

DIANA CAMPBELL BETANCOURT

Seismic Moments



There is no better place to sense the Earth than from a place of elevation. We are able to stand straight and walk on land without grasping onto anything. Even if we fall at any instant, we will not fall any greater distance than our own height, so we do not need to grab onto anything in particular to sustain our body.

Kishio Suga, *Existence Beyond Condition* (1970)

It is surreal to think about 14th February 2020, a day when 111,000 people entered the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy to be a part of *Seismic Movements: Dhaka Art Summit 2020*. Neither my colleagues nor I had ever experienced crowds like this in an art exhibition before, and my day was spent working with art mediators, volunteers and security staff to ensure the safety of the artworks in the face of throngs of enthusiastic visitors, most of them youths celebrating the first day of spring at the Dhaka Art Summit. We knew that this day marked a ‘seismic shift’ in how we could realise exhibitions in Dhaka—the local embrace of our platform meant that we would have to reconsider how to curate exhibitions that could have the capacity to host so many visitors. The total audience number of DAS 2020 was over 477,000 people, overwhelmingly young and Bangladeshi, enjoying the artistic and intellectual contributions of our five hundred plus team of collaborators.¹

Swept away with the joy of success we had no inkling that a virus associated with China at that time would soon envelope the world after DAS closed in mid- February 2020. As a result, many artworks were stranded in Bangladesh, and the challenges of moving them, people and funds kept us from being able to say that DAS 2020 was over. While we had to re-route several flights during installation, there was only one artist who could not make it to Dhaka due to COVID-19. Many of our visitors from Hong Kong, Taiwan and China were unable to attend as Bangladesh denied visas to passport holders from these countries just before the exhibition opened. We had no idea that I would be unable to travel to Bangladesh and that my Bangladeshi colleagues would be unable to leave the country, as we had no idea that being in a room with large numbers of people as we had just done would become something unfathomable to consider in a world with a ‘new normal’ of social distancing.

Referencing Kishio Suga’s 1970 text ‘Existence Beyond Condition’, this text explores DAS from the elevated place of the seventh to the fifteenth of February 2020, where years of preparation and work since the platform was founded in 2012 by the collector-couple Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani reached a metaphorical peak, with *Seismic Movements*. It will delve into the many strata of the platform and what makes it unique from other platforms that produce exhibitions that occur every two years.

Seismic Movements was a response to what I considered to be the gaps and voids of the Dhaka Art Summits between 2014 and 2018, and how I had situated those editions in relation to other large scale recurring events since relocating to South Asia from New York in 2010 (eg. The Asia Pacific Triennial, documenta, Venice Biennales, Munster Sculpture Project, Kiev Biennale, Sharjah and Istanbul Biennials, Kochi Biennale, Global Art Forum in Dubai, Manila and Thailand Biennales, amongst others). I perceived these “gaps and voids” as portals for potential—ways to differentiate what DAS does relative to other events, to be increasingly locally and internationally relevant, and to maximise the impact of bringing together so many people from diverse backgrounds—for three days in 2012 and 2014, four days in 2016, expanding to nine days by the 2018 and 2020 editions. The short duration of DAS was a solution to managing the expenses of running such an event, and also one that inspired people to come together in a concentrated and intense way.

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The title *Seismic Movements* emerged from my questioning, what is a summit? Between the 2014 and 2020 editions I registered the existence of many other art summits. Other than the India Art Summit, I was not aware of another that included the physical exhibition of artworks. In contemplating the word, I thought about the top of a mountain, and subsequently how Bangladesh has no mountains. I thought about how mountains are formed, and how the borders we see as so strict were geologically forged. Prior to conceiving the title and meta-theme for DAS 2020 I happened upon Dr. Zahia Rahmani's research project 'The Seismography of Struggles' and Adrian Villar Rojas' work with fossils from Morocco, in his 2017 exhibition *The Theater of Disappearance*, at the Kunsthhaus Bregenz, in Austria—the idea of humans creating seismic change and geological tectonic shifts, clicked in my head, and so this meta-theme was born.²

