

CURATORSHIP REPORT

Specially Created for

Social Creatives X Kolor Kathmandu

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SECTION 1. Preliminary Stage (Guidelines for Curatorship)

SECTION 2. Curatorship in Action

SECTION 3. Artwork Development

SECTION 4. Final Considerations on Curatorship Experience

SECTION 5. Photo gallery

SECTION 1. Preliminary Stage (Guidelines for Curatorship)

Back in December 2012 Faris Basharahil, Chief Executive of Social Creatives, invited me to join his collaborative multiple mural project with Sattya collective of Kathmandu, in Nepal, on an unusual curatorial expedition.

Six artists from Social Creatives were assigned a wall in Kathmandu where they could unleash their creativity jointly and were also invited to collaborate individually with six Nepalese artists on six collaborative murals, as part of the larger project named *Kolor Kathmandu*.

PREAMBLE

Travelling to Nepal, where the birthplace of Siddharta Gautama Buddha is thought to be (Lumbini), is already an inspiration in itself for a further journey of self-discovery.

Coherently with my preceding curatorial projects, I continue to move in marginal spaces, where I firmly believe I can recover the authenticity and connectedness between art and life, that I regretfully find missing in most main-stream and market-oriented works.

Both with my curatorial practice and art writing, I try to stay focused on my intent to promote an experience of art that on one side is non-elitist and yet probing and on the other can offer opportunities for alternative and more visceral readings and reflections.

Sensing a gap all too often misleading between art theory and art practice, I have personally embarked on an experiential journey within performance art to supplement my concurrent research.

Benefiting from a strong humanistic background, ultimately my efforts tend to encourage the audience of my projects into a more holistic experience of art as a means to cultivate their own individual aesthetic sense and to recover their humanity beyond the flimsy parameters of a decadent and commodity-driven society.

PROJECT

The Social Creatives communal mural and *Kolor Kathmandu* project segment were the perfect opportunities to embark on a collective journey of art making that could be site specific yet paradoxically transcending time and space.

As curator, my predominant role was working with artists, assisting them in filling gaps, proposing or shaping raw ideas, much the same as Socrates would paraphrase the figure of the midwife to describe his role in assisting his students during their thinking process.

How

In my vision, this journey implicated a *modus operandi* in three interspersed segments, one evocative, one conscious, one wishful, so that past (memories), present (experience) and future (visions) could be elaborated by each one of us in the most meaningful and personal manner to produce relevant yet individual works that would appeal and communicate, uncover and hide, give answers and raise questions.

In relation to the Social Creatives communal mural, the theme I proposed, or rather the springboard I proposed all of us to depart from and use in order to shape this journey in a more focused fashion, was something of a dilemma for the human presence and the surrounding natural space: the urban environment.

Departing from and therefore reviewing one's past experiences of Singapore in these terms, I tried to encourage all to discover this place unknown to us, in terms of culture, architecture, history, food, customs, quirkiness and so forth.

I also encouraged all of us to open all our senses and alert them in a bout of prolonged consciousness of the different and the similar without any consideration for right or wrong, better or worse, without any temptation of judgment, but keeping an open mind.

For the *Kolor Kathmandu* project segment, the process entailed a slightly different modality, as the choice of subject matter to be depicted had to naturally be within the confines of the entire *Kolor Kathmandu* objectives, namely one of

the 75 districts of Nepal. I had to keep an open mind as to how dealing with the established project and the input of the Singaporean artists invited.

Art is not only the result of conceptualization; it is also a way to transcend life and somehow to make sense of its inherent dichotomies.

It can potentially speak to anybody beyond obvious barriers of language, culture, religion and other human infrastructures, which hamper open communication amongst people.

Art can become a way to reconcile differences to present the only monistic truth of our lives:

One who sees everything as nothing but the Self, and the Self in everything one sees, such a seer withdraws from nothing.

For the enlightened, all that exists is nothing but the Self, so how could any suffering or delusion continue for those who know this oneness?
(Isha Upanishad, sloka 6, 7)

When

I suggested the tight time scale as follows:

1. Experiential session (from the morning of 15 March onwards)
2. Discussion & sharing (afternoon of 15 March & 20 March)
3. Action painting (from 16 March onwards)

What

This section served merely to propose suggestions.

