

Capital Spaces

Meera Menezes takes stock of the changes in Delhi's gallery scene.

LIKE THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES, THE THREAT OF SEALING and demolition has been hanging over the heads of gallery owners in Delhi for the past couple of years. In the run up to the Commonwealth Games, scheduled to be hosted in the capital in 2010, there has been a major drive to shut down commercial establishments located in residential/institutional areas. Faced with the risk of closure, galleries have had to move out of the city's centre and relocate to its periphery. Consequently, they have shifted to industrial areas, to pockets of Lal Dora land (the revenue term for *abadi* areas or rural settlements that existed in 1908, many of which have been absorbed by the city and are now 'urban villages') and even to the satellite towns of Gurgaon and Noida.

It is ironic that at a time when the art market is booming, prime property in the centre of town cannot be bought for the love of money. Art aficionados now have to commute longer distances to see shows. However, this enforced movement of galleries has not been without its upside.

Spaced Out

Galleries have more room at their disposal, now that they have shifted from small, cramped residential quarters to large, factory like spaces. Vadehra Art Gallery, for instance, re-located from its premises in Defence Colony to a bigger gallery. It now occupies two floors in a building in the Okhla Industrial Area.

Anant Art Gallery made a radical move when it shifted to two different locations - you can visit it at both Lado Sarai and Noida. Anant Art in Noida comprises two spanking new buildings dedicated exclusively to its exhibitions. Even an older gallery like Gallery Espace, which is fortunate enough to be located within a commercial complex, has expanded so that it now boasts three levels of exhibition space. Having bigger spaces at their disposal allows galleries to host big group shows and to accommodate larger artworks. This, in turn, gives artists an opportunity to show their massive installations in Delhi's commercial galleries - before this, they could only have been showcased abroad or at a museum. Increasingly, galleries occupying factory-like spaces are being used in interesting ways. They certainly provide curators with a plethora of possibilities.

A number of galleries which are now in close proximity to each other in Lado Sarai - like Gallery Threshold, Gallery Art Motif, Artpilgrim Art Gallery and Anant Art Gallery - are working together

to promote the area as an art hub. They are also in the process of synchronizing the openings of their exhibitions, which would be a boon for art lovers.

Areas outside the city centre were given a further fillip when Bodhi Art moved to Gurgaon. Bodhi Art's exhibitions in Delhi, however, have been nothing to write home about - save, perhaps, for the odd preview. The Devi Art Foundation is another important initiative in Gurgaon. Its first show was titled *Still Moving Image* (from August to November 2008) and was curated by Decksha Nath. The founder Anupam Poddar is a serious collector of cutting-edge contemporary Indian art, which he has been interested in for a long time. *Still Moving Image* drew from his collection and reflected Poddar's eye for spotting risk-taking talent.

The search for space has also prompted some galleries like Gallery Nvya to go truly commercial and move into Delhi's mushrooming malls. Some might argue that it is good for galleries to have a presence at more public venues so that they can reach out to a wider audience. However, this particular sort of re-location merely serves to draw our attention to the increasing commodification of art.

The expansion of spaces of commercial galleries and their move away from the city centre has had an impact on the Visual Arts Gallery at the India Habitat Centre. Given that galleries were earlier housed in smaller residential spaces, the large area that the VAG offered was snapped up for hosting a number of significant shows. More recently, however, the VAG has slipped from its pre-eminent position. There have been other reasons for VAG's decline on the art circuit. Apart from the expense of hiring it, the gallery is on offer for short periods, which reduces the exposure the show gets. Moreover, since no major alterations can be made to the space (the walls, for instance), only certain kinds of work can be displayed. Commercial galleries, on the other hand, are increasingly open to experimental modes of display.

The city proper has however managed to get a thrust with the opening of a new art complex in Connaught Place by the Religare Arts Initiative which launched its inaugural show in October. This centre hopes to have an all-encompassing programme with documentaries, seminars, residencies and a library.

There has also been a shift in the mindset of gallery owners in the city. The fact that galleries now participate in Art Fairs all over





Installation view of *City Cite Site*, an exhibition curated by **Latika Gupta** at Anant Art Gallery in 2008.

the world - Hong Kong, Shanghai, London, Basel and Dubai - has exposed them to international trends and cutting-edge art. In keeping with the current aspirations of artists, gallery owners are now more willing to showcase and fund video and performance art. Nowhere was this more evident than at *KHOJ LIVE 08: The KHOJ Performance Art Festival*, which was spread over the city. Even staid galleries like Palette Art Gallery agreed to host events and exhibitions linked to the Festival. This augurs well for the capital's art scene, since it shows that galleries are now willing to think beyond the clinking of the cash register, and even to encourage art forms that are not easy to sell.

