

TIMEZONES - EPISODE 3 TRANSCRIPT

IMAGINING WORLDS AND MEANING WITH FOUR ARTISTS FROM DELHI

In the third episode of Timezones four contemporary artists with a connection to the city of Delhi reflect upon their diverse and evolving practices. Heeding into the COVID pandemic, they share observations and open spaces of thought where new meanings and speculative realities are constantly being formed, un-formed and re-formed. The composition interweaves these conversations into fragments of found sound, musical renditions and sonic textures, contemplating the ever-shifting edges of truth,

A podcast by Suvani Suri and Abhishek Mathur

The TIMEZONES Podcast Series is co-initiated and co-produced by Norient and the Goethe Institute.

All Episodes: <https://norient.com/timezones>

Artists:

GS: Gagan Singh

PP: Pallavi Paul

M: Mochu

SYK: Suhail Yusuf Khan

GS

Voice note 1, if we take this as a voice note

M

I prefer a deregulated market of pirated ideas than something authenticated

GS

Often I work with a state of mind...

PP

So I am actually very interested in the way the story of the truth is enacted

SYK

Those shapes they formed this amazing melodic bank in my head

M

And so you're part of what you're reading, like an ongoing double print, over the page
Like in the case of Alice, after her fall through the rabbit hole

PP

How do we read this large moment...

GS

Think through drawing, think drawing...

SYK

Whenever there was a chord or a drone being played, I could react to it. That was my idea of expression, that was my way of communicating while being in a conversation with musicians around me

GS

What is a conversation...

M

Hello this is Mochu. I'm right now speaking from Istanbul. I'm usually based here and in Delhi, and I work out of both the cities. I work with video and text arranged in the form of installations, lectures or sometimes publications.

GS

I'm Gagan Singh and I'm a Delhi based artist. I enjoy exploring the site of the sketchbook. I find pain pleasure in sketchbooks, in sketching...drawing...
Life around me...quite interesting...I find that...I sometimes see things the way that they are not, sometimes the way that they could not be, sometimes the way that they can be imagined into...

PP

...and I am a video artist, a multimedia practitioner. I am also just in the process of submitting my PhD in Cinema Studies. So in a way, I have various kinds of practices I would say. I have a writing practice, I have an academic practice and of course I have a visual practice. And I move quite restlessly but also excitedly amongst all of these different kinds of practices.

SYK

I am a Hindustani musician and I belong to a family of hereditary musicians who, in Hindustani terminology, are called Khandani musicians. I practice an instrument called the Sarangi—a North India bowed instrument. I am the 8th generation of my matrilineal lineage of carrying the tradition forward.

M:

So I usually look at ancient history, geology, vegetation...by the time I get to some current event, it's already in the museum. I don't usually arrive at my own time...

There are a lot of niche spaces happening in my work. It's possibly the result of a fatigue with categories, with identities. So it's also a way to problematize the common-sense of the world, a way to say that the world is not a given, it is the result of active ongoing construction. Therefore alternative histories, improbable niche spaces with differing physical laws and causal connections allows for testing the limits of sense, both common and uncommon sense. That's how I started thinking of the portable hole in cartoons, and that of cartoon physics in general. For example, in children's cartoons- the bodies, the speeds, it's as if it is all made in some otherworldly manufacturing unit.

GS:

My works are about eroticism, humour, fictional with a background of being autobiographical. They reflect my day to day life. I enjoy the sense of humour, I don't know where it's coming from but it just carries in when I draw. Sometimes I find that I need to do something else apart from sketching. So I am trying that but I find my catharsis or this habit of sketching everyday. So I often begin with scribbling on a piece of paper. Drawing and the line which comes out, I feel it is more about the state of mind. The dictionary meaning you know to draw out, to pull out, to draw something out...from within i suppose...

PP

I was born in Delhi and I have been living here. It's a challenging city right. It's a city of ideas, people convene around ideas, people convene around and in intellectual contexts. Very interesting people pass through the city, practitioners of culture, practitioners of ideas. And it is also a city which is almost vulgar in its tendencies of violence, of aggression. In a way the city is a space of various different kinds of jostling currents and ideas, and it's always a challenge to navigate them.

So I am actually very Interested in the way the story of the truth is enacted, rather than the essential merit or demerits of the idea of truth. So for me, the idea of truth-making is like a material. And I don't mean truth as an absolute idea or even a persuasive mechanism. I actually mean it almost as a placeholder for various kinds of strategies, performances, sensations that we encounter on an everyday level. So I am looking at it almost as a provocation, as a philosophical provocation. It keeps me always implicated in an adventure of ideas.