I don't conceive a theme first and then scour the world for artworks to illustrate it, that is far too literal; the emergence of a theme came from thinking about artworks with their makers. The previous paragraph speaks to my process—as a curator I begin without a theme in mind, and I consider artists and intellectuals in open ended ways before engaging that theme—reacting to ideas and situations that we all experience dynamically in time—DAS 2020 very much reflected the struggles and debates pulsing through our consciousness, and the protest movements that people contributed their bodily presence to, from 2018 to 2020. DAS arguably hinted, once the exhibition ended, at the seismic shifts to come with the global COVID-19 pandemic, and structural racism. The meta-theme was born from a locally rooted but international set of conversations, letters and emails that coalesced into the sub-movements found across the Summit: 'Geological Movements,' 'Colonial Movements,' 'Independence Movements,' 'Social Movements/Feminist Futures,' 'Collective Movements,' 'Spatial Movements,' 'Modern Movements,' 'Moving Image,' etc.

SEISMIC MOVEMENTS: THINKING AT THE EDGES OF LANGUAGE

One of the many tactics of colonialism is imposing rules and standards from elsewhere and expecting people with no previous connection to these concepts to adapt their lives to them. In the case of Bangladesh's history, West Pakistan was trying to claim the need to 'purify' Bangla as it originated and evolved from Hindu influences of an ancient Sanskrit language. "Bengali alphabets are full of idolatry. Each Bengali letter is associated with this or that god or goddess of Hindu Pantheon. Pakistan and Devanagri Script can't co-exist," said Fazlur Rahman, Central Minister for Education, in a statement on 27 December, 1948, explaining why it was important to introduce Arabic script in East Bengal. "Every Bangla Alphabet Narrates a Bengali's life" reads one of the many posters from the 1952 Language Movement in Bangladesh.³ The Language Movement was seismic. It led to Bangladesh becoming the first country in the modern world whose independence is directly tied to a desire to think, speak and act in its mother tongue.⁴ Every February, most of the country celebrates its victory in overthrowing foreign attempts to control how its people express themselves, embracing the plurality embedded in their culture.

Language has the ability to program and shape how we see and experience the world; we can be different people in different languages. I like thinking at the edges of languages, finding new cognitive possibilities when trying to translate something that does not fit into the logic structure of another language. Most of the people experiencing DAS do not speak or read English as their primary language, and we celebrated this and developed our tone of voice with this in mind. English is a tool that allows us to communicate with each other and provides a portal for non-Bangladeshis to understand our unique context, but it has many limits. My team and I were very happy with our

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English title ‘Seismic Movements’, but it has no direct Bangla equivalent, so we initiated an informal think-tank with colleagues to endeavour to create a Bangla title that built upon the poetic meanings opened up by the combination of these two English words.

স_চারণ/*Seismic Movements* is one example of what is possible when thinking across and between languages – where the theme of the exhibition cannot be fully expressed by understanding only the English or the Bangla title. The Bangla title confused the clear organisational structure of ‘seismic movements’ by introducing the Bangla concept of স_চারণ (pronounced *shon-cha-ron*). A moving stereoscopic view of the exhibition and the works within it opens up when we consider the meaning embedded in both titles and ponder their slight differences. While seismic movements tend to be big, external and very visible, causing land and power structures to quake, স_চারণ is subtler and connotes a continuous flow (in no particular direction) of movement on both micro and macro levels. স_চারণ cannot be contained, and it is never linear. স_চারণ can be applied to blood or emotions circulating within the body, or to the wind outside, or to concepts that move across generations, like wisdom. The neural connections made in the process of translation are another form of স_চারণ. The circulation of visitors through the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy is a form of স_চারণ, as is the ideating process of building DAS as its core concepts develop across editions. It could be said that the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic is both a form of স_চারণ and a seismic movement.