I had briefly researched but also experienced murals: from antiquity to present day, from funeral ones in Tarquinia's necropolis to political ones in Northern Ireland, ...

I think it would have been effective to incorporate the following elements:

- working with spaces: use negative, unpainted or pre-painted areas; use features of the wall; the wall is not a virgin canvas, but can leave space for "interaction" rather than complete oppression with colours; use a challenge in the wall as a point of strength or feature for the mural.
- creating a *trompe-l'oeil*, deceive the eye, very effective and catchy.
- creating a door or window opening: a mural in relation to the viewer as his/her imaginary, metaphysical space of dreams and hopes.
- creating a mural that has depth and draws the viewer in.

Key deliverables of Daniela's involvement

The core of my deliverables was predominantly centred in the second phase, namely in the moderating of the discussion and sharing session which ultimately concluded with a plan for the contents and execution of the murals.

I was of course involved in the whole process I have highlighted above and activated myself in mediating and negotiating where and when required.

There was a certain amount of fluidity in my role, but to assist the artists and work with them was the constant modality throughout the project.

Furthermore, I have documented the whole event through photographs, with the purpose of preparing this report, not an essay as such, rather an opportunity to charter the entire experience.

For more information, please refer to

<http://socialcreativessingapore.weebly.com>

<http://www.sattya.org>

<http://kolorkathmandu.sattya.org>

SECTION 2. Curatorship in Action

Upon my arrival in Kathmandu, the non-central urban setting became immediately evident: a prematurely crumbling modern architecture contrasted against the agelessness of thousand-year old temples and stupas and the powerfully imposing nature of world's highest mountains and holy rivers.

The Bagmati river in particular captivated me.

Coming from a metropolis (Rome), with a neglected prominent river, such as is the Tiber, once associated with the attribute 'blonde' and now literally a deadly feature of the city, and living in another (Singapore), which only in recent past rescued its own river from its polluted state, the painful affinity with the Bagmati was a natural connection within the urban theme proposed and in relation to the direct experience of daily living space as a memory and as an aspiration.

Many from Singapore's first generation artists, such as Georgette Chen, Chen Wen Hsi and Lim Tze Peng to name a few, approached the river as site central to the heart of the city and its most vibrant life and culture. Over time, the insistent, and often romanticised, choice of topic caused it to become something of a convention¹ and this, in turn, seemed as if it spurred a debate that culminated with the exhibition *Not the Singapore River*, organised by a private gallery in 1980s.

Human life is often experienced in antagonistic ways and the Bagmati river, in my eyes, was no exception: the quality of holiness is clearly maintained, particularly at sites such as Pashupatinah Temple, where the ablutions of the corpse prescribed by the Hindu funerary practice continue to be carried out into the river, despite its pollution further into the city.

The river thus appeared as a dualistic site of self-reflection and aspiration, as a blunt description of what it has become today and as the visual imagination of what it can morph into.

¹ Kwok Kian Chow, *Ink Painting Societies, Singapore Watercolour Society and the*

Coincidentally, I later found out that one of *Kolor Kathmandu*'s objectives was precisely "to inspire change"² through the streets and therefore the Social Creatives artists' imagination as to what the river could become was aligned with Sattya's philosophy too.

The visit to the site of the mural, just outside Vijaya Memorial High School and Nepal Cultural Association in Kalikasthan, Dillibazar, provided a further confirmation of the appropriateness of the proposed central theme, given the dimensions of great length and short height.

In my first meeting with the Social Creatives' six artists I began highlighting my ideas and proposed them to focus on the image of the river, by referencing Singapore river and, bearing in mind the dutiful cultural and religious sensitivity issues, urged them to let their imagination flow over the images that they could materialise on the wall.

I also suggested a synthetic depiction of the river in its present state as an apt, realistic prelude to the greatest part of the mural, which would unfold in terms of aspiration as to how the artists see the river could turn into.

