

Addressing Art, Teaching and Process

What does it mean to 'see'?

What does it mean to 'learn'?

What does it mean to 'be'?

Art is a question. We are constantly trying to find different ways of taking on the challenge of answering this question. It is woven as multiple layers. Each layer reveals an unknown answer and a question. The process of questioning, defining, re-defining and engaging with the state of ambiguity is a discourse that artists, students of art, critics/historians and viewers of art are constantly negotiating. Art as a process and practicing discipline is dynamic. If one has to look at the question of art teaching, learning and practice one has to consider this inherent dynamic nature of the subject.

Art as an early intervention was a space for great freedom and expression for me. I had the opportunity to explore and discover the pleasures of art making starting from an early age. My school art teacher Tarit Bhattacharya from The School, KFI in many ways was my early source of inspiration for my art practice and approaches to art teaching later on. Tarit Anna as we called him studied print making from Shantiniketan and later came to Chennai to work in The School.

The space that he created for the students was exciting and nurturing. He introduced us to exploring a range of tactile mediums. We worked with clay, hay, cow dung, grass, cloth, wood, paper, charcoal, paint etc. He would allow us to paint on walls or create large paintings on newspapers. He would tell us stories he created on the spot with the sculptures he was making. We had no restrictions within the art room, it was a space to be free and at the same time feel responsible. Even though we were supposed to be trained 'academically' to draw still lifes, portraits and nature studies he let us develop our own approaches and styles of interpreting from life. He would say, 'every child is an artist'.

From there on I went to study painting in the Government College of Fine Arts, Chennai in 2001. I was very passionate about studying art and also in an institution that historically was important. The numerous trees and the heritage buildings instantly made me decide that this was the place for me to study. I imagined a place that was seriously engaged in different processes of art. I assumed that artists were deeply 'philosophical' individuals, consciously engaging with their work. But what I was to experience was radically different.

The Chennai Government College of Fine Arts, earlier called the Government College of Arts and Craft and before that called the School of Arts was, as most of you all might know the oldest college for the visual and plastic arts. It was established in 1850 by Alexander Hunter as a private school and later taken over by the Government. It had a significant history of art pedagogy and practice. By the time I had joined it had clearly deteriorated and was deep sinking into a black hole.

A structure or a syllabus was almost nonexistent. We drew and painted still lifes, portraits, and landscapes with pencil, watercolours, acrylic and oil paints for each of the four years. An

occasional exam called 'Creative Composition' was held. Help from peers and senior students were the only functional relationship that existed. We often heard stories about artists who taught in the college. By just being in the campus we got a glimpse of the history but were rarely told the importance of that place.

For the master's program more number of applications came in than for the under graduation. The challenge with the MFA was only to secure a seat and the degree was given automatically. What had significantly changed over the years was that practicing artist engaging with teaching was lost within the institution. There were important artists who held the post of the principle of the college. They during their tenure made valuable contributions and were deeply influential on young people who came to study art. Even though this process did not create a major wave but it was consequential to the college. Teachers and heads of institutions like Roy Chowudary, K.C.S Paniker, S.Dhanapal,

L. Munuswamy, A.P Shanthanaraj, etc had their own roles to play within the structure and building of it.

Only a few choose art as a practice and a way of life. For these young people going to the Regional Lalit Kala Akademi studios, the only incubatory space was an active choice. After I finished my MFA and I went to work in the studio as a practicing artist for one year. I was in a process of looking out for part time teaching job to support my practice. My first teaching experience was teaching Visual Literacy at the Visual Communication Department, Loyola College Chennai. After a year I got the opportunity of teaching art in a school that was very young with a broad vision.

I am teaching the Cambridge International Education Art and Design program. The syllabus in many ways is challenging. It is generic allowing for differences and unique qualities to be addressed. From subject, medium, approaches and histories it allows both students and teachers to explore art and design from their personal experience. Interpreting the syllabus in multiple ways was a revelation for me. The art teaching developed as a practice that complemented my visual engagement.