Bangladesh is the country with the most rivers within its borders and their স_চারণ creates the mud, sediment and soil that is transformed into the bricks that build up Bangladesh’s celebrated architecture and the earth and clay transformed by Adrián Villar Rojas, Bharti Kher, Damián Ortega, Héctor Zamorra, Korakrit Arunanondchai and Otobong Nkanga in their projects. The dust circulating the atmosphere speaks to another form of স_চারণ in the artwork of Peruvian artist Elena Damiani (*As the dust settles*, 2019-20). The Hilsa fish navigating the borders of East and West Bengal would be another form of স_চারণ, as would the experience of tasting this staple of the Bengali diet, and the pursuit of knowledge about this fish by Pratchaya Phinthong and his collaborators Dr. Arnab Biswas and Md. Sajedul Haque. The convergence of scholarly minds considering Modern Art Histories in and Across Africa, South and Southeast Asia (MAHASSA), changing the circulation of knowledge connecting scholars outside traditional North American or European centres (convening emerging scholars and a team of faculty and advisors from these regions in Hong Kong and Dhaka, in collaboration with the Asia Art Archive, Getty Foundation and Cornell’s Institute for Comparative Modernities) can be seen as another form of স_চারণ, as does the transfer of skills, from teachers to students, that built the art history of Bangladesh as chronicled in Dhaka-based artist-educator Bishwajit Goswami’s exhibition *Roots*.

The idea of স_চারণ doesn’t have a fixed centre. Politics today reminds us of the dangers of only paying attention to life in cities, and the works of art in DAS 2020 speak to experiences across all walks of life, especially those in rural contexts. The connection of culture and agriculture was especially evident across the Summit as artists sowed the seeds of ideas, watched them germinate in the research and production process, to reap and share the results with one of the largest art-going publics in the world. Weaving, stitching and sewing were other subthemes found across the DAS. The *Wounds Series* (1979) by Somnath Hore, is a moving testimony to the scars of violence that British and Pakistani colonialism left on these lands (connecting deeply to Walter Mignolo’s 2013 writings on “Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings”). These haunting works on paper also are reminiscent of aerial views of a landscape. The concept of scars and wounds ties together the bodily reading of স_চারণ and the geological reading of *Seismic Movements*. While scars are reminders of the healing

process of the body as it repairs damaged tissue, fault-lines and mountains are scars of terrestrial collisions, joints between moving plates. Religions from all over the world reference soul-searching and spiritual journeys to mountains as part of the quest for enlightenment beyond the confines of the human body. Works by numerous artists, including those of Karan Shrestha, Minam Apang, Liu Chuang and Zhou Tao spoke to this overlay of spiritual and bodily experience found in the mountainous regions connecting East, South and Southeast Asia, known as Zomia, chronicling the violence found in these highly charged locations.

Like most architecture in Bangladesh, DAS also exists on unstable foundations—its institutional history shows the shifting lines of what is and what is not possible. The American choreographer William Forsythe speaks to the potential for failure as being a catalyst for active forms of thinking. While it can be trying on the patience of our team of collaborators, I would argue that it is the vulnerability, malleability and instability of DAS that makes it such a powerful site for artistic production. Metamorphosis and adaptability are sources of power in contexts such as Bangladesh. We reinvent ourselves in every edition, building on the fertile sediment of ideas accumulating since 2012.

DAS is a kind of joint, a metaphorical fault-line connecting diverse histories and allowing for the circulation of ideas and generation of new structures to hold these ideas and histories together. We were pleased to be able to bring together artists, thinkers and importantly institution builders from the 'Global Majority World' (ie. outside North America and Europe) to consider how to build empowered movements through a collaboration with RAW Material Company in Dakar and Gudskul in Jakarta. Like fault-lines, the best ideas are generated through friction, through coming into contact. This 'coming into contact' also allowed us to develop new forms of solidarity as initiatives before us have done, including the Festival of Arts Shiraz-Persepolis (1967-77), The World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar (1966) and FESTAC in Lagos (1977), which have been referenced in past and present DAS editions.