SYK

It is quite a common phenomenon, among especially hereditary musician families where children start learning music like an oral language. You know how you pick up phrases when you're a kid around your parents. You'll see musicians practice around you, singing

compositions...you'll start imitating them. My grandfather was Ustad Sabri Khan Saab. He discouraged me, he kept saying that it is quite time demanding, it is not the right time to be a Sarangi player. After a few years he saw the interest in me and he said- no, I think you can be a sarangi player.

Sarangi is regarded as the most closest to the human voice in Hindustani music. It's etymology Saurangi meaning an instrument with hundred colours. Most of Indian classical instruments or Hindustani instruments per se have a sound box. They have, if not more, minimum 7-8 sympathetic strings. My instrument has about fourteen of them. Some of them are also skin-covered and their sound box is covered with leather parchment. That resonates the string at a much louder level.

GS

What, drawing conversation does or what drawing does is it allows you to explore things which are not part of your vocabulary, which has been formed. But what drawing does is it allows you to not formulate this. It is always correcting what you could impose on it.

To hear oneself is the most settling acting there is. To not talk, to let that talk transcribe itself on paper, lets you move away from that talking in the head.

...especially when I start with the hat and the semi-circular lines and the hat, when I am making that, I can feel that it is of a certain textural quality...I am weaving a hat which is made of light bamboo or wood, you know...Then I bring in hair, in front of the ear and behind...It gives me a feeling...this thing that, ok, now a face is being moulded...and then I move to the rest of the body. Making the torso, the arms. And for that moment that presence happens. Then you are attentive to what the Madam is about to say...Now I am in dialogue, listening to what is being drawn...

M

In a similar way, in my video also, as I see it, the magical, haunted experiences are actually only a subset...it is a subset of aesthetic inhabitations of this kind...

Like you have frame narratives where somebody asks a question and then the question is answered through another story...and this produces a phantasmagorical projective space in between, where the rules are new, and new rules always appear magical or mysterious...

SYK

My grandfather in particular was highly inspired by the mystical practices and mystical life...

All Hindustani musicians look at musical notes as supernatural figures. They have personalities, they have movements...in Mughal courts, you know, the ragas used to come out alive in their

life forms. So Todi would come out and start dancing in the court. Bhageshwari would suddenly take this beautiful figure of a woman.

Once he was talking about this table player from Banaras– Pandit Anokhe Lal who apparently had the most amazing ‘Na dhin dhin na’, just plain ‘Na dhin dhin na’ as a Thekha. When he used to play ‘Na dhin dhin na’, it used to feel like sunrise has gotten still.

PP

Memorialising and speculating. When I saw those two words placed together, it became kind of clear to me that one cannot be done without the other, right? In a way, you cannot speculate without memory and memory is no good if it doesn’t allow you the adventure of speculation.

SYK

I think the whole expression of words– I am learning it now. My own research in ethnomusicology, is kind of pushing me to express myself in words as much as possible. I discovered a scholarship which was talking in my own language. Really sophisticated Hindustani musical terminologies which I learnt as a household language, the formal meaning behind them started disclosing. And that’s when I was like...uhhh I think I can really write a paper on that. How my grandfather learnt music was not like how I am learning music right now, through academia. He learnt it as an experience because it was passed on to him and he saw it happening around him. I am only getting to think about it and having the discourse now.

I am more interested in phenomenology, and how that aligns with the study of mysticism and the supernatural effect in Hindustani music. Colonialism, affect theory, again very philosophical...multiculturalism, hybridity, globalisation...this is kind of the most theoretical part I am addressing...ya I mean the more I am spending time with it, I think it is not only changing me as a musician but as a human being.

M

Philosophy begins with the feeling of astonishment.

Fantastic imagery and fantastic worlds are philosophical tools as well. This also feeds into my approach of making fan-fictions for philosophy and even maybe fan-philosophies itself.

In Japanese Otaku culture, there is a term called Doujinshi, a specific culture of producing fan-fictions based on manga worlds and manga characters. There are entire Doujinshi festivals where these so-called low grade works are traded, exchanged and enter competitions. I usually think of my works as part of this kind of a bootleg market of ideas and forms. I make a reference to this in [Toy Volcano](#) where a group specializes in a science itself that’s bootlegged...so Bootleg Physics.

It is necessary to restore magma

the boiling matter
the luxury of lava
to place a piece of fabric at the foot of a volcano to restore the world
the luxury of lava

–[News bytes]–

GS

The composition of a virus...how a certain group ends up creating the original illustration which is being used all across the world, as the most authentic representation of what is the composition of a virus and what it looks like.

If we don't have this image, what image would we have? If we didn't know what a bacteria or a fungus or a molecule or a virus looked like, it would be mysterious and it would...the only thing we would see is people dying, people falling sick but we would have absolutely no image... all we would see is symptoms...

M

So in the absence of symptoms, it's as if there isn't any virus, it has no manifest existence because that's the point at which it correlates with our immediate senses.

