

Writing on The Run: *A Midpoint Ruminations on Curating The Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2020*

South Asia's largest arts festival, and with the upcoming edition now running for four months instead of the usual three, the scale of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale is diverse, intense, and immersive. In just over four editions the Kochi-Muziris Biennale has become a crucial platform for regional and international art and discourse in South Asia. Situated largely on the island of Fort Kochi in the state of Kerala, the KMB is the embodiment of Kochi's rich histories and cultures, a pluralism that predates the Western Enlightenment. Incidentally, this ethos made its way into the artwork I made as an artist in the last edition in 2018, where I stayed for almost two months in Kochi, researching and developing a short film and installation of a semi-fictional history of book-smugglers. Using existing letters and records from Kochi's libraries and archives, and based on my interactions with local librarians, paper pulpers, and junk and boatyard workers, I examined "loss, the indecipherable, migrancy, displacement and cross-cultural experience—one that is as much about the movement of ideas and language as it is about the political and economic legacies of power structures."¹

For a biennale that has always been artist-led, every edition of the KMB allows for an unconventional exercise in curating. As curator of the 2020 Biennale, and as an artist in conversations with other artists, I think about curating the Kochi-Muziris Biennale beyond the final production. Process, method, technique, undercurrents and original contexts are more than background, and the challenge is to ensure that the exhibition doesn't descend into a flattening spectacle, and the invariable fatigue of encountering so many artworks doesn't devolve into shallow readings. There are multiple ways to alleviate this, which is why the KMB commissions new work, and encourages production on-site where possible. But it also becomes vital to recognise the importance of going beyond site as encompassing frame. It is important to ensure that sites (especially heritage sites with immense historical baggage) do not supersede the works displayed. Ideally sites can provide sensory or cognitive cues to viewers that would, I hope, make the reading of regional specificities more fluid. This in turn leads to the next challenge—how can one retain regional contexts of artworks from across the globe?

Perhaps one method would be to recognise the way so many of these contexts intersect. An obvious example would be how postcolonial nations continue to grapple with generational trauma, and how artists navigate the collisions of borders, communities, languages, media and so on when negotiating this. These approaches may be similar or divergent, but what is notable is that they remain imperatives that are still current, especially when thinking about the way so much of the global South continues to cater to the North in terms of resources, but also in the neo-colonising of nations as ideological battlegrounds. It isn't simply about the 'balance of power'—itself a hierarchical phrase that denies other forms of power within communities and collectives—but about recognising that the rhetoric that privileges certain groups over others is already being reframed or dismantled, and a key aspect of this reframing involves the acknowledgement of intersecting contexts. I'm especially enthused by the effectiveness of collectives in decolonising and recording subsumed histories.

BEYOND REGION

In formulating the curatorial structure of a biennale such as Kochi-Muziris, it is important to consider the problem of constructing region. As the first curator who isn't based in India, and as a Singaporean, I am excited by the opportunity to spotlight the vivid practices and discourses in Southeast Asia, while simultaneously being troubled by this geographical classification. The main reason, for me, will always be the dangers of the appeal to authority, or the claim to speak on behalf of a region from a position of knowledge that, as a curator, is sometimes expected. Classifications such as "South Asia" or "Southeast Asia" are difficult to reconcile. They appear to bring together states that diverge quite radically, but also given the complex geo-politics, histories, and cultures with porous 'boundaries' here, "South Asia" would present them as a supposedly unified geographical region. Personally, these terms are especially troubling because it assumes that we must read this rich tapestry, this multiplicity, primarily as state (or nation) first. This is especially applicable when we see how the interaction between cultures or communities is invariably framed as transnational or statist, where national identity is regarded as the signifier of all parties in the conversation. At the same time I do recognise the importance of cultural production (in thinking, writing and in making) in postcolonial states having to grapple with what constitutes statehood, nation-building, and regional allyship, and in recognising other forms of power within communities and collectives. Critical cultural production here is also about recognising that the rhetoric that privileges certain groups over others is already being reframed or dismantled, and that a key aspect of this reframing involves the acknowledgement of intersecting contexts.

