



Visthar

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New Connections, New Creativity

(Arts Collaboration Meeting, March 21st to 25th 2002, Bangalore)

The Organisation:

Visthar in Sanskrit means "Dimensions". Registered as a Trust in 1989, Visthar has been consistently involved in exploring new dimensions in Gender Studies and Support, Cultural Studies and Support, and Development Studies and Support. Visthar has been recognised as a non-formal academy for development studies, and a support organisation for NGOs and peoples movements in India and abroad.

Focus and Commitment:

Visthar is committed to the process of enabling people achieve full realisation of their rights as human beings – a process of attaining and sustaining equitable and dignified ways of living. Towards this, we need to challenge the structures and cultures that dehumanise, alienate and marginalise vast sections of the population. An alternative model of development also requires resisting the onslaught of homogenising cultures, knowledge systems and technologies. Our goal is to initiate and support processes of resistance and creation of alternatives in the field of development education and praxis.

Programmes:

Visthar works with and through a wide cross section of individuals and organisations: NGOs and NGO networks, Church related organisations, social movements, student and youth organisations and the academia. With a focus on South India, the involvement extends to the other parts of India as well. The activities of Visthar include Training, Community Action and Support, Research, Documentation and Publications.

Our on-campus activities and projects include:

Resource and Learning Centre (RLC):

A facility for conducting seminars, workshops and conferences.

Paper Unit:

A training and production unit of recycled handmade paper.

Pottery Unit:

A training and production unit

Our publications in English and Kannada encompass a wide range of issues in the study of society and culture.

The IFA Connection:

Visthar's relationship with the India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) began with the installation/performance project undertaken by Mr. C.F. John, Ms. Tripura Kashyap and Mr. T.M. Azis. Mr. C.F. John has been involved with Visthar since its inception, and is the Senior Programme Associate and head of our Cultural Studies and Support unit. As a seed grant project, the three artists developed working sketches for the installation and choreography around an old disused well that is now part of the Visthar campus. Visthar is now the institutional grantee for the larger project.

We have taken on the responsibility of helping IFA organise **New Connections, New Creativity**. Being part of this discussion forum would also offer us new perspectives about creative processes and practices.

Background:

The India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) is mandated to introduce new approaches to philanthropy in the neglected field of the arts and culture. Whereas existing support goes out for the presentation and celebration of Indian culture, IFA gives focussed and consistent attention to strengthening underlying artistic processes, overcoming constraints on creativity and seeding innovation. As a grant maker, IFA sees its role as filling important gaps in the assistance available for culture and the arts in India.

IFA's grant programmes focus on areas where the need for assistance far exceeds available funding. IFA also support new connections and alliances in the arts, with the aim of propelling fresh creativity.

IFA's Arts Collaboration Programme:

IFA's arts collaboration programme fosters convergences between disciplines, contexts and points of view in the arts. This programme supports two or more individuals or groups from any arts field to work on a project that involves their diverse backgrounds, skills and artistic languages, and results in shared outcomes. This programme seeks to enhance understanding, respect and tolerance among artists, foster a climate of sharing and cooperation, and trigger thinking about the arts as a field of common interest. Collaborations have been supported to facilitate the creation of new work or adaptations, strengthen training methods or support systems for the arts or pave the way for fresh artistic departures and movements. This programme is addressed to artists who seek a point of departure from prevailing arts practice in India. IFA has made 26 grants for arts collaborations so far.

IFA has, over the years supported projects that comprise systematic interrogation and exchange within such disciplines as literature, music, dance, theatre, and the visual arts. Collaborating artists include photographers, poets/writers, actors, dancers/choreographers, graphic designers, installation artists and so on. While some projects are interfaces between the traditional and the contemporary artist, others concern various ways of energising contemporary arts practice in the arts. Stretching the boundaries of the visual and performing arts, forging new musical idioms, and exploring public and community spaces as a context for art, are some of the significant concerns of the different projects. Outcomes include stage productions, installations, a compact disc of new music, a graphic novel, television screenplays and radio scripts among others.

New Connections, New Creativity is an attempt to bring together all the IFA grantees and their collaborators to think about the value of collaboration as a form of arts practice.

Objectives of the Meeting:

- Create a platform for dialogue among artists from various disciplines all over the country
- Build a community with a shared interest in creating new spaces for artistic practice, and working towards a sustainable dialogue among its members
- Initiating a dialogue between artists who get support and the organisation that supports them.
- Create a platform to reflect on the possibilities and problems of creative collaborations
- Connecting artists with members of their own community might also seed new collaborations
- Energise reflection about collaboration as a form of artistic creation
- Thinking about collaboration as a value that constitutes an alternative form of practice
- Consolidating this initiative over the years into a culture of exchange

Structure:

There would be **forty-minute presentations** by the grantees and their collaborators, followed by discussions on the issues addressed in the presentations. The larger group would then disperse into smaller **breakaway groups**, to discuss issues and concerns in more detail, and with regard to their particular interests and disciplines. The four-day meeting would conclude with a **plenary**. The plenary would be followed by **reflections**, a session where the participating members could bring any issues that were left unaddressed during the meeting, to the table. It could be a free-flowing session that the participants use to voice their experiences over the four days.

