



Collectivism in the Contemporary Sri Lankan Art: The History of an Unusual Case of Artists

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This chapter¹ is an attempt to understand the nature of art collectivism through a close exploration of the work of one particular collective run by a group of artists. This is, the Theertha International Artists' Collective in Sri Lanka in the post 1990s, an epoch that witnessed the radical transformation of much of South Asian art within national contexts, particularly visible in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Through Theertha's vision and mission that translated into a major constellation of programmes insistently executed for nearly 18 year, the artists' collective was able to

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establish a particular brand for their art activities within Sri Lanka, and beyond. The intention of this chapter is to explore the socio-political and ideological manoeuvrings and the grounding of the artists within the larger landscape of art, back-grounding the culture and politics of Sri Lanka.

Art collectivism has a long and illustrious history within modernism and in postmodern as well as contemporary contexts of art. Such collectivism has emerged within specific contextual and temporal dynamics, sometimes as an appendix of a social movement or as resistance to orthodoxy and, at other times, as a cathartic or an empowerment strategy. The historical trajectories of art across various parts of the world are punctuated and enriched frequently by such collectivisms. Among many, there have been Dadaists, futurists, surrealists, the Fluxus, the California Beats, Guerrilla Girls, to name a few from the Euro-American centres of art. They are well documented and have been global signifiers for anarchic and anti-establishment stances in art, and some of them have also been sources for critical engagement with contemporary society.

In order to understand the collectivisms within South Asia, and particularly in Sri Lanka within which the artists have organized themselves for socio-political as well as aesthetic purposes, it is necessary to look beyond their engagements with Euro-American modernism. Also, it is imperative to reason with the artists' collective in Sri Lanka, beyond the trope of resistance to cultural hegemonies of dominance. For decoding the collective behaviours of artists, there is necessity to create a premise that could be sensitive of the contexts fraught with socio-political constitutions. Describing the context for change within India for Indian artists, Geeta Kapur describes it as "a civil society in huge ferment, a political society whose constituencies are redefining the meaning of democracy and a demographic scale that defies simple theories of hegemony" (quoted in Turner 2005: 3). This can hold true for many of the Asian countries and their artists' restless need for finding and redefining their own parameters for making their art contemporary. And this is intrinsically connected with the way these nations' politics and cultures played out in their own turfs as well as outside. For instance, the economic transformations happening at the end of last millennium in India and China, the two largest countries in Asia, as well as elsewhere in the Asia Pacific, had their own impact within the region. The socio-cultural and political impacts of such changes together with the newly emergent ideologies de-centred the older centres and challenged the established hegemonies of dominance. As Turner has observed, "the turn of the century has witnessed the beginnings of an

astonishing alteration in the balance of power towards Asia, militarily as well as economically” (Turner 2005: 1). This transformation signalled “the impending close of five centuries of global domination by first Europe, then the United States” (Turner 2005: 1). At the same time, the initial years of the new millennium facilitated the rethinking of the ways in which world relationships had been fathomed so far, and many of these relationships had to be “transformed by globalisation” and the so-called war on terror (Turner 2005: 1). South Asia in particular had undergone regime changes, economic expansions and restless political environments in most of its constituent national regions, while globalization, consumerism and materialism played into their social fabric bringing in new cultural dynamics to reckon with. As Turner eloquently reasons, “artists can, through their work, reflect the values and aspirations of their own society, and of humanity. While some react with cynicism and even despair, others produce an art of resistance. Over the past decades, many artists in the Asia Pacific region have protested colonialism and neo-colonialism; global environmental degradation; cultural loss; illness due to poverty; sexual exploitation; social and political injustice; war; violence and racism. Their work is in the broad area of social justice” (Turner 2005: 4).

The art of 1990s within South Asia and later decades implicitly mirrored the anxieties and the triumphs of the regional as well as global changes referred to earlier. And in this context, a number of artists and art movements in the move towards affecting transformations within the field of art, sometimes facing resistance and reticence from the art establishments at home and sometimes the sustenance for transformative energy of artists, came from sources outside of their home countries.

