Grantee   : Navin Thomas

Grant amount : Rs 3,00,000

Grant period   : Twelve months from 15 September 2013

Précis

This grant supports a book-making project tentatively titled 'Bangalore Photo City: Lost and Found', which reconstructs a 'found' history of 1960s-80s Bangalore drawing upon 2,00,000 photo negatives salvaged from a scrap yard. The negatives will also be digitised and hosted on a suitable server to make them publicly accessible for future research or artistic work. Grant funds will cover material costs for experimenting with the book design, costs towards renting a high resolution scanner, professional fees, artist's honorarium, and accountant's fees.

Extending Arts Practice

Grant Description

Navin Thomas is a Bangalore-based sculptor and sound artist, often working with mixed media and found materials. Navin's earlier practice has been of a rather esoteric nature; for example, as part of a recent residency in Belgium, he created a sculptural installation of four musical urinals using classical Hindustani music and recorded frog mating sounds. However, Navin is also a self-professed flaneur and collector of scrap says in his proposal, 'As part of my practice and as an extension of my work, I spend lengthy periods of time observing scrap markets and recycling yards. In a city where there are no real museums or well-researched cultural or curatorial practices, the best way for me to observe cultural change is to examine what a city discards and later regurgitates into some newer form or idea.' A long-time resident of East Bangalore, one of the more cosmopolitan areas of the city, Navin has had a keen interest in understanding the changing nature of the city, and its perceptions. During one of his strolls in scrap markets, he came across a group of recyclers who were attempting to recover silver from discarded photo negatives thrown away by some of the older studios. Navin managed to salvage 2,00,000 negatives by paying for the value of silver they would yield. Thereby emerged the idea for his new project 'Bangalore Photo City: Lost and Found'. The content of the negatives varies from pop bands in the sixties to open air wrestling matches in the seventies.

Navin has been given a grant under EAP for this project, which takes his practice into a completely new zone of reconstructing the history of Bangalore through found negatives, eliciting not just his practice as an artist, but as one who shares a certain engagement with this city. He will work on a book-making project through this grant, which extends his practice by compelling him to consider the possibilities raised by wider audiences, especially since his previous work has been rather niche and highly experimental in nature. Navin will be collaborating with a Bangalore-based graphic designer, Chandrashekar Kornepathi, for creating the photographic book.

Describing the project, Navin says, 'A lot of the visual books made on Bangalore privilege chronology or engage the never-ending debate about the authenticity of old Bangalore. For those of us who grew up in this city, we know that it wasn't really those bygone spaces that made this place a city, but it was mostly its denizens and anonymous regulars that made up the true spirit of this "reluctant" city. Our book takes a different approach, whereby we will work mostly with human situations, gatherings, ceremonies and celebrations (depending also on what is retrievable from the negatives). We're looking at the 1960s-80s, lost images of a post-colonial, post-independence fledgling city, yet to discover its future as a Silicon Valley. The negatives yield rich insights into the popular culture of the time and the material for the book comes from over a decade long self-appointed task of salvaging film stock in the form of silver gelatine, and glass plate negatives to 8mm and 16mm non-commercial independent amateur films. So the book also surfaces as an archaeological artefact of lost and found culture, because I will be including a lot of other film material that I have been able to rescue and restore.'

The project has multiple dimensions, which include digitising the negatives, hosting them on a suitable website, selecting the images and curating them into a book outlining a 'lost and found' history of Bangalore, and finally curating a public exhibition which will include some video work made from found footage, engaging with the city. In the first instance, IFA will support the initial phase of the project, which is to digitise the negatives, facilitate hosting them online, and the work towards the book design. Navin is keen to explore a sculptural dimension to the book, using special paper that leaves thumb

imprints, giving the reader an experience of handling photographs or negatives. He will be looking for support from IFA in helping establish contact with suitable publishers at a later stage, and is looking at a print run of roughly a 1000 copies. In the next stage of the project, Navin will send a fresh proposal outlining the curatorial idea for the public exhibition, and he is keen to bring on board a core group of historians, artists, urbanists and curators, for the project at that stage.

Navin's proposal was sent for external evaluation to Lawrence Liang, who quite succinctly captured the significance of this work: 'Stanley Cavell uses the phrase "finding as founding" to describe what it may mean to stake foundational claims based on epiphanic and accidental discoveries and it is an interesting formulation to think about what it may mean to curate found photos as a way of narrating the history of a city. Navin's proposal is exciting and his idea of writing a history of the "reluctant city" through the creation of a visual archive of its denizens has immense potential and is much needed for a city that swings wildly between amnesia and nostalgia.'

This grant, therefore, addresses multiple needs foregrounded under the EAP programme, namely: taking Navin's own arts practice into a more sociologically determined zone, and thereby enabling him to experiment with his conceptualisation of audiences and artwork; opening out the question of historiography through found photographs which could potentially yield new ways of thinking about cities, local history, as well as photographic history; enabling the sharing of a rich collective resource for future artistic and research projects through the digitising of negatives and making them publicly available; contributing through practice and theoretical interventions to the area of photo curation, as well as the curation of 'accidentally discovered histories'.

Budget

Material Costs

Rental costs for a high resolution scanner (@3500 pm)	42,000
Paper and other materials for book design	20,000
Prototype for book	25,000

Professional Fees

Payment for digitizing and cataloging of materials (@ 5000 pm)	60,000
Honorarium (@12,500 pm)	1,50,000
Accountant's fee	3,000
Total	Rs 3,00,000