[Toy Volcano](#) is centred around these negative entities, these void-objects scattered around a mountain...and throughout the narrative of the video-lecture, there is a confusion whether the void is in the imagination, a gap in knowledge or whether the entity is a physical, geological fact.

The pandemic has retroactively become a context for the work. In its weirdness, the irrationality, at the level of blatant disbelief it's paradoxically at home.

His worries were mostly about contamination. He knew that holes are parasitic, always in need of a host. They do not exist alone.

PP

So [Share Your Quiet](#) actually came about as a response to the kind of noise that was almost made this index of public spirit after the janta curfew was announced...the day long Janta curfew. As you know i heard people coming out clanging and banging pots and pans and various other kinds of things....

This entire sort of manufacturing of a noisy consensus, around a certain kind of national identity...it occurred to me that there would be people who want to think of quiet as a withdrawal from this moment, as an active political withdrawal, and a sensory withdrawal.

So [Share Your Quiet](#) was essentially a very simple open call. It asked people to record what they perceived as quiet and send it to us. And then these recordings would be published every week and that way there could have been a symphonic dialogue. So people all across the world were actively interpreting their quiet and sharing it with one another and also listening in to the quiet of others. Because the project was announced during a time when most countries were in lockdown, it also in a way became a very particular archive of this global event. It was a synchronous experience of fear, of withdrawal, of isolation, but also of curiosity, and also of anticipation.

GS

I am walking most of the time in the city and that really works.

The pandemic has come but with the mask I keep walking. I see less people but I keep walking. I keep crossing colonies, traffic lights, societies, markets, shops. I am hopping here and there and it really works for me.

SYK

I was asked to do, very recently this radio interview and they asked me to play something which would resonate with the times and I found this rendition of a ghazal which Bahadur Shah Zafar wrote when he was exiled after the 1857 revolt.

“Baat karni mujhe mushkil kabhi aisi toh na thi, jaisi ab
hai teri mehfil kabhi aisi toh na thi”

*(It was never as difficult to converse as it is now,
this gathering was never as it is now)*

He wrote this ghazal while being confined in a room and looking at Delhi from a window and in spite of being the king of the Delhi Sultanate he couldn't go out. You know when this lockdown started I felt like this old retreated lost king who is sitting behind the window and just looking at the world go by and not being able to have any conversation without any social awkwardness.

M

This reminds me of a very interesting text I read about the pandemic by Michael Taussig called [‘Would a Shaman help?’](#)

“...with global meltdown we now live in a reenchanting universe for which the aesthetic of a dark surrealism is relevant.”

He equates shamanism with Giorgio Chirico's paintings where “being alone in cities with empty streets and piazzas is more shamanic than the real thing”.

PP

Even though we are being told that everything is closed, that all kinds of productive labour is at a standstill...Well yes, productive labour that feeds the logic of capital, businesses is maybe at a standstill but there is a production relentlessly ongoing. People are cleaning their houses, feeding their children, waking up in the morning, doing reading, doing listening, you know and that is also work!

SYK

It's really interesting for me this entire lockdown has pushed me to come out of my own addictions, my own habits, my own naïve needs of being somewhere, of doing something, or getting out of the house...

GS

Just because of sitting in the balcony I was able to do works with charcoal and watercolour, and with ink, and with oil paints, acrylics, with brushes that I had not used in 20 years... The space got energised, it got a different energy for me...it became a different understanding of being at home...

SYK

In Hindustani music and also in mysticism there is this concept of Chilla which is nothing but solitary confinement. Centuries old tales- they say that saints have been practicing it to attain higher levels...so for me I take it from that angle...I think that this is a blessing in disguise for me. All I need to do is just sit at one place, gather my thoughts and only work towards my research, towards my music, towards my own understanding of life...and that's the only way to do it you know.

GS

I suppose, I think the moment we have a change of routine, we become alert of the new surroundings. Or I suppose the existing ones which have always been there for us.

M

I mean you're actually training your mind to change...that's something I enjoy a lot...because you are changing your own mind that is most interesting...like what else is better.

PP

Yes of course, you know we are surrounded by an anxiety about the future, about our present and that anxiety is not only an individual anxiety but also a collective anxiety and I think that even though we may not be able to physically congregate or move perhaps, it is important to retain these spaces which actually intend to pushback whether it is through what we choose to say but also equally from the spaces we choose to withdraw from and refuse to participate in.

GS

... listening to conversations...so listening has been healing and so has been expressing...

PP

And it is this kind of an archive through the space of healing, through the space of listening together which can produce a healing...maybe a collective healing produced through a collective listening...

M

So it's like okay should we make this complete film entirely at home...just make small papier mache models and do stuff...so that's what I was saying...should we find some 3d experts and then learn a lot of After Effects, create new actors, new places, new landscapes, new country and then shoot the film in that country.