THE BASE OF THE SUMMIT, VISION, ACTION AND PATRONAGE

We were only able to achieve this peak of DAS 2020 due to the solid base of support and commitment of the founders of Dhaka Art Summit, the Dhaka-based collector couple Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani.⁵ My experience of the first Dhaka Art Summit in 2012 was digital, via the extensive media coverage and social media posts that this new art platform in Bangladesh was receiving. So many Indian gallerists and journalists on my Facebook feed were suddenly in Bangladesh, a country that I had heard previously very little about in relation to contemporary art. I had already met artists Mahbubur Rahman and Tayeba Begum Lipi at a conference in London and heard about their Triangle Network affiliated organisation Britto, which had years of experience catalysing international exchange on an artist residency level. Beyond that, Bangladesh had little presence in the international institutional or market circuit in an increasingly globalised art world. Looking at DAS as a young curator living in India at that time, it seemed like a market-oriented platform hosted by a local enthusiastic young collector couple. Externally, it seemed to be a place where the Samdani's gallery and auction house specialist friends and curators from the Tate Museum convened to learn more about art in Bangladesh, and possibly to sell art to the Samdanis and other Bangladeshi collectors who might be emerging along with them. It seemed to be a place where Bangladeshi talent could be discovered by the world, and also promoted through two sizable cash art prizes (the \$6,000 Samdani Young Talent Award, and the \$12,000 Samdani Artist Development Award, which were transformed

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into what is now the Samdani Art Award). Unlike the India Art Fair, it seemed to be a place that contributed to the development of new talent and research, rather than just being an art marketplace much like any other. Of only three days duration, and with a program developed from many sections, the format resembled an art fair (*Flash Art* magazine's pre-event coverage stated that it was modelled on the India Art Fair).⁶

I was impressed, as was the rest of the 'South Asia-interested' art world, and curious to learn more, at how this couple could bring so many people together so quickly. The reach of the first DAS made it clear that Bangladesh, in considering South Asian art, was not a place one could ignore. A gallerist friend put me in touch with Nadia Samdani who sent me some Bangladeshi artists' portfolios. When artist Jitish Kallat brought us together in Mumbai I discovered that DAS actually had *nothing* to do with the art market, of buying and selling of artworks, and everything to do with creating opportunities for artists to develop outside the very limited possibilities available to them in Bangladesh. The Samdanis firmly believed that the artists in Bangladesh are as good as those from India and Pakistan they had seen during their international art world travels. Bangladesh lacked a gallery representation and market system that would allow artworks to travel internationally, Bangladeshi artists were held back from reaching their full potential. As collectors keenly interested in South Asia, the Samdanis didn't know where to begin researching South Asian art beyond India and Pakistan, so they decided to create a platform to allow this kind of knowledge to be produced and to be amplified around the world. While the initial press stories on the first Dhaka Art Summit quoted Nadia Samdani and spoke about the platform being modelled on the India Art Fair and referenced the economic booms of India and China,⁷ the Samdanis knew that Bangladesh had no market for contemporary art, and that any kind of art fair would not work. They also knew that looking at an isolated Bangladesh would not serve the purpose of developing the infrastructure for Bangladeshi art domestically and internationally, and soon after the first DAS they searched for a curator to help them expand their vision. I was approached as the 'international curator' with Mahbubur Rahman appointed as the Bangladeshi curator to oversee the program of DAS 2014. By this time they had already formed the event's overall shape by inviting local and international galleries (which were given their spaces free of charge) to make presentations of their South Asian artists, with Ambereen Karamat (an art consultant from Pakistan) curating a group exhibition of Pakistani art; Veerangana Solanki curating a group exhibition of Indian Art; Deepak Ananth, an exhibition of Bangladeshi art; and Rosa Maria Falvo, an exhibition of Bangladeshi photography.