I finally proposed that a 24-hour span for the main part of the wall may offer them opportunities of natural change in colours and an unfolding of a narrative, which could relate to the lives of the people in Kathmandu as we all had witnessed them during our journeys in cabs and on foot.

After consultations and discussions amongst themselves, the artists came up with a long sketch that I thought was the perfect embodiment of our synergy: my curatorship and their creativity.

The *Social Creatives*' artists involved in this section were:

Kala Roseanne	Redzuan Salleh
Thaib Bin Abdul Wahab	Wong Yan Han, Melvin
Loh Zhongwei, Eden	Renny Normala

² <http://kolorkathmandu.sattya.org/about/about-us/>

Kolor Kathmandu

With regard to the *Kolor Kathmandu* project segment, the curatorship session was carried out a few days after Sattya's presentation of the entire project including visuals of murals produced up to that point in time by various other local and international artists. By then, I had a clearer idea of how to assist the artists, even though I felt that my input was greatly limited by a number of essential restrictions, such as topic, time, space, artists. Still, it was a new experience for me and I welcomed the challenge.

Kolor Kathmandu is a year-long initiative by Sattya partly funded by Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development.

With the central idea of depicting the 75 districts of Nepal onto the outdoor walls in Kathmandu, *Kolor Kathmandu* invites and receives offers of collaboration from artists in Nepal and worldwide.

On the day of curatorship session the Nepalese and Singaporean artists paired up naturally after an informal presentation on styles and preferred themes in their practice.

I felt my input was centred in drawing all the artists' attention onto their preferred relationship and how they would build it as a way of getting familiar with one another's practice in the realisation of the mural.

Another essential element I pushed forward was the way in which the Singaporean artists could bring their multi-cultural sensibility and experience onto the table to create an artwork that could blend their input in a harmonious collaboration.

And finally I pointed out to all the artists to try to leave their comfort zones and push themselves onto attempting new ways of approaching the subjects to depict, despite an almost complete lack of knowledge about them and despite a dependence on concepts and stories related to them by others. I suggested that precisely the stories could be an apt departing point where to find common themes that could keep the collaboration true to its essence.

The social times spent together became an essential part of the process to get to know one another and to share stories and experiences, including the mundane.

The result of the pairing up was recorded³ as follows:

1 - Wong Yan Han, Melvin and Prajwol Upreti chose the Pyuthan district; wall in Dhobigat.

2 – Kala Roseanne and Michelle Lama chose the Swangja district; wall in Dillibazar.

3 - Renny Normala and Aditya Aryal chose the Morang district; wall in Baluwatar.

4 - Loh Zhongwei, Eden and Bawhana Tulachan chose the Jumla district; wall in Basundhara.

5 - Thaib Bin Abdul Wahab and Anish Bajracharya chose the Bara district; wall in Bhanimandal.

6 - Redzuan Salleh and Shraddha Shrestha chose the Lamjung district; wall to be confirmed.

³ The information is correct as at 10 May 2013.

SECTION 3. Artwork Development

After our arrival in Kathmandu on 14 March 2013 and a brief curatorship the following day, all the artists and other participants to the trip, including myself and my 8-year-old son, began preparing the wall as early as 16 March, even though the idea as to what to depict was yet to be formed by the artists.

This essential preliminary stage entailed a very tedious and yet necessary work of removal of all the papers that had been stuck onto the wall prior to priming it. Initially with our nails, then with made-up tools found on the street, such as nails and other metals scraps, we began cleaning up the wall relentlessly under the benevolent sun and the persistent noise pollution of pointless tooting by trucks, cars and scooters.

The wall was part of the perimeter of the Vijaya Memorial High School and Nepal Cultural Association in Dillibazar, also strangely attended, despite the name, by many children of elementary and middle school age. The constant presence of students was an auspicious and pleasant element, which provided everybody with an open and welcoming human distraction from the task at hand. The children were overall well behaved and curious, yet occasionally shy. There were also *impromptu* games of football, hide-and-seek and just running around in the courtyard of the school. The public passing by was often curious and always friendly, stopping by to ask questions and make contact with anybody working on the wall.

