support of this argument.

I, on the other hand, had been growing uncomfortable with what were then perceived as both political art and popular culture within my context. Political art, then, stood for high-strung documentary realism that revolved around big history and its polemics. The feminist movement was providing sustenance to this discomfort against big History and an entire generation of women filmmakers and visual artists was emerging with new forms and languages to deal with little histories. But at the same time Indian popular culture, namely Bollywood, with its newly found market in the western world along with yoga and vegetarianism, was pushing artists like us to the fringe. Only Hindi cinema (made in Bombay) and writings in English were considered significant post-colonial practices emerging from the vast land of the Indian

local Marathi culture over the multi-lingual cosmopolitanism. I use both names intermittently depending on the context.

subcontinent. All other languages, art practices, cinemas were relegated as regional / vernacular and hence peripheral. This is the old story of a periphery turning into a centre by creating further layers of peripheries. I, along with many others of my generation, felt that this new hegemony needed to be countered by constructing a different kind of public visibility for the other practices. Some of us found the concept of public culture as a viable option. We conceived, created, produced and mobilized various editions of art festivals as a political assertion of public culture through the first decade of the millennium, most significant among them were a series of art events curated for World Social Forum. This attraction to art in public places made me inclined towards scale and spectacle that Merle and Philip felt uncomfortable with, and that was understandable given the history of public spectacle of fascism in Germany.

On the other hand, censorship was an issue that was difficult for me to explain to someone in Berlin. India was not a declared military or religious state and hence the censorship was not as tangible as, say, in Iran. But it was imposed in various insidious ways by exerting control over public exhibitions. The control was partly motivated by political consideration and conservative social morality, and partly in favour of commercial cinema. And in the absence of any proper archive or museum to preserve non-commercial art / film many works got extinct simply because of the lack of public visibility. I remember once talking with a young visual artist in Berlin (it was a chance encounter in a pub where his installation was displayed) and the topic of censorship came up. After trying to fathom the issue he remarked – I cannot imagine working under a condition where I don't have the rights to show my work. I was a bit bemused. I wondered why he was showing his work in a pub that was frequented by very few people and not at the nearest city square – since he had all the rights to show his work. Well, the issue of outreach and reaching out is a complex one and not devoid of local specificities.

These differences concerning our formal approach became most evident in the collaborative project titled Import Export (2005)³. It was a larger project with various components of research art on cultural transfer between India and German speaking Europe (Germany and Austria) and a few documentary films were commissioned for that. Philip and I co-directed the film From Here to Here (2005). We were vaguely aware of what today I am describing as ideological compatibility but formal distinction between us - and decided to call it a video scribble instead of a film. Philip shot it in Berlin and Hamburg and I shot in Mumbai and Bangalore. We had full autonomy in the choice of the protagonists, shooting style and editing process – only at the final stage we sliced them together. In that film Philip's choice of protagonists were an AIDS activist in Berlin who was half Indian and half Jewish, and an India-born former television journalist in Hamburg. He shot with them in iconic and contested locations such as at Hamburg cargo port, in front of the deportation centre, near the installation of Der Verlassene Raum - the monument to Nelly Sach in Koppenplatz etc. and discussed dense and intricate questions of legalities and sociality of

³ Import Export: Cultural Transfer Between India and Germany, Austria was a trans-disciplinary project by Werkleitz Gesellschaft e.V. (Halle / Salle), House of World Culture (Berlin), Majlis (Bombay) and DeEgo (Vienna). The project was structured around three thematics: Moving People, Moving Concepts and Moving Goods. It was funded by EU - India Economic Cross Cultural Programme, a body that was founded in 1995 to 'increase the visibility of Europe in India and that of India in Europe...'

citizenship with them. For my turn, I chose a ladies club of elderly German expatriots who came to India soon after the second world war by marrying Indian men and stayed back since then. I shot with them at a party, in a vegetable market, in a ride through the city and so on discussing old age melancholy, weather comparison, food compatibility, language disparity, travel logistics, family album etc. No need to mention that it was a nightmare to compile the two tracks together into a coherent *From Here to Here*.

For the same project Merle co-directed another documentary with Dorothee Wenner titled *Star Biz* (2005). That film was about the conjugation of the German car industry and the Indian film industry. In Bollywood films the Mercedes car, ferrying the film stars and mafia dons, stands for the highest form of luxury and consumerist desire. In the copy-happy culture of India the logo of the Mercedes car is replicated and hoisted on lowly vehicles and thus giving it almost the status of a revered deity. Merle's instinctive interest in popular culture made her script a quasi-documentary narrative around the phenomenon. As I have already mentioned my relationship with popular culture was tense and so I was unhappy with some of the choices that the film made. So earnest we were in our respective position that we not only argued bitterly but carried the burn of it for a few years.