I have been working with young adults between the ages of fourteen to seventeen. Most of them want to pursue art or design for their future. A range of subjects and mediums have been explored painting, drawing, sculpture, print making, graphic design, photography, textile design, etc.

Each student chooses one or more personalized topics to work on for a period of two years. The study area is divided into various Components. Approaching each component involves an intense process of study and introspection. The student starts by researching on the chosen area of study. Research includes looking at other artists/designer's work, art movements and critical art writing. A body of primary sources is built by visiting museums, art galleries, different places of relevance and interest.

With the primary and secondary source that is collected the student is initiated into a process of exploration and introspection to identify an artistic expression. This process is stimulated by attempting to answer a series of questions. These questions are ones that stimulate knowledge and deeper self-observation. The submission is one final piece and a body of support work that illustrates the student's process and progress. The structure of assessment is also generic in nature. The rubric is one that allows for assessment as a holistic way of seeing any work of art. The teacher who has been facilitating the program plays a major role in the assessment process of the individual candidate's work. This is the syllabus that I have been working with for the past few years. It is one that is very open and interesting. The private school that I teach in values art immensely and they see it as an alternate to the future of education as we know it today.

What does it mean to teach art?

What is the role of the Teacher?

How does the process of 'imparting', sharing, growing and learning happen?

To be able to look, to be sensitive and to stimulate intuition. To be able to ask the right questions and attempt answering these question. To be alive to ambiguity and being open to new ideas. To constantly engage with questioning, defining and re-defining with the spirit of enquiry. Challenging dogma, deterioration and decay.

Spaces and people holding these spaces play a crucial role in building communities engaging with an artistic exploration. The hope for newer, open and interesting spaces is an essential requirement. But what about existing spaces? How do we keep it engaging, innovative and inclusive? Institutions, schools, Akademis, shared studio and exhibition spaces. What is our responsibility in holding these spaces and building frameworks that address vulnerability and the fragile nature of relationships?

We have to acknowledge the fact that artistic spaces have to constantly challenge its dogmatic practices. In Chennai the state supported artistic spaces have declined beyond immediate recovery. Engaging newer private spaces might keep coming up. Their intentions could be layered. Who benefits from these spaces and whether they are inclusive are dangers of private, protected spaces. In this context what is the responsibility of a more inclusive State initiated space. Currently the State is completely neglecting its responsibility of providing adequate facilities for visual art practices. The state has played a key role in closing down bodies like the Tamil Nadu Ovia Nunkalai Khuzhu. A State Government body under the Ministry of Culture supporting fine arts. The essential question at this point is whether the State sees the importance of art teaching, art practice, artistic and creative spaces? Or is sensitivity to art only possible from private initiatives?

In addressing art, teaching and process I would like share my views on few of the many challenges that plague Chennai's relationship with art. My understanding and views have evolved through conversations, discussions with friends, artists and teachers.

Art education from an early stage?

Art within education should play a crucial role. We have to become more sensitive to understanding that creative expression is very important for any individual. An experience of working with different tactile mediums that constantly stimulate the senses should be introduced to children. The process of growing up addressing each milestone has to be adequately supported by the way art is introduced and allowed to be explored. It has to be a physical space for fun and learning. And for those who want to pursue art, exposure and support should be given at an early stage. Art and expression has to be woven as an integral part of our social fabric. Introducing art to children can foster a gradual change towards recognizing the social value and appreciation of art.

Politicized State run space

The Govt. college of Fine Arts has a range of students coming to study in it from different rural, urban, economic, and social backgrounds. Students are constantly trying to negotiate with the limited resources they have access to. The college is politicized in ways that has only brought it down. Terminally hacking a healthy artistic discourse and seriously damaging its everyday functioning. For example years back the College's hostel facility was shut down without adequately discussing its pros and cons or finding alternatives. The students were considerably impacted from such a move.

