

From SOB0 to OSB0?

Kamayani Sharma plots the trajectory of the alternative art scene in Bombay.

It was difficult to get hold of artist Julius Macwan, founder of the Bandra-based art space called Last Ship. When we finally did, he informed us that his initiative was shutting down after more than two years. Why? “Because nobody gets it.”

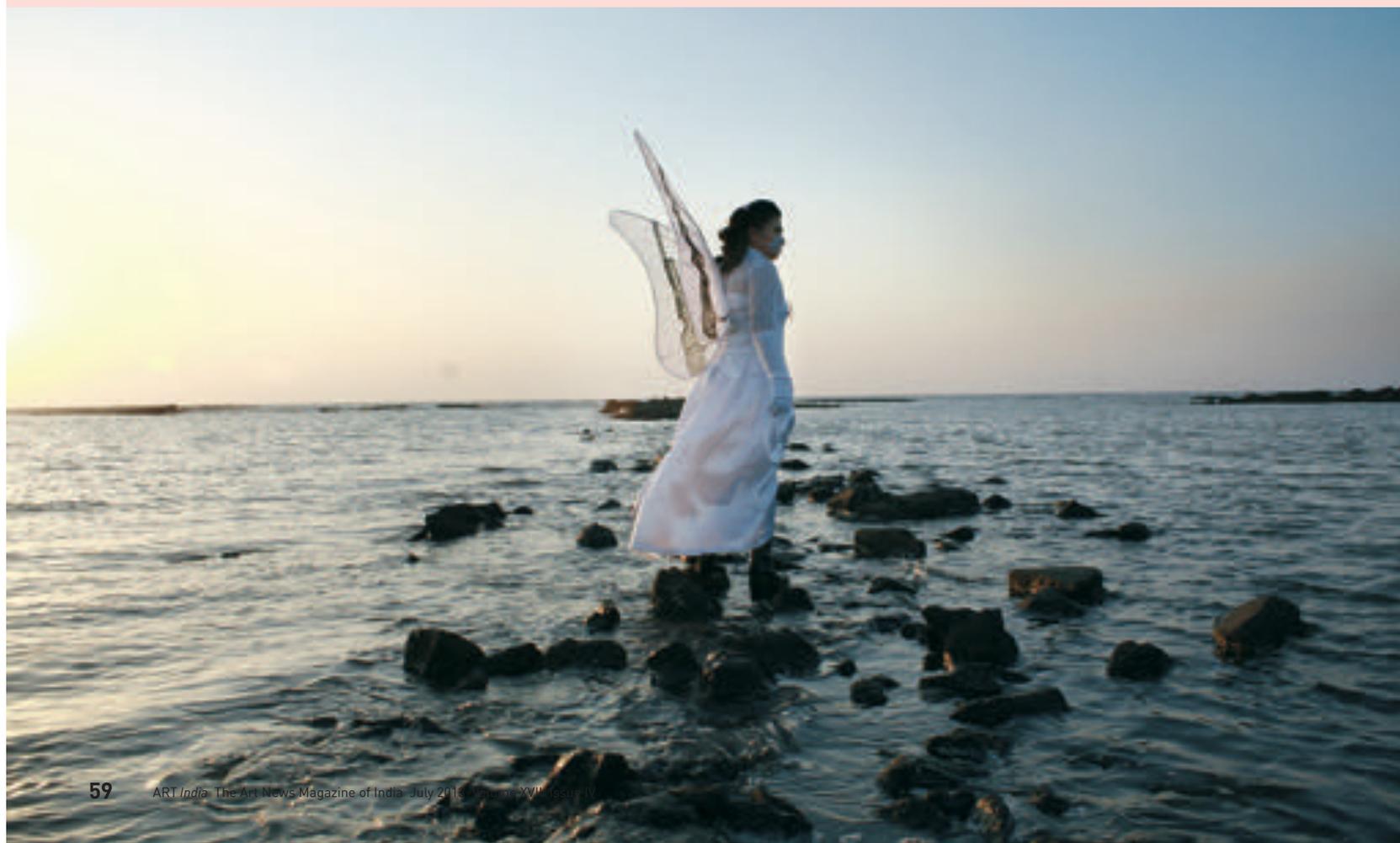
One is unsure what to make of this statement. If there was ever a time for an art initiative to be ‘gotten’, it would be now. Over the past couple of years, there has been an acceleration in the emergence of collectives, residencies and experimental spaces. If one were to create a typology of these organisations, one would discover agencies responsible for public art projects, artists banding together to offer studio space and mentorship, and individuals looking to engage neighbourhoods away from the sparkle of South Bombay.