I have always been wary of the designation of a single city or state as a 'hub', or centre of cultural production. Almost every Baltic and East European city I visited claimed to be the "next Berlin" as if that were a validation of cultural accomplishment.² This anxiety of being included in the hegemonic idea of Western Europe and its definitions of what constitutes the currency of contemporary cultural practice narrowly demarcates the default position within which we can discuss practice, action, thinking, and the urgencies of our time. As one of the gallerist Kalfayan brothers put it, "Why the next Berlin? Why not the next Hong Kong, or the next Beirut, the next Sao Paulo?" If any city can claim to be (forgive the neologism) a 'spokesite' or cultural centre, surely these cities are more vital.³

The perception of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale being only regional is an assumption that I am unwilling to make. It seems to be rooted in the perception that sites outside the global North are, by simple virtue of location, necessarily regional. Historically, Kochi has traded (in its ancient form as Muziris) over two thousand years ago with Mesopotamia, Babylon, Assyria and Egypt. Its trading history is rich and continued even under its colonisation by the Portuguese, Dutch and English. Where there is trade there are exchanges of ideas, cultures, religions and languages,⁴ and so it could be argued that Kochi has always been internationalist. Where the KMB might be considered regional would be in its localness, in its connection to Kochi. It's one of the first things noticeable when visiting the Biennale – the way its residents have a personal involvement, with strong opinions about the art and artists of each edition. At the announcement of my appointment as curator, I had spoken of the way biennales are often akin to floating cities that are unmoored from their locality or regionality. The Kochi-Muziris Biennale is unique in that it is rooted in the intertwined histories and cultural multiplicities of Kochi, while providing a crucial platform for a larger discourse of the critical, political and social impulses in artistic practices. To shift the lens through which we read the spectacle of exhibition, especially biennale spectacle, dialogue and practice must be repositioned through acknowledging intersecting narratives, and retain, as much as possible, the original contexts of the works. I believe it is possible for the KMB to retain regional realities and histories through cementing existing affinities and establishing new commons. A biennale such as this is also a way to distinguish the majority world from Euro-American perspectives, and to postulate alternative strategies to exhibition-making. While acknowledging the criticisms of biennales, it is necessary to parse what aspects of regional biennales can contribute to the sustainability of the scene, and to the disruption of linear chronologies. The KMB holds the potential to demonstrate non-entrenched ways of looking at, exhibiting and making art from the majority world.

COMMONS AS CRUCIBLE

Perhaps this why I can imagine the Kochi-Muziris Biennale as being more than a cultural staging area, but a crucible within which these intersecting discourses and practices can occur. A biennale is so much more than a mere accumulation of coincidental collisions. As a possible knowledge commons, the conversations that would emerge from the exhibition, the seminars and other programming would be vital in demonstrating the diversity of strategies that artists employ. Our commingled digital futures are inextricable from the transmission of knowledge, ideas and capital, and so too are we subject to neoliberal infiltration and control. Though we may share the same concerns of land, migration, the climate crisis, rising autocratic regimes, and embedded technology and surveillance, for instance, we diverge in our methods and approaches in thinking and in making. This is what I've been looking for during my curatorial research and travel during 2019.

This diversity of strategies, methods, and production can be emphasised and shared. This is not new, and is evident in, for instance, the significant work increasingly being done by artist collectives. A powerful example would be the multiple acts of remembering and reintegrating precolonial community-based thinking and practices in performance. Active decolonising initiatives, unearthing of overlooked histories and bodies of knowledge—all these are of keen interest to my plans for the KMB, as they have always been in my work as an artist.