POST-1990s SRI LANKAN ART

The 1990s can be seen as a decade that stirred collective energies within the Sri Lankan artists’ community that changed the course of art history in many ways. This was the decade of ‘90s Trend’, an art movement that thoroughly contemporized Sri Lankan art, and impacting the art community which changed the way visual art was thought of, made and consumed. The 90s Trend can also be seen as providing the defining energy that fuelled many attempts of collectivism within Sri Lankan art scene and its ideological positions, and it certainly had much to do with the formation of Theertha, an artist’s collective that supported and propagated experimental and socially critical/interventionist art of the 90s Trend.

Insightfully, Kapur notes, “once we admit history – over and above art history – as the matrix from which the notion of avant-garde arises, then there are always plural histories in the reckoning” (2005: 57–58). Taking into account Kapur’s words on the avant-garde and the complexity of the 90s Trend, it cannot be understood only within an art historical discourse of Sri Lankan art. To assume the purpose of its evolution as a contestation between formalism and aesthetic structures of the previous art practices or as an anti-art establishment ploy is reductionist. Rather, the 90s Trend and its collectivism reflected a historicism that was rooted deep in Sri Lanka’s socio-political moment of the time. Kapur cautions us further on the Afro/Asian avant-garde by stating that two events should take place simultaneously for Asian and African avant-garde to come to its own (Kapur 2005). The first of these is a “move that dismantles the hegemonic features of the national culture itself”, while the second is “a move that dismantles the burdensome aspects of western art, including its programmatic vanguardism. That is to say such an avant-garde has to treat the avant-garde principle itself as an institutionalized phenomenon, recognizing the assimilative, therefore sometimes the paralyzing capacity of the (western) museums, galleries, critical apparatus, curators and media” (Kapur 2005: 58).

In many ways this holds true for the 90s Trend art and its sense of vanguardism. The 90s Trend certainly came out of a situation of political anarchy and social chaos. Sri Lanka was grappling with its own legacy of post-colonial problems. In 1988, a violent youth uprising in Sri Lankan society took hold of the southern part of the country, and long-drawn armed conflict due to ethnic issues terrorized the north and northeast. These dynamics allowed many thinking segments in the country and a number of vocal artists in particular to question the identity, authenticity of national political and cultural practices as well as the legitimacy of and nationhood itself. If there were a sense of stability and assurance of a new national identity for a few decades following Independence in 1948, by the 1990s it was disintegrating irrevocably. Therefore, whatever art collectivism that emerged as an avant-garde was heavily critical about the state and its reflections of national culture, its interpretations of national history, its handling of ideas of nationhood and the way the economy was handled, other than the critical outlook on the existing practices of art formalism which was seen as an introvertive exercise still heavily dependent on modernist art practices introduced by the colonial masters.

The new art of the 90s reflected an insistent interest in socio-political narration, witnessing and documenting what artists saw, heard and reacted to. It also treated subjectivity as a casualty of urban myth while it enter-

tained approaches with a sense of feminist criticality and identity politics. The unbridled globalization of the post-1970s period and its consequences, its bastardized capitalism, extreme consumerism and the emerging youth culture were intense topics for socio-cultural critiques. If the 90s art de-centred art from its existing sense of formalism, it did so by the critiquing art formalism's aloofness or distance from the larger-than-life socio-political narratives circulating at the time. The critique also targeted art formalism for its 'past bound' ideological anchoring that refused to recognize the 'now' or 'contemporary moment' where multi-layered multiple histories collided as a source of credible narratives for artists to work on.

Its evolution into the next decade saw a complex set of dynamics at play within the visual art field, popularizing of the idea of 'alternative' as the 'critical other' to the conventional and established art. Within this, many attempts were made by artists and individuals to support the newly emerging radicalism and corresponding ideologies of contemporary art. This was possible since they sought to establish alternate art spaces, alternate art educational institutions and alternate group efforts. The 90s Trend was thus seen as a serious epistemic break in Sri Lankan visual art history and practice.

If one were to locate Theertha in this contemporary art history temporally, then it would be placed at the point where the 90s Trend completed its first phase as a movement, where its primary ideological positions were firmly established and the art of the future—and the new millennium—awaited new interpretations and directions. Theertha thus emerged as an 'alternative' to explore possibilities within this new ideology. As such, it was an entity that combined art management, philanthropic entrepreneurship, art activism and art education, all in a combination that supported a highly experimental, critical and out-of-the-box, cross-border germination of art.

