

IF THE ELEPHANT GETS SICK

Seven artists tell how the health emergency is overwhelming India

By **Maria Teresa Capacchione**

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On March 24th at 8 pm the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi appeared on TV to announce that, from midnight of the same day, all of India - 1.3 billion inhabitants - would be quarantined: he closed shops and markets and prohibited all types of transport, both public and private. Thus initiating, with just a 4 hours' notice, the largest and most severe lockdown known in the history of the world.

With a devastating result on the population, as stated by the writer Arundhati Roy in a recent article published in the Financial Times (*): "The lockdown worked like a chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated hidden things. As shops, restaurants, factories and the construction industry shut down, as the wealthy and the middle classes enclosed themselves in gated colonies, our towns and megacities began to extrude their working-class citizens — their migrant workers — like so much unwanted accrual. (...) The lockdown to enforce physical distancing had resulted in the opposite — physical compression on an unthinkable scale. (...) The main roads might be empty, but the poor are sealed into cramped quarters in slums and shanties. (...) Today (April 2) in India, there are almost 2,000 confirmed cases and 58 deaths. These are surely unreliable numbers, based on woefully few tests."

Exibart asked some of the most successful Indian artists working between Mumbai (**Dhruvy Acharya, Atul Dodhya, Archana Hande, Jitish Kallat**) and New Delhi (**Raqs Media Collective and Mithu Sen**) and one artist living between India and the United States (**Annu Palakunnathu Matthew**) to tell us how they think their country will be able to face this extraordinary and dramatic moment and how they live it from a professional and personal point of view.

"A country of 1.3 billion people have been told that they can't move. And there aren't really any systems in place to take care of the daily necessities of people who are not cushioned by class privilege. We have seen thousands of people walk silently through the streets in a mass exodus from the cities. Seeing this caravan of people walk, knowing that they will walk for hundreds of miles, against the might of a violent state, is a strangely intense experience". Say the **Raqs Media Collective**. "This pandemic – continues **Dhruvi Acharya** - is bringing to the fore so many of our misplaced priorities as humans, like choosing greed, war and terror over the environment, education and healthcare.

But Indians also have a very strong sense of community and as far as possible, people are helping each other. In most of Mumbai, vegetable vendors come to street corners and

people wait in line with masks and gloves, pharmacies and grocery stores are still fairly well stocked. Industrialists, actors and just regular folks have been donating generously to feed the migrants”.

The concern that emerges most strongly from the interviews is the awareness that this pandemic is terribly discriminatory. “Quarantine and social distancing, necessary as they are, are also social luxuries”, states **Mithu Sen**. Also **Jitish Kallat** points out that respecting the given rules is almost impossible when “a large part of the urban population lives in a very congested situations where true social distancing is very hard to enforce as water supply and sanitation are shared by huge numbers of people.”

So how does this situation of unease, of strong concern, of fear reflect on the work of artists? There are two seemingly opposite attitudes: those who were annihilated, "frozen" by the events as **Archana Hande** told us, those who instead feel the urgency to communicate the extraordinary and dramatic moment through their work.

“At the moment I see this as a phase for reflection and I have no idea how this might manifest in my work”, says **Kallat** to whom **Mithu Sen** echoes: “I feel that its time for us to be inward-looking; reflect on the systemic, structural, and cognitive values that have been implanted within us. We are caught right now in an in-between state, having long drifted away from the normalcy of the way things were, and with no clear vision of what the future will look like”.

Annu Matthew who had recently returned to the US after a six-month stay in India when the lockdown in America began, admits that “with the crisis in the background, I find that I am unable to focus with my usual intensity on the installation of my project on the *Unremembered* Indian soldiers from the Second World War. I get distracted and there is a helplessness that I respond to by thinking, the only thing one can do is follow the rules. Will I do work on this pandemic? I don’t think so. But it will clearly influence the way that I share my final work outside of conventional gallery spaces”.