As for the Biennale's focus on the global South, I am not aiming at only emphasising solidarities, but to also recognise the contradictions inherent in any notion of all-encompassing terms. Localness has its problems as much as sweeping or essentialist ideas of what constitutes the

discourses and practices of the global South. Aspects that speak more of localness to me are the divergent methods and approaches employed when talking about geopolitical borders, for instance. While certain South Asian practices tend to focus on land, Southeast Asian practices that address the same geopolitical concerns look towards the sea. These terrains are method, metaphor and medium to examine concerns as wide-ranging as issues of ownership, rights, displacement and exile, landscape and ecologies, human interactions with other species, and natural rhythms and human impact, bodily autonomy, idealised and failed bodies and gendered violence, post-industrial devastation and regenerative propositions.

The concept of nation and inviolability of borders is a depressingly pernicious myth that denies the diffusion of languages and ideas, and the way digital spread resists nationalisms. We can see this reflected in growing investigative methods in artistic practices that directly excavate and implicate the monetisation of everything—environment, activism, crisis, knowledge production, transmissions and access, global capital flows and inequities. Perhaps the difference here is the rejection of the narrative as singular, choosing instead an embracing of submerged and manifold stories, and where and how and through whose agencies they diverge.

Across South Asia, East and Southeast Asia, West Africa and South America, I have encountered a number of practices that demonstrate a sureness of context and purpose. Of special note are those that examine the politics of language hegemonies, historical record, suppressed or vanishing languages and indigenous ways of life. This is cause for optimism as well as damning counterpoint to hegemonic and monolithic narratives. Sometimes embodying a spectacular materiality and tactility, these works range from the filmic, literary and text-based, or even nonverbal and nonmaterial articulations, to critical reinventions of craft traditions and performative gesture. The critical reinventions here refer not just to the influence of traditional medium, tactility, texture, technique and craft. There is a strong understanding of generational heritage as disruptor of hierarchical global market forces, convention, and fickle trend. I'm excited too by the growth and quality of art historians, archivists and writers in Southeast Asia, a number of whom are also working with living artists and artists' spaces.

THE BIENNALE AS BULWARK

One of the guiding principles behind my practice as an artist and writer is the maxim that it is not necessary to be effectual in one's time. This acceptance of pace of change, but more importantly the recognition of the impossibility of quantifying effectiveness, has allowed me to spend a decade at a time on single projects. In my current position however, it is possible that for the first time, the work can be effectual, or at the very least, provide the necessary opportunity for eventually effective work.

So while I accept the various criticisms of the biennale as a vehicle for activism I think it is important to recognise that political awareness does not inevitably mean humourless, dour, over-earnest or aesthetically lacking art. Such simplistic dichotomies are reductive and dismissive of what is patently obvious—that artists are as affected by their environment, as much as shared urgencies and critical turning points in discourse. To argue for a non-political biennale (and what does that mean?) is to argue for intellectual and creative isolation from lived experiences, realities, fears and aspirations. I might go so far as to call it reductive escapism, a pernicious desire to separate artist from environment, and art from lived context.

One of the desires of cultural institutions, artists, writers, academics, etc. is to contend with the urgencies of their times. In doing so it is easy to become disenchanted with, or apathetic about the state of our societies, our collective futures, and the planet. Yet I would argue that our fears for the future do not detract from our abilities to think and to make, but fuel our yearning to articulate through art the complexities of our realities. This affirming power of artistic work, no matter the medium, has been a keystone in my practice, and will continue to inform my curatorial work for the KMB. I have an unshakeable conviction in the power of storytelling as strategy, and of the transgressive and transformative potential of satire and humour. Optimism in practice—in artistic practice and collective work, especially in regional or local contexts and forms—includes questions like the possibly redemptive and revolutionary power of practice beyond the market. This has underpinned my practice (and especially when I've made new artwork for biennales) and is an important aspect of my curatorial research. The biennale as a bulwark against despair may seem a laughable idea. But the ability of our species to flourish artistically in fraught and dire situations, this refusal in the face of disillusionment to disavow our poetry, our languages, our art and music, our optimism and humour, is a stubbornness to be celebrated, as are the communities that come together to make this happen. This is what I hope to foreground in the next edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale.

