

A Bouquet of Curatorial Voices

A year ago, when the first edition of the United Art Fair (UAF), founded by businessman Annurag Sharma, was announced, it purported to be a free, artist-driven fair. Eventually, the Fair didn't live up to its promise, charging a 35% commission on works sold. The Fair's business model came into question and its curatorial rigour was criticised.

Making amends, the second edition of the UAF, held at Pragati Maidan, New Delhi, from the 14th to the 17th of September, was conceptualised by a new curatorial team headed by Peter Nagy and comprising Alka Pande, Mayank Kaul, Heidi Fichtner, Meera Menezes and Ram Rahman. This time, the UAF came clean about charging artists 50% commission on sales. Despite this drawback, the Fair showed promise as a platform for young artists struggling to find gallery representation. **Kamayani Sharma** met Nagy, Menezes and Rahman to discuss the successes and the failures of the second edition of the UAF.

Kamayani Sharma: You helm a gallery. What was the experience of orchestrating a multitude of curatorial voices at the United Art Fair?

Peter Nagy: I am not a dictator. For me, the United Art Fair was about creating a democratic platform for diversity. A plurality of perspectives meant that each brought her or his own strengths and tastes to the project. Alka Pande is known for working with more traditional material, while Heidi Fichtner is more involved with 'cutting edge' art. We also sourced works from the Delhi Crafts Council. Ram Rahman is such a photography aficionado while Meera Menezes has her own approach, but with a full-time job she was very busy, so she asked to take a half-position. I therefore asked Mayank Kaul, a designer, to join the team and balance things out. They signed on because I asked them to; they are all friends of mine and agreed to join because I was at the helm.

K.S.: You have spoken about rejecting the 'boxy booth' aesthetic prevalent in most fairs and aimed at a museum-like organisational logic.

P.N.: I wanted to break the 'boxy booth' aesthetic of art fairs and have a greater sense of space, one that was also, perhaps, labyrinthine. I wanted people to get lost, to be confused, so that they would double back and remain engaged. I wanted them to talk about the artwork while standing in front of it and not in some 'blah blah' tent dedicated to symposiums, which we eschewed altogether. The good thing about the fair model is that it's about foregrounding the experience of the actual object.

K.S.: Tales abound of artists striking deals outside the Fair causing it to suffer commercially. What is the role of the UAF as a middleman?

P.N.: The UAF is a middleman, a platform intending to sell artists' work. One has to be sensitive to the parameters of the market. I started Nature Morte in 1997 and it didn't really start making any sort of profit till 2003. Most businesses take years to build and require investors. Dealers and collectors try to strike deals behind my back all the time because that's just the nature of the business.

K.S.: Speaking of Nature Morte, how do you see your role as a gallerist in relation to that as an artistic director of an art fair? Would you show any of the artists here in your gallery?



The curators of the United Art Fair: (Left to Right) Mayank Kaul, Meera Menezes, Ram Rahman, Heidi Fichtner, Alka Pande and Peter Nagy.

INTERVIEW



P.N.: A gallery has different commitments – it is about honing artists and establishing a long-term association. The perception is that Nature Morte is wildly successful and yes, we are to a certain extent. Many of the shows aren't always popular with Indian buyers and the sales to European clientele have dried up since the boom years so it's a sustainability issue at the moment. But that's business. Would I show some of the artists that will be at UAF at Nature Morte? Some of them, yes. Gallerists did come specifically to scout for talent – Amrita and Priya Jhaveri, Sharan Apparao and Tunty Chauhan were all there.

Kamayani Sharma: Given that the market for photography in India is still not mature, how did you go about curating a photography section in a commercial fair?

Ram Rahman: As the display wasn't themed or conceptualised around a theoretical formulation, I was free to pick works. Many of the works were little known. I also have an interest in the history of the medium. So, I thought it was a good opportunity to explore it and bring out work which would be very hard to show in a gallery as gallerists are very hesitant to take risks. My idea was to bring together a wide sweep of practices – documentary-style, film studio work, pictorialist, studio and non-studio work.

What I also liked about the situation was that it was public. People have a real connect with the medium. You can put up almost any photographic image and they will pay more attention to it than to a painting.