THEERTHA²: A PILGRIMAGE OF RADICAL ARTISTS

Theertha was initiated in 2000 by a congregation of 11 artists, many of whom had spearheaded the 90s art transformation. As such, these individuals and Theertha automatically became the bearers of the 90s art

²In Sanskrit, Theertha refers to a port to which things come and from where things depart. The group was named Theertha with the notion that it was a place from where ideas would originate and to which ideas and practices can come from elsewhere that might be adopted and localized.

legacy, with Theertha's vision invariably holding the same liberating stance of the 90s art that leaned towards the experimental contemporary. The collective worked with a mission to stimulate the art community into engaging with the broader spectrum of creative possibilities that were opened up with the shift in thinking with 90s art. Theertha was also the logical next step in the culmination of activities by many restless artists who were interested in finding ways to deal with their own socio-political dilemmas, the anxieties of taking a different position to that of officially sanctioned art and an urgency to connect with the outside art world.

With reference to the stimulus and orientation of the collective, Perera notes of the violent politics that emerged in Sri Lankan politics since the 1970s (Perera 2011: 11). The more specific of these were "the two anti-state rebellions launched by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in 1971 and in the late 1980s, and the Tamil separatist rebellion that emerged in the early 1980s which ended in 2009 with the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)" (Perera 2011: 11). Despite this widespread and institutionalized political violence since the 1970s, "the artists of the 1990s were too young to remember the violence of 1971, even though some artists active in the 1970 such as W. Nayananda used art as a medium of expression for their experiences and memories as rebels and political prisoners as well as to represent what they thought were the ills of society" (Perera 2011: 11). However, as the art of the 1990s with their pronounced interest in politics dawned, "initial efforts of artists such as Nayananda were taken to a much more conscious, interventionist, vocal and consistent visual extreme by the new generation of artists who became active at the time" (Perera 2011: 11).

There have been number of important moments when radical artists rallied together to demonstrate their stance. Such collectivism can be understood within a larger history of students' resistance in the Sri Lankan socio-political landscape. As Perera has pointed out above, most 90s artists were too young to remember the early resistance and rebellions by university students such as in 1971 and before. However, the legacy and memory of resistance and protests for social justice were articulated within the universities' students' movements. At least since the 1950 and right up to the present, the country's university system has been an active ground for dissent and rebellion against a number of causes. The majority of the artists affiliated to ideas of collectivism mustered the memories of student movement bringing forth personal experiences, as some of the artists were victims of the state's violent repressions either as political activists or university students involved in politics, or both (Figs. 11.1, 11.2, 11.3, and 11.4).



Fig. 11.1 *Dinner Table*, 2004. Installation by Sanath Kalubadana, an artist who worked with Theertha. (Photograph courtesy of Theertha Archives)

In many ways, the 90s Art Trend and its politics of resistance and collectivism is different from yet another well-known collective movement, the 43 Group's collectivism. The latter premised upon impetus for resistance and change largely in a colonial context, without factoring in the discontents of socio-economic and political conditioning that the students' movement had propelled. The 43 Group,³ a collective of artists during the 1940s, organized themselves to bring in a modernist ideology as an alternative to the prevailing academic visual art tradition at the time introduced by the British during the British colonial rule in Sri Lanka. They became influential in propagating the modernist aesthetics and corresponding formalism in the following decades up to contemporary times.

³For a good description of the constructions of the 43 Group read, *43 Group: A Chronicle of Fifty Years in the Art of Sri Lanka* by Neville Weeraratne. Melbourne: Lantana, 1993.



Fig. 11.2 *History of Histories*, 2004. Installation by R. Vasanthini, K.S. Kumutha, K. Tamilini, S. Kannan and T. Shanaathanan in collaboration with people from Jaffna at Aham-Puram exhibition sponsored by Theertha in Jaffna, Northern Sri Lanka. (Photograph courtesy of Theertha Archives)

The artists that were involved in the 43 Group are Lionel Wendt, Justin Daraniyagala, Ivan Peries, George Keyt, Aubrey Collette, Richard Gabriel, L.T.P. Manjusri and Harry Pieres. The idea of resistance in the 43 Group relied on the discontentment of the allegedly contrived art expressions. This is not to say that the 43 Group artists' engagement in art stemmed only within an environment that eluded politics. The 1940s was a crucial time in the political history of Sri Lanka, a time leading to Independence in 1948, and the anxieties of the freedom struggle were felt within the artists' community as well as the whole country. Lionel Wendt's photography and his heavy involvement in the well-known documentary film *The Song of Ceylon* presents his conscious celebration of what is 'native' contrary to the 'Western' values circulated. The group was noted for its attempts to renew and revive what is traditional in the arts. Aubrey Collette was well known for his cartoons that articulated political satire at the time.