IN *SUMMARIUM*

I'm writing this almost exactly a year to the date of the opening of the KMB in 2020. This coincides with the end of one seemingly dismal decade. We seem doomed to repeat the mistakes of history: note how much of contemporary geo-political farce and tragedy is performed by those secure and smug in the supremacy and primacy of their culture, their language, their nation, their tribe, their religion, their ideology and their 'values'. The inability to read the cultures and mentalities outside one's own is a miserable state, of one that we should be ashamed, not smug. A commons then, is not just an archive that holds in stasis till activated. It is prolific, shapeshifting, and impure. Here we can read and listen, here meaning and implication can be glimpsed, parsed, reinterpreted and so live on in the minds of others, an ever expanding, rerouting, mutating web. This web also reaches across narrow geography, theological and political concerns—solidarity crosses over, solidarity in the shared ideal, whether it be free speech, free press, individual liberty, defining the spirit of the law and jurisprudence, and the emancipation of people. The intersections of people and incidents, flashpoints of censorship and sites, all point to the crucial importance of the political, cultural, literary, scientific and philosophical climate necessary for ideas to thrive and flourish. There is unsurprisingly no perfect concatenation of circumstances, times or epochal characteristics necessary for ground-breaking work, ideas or revolutions. The human need to think freely without proscription, in spite of, and sometimes because of repression, all point to the way we react to conflict. The only enemy is apathy. That has no name or face, and it lies entwined with its bedfellow—self-censorship.

Given that a number of us are subject to the latter what can be effectual in the work that we do? How does my work as an artist and writer, examining the history of cultural destruction and resistance, and the constructions of knowledge commons, inform my work as a curator here? Over the last decade of practice I've come to believe that the act of writing is not a solitary process. As I travel alone across the globe as part of my curatorial research for the 5th edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2020, I've unexpectedly felt this harden into a conviction that even the most seemingly solitary of endeavours or journeys is not inherently isolationist, but derives its impetus from that wellspring of collective knowledge and ideas. The many voices that populate and inform

our processes of thought, action and choices, are evident in the realisation and manifestation of those choices, and in the ease in which so many disparate practices from across diverse regions can be comprehended with surprisingly few barriers. It helps that artists tend to gravitate towards similar or linked issues, and grapple with shared urgencies, even though their methods and approaches may differ greatly. It is these differences that I find so intriguing, in part because they speak to the particular contexts or specific environments within which artists think, live and practice. Sometimes this can be easily seen as regional specificities, beyond mere essentialism.

I've also had the joy of experiencing practices where a particular sensibility is borne from a mismatch between personality and the suffocating conformity of peer and prevailing ideas. Sometimes this is evident in the sort of humour that we recognise as an exercise of survival and resistance against brutal totalitarianism, but sometimes the humour is aphoristically poetic, perverse, deliciously bizarre, and quietly tangential in a completely unexpected and revelatory way. One of my favourite encounters was with an artist whose work effortlessly crossed very fraught class and political divides through one of the funniest forms of endurance performance I have seen. It also demonstrated the anarchic absurdity at the heart of a lot of endurance performances that sometimes gets overlooked. There is optimism in the darkest humour even, and this is what leavens the direness our time. It is in the robustness of humour that we can imagine the possibility of kinship, and remember that we are not isolated in this fight.

Notes

¹ From the curatorial wall text by Anita Dube, curator of *Kochi Muziris Biennale 2018*

² I heard this from heads of cultural institutions, state museums in particular, but also from sundry artists, curators, and writers

³ My discomfort with this is part of the same unease with which a biennale's curator is suddenly a spokesperson for region

⁴ A Tamil collection of poetry from the period, the *Akananuru*, has exquisite descriptions of these interactions. In Pliny's *Natural History*, he refers to Muziris as the "first emporium of India"