Unfortunately, Apeejay Media Gallery, which under the Directorship of Pooja Sood played a pioneering role in showcasing video art in the city, has now taken a backseat. However, several other galleries have rushed in to fill this lacuna and have come forward to support shows whose commercial success is not guaranteed. This was exemplified clearly at *Mechanisms of Motion*, the exhibition concentrating mainly on video art that art critic Marta Jakimowicz curated for Anant Art Gallery in February 2008. While gallerists like Peter Nagy at Nature Morte have always encouraged new media art, others like Renu Modi at Gallery Espace are also beginning to jump into

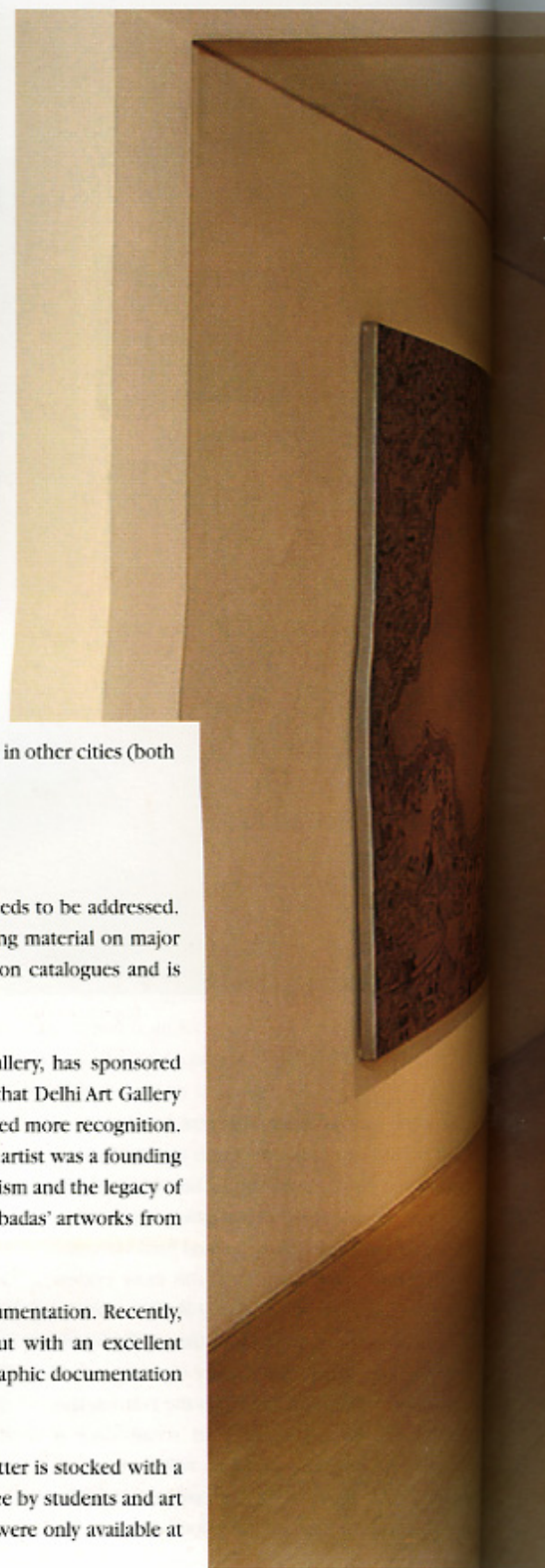
the fray. Modi's latest initiative, titled *Video Wednesday*, showcases videos by three artists on the last Wednesday of every month. Next year, the gallery plans to release a book featuring both the participating artists and their work.

Flush with funds, galleries are also no longer restricting themselves to hosting shows solely within their own premises. They have begun to rent spaces and work with public institutions for major exhibitions. Examples of such important initiatives include the *Raghu Rai Retrospective*, which Bodhi Art sponsored at the NGMA in 2008, and Anupam Sud's show sponsored by Palette Art

[Lead Feature]



Installation view of *Mechanisms of Motion*, an exhibition curated by Marta Jakimowicz at Anant Art Gallery in 2008.



Gallery at the Lalit Kala Akademi in 2007. Gallery owners in Delhi have started to network with galleries in other cities (both in India and abroad) in order to organize travelling exhibitions of contemporary Indian art.

The Drive for Documentation

The paucity of literature on contemporary Indian art is finally being treated as a problem that needs to be addressed. In the past, art students and writers used to wring their hands in despair at the woeful lack of reading material on major Indian artists and important exhibitions. Now, almost every gallery worth its salt publishes exhibition catalogues and is engaged in bringing out monographs on the artists they represent.

