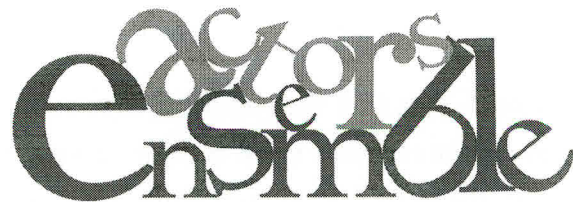


Mall Wall

Final Narrative Report



INDIA FORUM

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Introduction

This final narrative report briefly lays out the project milestones and acknowledges the various team members, who contributed to the successful outcome.

The report is divided into four parts:

- 1. Project summary*
- 2. Process of creating the artwork*
- 3. People who were part of the project*
- 4. Reflections on the process*

1. Project summary

The stated agenda of Project 560 was thematically contiguous to the work that AEIF had already created. However, this work marked a very clear foray outside the proscenium, as well as some formal experimentation that combined theatre, climbing and visual art. The emphasis was on inter-disciplinary work, and the project succeeded in mixing and matching practitioners from various specialisations such as graffiti art, climbing and movement. We were also able to create good associations with academics, who were doing research in the areas we were engaged with. These areas were connected with pressing local issues such as heritage conservation and urban planning for adequate green cover. We were also able to sensitise the mall authorities to the importance and value of art in public spaces, through the project.

2. Process of creating the artwork

After a rigorous planning and design process the painting was carried out from the 11th May – 22nd May.

The major painting elements were:

1. The graffiti
2. The side panels
3. The "watermark" old map of Whitefield

4. The bird and the trees
5. The illusion on the arm

1. The graffiti

If you walk along the Eastern Wall of Lal Bagh either going towards Asoka Pillar or away from it you will see a small painting of a boy running; flying a kite. You could easily miss it but if you go looking for it you will see it. It is a beautiful reminder of freedom and open spaces – earth, wind, sky and human. Arriving at the central figure of the speaker-head climber, reaching out from the grey towards the burst of green in the painting on the Mall Wall finally happened along these lines, although after a few major and minor hiccups. It was early days yet but Banksy was already a strong inspiration. We hit several of the classic problems of collaborative endeavors, as we began. Lessons in coordination, clear communication, complimentary distribution of duties and anticipating what the various artists expected to gain from the process of engagement would have come in very handy at this point. Some sound external advice from Kirtana Kumar about the importance of good leadership while working collaboratively with a diverse group of artists pulling in as many directions, in the name of finding the right 'angle' that should drive the visual, helped nip a rather wild association right in the beginning. The initial Banksy inspiration stayed on.

After the initial delay a dream team of visual artists formed. Designs were arrived at and agreed upon with great alacrity. The design, however, was on an A4 size paper that had to be transferred on to an uneven 54 feet high and 15 feet wide wall. Based on some intelligence gathering, the design was projected onto the climbing wall with an OHP that needed constant adjusting of height and distance from the wall to negotiate the asymmetric surface of the wall. One of the innovative aspects of the painting process was the combination of climbing, painting and projection in the early stages. Climbers and painters then worked with permanent markers and outlined the major lines of the artwork. This enabled the initial details of the graffiti to be rapidly created.

2. The side panels

While the graffiti is direct in its critique of the city we also wanted to mark the wall with our celebration of the city. We painted some of the best known and some not so well known landmarks in and around the city. On these panels are iconic images, each telling the myriad stories of Bangalore, be it geological, historical or mythology. Some of these are: The peninsular gneiss, Pond Wall, the Toy Train in Cubbon Park, the Islands in Ulsoor Lake, the Gurudwara, the Jamma Masjid, Tippu's Drop, Savandurga and Gavigangadheeshwara Temple. The wall panels are visible from a bridge on the second floor on the opposite side and from various entries leading into the main courtyard. A climber on the wall appears to be walking on the stenciled skyline painted on these panels when viewed from the side. It made for very interesting photo opportunities.