Unlike the New York of the '60s and the '70s, Bombay hopes to develop a public-funded ‘underground’ in spite of the government, not because of it. Christine Ithurbide, a geographer researching contemporary art spaces in India at the Université Paris Diderot, puts the proliferation of many private art initiatives in the country down to a lack of state support, contending that they arose in response to needs not being met – Khoj and Sarai, of course, but also the Bhulabhai Desai Institute in its heyday, for example. Ithurbide also emphasises that the practical realities of Bombay’s political economy have had an influence on the development of its cultural topography. Skyrocketing real estate prices force artists to move north even as a commercial gallery district thrives down south. “On the other hand, Baroda

has all the right ingredients – artists, students and low rents – and still not many significant initiatives. So I suppose it’s a matter of willingness as well.”

It is the absence of traditional forms of funding and patronage that has resulted in the cropping up of a variety of organisations with diverse ambitions and operating models outside the gallery circle. Critic Gitanjali Dang, founder of an alternative curatorial project/programme Khanabadosh, does not see galleries and non-profits in Bombay being antagonistic to each other. “The gallery has been the backbone of the scene. The idea, however, is to explore projects outside the established

Mansi Bhatt. *No Moral.* Performance at [en]counters – powerPLAY. Organised by Art Oxygen. 2013.



structure.” Among Khanabadosh’s projects was Valsan Koorma Kolleri’s *Camouflage*, a set of site-specific sculptures that blended into the environs of the Mumbai Port Trust Garden. Perhaps, it is in the case of public art projects, which demand significant monetary and logistical support, that the city might come across as not providing support. Change, however, is on the way.

Earlier this year, one found amidst the joggers and dog-walkers on Bandra’s sea-facing promenade, clusters of people standing and contemplating what appeared to be a utility pole with the phrase *I Live Under Your Sky Too* spelt out in three languages using LED wires. This was Shilpa Gupta’s sculpture silhouetted against the Arabian Sea (since moved to the High Street Phoenix mall). Funded by the Hyderabad-based Creative India Foundation (CIF), helmed by Diana Campbell, the project is an attempt to bring art out of the sequestered white cube.

Apart from the CIF, several organisations

have risen to the challenge. Asia Art Projects helped organise [en]counters – powerPLAY in January, the Focus Photography Festival in March and published the Mumbai Art Map to attract a new viewership to the city’s existing art districts. What About Art? run by Eve Lemesle, hopes to make life easy for artists and agencies wishing to mount ambitious public art ventures by providing logistical assistance and organising funds. Says Lemesle, “We help artists with their studio practices as well as public art projects – fabrication and installation. We help cultivate collaborations between them and engineers and architects.” Says Elise Foster Vander Elst, Executive Director of Asia Art Projects, “It’s interesting to note that over the last few years in Mumbai several galleries have closed. However, many new arts organisations have appeared.”

Art Oxygen, the initiative whose flagship project is the aforementioned [en]counters, an annual public art festival spread across Bombay that engages with issues affecting

citizens, has similar objectives. Co-founder Leandre D’Souza reiterates that the idea is to appeal to people who don’t visit galleries. “We work with neighbourhoods and with artists from the city who understand its complexity,” she adds. “For example, two years ago Sharmila Samant’s intervention, *Mrigjal*, tackled the issue of unequal distribution of water in the city.”