But these distinct formal approaches were more generic and clearly not written in stone. Philip has co-directed *And-Ek Ghes* (2015) with his collaborator Colorado Velcu, head of an extended Roma clan. That film, made in the spirit of collaboration and equality between a professional filmmaker and his protagonist, revolves around a specific time when Velcu family move from Fata Lunci, Romania to Berlin. It unabashedly resonates the love and romance, the colours and affective sound tracks of the Bollywood genre. The co-director Colorado Velcu had determined the choice of the form, and his affinity with Indian popular culture as well as his choice to align with a decisively non-western form was the guiding factor. I too had my brush with popular culture, especially through my curatorial interest in local histories that occasionally took me in close proximity to popular culture. Besides, in my films I sometimes pastiched popular culture to pave the way for an argument towards hybridity in contemporary urban culture.

Yet our collaborative ideas materialised differently at different times, often outliving and transforming the scope of the original project. In *From Here to Here*, there was a brief segment where we first got to know about Mall Singh, the Indian POW in Germany during WWI - through an old shellac record in an obscure archive. Four years later this small segment evolved into a full length political ghost story - *The Halfmoon Files* (2007), where Philip Scheffner traversed through the intervening 90 years. In 2002 Merle and Philip curated *Lunch in the Ashes* - a show with four artists (Maria Thereza Alvez, Jayce Salloum, Shelly Silver and me) for Werkleitz Biennale. I developed a short video on post-industrial cityscape in Mumbai for that show. Five years later that short video grew into a non-fiction feature on overlapping cities and bodies in a megametropolis - *7 Islands and a Metro* (2007).

Not to be concluded, not yet...

It has been an intense few years of close encounters and that too almost two decades ago. We have not worked together since 2005. Our interests and personal

priorities had taken different trajectories but the years spent together have stayed with us in unexpected ways. Looking back at it I found that 2005-10 was an interesting period in this context. Merle published *Cut!* (2005), her first novel – on the journey of a German couple in search of the biographical father of her – an Indian. The biographical investigation turned into a historical thriller in the context of World War II. *Cut!*'s narrative is anchored in the practices and technologies of moving images across the continents, specifically in the history of evolution of Indian cinema. Around the same time Philip made his acclaimed documentary *The Halfmoon Files* (2007) – spun from the first phonographic recording commenced by German scientists at the prisoners' camps in 1916 – the film is about the ghost-isation of history of the 20th century and its illegible archives stored in German cinema. (footnote: see Nida Ghouse's text in this volume) In 2008 I embarked into a large scale research art project titled *Project Cinema City*. Later I authored a non-fiction book titled *dates.sites: Project Cinema City Bombay / Mumbai* (2012). The book is a fragmented and jagged timeline - multilayered text-fragments comprising policies, events, dissents, movements, memoirs, rumours, beliefs and fictions were grafted around dates, weaving the history of Indian cinema and popular culture into minor and major historical-political events.

If we lay these three works on top of each other we would find an intricate map of war, cinema, technology and moving people between Western Europe and the Indian subcontinent through the 20th century. The works are of different registers and textures but there is a methodological connect – of using the technology of image and sound production, and their production and consumption patterns as a needle to weave political histories. I must acknowledge here, that the idea of tracing the emergence of urbanity and the urban public in Bombay through the traffic of people and goods pertaining to the two world wars and related evolution of image technology got consolidated partly during the time I spent in Berlin preceding the making of the *dates.sites* book. However, I am clubbing these seemingly disparate works together not to create a harmonious story of generational thoughts but to bring home the point that cinema, for us, has not only been a disciplinary choice but a potential discursive tool. Even when we were not making films we were thinking through cinema - the many contradictory ways that it had come to define the last 100 years.

Philip and Merle have since developed a special way of working together and independently. They choose a found news item, research it thoroughly and then Philip makes a documentary based on the research and Merle writes a fiction off the research. This is a unique process of collaborating by sharing detailed research material and developing two different narrative registers from that. It further expands the elasticity of the theme beyond the boundaries that are integral to each discipline and genre. Looking at their works in the last few years it seems they are now more focussed on the territorial-ism of contemporary Europe. *Havarie* (film by Philip Scheffner, 2016 / novel by Merle Kröger, 2015 and English translation as *Collision*, 2017) can be considered as a prime example of this. The geographical locations and the time frames have got concentrated while the narratives unfold more on the principle of delicate excavation - with the hands of an archeologist and eyes of a detective.