SHIFTING DAS OUT OF A SPACE ASSOCIATED WITH THE MARKET AND INTO A SPACE ASSOCIATED WITH THE CURATORIAL

Looking to break a structure that deceptively made DAS look like an art fair I commissioned ambitious projects (as well as presenting the kind of work that had not been seen in the region before, and at international standards) that would highlight the real work that DAS was doing by supporting art outside commercial channels. Artworks were produced and exhibited in manners typically unseen in an art fair; we gave the kind of production support that was rare to experience anywhere else in the region. The Kochi-Muziris Biennale had yet to be initiated when DAS began and had only realised one edition when I began developing DAS 2014: even there the onus on producing artworks was placed upon the artists and their galleries for the first edition (and subsequently), not on the Biennale foundation. We enabled Rashid Rana to expand his work to architectural scale for the first time, and also made the first ambitious presentation of Shahzia Sikander's moving image work in South Asia (the Lahore Biennial and Karachi Biennial later presented her work in Pakistan using the logistics strategy developed for DAS, and borrowing equipment from the Sharjah Art Foundation). Additionally, I had to create an infrastructure to insure and exhibit artworks in an environment devoid of such a framework and places to rent high-tech equipment. These solutions, resolution of methodologies and establishing international partnerships, were how we were able to create the platform that DAS is known as today.

While beginning work on the Dhaka Art Summit early 2013, it was not until October of that year that I became Artistic Director of the Samdani Art Foundation, taking over the Summit as Chief Curator. I then began to contemplate what DAS 2016 might be (predating the realisation of DAS 2014)—this continuity of vision across editions allowed the institution to grow quickly, building on previous relationships, knowledge and insights, rather than starting fresh each time. One of the first things implemented post-DAS 2014 was to eliminate medium-specific elements, such as the Bangladeshi photography exhibition, as photography was not considered to be fine art. Art consultants and others who had financial interests in the exhibited artworks would also not be involved in future DAS programs, and while DAS 2012 had gallerists and auction house staff speaking on panels, future editions would not (with the exception of panels on artist estates). Given my American-trained background I've always considered scholarship and the market should be separate, but the Samdanis envisioned the need for galleries to support Bangladeshi artists in order for an international ecosystem for Bangladeshi art to truly grow. That international galleries

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exhibited without site fees was a brilliant strategy by the Samdanis as they could see first-hand the kind of people that DAS could attract through its curatorial and scholarly platforms, while simultaneously getting to know artists and their work within the Bangladeshi context. Just a few of many success stories catalysed by DAS, which lead to long-term meaningful working partnerships, were *Experimenter*, which signed on Ayesha Sultana (their representation of the Bangladeshi artist Naeem Mohaiemen predated their relationship with the Samdanis), *Project88* signed on Shumon Ahmed and later Munem Wasif, *Jhaveri Contemporary* began working with the work of the late Bangladeshi modern sculptor Novera Ahmed (their representation of the British Bangladeshi artist Rana Begum pre-dated DAS), *Exhibit320* began working with Mustafa Zaman and Yasmin Jahan Nupur, *Galerie Krinzinger* began working with Shumon Ahmed and Rafiqul Shuvo. In 2014 it was decided to cease international gallery participation from subsequent Summits, but in order to keep local galleries invested we continued to give them exhibition spaces in 2016. This ceased from 2018, as it was evident that visitors could visit Bangladeshi galleries directly rather than encounter them within DAS.