For instance, thanks to art historian Roobina Karode, Ashish Anand, Director of Delhi Art Gallery, has sponsored sumptuous and well-researched volumes on the artists the gallery represents. What is noteworthy is that Delhi Art Gallery does not focus on flavour-of-the-month artists; it deals with the work of artists who need to be accorded more recognition. A case in point was the retrospective it held of the Oslo-based artist Ambadas in 2008. The 85-year-old artist was a founding member of "1890", a Delhi-based movement that at one time tried to set itself up against Western Realism and the legacy of Raja Ravi Varma. The retrospective was painstakingly put together by the gallery, which sourced Ambadas' artworks from major art collections.

Vadehra Art Gallery (VAG) and Nature Morte have always believed in the value of good documentation. Recently, however, other galleries have woken up to its importance as well. Art Alive Gallery has come out with an excellent publication titled *Faces of Indian Art: Through the Lens of Nemat Ghosh*. This book provides photographic documentation of fifty-two artists in their studios.

VAG has also converted its Defence Colony space into an art bookshop and reading room. The latter is stocked with a range of journals, international art magazines and books on art and films, which can be perused for free by students and art lovers alike. Vadehra Bookstore is a welcome addition to the scene, as earlier, books and films on art were only available at



Gigi Scaria, Installation view of *Absence of an Architect* at Palette Art Gallery, 2007.



Raqs Media Collective. Installation view containing *Location (n)*, 2002, and *Co-ordinate (signs)*, 2002, at Nature Morte in 2006.

college libraries and the NGMA. The gallery has also set up the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art (FICA), which has a number of different goals. Among them, is the plan to establish a contemporary art museum in New Delhi by 2010. FICA is also in the process of building up an archive of contemporary artists and has instituted a yearly Research Fellowship to help promote critical writing on art. The FICA Emerging Artist Award 2008 was given to Baroda-based artist Sathyanand Mohan.

Walking the Talk

In an attempt to educate the viewing public

- and thereby enthruse new collectors - galleries are organizing lectures by artists and slide shows of their work. This gives the public a chance to interact with artists. Delhi has few spaces and events that are dedicated to promoting a discourse on visual art practices (with the notable exception of the annual cultural festival, Manthan), so these new initiatives are welcome additions. At least, they venture to establish other paradigms of aesthetic value than the prices that Indian artists are achieving at auctions.

While these new ventures are commendable, the contemporary Indian art exhibitions that we have seen over the last year have contained a

mixed bag of offerings. Few galleries are really showcasing cutting-edge art. Many artists feel that despite the boom in the art market, galleries are not really concerned with their long-term welfare and success. Artists, in turn, do not feel a sense of loyalty towards specific galleries and are willing to shift their allegiances if a better deal is offered to them.

Peter Nagy's Nature Morte has consistently presented good solo shows: from Sheba Chhachhi's exhibition *Winged Pilgrims: A Chronicle from Asia* in January 2008 to Mithu Sen's *New Works in Multiple Medias* in November 2007. Nagy has been supportive of progressive art initiatives. He has an unerring eye for high quality work and has



Josh P.S. *Who Owns the Peacock Throne?* Wood, wax and gold extracted soil. 150 cms x 250 cms x 212 cms. 2007. Exhibited at Nature Morte in 2007.

promoted Indian art and artists at various Biennales and Art Fairs abroad.

Anant Art Gallery, which is owned and run by Mamta Singhania, also encourages young artists working in new media. It is encouraging to see that commercial considerations often take a back seat at Anant - for instance, in shows like *Mechanisms of Motion* curated by Marta Jakimowicz or in solo shows by artists like Sheila Makhijani and Atul Bhalla. However, the quality of the artists that the gallery represents is, at times, uneven.

In the past, Vadehra Art Gallery concentrated on Modern art. Of late, though, its programming

includes many more exhibitions of contemporary Indian art. *Click ! Contemporary Photography in India*, a large show on photography in March 2008 was commendable although it could have been more discriminating in its selection of artists. One of the more memorable exhibitions at VAG's Okhla space was curated by Vidya Shivadas from the 9th of April to the 3rd of May 2008. *Fluid Structures - Gender and Abstraction* (1973 - 2008) focused on female artists (such as Gargi Raina, Nasreen Mohamedi and Zarina Hashmi) working with abstraction.

Even Gallery Espace, known for concentrating on Modern art, is slowly shifting gears

and encouraging work by younger artists. Palette Art Gallery, run by Rohit Gandhi and Rahul Khanna, has also been showcasing video works by artists like Gigi Scaria and Pratul Dash.

New galleries continue to pop up in the capital, hoping to cash in on the art market boom. Ironically, some of the older, more established ones like Art Heritage, which has hardly had any worthwhile shows, are being phased out of the gallery circuit. Of course, the litmus test for the Delhi art scene will really arrive when (and if) the market for art nosedives. Until then, both galleries and artists can rake in the shekels unchecked.