Samant’s Open Circle (1999-2008), an initiative with Tushar Joag, Shilpa Gupta and Archana Hande, is mentioned by another group of artists as an inspiration for their own. Cona, a Borivali-based artist-run initiative, has Hemali Bhuta, Sachin Kondhalkar, Rajalakshmi Pandit and Shreyas Karle as its founding members. Karle is an experienced manager of residencies thanks to his ongoing stint as the Director of Rajasthan-based Sandarbh, initiated by Chintan Upadhyay. Cona is run from a space in Bhuta and Karle’s home. Bhuta locates Cona on Bombay’s art map, “This space and its unusual location, the Other Side Of Bombay (OSBO) as

Valsan Koorma Kolleri.
Installation at *Camouflage*.
Organised by
Khanabadosh. 2013.





Collaborations are the order of the day: Shreyas Karle of Cona and Diana Campbell of Creative India Foundation in conversation with young artists, students and curators. 2013.

opposed to the SOBO art district, aims at creating an initiative that functions at the periphery. It bridges a gap. Since most of the artists live and work in close proximity, this is akin to an adda.” They see themselves mentoring a younger generation of artists and creating opportunities for them. Bhuta is eloquent about the need to offer options, “It has become important to establish parallel pedagogies, not to rebel but to improvise by filling the blanks.” The closest relative to Cona is the Clark House Initiative founded by Sumesh Sharma and Zasha Colah. Bhuta is optimistic about the gradual but steady transformation of the scene by these developments, “It is a new phenomenon and will take time to penetrate the commercial art scene in Mumbai. The only concern should be that these organisations preserve their alternative identities and not turn into institutional players.”

While Cona expresses a fear of being subsumed into the system, Visual Disobedience seems to want in. A relentless presence on the internet, Visual Disobedience’s website claims that it wants to change the way art is perceived and “make it more accessible”. Its achievements include the Mogambo mural in Bandra’s

Chum Village; it also helped bring Miko Kuro’s *Midnight Tea* to Mumbai last year. “We want people to buy affordable art,” say Saurabh Kanwar, founder, and Kevin Lobo, editor. They talk about how Visual Disobedience began life as an idea that Flarepath, the social media company Kanwar runs, pitched to a client. The pitch was unsuccessful but the initiative was launched. Interested in promoting artists through social networking portals, getting them commissions and opportunities to get exhibited, Visual Disobedience draws inspiration from Only Much Louder (OML), the management company for musicians. OML seems to have a cult following and indicates the creation of a genre of social media-oriented organisations that function like talent agencies.

In contrast to Khanabadosh, Art Oxygen and Cona lamenting the shortage of grant-making bodies, Visual Disobedience’s funding model does not preclude corporate sponsorship. They sold merchandise made by their artists at the NH7 Weekender in Delhi and Pune and had two artists painting on a denim canvas provided by Jack & Jones at the Pune event. Does this compromise the creative integrity of the artists? Or blur the line

between encouraging talent and building a brand?

Apart from Macwan’s *Last Ship* (2011-13) Saloni Doshi’s Mazgaon-based Space 118 has been offering residencies since 2010. And this July, Cona is starting its programme with ‘Passing Through’, an opportunity for young artists from outside the city “to explore it through research or a process-based practice”. A fully-funded residency supported by the Inlaks Shivdasani Foundation, it is expected to culminate in an exhibition at Chatterjee & Lal.

While all these organisations operate independently, with different sets of goals, there seems to be great interdependence. What About Art? teamed up for the Focus Photography Festival with Asia Art Projects that collaborated with Art Oxygen for [en] counters; CONA hosted Khanabadosh’s event *Something to Chew On...* Quite a case of musical chairs! What they have in common is the desire to push the envelope and pull in an audience. Foster Vander Elst certainly feels like she’s riding a new wave, “We are part of a group of dynamic organisations who are establishing new models of producing art projects in India”, she says confidently.