Following multiple twists and turns in life I currently live in Germany on a work

assignment at a German state institution. As part of the job I need to come up with strategies to connect local art practices with those of other locations and cultural thinking. While navigating the local culturescapes and trying to build public art projects the lessons and skills learnt years back in Kreuzberg often come handy. Our institution is in Köln and Köln is not Berlin. Its history, its memory, its sense of legacy and forms of public life are very different from that of Berlin. Aggressive industrialization and violent de-industrialization play a crucial role in the demography, cityscape and public culture of Köln and the surrounding state of North Rhine and Westphalia. But what helps me navigate this context in my current job is the understanding that I gained from my previous stints in Germany / Berlin, that the cultural signage in this continent lie vertically, like minerals, and not horizontally across the vast expanse of the land, like harvest, as is in my country. This has been a valuable lesson for me and I remember a wisecrack that I coined many years ago in Berlin : 'We don't have an underground culture because our architecture has no concept of a basement'.

Postscript

If this text was to be considered as a memoir then it could end with the previous sentence. But we live in 2020 and this is not just another year, but a year that needs to be marked, however tentative that might be. Following the COVID-19 related chaos in the world order the issues that have come to stare at us are precarity, the crisis of globalization, neo-territorialism, medical morality and state surveillance, pro-normative and pro-hegemonic social backlash etc. The instances of alliance across continents, that is being discussed here, are very connected with all these issues. We chose to live by freelancing from project to project and believed that this was part of non-conformity and adventurous. We believed, to an extent, that by not being hired by the structure of the state we were countering the system. Little did we suspect that we were actually nurturing an economy of precarity that would soon become the norm instead of dissent. At this time when capitalism is inducing a regime of austerity and downsizing its institutions to reduce its liabilities in the name of social distancing, footloose cultural workers like us fit their eligibility list to the T.

We also created early instances of cultural globalization and made modest propositions for the biennale culture with our exchange projects, that then mushroomed in the following years. Travel was an integral part of our way of functioning, another geography was essential to counter the bio-ethnic politics of our own locations. Despite the horrendous visa regimes it was still possible to cross state borders, as political territorialism was ideologically simpler to defy. But the new border system that is likely to evolve under the morality of medical safety will be far more opaque. These new borders will have extra sentinel under medical surveillance, environmental vigil, social accountability, racial suspicion and so on. We could oppose the notion of national security but countering the divisive notion of bio-medical safety and its impact on civil society will be something completely different. Much of our beliefs, skills and memories are under threat of being irrelevant. Algorithm based global culture may create many more *chars* (slit islands as Kreuzberg was before its gentrification process) across the planet or may completely flatten the pluri-verse. The history of communication technology has definitely taken sharp twists and turns, in both directions of the hegemony and the subversion, since the beginning of the new millennium and will continue to do so.

Jugad is an Indian term that has caught the fancy of cultural studies in the last decades. It is a street lingo, literally meaning 'make do', implying the resilience of the subalterns. It first came to use for various subversive and imaginative processes that people develop for survival – for example, digging a trench under the wide pipes for water supply to make a shanty-home away from the eyes of the police or using a hand cart as a camera trolley for filmmaking. *Jugad* is often romanticised as an example of creativity of the 'have-nots'. I always had a problem with this valorising, and thus validating, of the desperation of people, who are made to live without any welfare, insurance, infrastructure or facility, as creativity and resilience. But for numerous western filmmakers, artists, journalists and scholars the *jugad* of the South has been the new-ethnography. With the cruel twist in the timeline it seems that now the whole world is moving towards a life through *jugad*.

I would like to end with an instance that intermingles solidarity and *jugad*, though it is not directly related to the purview of this essay. Pong produced *Purple Sea* (2020), directed by Amel Alzakout. It is a montage film of fragmented sound and images from underwater and the surface of the Mediterranean Sea, as was filmed by a camera worn by the filmmaker while she was struggling to survive a boat wreck. The overloaded boat carrying Syrian refugees from the Turkish coast to the Greek Island Lesbos overturned, turning the short trip of hope and aspiration into a desperate act to survive and an excruciating wait for being rescued. Corresponding to the splintered realities between legality / validity and illegality / invalidity that repeatedly get played in the Mediterranean sea the tiny camera on her body caught glimpses of life and fear a jeans clad leg, a butterfly brooch on a blouse, a cigarette packet, bright orange colour of a life jacket, water bubbles, rustling sound of bodies trying to keep floating and resisting the chill, shrill sound of emergency whistles and a lot of silence. The fragmented material of the tiny camera is stitched through an autonomous narration of fragmented memories of life away from the water by the artist / protagonist. It is edited by Philip Scheffner into a paradigm shifting discourse. The solidarity act in *Purple Sea* has been to challenge the technology-rich superstructure that chronicles and circulates the refugee narratives, by providing an incubator - rich with collaborative skills and labour, where the citizen reporter, the narrator, the protagonist and the artist can merge into one, and create a new convention of biographing the self. Maybe *Jugad*, with its easy access to diverse materiality and an inherent skill for insidious permeation, will be able to permeate the current regime of representation as well as resist the austerity drive of the post-pandemic capitalism of the 21st century and develop a new map of solidarity.

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