It is important to note that when we started working together Nadia Samdani and I were in our twenties and Rajeeb Samdani in his thirties; we advanced together through our experiences with DAS and the Foundation over these years. The platform we developed to assist Bangladeshi artists gain visibility in 2014 was not the same that was needed in 2020, or that might be needed in 2022. Each edition responded dynamically to the one before it, and to the ways we thought that Bangladesh needed to be presented for visitors to understand it outside of the heavy shadow of India, and how we in Bangladesh could set an example globally for how an art institution could be. As I was living in India at the time and that was my central reference point to South Asian art, the international arm of the 2014 program was India-heavy, and our international visiting friends were primarily from India. The more time I spent in Bangladesh the clearer it became how distinct Bangladesh is from India, and the more I worked to distance the misguided surface reading that Bangladesh was the smaller, denser, poorer cousin of India.

While DAS 2012 was not a curatorial platform and the 2014 edition was considered weak due to the nascent Bangladeshi experience of the international curators involved (including myself), I perceived the enormous potential for DAS becoming a site for curatorial acumen and invention of new exhibition and discursive formats – the curatorial, paired with the inspirational potential found in the creative wealth of the local art and architecture scene, might create the condition where this dynamic could be our content (Dhaka and Bangladesh lack the comforts that draws in international tourism, as well as sustaining a negative perception in the minds of those who have never visited. It is also interesting to note that our most critical visitors are those from India, which can be attributed to the rise of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s anti-Muslim sentiments; while international visitors have risen substantially since the first DAS in 2012, Indian visitor numbers have decreased to only the most die-hard of devotees.)

When appointed Artistic Director of Samdani Art Foundation in October 2013, developing the Foundation and Dhaka Art Summit into leading sites for incubating curatorial thought (a paramount agenda for the 2014 edition of DAS), I developed a strong team of curatorial collaborators who I knew I wanted to work with for each future edition. Some of the invited curators who visited and later became part of the core curatorial team included Dr. Shanay Jhaveri, Dr. Devika Singh, Nada Raza, Cosmin Costinas, Iftikhar Dadi, Amara Antilla, Beth Citron, Katya Garcia Anton, Daniel Baumann, Simon Castets, Philippe Pirotte, Kathryn Weir, Sean Anderson, Aurelien Lemonier

and Sharmini Pereira. Most attended as either a speaker or jury member before joining the DAS team. As chief curator my role was to cohere ideas found in the guest curator's exhibitions through my exhibition (which began as 'Solo Projects' in 2014 and 2016, mostly new commissions of South Asian and diaspora artists with transnational experiences in South Asia, revolving around themes found elsewhere in the Summit. This morphed into a section called 'Bearing Points' in 2018—five curated group exhibitions punctuated by large commissions—that sought to reorient how Bangladesh was perceived, the title referencing points on a compass. The 2020 edition brought everything together into a single theme, 'Seismic Movements'). I also looked for disparities in research and exhibition histories which informed the commissioning of sub-exhibitions comprising the larger construct of DAS; eg., the DAS 2018 exhibitions *One Hundred Thousand Small Tales* (a part-archive, part inventory survey that mapped the various paths of art production in Sri Lanka from its independence in 1948 to the present, curated by Sharmini Pereira) and *The Utopian Stage* (excavating the archives of the Festival of Arts Shiraz-Persepolis, curated by London-based Iranian curator/historian Vali Mahlouji, its participants from the non-Western majority⁸); the institutional history and collection legacy of the Asian Art Biennale in Bangladesh under the leadership of Syed Jahangir (a response to larger profile biennials in Asia, such as the Gwangju Biennale which erroneously claimed to be the first biennale in Asia); and in 2016, *Rewind* linking Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, Burmese, Pakistani and Indian modern art, where abstraction emerged from figurative practices. Across DAS 2014 to 2016, I realised that Western artists who made their lives and careers living in these regions were rarely included in regional surveys, while diaspora artists, who had not spent anytime within the region, were. Given my loathing of identity politics this exhibition construct was my response to what I felt were myopic racial definitions of what it meant to be associated with a region, and DAS 2016 introduced artists with regional ties such as Lynda Benglis, Tino Sehgal, Germaine Krull and Saskia Pintelon.