K. S.: How did you decide whose works to include?

R. R.: Dev Benegal is a film director but I just happened to know that he's a very keen photographer. So, I persuaded him to show his pictures. It took me a decade to twist Manu Parekh's arm so that he could show his photographic work. He was very nervous. I've known the work of Ram Dhamija, O. P. Sharma and J. H. Thakker for a long time. When I had started my lecture series,

A View of the UAF. 2013. The photography section was curated by **Ram Rahman**.

The Forgotten Histories of Indian Photography, I had asked them for small digital images I could project. Among the new photographers, I found Selvaprakash online. A lot of people approached me and some of them were included. I also made some surprise discoveries along the way. Apart from the photographers, I brought in enamel artists, paintings by some Goan artists and a signboard painter called Akhlaq Ahmed.

K. S.: What was your curatorial approach like in terms of preparing the display?

R. R.: I have worked on Sahmat shows which have involved hundreds of people, so the scale wasn't so alien. I paid attention to context and content. We discussed the way the works should be shown. For example, Romi Khosla has been studying conflict zones and shifting population. So, along with his pictures of Bosnia and Palestine, I asked him to create a dense display with text and maps to highlight the narrative.

With Selvaprakash's photographs, I said that I could see them as large prints and asked him if he could afford to have them made. He agreed but had to wait for many months to save up from his salary. I often had these





A View of the UAF. 2013.

double interests running through. And I was doing these photo-puns with Husain in works by Ram Dhamija, Habib Rahman and O. P. Sharma. I just wanted Husain to be 'present' in the Fair.

My real effort with all these photographers was to get them to make prints, frame them and allow me to show them. They had to pay for them; a gallery was not sponsoring them. That's a risk I persuaded them to take.

K. S.: In the absence of institutional support can one consider the UAF to be an alternative space for artists to show their work?

R. R.: Surely. After all, I was able to show work that I wouldn't have been able to show elsewhere. Government institutions like the NGMA or the IGNCA wouldn't have done it. If the model can be sustained, it may well develop into an alternative space for lesser known artists. Also, it gets attention with all the online publicity in the form of slideshows. Even if people see only one image, at least they are reading a little bit of the text about the photographer. It's a way of opening out the knowledge field.

Kamayani Sharma: How did you select artists?

Meera Menezes: There were three ways in which I decided whom and what to include. There were artists whom I had seen at residencies and shows, and I liked their work. I also asked several artist friends for recommendations. Artists have a very particular way of looking at art. I enjoy that act of seeing and wanted to incorporate it. The third way, surprisingly, was Facebook. I saw images online and if I liked them, I asked the artists whether they would be interested in exhibiting. If they were, I requested them to send me more images from which I selected works for the Fair.

K. S.: Peter Nagy said that he didn't want the five of you talking to each other. What was the process of collaboration like? How did you feel about the arrangement?

M. M.: Yes, the only time we conferred was to make sure that we weren't selecting the same people! Peter was very clear that he wanted each of us to bring our distinct sensibilities to the table and did not want to muddy the waters. How I felt about it is a tough question. Some sections worked and some didn't. People told me that my relatively quiet and restrained voice got submerged.

The scale was a tremendous challenge for me. Most of my works were small and intimate and at a fair you need to have a very different conception of space. I realise now that I was not as ambitious as the 'fairground' format of a fair demanded I be. Most of the work had to be wall-mounted, so sculptures and video works could not be included because of infrastructural limitations. The Fair was good in the way it was diverse but it was also uneven.

K. S.: What were some of the challenges of being part of the UAF?

M. M.: One big hurdle was that some artists weren't willing or able to accept the terms and conditions of the Fair – 50% commission, giving one art work to the Fair and also paying for one-way transportation of the works. These were limiting factors.

K. S.: You are both a critic and a curator. How was your involvement in a project of this size informed by both these roles?

M. M.: I have never understood the idea that there is a conflict between one's roles as a curator and a critic. The concept dictates who I am going to include in a show. There was no scope for that kind of conflict anyway – many of the artists are just starting out and I obviously haven't written on any of them.