Dhruvi Acharya’s work, however, has always focused on events and experiences, the most positive as the most dramatic. “In this situation we are witnessing so many varied ways of human thinking – generosity, selflessness, stupidity, fear, disregard of science, kindness, unity, racism etc. And then there is the drastic change in our normal life with no outings, social distancing and isolation. All this is bound to affect my work”.

For **Raqs Media Collective** who’s work is mostly about time and about a sense of interconnection: “The virus changes the way we experience both things. It changes the way we think about as simple an act as breathing. Nothing can be taken for granted now. Neither in art, nor in life.”

Mithu Sen, who presented the performance (Un)Mansplaining" at the last Venice Biennale, is an artist/poet who works with different media including drawing, poetry, installations, sound: in your opinion can we consider this pandemic a war of our times?

While I am hesitant to invoke War as a parallel to situate this pandemic, I am in agreement that this situation is as novel as the virus is. It is becoming more and more apparent that our world is changing, and has already changed, immeasurably. So much so that, to talk about the contemporary moment without talking about Covid-19 would be as ridiculous as talking about life in India in the 1940s without mentioning the partition, or about 1950s in Germany without mentioning the second World War.

I am also fearful of how Covid-19 really is divulging itself as a mutation of existing cultural and political hierarchies — not only within nation-states but also in between them. It is yet again presenting to us a model of the politics of projection, not self-invigoration, self-reflection, and self-assessment that we need — with most urgency.

The decay, death, and destruction being wrecked by the virus are potentially shifting the meaning of war and devastation. When have we lost so many lives in our history and due to what? I think this inquiry will only reveal the unusualness of what is happening.

Archana Hande knows the life of the slum very well and brought it into some of her works like "All is fair in magic white" also presented at gallery Z2O in Rome. We asked her: how do you think the "social distancing" can be applied in a situation where about 1 million people live in about 1.7 km² (thinking about the only slum of Dharavi, in the city of Mumbai)?

The social norms and rules and regulation for this Virus is only for privileged people, from washing hands to staying home to keeping a meter distance - is a question of basics only for privileged ppl - upper-middle-class and above. As I mentioned the brain is frozen, I can see the quick conversion of becoming a dictatorial world - but can't stop. As much the virus is of the new generation it has come to help the dictatorial power to succeed. So are we ready to see a clean society - free of poor and free of unwanted religion, language, caste or class?

Athul Dodya is an artist who also exhibited at the Venice Biennale 2019, very sensitive to social phenomena, his work was deeply marked by the events that shook India in 2002: do you think that this unique event will somehow push itself into your future artworks and if so, how?

Well, the time and the world we live in is always affects a sensitive artists. As I said above that I don't know whether it will add some new thoughts or approach to my process of painting. As far as creative process is concerned, things doesn't change overnight. At the moment we are also not sure that how this disease will be tackled in coming days. So it's too soon to talk about it's impact in future work.

Raq Media Collective (composed of Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta) is a collective that explores, through media projects, the world remodeled by globalization. We asked them what will be the economic, social and cultural impact of this lockdown in India?

The mass exodus of migrant workers from cities that happened within days of the announcement of the lockdown showed us that instinctively, people knew that the economy was sinking, rapidly. And that there was total lack of confidence in the state's ability to deliver support to the population. Those who rule us offer empty rituals in exchange of our subservience.

The state tries out new tricks of repression. Some work, some don't. Limits are being tested, politically and socially, and things are frayed, fragile. The last three months had seen great upheaval and hope, because people were taking what 'citizenship' means very seriously in response to an attempt to pass a discriminatory citizenship law (**). The streets of our cities had become sites of a new attempt at creating an agile democracy of deeds.

A Jitish Kallat - artist who investigates the relationship between the community and individual, also present at the Venice Biennale 2019 - we asked how he thinks that the closure of borders can affect the development of Indian art. And if, in general, the economy of India will be affected by the isolation to which she has forced this situation.