Bangladesh has a phenomenal architectural scene: we were the first to commission and produce a survey exhibition of Bangladeshi contemporary architecture, curated by Aurelien Lemonier in 2016, which preceded and arguably influenced the much talked about *Bengal Stream* (2018) at the Swiss Architecture Museum in Basel. The curators met Lemonier in their research process, and while he was not generously credited by them he was very helpful with his knowledge and contacts. This instance highlights DAS' research and online information having a global ripple effect, its impact transcending any credit lists one might see on exhibition walls or acknowledgements in a publication.

DAS 2018 was taxing due to the logistical work needed to accomplish the guest curator projects. Similarly, when audiences attended the prior DAS editions in 2014 and 2016, they were not aware of the intense behind-the-scenes financial and logistical acrobatics, including the sourcing of technical equipment from other foundations and fundraising external to the Samdani Art Foundation that made what was seen by all possible. The exceptions to what was available in Bangladesh seemed like the norm; when negotiating the loan of a hemp sculpture by Mrinalini Mukherjee in a country with no art insurance I had to prevail upon the owners to insure it themselves (which they did, to which I was immensely thankful and proud to have been able to show this work in Bangladesh ahead of her lauded retrospective at the Met Breuer in New York); similarly, convincing other collectors to not only loan their artworks to a country they had never considered before but also again to insure them; begging the Sharjah Art Foundation to loan technical equipment for multiple projects; and to avoid government censorship (from Sri Lanka) to realise Sharmini Pereira's *100,000 Small Tales*, the personal hand-carrying of art onto flights into Bangladesh before DAS 2018 opened

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(which required her to negotiate permission from the CEO of Sri Lanka Airlines). While these outcomes evidence what might be possible in Bangladesh, the unique working processes can be daunting for those without experience, working in contexts without formal art institutions; there was considerable translation on my behalf to bridge how things are done abroad and how they are done in Bangladesh.

Behind-the-scenes difficulties aside, DAS 2018 was a critical success—a number of its exhibitions continue to travel around the world, participants have begun collaborating in wider forums globally, and guest curator Dr Devika Singh was hired by the Tate Museum as curator of South Asian art, partially in response to her DAS 2018 exhibition. However, I understood that this multiple curator model would no longer work for future editions. Observing the same curatorial approach adopted by the Sharjah Biennial and Gwangju Biennale for their cycle aligned with DAS between 2016 and 2018, I knew I wanted to abandon this model, given the difficulties for collaboration within a team of curators with individual agendas and the inequities inherent—e.g., space allocations, identical loan requests, budget allocations, and so on. The ensuing reviews of both biennales highlighted these dilemmas, for the broader perspective of curatorial visions to become apparent when structurally divided into distinct parts. The decision therefore was to build another model for co-curating, where I could be both the chief curator and co-curator of the program, to allow a plurality of voices to emerge while also being able to direct and write the bigger picture narrative without choppy organisational waves in the middle, to build a team of collaborators much like a theatre production, as a counterpoint to the individual curatorial ego.

Reflecting further on DAS 2018, I realised that its strength was not just its curatorial acumen—more so its audience, one that engaged with and brought these ideas into their lives. With more than 300,000 visitors over nine days, DAS became the highest daily visited contemporary art exhibition in the world according to *The Art Newspaper*.⁹ In between DAS 2018 and 2020, photojournalist Shahidul Alam was arrested under Section 57 of Bangladesh's Information and Communication Technology Act (for allegedly making "false" and "provocative" comments in an interview to *Al Jazeera* on student protests), provoking the journalistic and art worlds into an uproar about how Bangladesh could host an expansive event like DAS while simultaneously instigating repression of artistic freedom. This aroused my consideration about personal conviction in the arts—many artists, poets, thinkers and architects who maintained their conviction about their ideas had historically been sent to jail as a result. Many artists who created the images, words and songs that mobilised Bangladeshis to stand up for their independence had been in jail; artists had catalysed such movements of freedom of expression and will continue to do so. Having so many people in the same spaces contemplating ideas that could not be freely expressed in the print media, but could be expressed through art, gave me a huge sense of agency at a time when such artistic freedoms were under threat. How could I use the exhibition as a *movement*—and not just simply as a presentation of art? Anticipating such an audience I wanted to create an exhibition and discursive/research platform where we could discuss past movements of resistance, and consider how ground shifted over time physically and metaphorically. In the process of designing the exhibition, I hoped that our audiences could spend time thinking about ways and mechanisms that might shift the world and build on the work that generations before us have put into freedom of expression.