To ascertain the programme and its possible future direction, a **review panel** has been constituted. The panel would be participant-observers in the discussions, review specific projects and discuss the programme with advisory panel members who have helped IFA to evaluate proposals.

Objectives of the Review:

The review would enable IFA to take a fresh look at the rationale for having a programme like arts collaboration. The review is expected to address the following issues among others:

- Did IFA enter this area of grant making prematurely, considering that a culture of dialogue among artists is almost non-existent in India?
- What impact has the programme had on the field? Has it succeeded in energising a more reflective practice in the arts?
- How much of interdisciplinary thinking has been stimulated by the programme?
- Does collaboration constitute an alternative arts practice?
- Since collaboration primarily addresses a modernist context of practice, can the scope of the programme be widened to allow space for more traditional methodologies and practices?
- How might it be altered or expanded to address emerging practices and newer areas of concerns in the arts?
- How could IFA build on the platform already created by three rounds of grant making under this programme?

The Review Panel:

The review panel was constituted keeping in mind the diversity of possible perspectives in the arts. The idea was to have a balance of practice and theory, and a diversity of disciplinary expertise on the review panel. The four review panel members are practitioners who also theorise consistently about arts practice. Their expertise encompasses filmmaking, photography, visual arts and literature. Their perspectives would be instrumental in imagining a future for the arts collaboration programme.

S. Ramakrishnan (Chennai):

He has been associated with parallel literature and publishing efforts in Tamil since 1966. In 1974, he established Cre-A, a publication venture in Tamil, and has edited more than 70 titles ranging from creative fiction and criticism to philosophy, health, environment and popular science. He is Managing Editor of the Dictionary of Contemporary Tamil, the first databased, defining dictionary in any Indian language. He is also the founder of Mozhi, a public charitable trust developing resources in language and culture.

Shuddhabrata Sengupta (Delhi):

He is a filmmaker and writer with the Raqs Media Collective, interested in Media Practice and Research. He is one of the initiators of Sarai, the New Media Initiative - a space for research, practice and conversation about the contemporary media and urban constellations. Sarai is a forum 'committed to building lines of communication between people around critical issues and across cultural & technological barriers'. In their own words, "In laying open the possibilities of a new communicative ethic, and a space for connectivity between different strands of intellectual work, cultural intervention, technological innovation and a commitment to free speech and open culture Sarai hopes to create a modest autonomous space for public creativity in Delhi".

Ayisha Abraham (Bangalore):

She is a visual artist, 'traveling between cultures, traversing boundaries and refusing the comfortable unities offered by the idea of national roots'. The rootlessness of movement, and not always movements of choice, is taken up as a challenge by Ayisha, and has been made to yield an artistic practice that unsettles the certainties of everyday objects. Her journeys between such disparate spaces as Delhi, Vadodara (Baroda), Harlem, and Bangalore have produced 'an unembarrassed embrace of the fragment, the discontinuous, the decentered, that in turn produces altogether new unities'. In her commitment to reading theory and re-reading visual practices, 'Ayisha Abraham represents an emerging though as yet hesitant trend in Indian art that is conceptual and thoroughly urban, while addressed to an international audience'.

R. Srivatsan (Hyderabad):

An independent scholar, a practicing photographer and an engineering professional, Srivatsan's theoretical writing has appeared in *Economic and Political Weekly* and *Public Culture*. His book, *Conditions of Visibility: Photographic Imaging in Contemporary India*, published by Stree in December 1999, 'explores in full magnitude and virtually for the first time in India, how the social circulation of the visual image determines its meaning'. Taking into consideration a range of visual material like handpainted cinema hoardings, the modernism of Henri Cartier-Bresson, a poster of Dr B.R.Ambedkar, photographs in police records, the visual politics of advertising, news photography and the new India projected in the world of tourism, his book elaborates new theoretical perspectives on visual hegemony with regard to the political processes of the photographic image.

Documentation:

Since documenting the discussion is crucial, five documentalists would record the discussions within the five breakaway groups in addition to audio recording of all the sessions. Each of them would then present in their reports in the plenary. One of them would also act as the main documentalist and prepare a report collating all the issues that are discussed over the four days. The audio recording would also be transcribed and prepared as a document for IFA's internal records. The documentalists are either young artists or fresh graduates with an interest in the arts, who can bring to bear a certain sensitivity for the arts in general and a sharper involvement with specific disciplines in particular.