The priming of the wall was another task that duplicated endlessly to make sure that the grey underneath would not be seen.

After two days of preparation, concurrent curatorship and artists' sessions, on 18 March, the sketch was finalised and the colours required ready to be applied. The creation of the Social Creatives community mural was lengthy, with sections divided amongst the artists, but finally it was completed on 22 March.

SECTION 4. Final Considerations on Curatorship Experience

I am thankful to Social Creatives for having given me the opportunity to work with mural artists and experience the mesmerising world of murals in a completely new setting.

Upon completion of my MA studies in Asian Art History, my continuing education in curating is carried out mostly through hands-on experience and subsequent reflection on the experience.

The reading of texts is an additional tool that can help that experience being focused, relevant and professional.

Yet, curating art to me is mostly working directly with artists, with people, not only abstraction. It is about getting to know their artistic journey in order to create the most efficacious setting for them to exhibit and for the audience to appreciate not only their art but art in general as a tool of communication amongst people with different backgrounds for the promotion of a better, more integrated society.

Collaborations offer us opportunities of confrontation not just with others, but with ourselves too, testing our knowledge and understanding of the world in a continuous and open-minded flux.

The curatorship experience with Social Creatives has certainly made me more aware of how ideas can operate with people in an environment where freedom appears to be paramount: yet I found so much sensitivity on the part of the artist for the truly all-encompassing audience, the passer-by of any age, any sex, any background, any education, ... Their art genuinely speaks to anybody, because it is sited in the real life and in the every day.

The creative process too is unusual and so genuinely meaningful: it is open to all and cannot shy away from mistakes or flaws. It is real.

Similarly, and fully aware of the implications, I have tried not to impose my enthusiastic visions, but gently negotiate them with the incipient knowledge of the artists in their professional roles and as human beings, in a sort of reverse

mechanism of curatorship, where I became devoid of certain powers and had to work in a different manner than before.

Re-negotiating my comfortable position as relatively authoritative within the context of an exhibition, I have attempted new modalities in dealing with the artists, with the ideas, with the new environment without any expectation on myself and with a spirit of discovery.

The Social Creatives Vijaya Memorial High School and Nepal Cultural Association mural at Vijaya Memorial High School and Nepal Cultural Association and the various murals of *Kolor Kathmandu* remain testament to a visually successful effort that brought together not just two countries but many types of synergies, hopefully making us all the more rich and ready for new projects.

SECTION 5. Photo gallery

(Photo credit: Daniela Beltrani, unless otherwise stated)

Wall at Vijaya Memorial High School and Nepal Cultural Association primed and ready to be painted on.



School children by the wall, outside Vijaya Memorial High School and Nepal Cultural Association.



18 March 2013: the colours have arrived and the artists are ready to paint.



19 March 2013: sharing art and culture at Sattya.



19 March 2013: sharing art and culture at Sattya.



19 March 2013: students by the unfinished mural (detail).



19 March 2013: Melvin working (detail).



19 March 2013: Social Creative mural under way (detail).



19 March 2013: Social Creative mural under way (detail).



20 march 2013: Thaib and Anish discussing their collaborative mural.



20 March 2013: Shreddha and Redzuan discussing their collaborative mural.



21 March 2013: Social Creative mural almost complete.



21 March 2013: Melvin, Thaib, Eden, Redzuan, Kala in front of detail of complete Social Creative mural



22 March 2013: Social Creative mural completed (detail).



Wong Yan Han, Melvin and Prajwol Upreti, Dhobigat: Pyuthan district.



(Photo credit: Sattya)

Kala Roseanne and Michelle Lama, Dillibazar: Swangja district.



(Photo credit: Satty)

Renny Normala and Aditya Aryal, Baluwatar: Morang district.



(Photo credit: Sattya)

Loh Zhongwei, Eden and Bawhana Tulachan, Basundhara: Jumla district.



(Photo credit: Sattya)

Thaib Bin Abdul Wahab and Anish Bajracharya, Bhanimandal: Bara district.



(Photo credit: Sattya)