The Dhaka Art Summit in 2012 began as a platform for Bangladesh, expanded to a platform for South Asia in 2014, and grew to include other regions and transnational platforms in subsequent editions. Taking the metaphor of moving tectonic plates, reminding us that the physical ground that nations stake claim to has and will invariably be far from static, *Seismic Movements* marked a shift in the platform of the Dhaka Art Summit to no longer be defined by a geographic regional remit. In my view, a geographical remit is a limitation that can keep us from addressing the complexities of racism, avarice and enmity that continue to plague the world. Could a region instead be a state of mind, a set of values, a place of shared conditions where people who are of the land are made to feel subordinate and inferior to their historical colonial rulers, and descendants of slaves and exploited workers moved to that land continue to be oppressed by powers ruling these lands today? As it has been since its inception, DAS is committed to valuing the contributions of artists and thinkers who art history has undervalued due to systemic racism and classism embedded in who has the power and agency to write history. It is hoped that through our efforts and those of others, these voices will finally be able to be heard, not just in Bangladesh or the region, but all over the world.

Notes

¹ Rather than release an artist list, where people could pick out names that they knew, we released a graphic designed mountain range that included all individuals, institutions and team members who built the Summit. Given our work with collectives—whose members change relatively often—it would have been impossible to release a static artist list, and this approach required readers to consider every name when trying to find out who was part of the exhibition

² The theme also tried to respond to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's call in her speech at DAS 2018 that another kind of work, activism outside the exhibition, had to walk hand in hand with a platform like DAS if we were to try to address the "impossible possibility of a socially just world"

³ Thank you to Muhammad Nafisur Rahman for sharing this research with me which inspired the form of this essay

⁴ It is important to note that more than forty other indigenous mother tongues are spoken in Bangladesh beyond Bangla—and DAS also has been working to empower indigenous communities in Bangladesh since its inception. 'Sovereign Words' in DAS 2018 brought together indigenous peers from over the world, including Australia. My mother is indigenous Chamorro from Guam, so my engagement with indigeneity comes from a personal place

⁵ This support and commitment also extends to the employment and development of our core team in Bangladesh, especially Mohammad Sazzad Hossain, Ruxmini Reckvana Choudhury, Mobinul Haque, and Asifur Rahman, who are our head of administration and assistant curator, engineer, and architect; all of these talented individuals were working first time for a major art festival. I mention them because if the art world is going to fight racial and class bias, it has to start by hiring people who come from outside the small community of elites running the art world, and by supporting their growth over the long-term

⁶ <https://flash---art.com/2012/04/bangladesh-bangladeshs-first-art-summit-and-a-hope-to-be-the-new-india/>

⁷ 'Bangladesh's first Art Summit'; <https://flash---art.com/2012/04/bangladesh-bangladeshs-first-art-summit-and-a-hope-to-be-the-new-india/>

⁸ See Vali Mahlouji, 'The Super-Modernism of The Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis', *di'van | Journal of Accounts* 2, 2017, pp. 42-53

⁹ *The Art Newspaper*, Special Report 311, April 2019; <https://www.museus.gov.br/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/The-Art-Newspaper-Ranking-2018.pdf>