3. The "watermark" old map of Whitefield

There is an old map of Whitefield and a whole lot of oral history associated with it. We are interested in local histories and the processes of slippage and erasure in the construction of historical narratives, so this map figures in the wall painting. There is a consensus that around 1882, 3900 acres of land was granted by the Mysore State for planning a settlement for the Anglo Indians. The plan is a perfect circle with a central open area acting as a 'village green'. Residential areas were created in bands of concentric circles of the 'Inner and Outer' circles radiating from this central green distinguishing the upper class from the lower. One of the most famous bungalows is the Waverly Inn that Winston Churchill visited. Stories from residents about the 'red mud' that got into your nails and clothes, cycling up the hill that doesn't exist anymore for 'Joy Ice cream' and 'Egg Bonda', of colonial bungalows that have disappeared, houses with 'monkey tops', the resident who walked snakes on a dog leash form the rich tapestry of the local

lore. We painted a 'watermark' of this old map behind the speaker-head climber as a clue into this history and as a gentle resistance to erasure of the Anglo Indian history in Whitefield.

4. The trees and the bird

While the project was going on, BBMP announced a ban on planting of certain trees because they were high maintenance. The Gulmohar, a native of Madagascar and home to The Small Green Barbets, is one among them. Trees in this city have a rich history; they were brought in from diverse environments from all over the world to create a unique biosphere. The Honge Mara and the African Tulip grow and flower side by side in perfect aesthetic complementarity. Many of us have a collective memory of these trees from our childhood. The burst of colour in the upper section of the painting include the Rain Tree or Male mara (South America), Nile Tulip (East Africa), African Tulip (Neerukai Mara) Jacaranda (Brazil) Honge Mara or Pongom (India, Seychelles, Malaya, Ceylon, tropical Australia & China, some Pacific islands), Tamarind or Huse Mara (Tropical Africa), Indian Cork also called Akasha Mallige (Burma & Malayan archipelago), Copper pod (Ceylon, Andamans, Malaya and North Australia) and the Tree of Gold (Tropical Americas). We need to figure out greenery in our urban spaces. Surely 'low maintenance' ornamental palms can't be the answer.

The bird that bursts forth from the corner of the wall is somewhat tongue in cheek. The bird seems to rise out of the stone and ash colour of building of Phoenix Mall towards the sky.

5. Illusion on the arm

The surface of the wall is uneven. The wall has two climbing surfaces of varying inclination and these are connected by side panels. The arm of the speaker-head

climber appears longer when seen from anywhere else in the courtyard because the arm painted on three surfaces is visible – the two climbing surfaces and the middle panel connecting them. As you walk closer to the wall the arm shortens because the panel becomes less and less visible disappearing completely when you stand directly in front of the wall; creating a slight upward movement in the climber. Similarly, the rocks and the trees also expand and contract as you walk away or closer to the wall.

The second phase of the project was the performance on the wall from the 6th to the 8th. The four characters created were:

1. Anjali – a typical shopper
2. Tony – a commuter
3. Salim - a tribute to the famous ornithologist
4. Rose – a nod to the old Whitefield and the local legends concerning Winston Churchill and Rose

The mix of theatre actors, visual artists and climbers created a dynamic that had very fruitful outcome overall. However there are some areas that need scrutiny for future application and successes. The variable of the audiences' presence needs some extra attention and the mix of collaborators may need to be reassessed. The presence of the audience during the painting was kept at a distance to ensure safety. This was reassuring and it strengthened the collaborative spirit of the team. However performance brings with it a different energy. Performing in a high risk situation in collaboration with participants who do not have as much experience with that energy are liable to make mistakes in moments of excitement. This was an important learning experience for me. The proxemics with the audience was constantly changing not only with me but also with my belay who was on the ground who sometimes altered the speed with which I was being brought down. Although my belay and I are both experienced – I as an actor and he as a climber; this can cause some anxiety both in the performer and in the audience.

4. Discussion of process

This discussion of the process is divided into the following sections:

1. Narrative of the city
2. Inter-disciplinary emphasis
3. Technical challenges
4. Risk-taking (physical and creative)
5. Creative critique of consumerism

1. Narrative of the city

AEIF has invested a great deal of energy in locating itself within the cultural landscape of Bangalore. Our sense of belonging and home, is rooted in Bangalore and with this project we continued our narrative. With Mall-Wall our exploration of the city spanned multiple media and created multiple texts – such as the performance, the photographs of the performance, and the transformation of the wall. The largest text was the wall itself – which told the story of Bangalore’s transformation from the Garden city of the 80s to the global village of the 90s. The duality of the wall – expresses the vibrant local foliage contrasted to the grey urban jungle. The homage to the Gulmohar tree, and other local trees speaks to the old tree-lined avenues of the Garden city. The energetic speaker-head climber (who is often mistaken for an astronaut!) tears through the urban wasteland and reaches for the wild splendour of nature. We continued working with this duality in our other texts and in many respects this is a result of our dialogic engagement with the changing cityscape.