The closing of borders and related health anxieties are going to change the world for a very long time to come. We had seen waves of de-globalisation emerge with rising nationalism and xenophobia, now Covid-19 has added a And in this the Indian art scene or the Indian economy will suffer (and also transform) just like all other art scenes around the world. As social distancing, travel bans and event cancellations have become the new norm we witness how a tiny microscopic entity has invaded the very life-pattern of the most dominant species on the planet. Perhaps this is a test to see if we can co-operate and re-calibrate our relationship with our surroundings and the planet. Perhaps a planetary pandemic of this scale forces us to go into isolation to truly reflect on our inter-connectivity.

Speaking of closing the borders I managed to return just in time from the United States, I was in Nashville where, just a week before the global lockdown, was inaugurated at the Frist Art Museum my exhibition entitled *Return to Sender*. And, as a demonstration of the way in which this pandemic has revolutionized our way of life, within a few days the museum - which of course had to close its doors to visitors - has organized itself to put on line the exhibition, now visible to virtually everyone:

<https://fristartmuseum.org/calendar/detail/jitish-kallat>

Dhruvi Acharya focuses on the psychological and emotional aspects of a woman's life with a subtle style, sometimes dark and often ironic, in this period from her quarantine is exploring in her paintings the impact of the pandemic on psychological, social and physical aspects. We asked her how she thinks the contemporary art system can react to such an extraordinary event?

Once we get our bearings, I think the art world will come together to raise funds for those in need. I personally think it may benefit the art world to slow down bit so artists get more time to make work before exhibiting. Selling of art will also be affected – of course the wealthy may continue to buy the work of established artists.

But it may get hard for mid-career and younger artists, so maybe the art fraternity can support young deserving artists with supplies, stipends and studio spaces. Also, many galleries may close down, so online exhibitions could become the new normal until we have a vaccine.

Also, just as museums are opening their online doors and making their collection more accessible, the contemporary art world has an opportunity to reach out to communities in different ways and make art more accessible to the sections of societies who say they don't understand art, because I firmly believe art has the power of healing hearts and minds.

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew uses archival photographs as a source of inspiration to examine concepts of memory and to re-examine individual and collective history. Her family lives in India and she works in the USA: both places are in lockdown now, how do you think the two countries differ in their approach to this difficult situation?

In February, I came back to the US after a six-month Fulbright Fellowship in India. When we left India in February, I was incredulous that there were few so called reported cases there. Especially with the density of people, trade and travel with China and East Asia, it didn't add up.

India took more sudden and extreme measures but with little planning for the masses of disadvantaged. When we left India in February, I was incredulous that there were few so called reported cases there. Especially with the density of people, trade and travel with China and East Asia, it didn't add up. Once I was back in the US, the leadership here also did not address the impending pandemic and did not push the precautions that we could have taken to lessen its impact. As we drove across the country from the East coast to the West, ending in California, the crisis unfolded before our eyes, leaving me feeling the steps that had been taken seemed too little too late.

While speaking to my friends and family in India, I hear that they are willing to hunker down for two weeks or more till this passes. But the fact that they and I have the option to do that reflects a vast class difference, as many of the poor are stranded and hungry. This is also reflected in United States. The photographs in the Indian media are heartbreaking and seem to echo past images from the Bengal famine through Partition.

As we said at the beginning, what is happening in India is the most massive quarantine a country has ever been subjected to in the world. Yet the news that we receive are few and incomplete, but it is unimaginable that such an extraordinary situation does not overwhelm like a tsunami all that meets: people, economy, culture and, of course, the world of art.

We cannot, therefore, not look with enormous concern, anguish, but also interest in everything that happens in the second most populous nation in the world, a country of enormous social, cultural and economic complexity, like India.

(*) Arundhati Roy, *Financial Times* 3 April 2020: <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

(**)The new citizenship law proposed by Prime Minister Modi would facilitate the acquisition of Indian nationality to a large number of immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, provided that they are not Muslims, thus affecting the Hindu communities, Sikh, Ainit, Christian, Buddhist and Parsi. According to the opposition, the measure represents a fundamental break with the principle of secularism of the Indian State enshrined in the Constitution.