Artists as teachers/teachers as artists

The Chennai Govt. College of Fine Arts has had a number of artists who have been teachers. This lineage of artists who studied in the college coming back to teach also engaging with their own art has abruptly stopped. The reasons for this could be multilayered. Teachers are appointed to the college through the Government employment office. The employment office mandate in choosing a 'good' candidate might not be accurate. Institutions should become shared spaces accommodating practicing artist. Integrated studio spaces for young and senior artist allowing for apprenticeships. These can become important places of sharing and learning. Alternate methods or decentralized approaches need to be identified. Dissolved hierarchies and newer perspectives should be embraced.

Syllabus/ methodology

The syllabus and study resources have to be revised. The College has to define its core values again. It needs to clearly state its function and role in supporting artistic practices. The college as a body has to realize its capacity and its relevance in a larger social context. Once this location has been identified it needs to elaborately construct a methodology that supports training of skills associated with visual and plastic art. And more importantly stimulating the philosophical introspection on the practice and relevance of art.

Infrastructures

The campus of the college of Arts is saturated with history. The college has to shed its colonial past and build its own contemporary meaning and significance. The infrastructural resources have to adapt to current needs and processes. The division of various Departments has not been reviewed in the longest time. For example the Visual Communication Department has not

updated its resource material or practically has no infrastructure to tackle the demands of new media studies. The same can be said for all the Departments. Newer departments or branches that investigate the multidisciplinary aspects of art have to be established.

Studio, exhibition and sharing spaces

The culture of studios, alternative or open exhibition spaces is extremely limited. The college has recently built an 'exhibition' space which has no meaning within the structure. It needs to evolve as a more organic space that the community sees important. It should also acknowledge contemporary practices and be a space that allows for artist to embrace and manipulate. Certain flexibility should be allowed. This is also a factor that the Chennai Lalit kala Akademi gallery space should address. The Central Government controlled body and space rarely understands or allows for the gallery space to be used in newer experimental ways. The community studios lack in terms of responsibility from both the governing bodies and the artists.

Community building

Art and its ways are largely disconnected from everyday life. How do we reflect on the fact that art contributes to community building? Is it possible for us to rethink and re-define the way we relate to art? How do we find newer ways of interacting with multiple disciplinary contemporary art? Can more public places accommodate art in experimental ways? How can practice, exhibition and sharing of art be more inclusive? Can public discussions on art happen?

Some of these questions can only be addressed if firstly artists want to engage in discussions. Being a practicing artist I have often heard most artists blaming audiences for not responding to their art. But is that always the case? Being in a time where alternate ideas and experiments are possible, what then is the responsibility of the artist? Can we as a community acknowledge essential questions?

The relevance and need for art has to stem from society. Individuals and private bodies have contributed significantly to the challenge. There might be more private interventions in the future.

What roles will the State chose to play in this context?

How will it reinvent itself?

Being sensitive to the varied differences that exist in our social structure, what provisions will it make?

In the past institutions have played a key role in building art practices but today they have to be reinterpreted. The real problem arises when living institutions become institutionalized bodies. These decayed spaces like the Chennai College of Fine Arts follow systems without addressing its meaning or being sensitive to core values. The teachers and students together accept mundane practices and suffer from lack of exposure. Such spaces become isolated, brewing myths, ideas and pseudo philosophies on art. If not treated as an immediate crisis the loss can be disheartening. Art's role is not limited to aesthesis it can also be a silent tool opposing authority. For this and many other reasons we cannot let State run institutions sink. For a fact a number of students from varied social backgrounds, still come hopefully to study art and build an existence. And I am increasingly seeing more young people wanting to pursue art. Most often their local choices are limited. Studying elsewhere is a painful choice in terms of being able to afford it and not everyone can make that choice.

We as artists, teachers, students, historians, curators and responsible governing bodies have to be inspired. We have to build mutual relationships. The State has to identify ways of supporting and channelizing resources accordingly. It has to adequately intervene and incubate art processes. The State should not only follow a mandate but see a vision. Various institutions from around the country have to become open to networking and building working relationships. Integrated shared spaces that acknowledge experiences, differences, histories, politics and artistic interpretations can be initiated. All this can happen if all of us and most importantly the State sees as essential to enriching quality of life.