2. Inter-disciplinary emphasis

One of the strong principles for the project was an emphasis on an inter-disciplinary approach. As a theatre company we were keen to step outside the confines of the proscenium and experiment with space. In addition, we wanted to break the silo mentality of the arts community and engage not only theatre people, but also visual artists, physical performers and non-artists. We attempted to create a space where all practitioners could “do their thing” but also step out of their comfort zone and work outside their usual domains. Thus, as theatre people, we ended up working with a vertical stage. The visual artists on the

project had to work with heights. The climbers on the project had to grapple with aesthetics. The less successful parts of collaboration involved the problem of politics. As a theatre group we had articulated a fairly clear agenda, and where people were able to align with these ideas, there was a common working language. However, problems occurred when collaborators were not willing to let go of their autonomous aesthetics spheres and “step out” halfway. This resulted in some changes to the composition of our team of artists in the early stages of the visual design. As theatre people and the producers of the project, we wanted to encourage a simple and direct style, because of the peculiar constraints of the project (public/commercial space, floating audience, heights, scale and so on). This allowed people from different background to “plug-in” easily. The excellent balance of technical skill and creative dialogue that the team of collaborators eventually managed to achieve was one of the successes of the project.

3. Technical challenges

Perhaps the least evident aspect of our project from the outside was the number of technical challenges we faced on the project. The design of the winching system was quite an effort. The highly bureaucratic and commercial nature of the mall space posed many challenges. Our inability to make “hard” modifications to the space was a huge problem. Thus many conversations with structural engineers, fabricators and the mall managers ended in headaches. After much digging around in 10th standard Physics text books, revisiting of pulley principles, and haggling - a hard solution was abandoned. The soft rig that was eventually used was a lighter “snap-on-snap-off” system that provide a basic and safe solution, within our budgetary and space constraints.

4. Risk-taking (physical and creative)

One of our biggest strengths on the project was our ability to take risks. The rather rigorous climbing training that both Mallika Prasad and Ram Ganesh Kamatham went through paid off. While we were initially looking to include martial artists, performers and dancers – we found that the unique combination of skill sets required to perform – movement sense, spatial awareness, familiarity with climbing gear, and comfort with heights – only existed within the AEIF core team. Thus given the short timelines, we played to strengths and our ability to take physical risks was on full display. However, we also took serious creative

risks. Audiences used to our proscenium work did not quite know how to consume our work outside of the comfort of the frame of a ticketed show. The floating audience of the mall as well were not quite sure how to interact with the show. We were averse to create a "ticketed" experience because we were working in the realm of public art. The net result was somewhere in between.

5. Creative critique of consumerism

Perhaps the most lasting impression of the project was the fact that we semi-permanently placed a 50 foot odd anti-consumerist message into one of the busiest shopping malls in Bangalore. While this is subversion at its best, it is not in the least negative. The entire bee-hive hierarchy of the mall, from the senior managers, to the floor staff, to security, to housekeeping interacted with us – and uniformly expressed their amazement at the art work and process. Thus our anti-consumerist project took root in the best possible way, with the willing and active participation of the people knowingly or unknowingly embedded into the mall hierarchy. In several interactions with mall top management, the mall was referred to as a cultural centre, with shopping only an ancillary commercial activity. We beg to differ and our playful artwork is our contrasting thesis. We do believe that dropping a 50 foot piece of art into a commercial space has challenged the market logic of "advertising real-estate". However, we have not slipped back into the conventional grumbling of a cultural elite as yet another mall reconfigures the neighbourhood, nor have we embraced it as middle class emancipation in the form of increased consumer power. We have simply bracketed a middle ground – one that engages with the present in order to positively transform it.