Fig. 11.3 *The Barrel Man*, 2004. Performance by Theertha artist, Bandu Manamperi. (Photograph courtesy of Theertha Archives)

And the George Keyt's⁴ transformation from a European lifestyle to one of simple living in the village is one of the critical stances taken by 43 Group artists against the socio-political and cultural environments at the time. Having stated these actions of the 43 Group members, I have to reiterate that the 43 Group's intervention was mostly about art knowledge and their art was not about a critique of a socio-political burden or its economic reality.

⁴For a substantial reading on the life, times and contributions of George Keyt read, *Buddha to Krishna: Life and Times of George Keyt* by Yashodhara Dalmia. London: Routledge, 2017.



Fig. 11.4 Snakes and Mikes, 2007. Painting by Theertha artist, Jagath Weerasinghe. (Photograph courtesy of Theertha Archives)

As such I would like to argue, the 90s Art and the subsequent collectivism resulting in group formations such as Vibhavi Academy of Fine Arts and Theertha has its genealogy in the student resistance and their political struggles in Sri Lanka.

Both were alternatives to what were in place. Vibhavi initiated in 1992 concentrated on teaching, providing an alternate forum for teaching from what was offered by the state-controlled Institute of Aesthetic studies, which later became the University of the Visual and Performing Arts. Theertha on the other hand focused on many more activities including providing forums for experimental and collaborative art-making, exhibition spaces of critical art, artists' travels in South Asia and beyond, training of art teachers, publishing and so on. Many of the key leaders in both organizations, and particularly of Theertha, had an intimate relationship with university-based politics briefly referred to above.

One of the main proponents of the 90s art as well as a founding member of Theertha, Jagath Weerasinghe's seminal exhibition *Anxiety* (1992) illustrated his grappling with social injustice in the background of the violent 1983 inter-ethnic violence. The exhibition illustrated the divided nation along ethnic lines (Tamil and Sinhala). Himself a student leader

during his university years, victimized by the state-sponsored violence, Jagath Weerasinghe grew up in a background with a Marxist orientation. His father was an ardent Marxist and trade unionist.

Another 90s artist, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, had his advanced art education in the then Soviet Union. He brought in its socialist nuances to his art activism within the art education programme he initiated with the Vibhavi Academy of Fine Arts he established. Well known for his series of work, 'Barralism', he cultivated an artistic perspective on the war and its consequences on a nation's landscape. Commenting on Thenuwara's work, Perera writes, "he has identified his entire discourse as 'barrelism', which has transformed the image of an ordinary empty barrel into a series of artworks through paintings and installations imbued with political meanings directly linked to the political violence of the immediate past as well as the uncertainties of the present", which "probed contemporary Sri Lankan politics" (2011: 65). As an avid activist against the war, he played crucial role as an artist and activist for human rights. Although the initial ideas and energy for 90s Trend came from individuals who graduated from the Institute of Aesthetic Studies, its archaic curriculum and cumbersome structures were too slow to respond to emerging ideologies and new practices of contemporary art. Vibhavi Academy of Fine Arts was formulated as an 'alternative', representing the desire to garner this contemporariness in the visual art practices, teaching and learning.

The genesis of Theertha also has to be understood in a similar socio-political context. For instance, the other founding artists of Theertha beyond Weerasinghe, namely, Pradeep Chandrasiri, Koralegedara Pushpakumara, Bandu Manamperi, Pala Pothupitiya and Sarath Kumarasiri, were active participants and leaders in the students' protests during their respective years in the Institute of Aesthetic Studies. Chandrasiri's well-known photo series and installation of 'Broken Hands' was based on his personal experience of an abduction and torture during his involvement in the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurrection of 1988.⁵ And Manamperi's penchant for resistance to state-sponsored violence and critical stance in his performances factors in his memories of the army detention camp where he was incarcerated as a 16-year-old teenager for his involvement with JVP 'subversive' activities. He played an active role as a student leader in his subsequent years at the

⁵As with its first insurrection in 1971, the JVP's second insurrection in 1988 involving mostly rural Sinhala youth aimed to topple the elected government which they considered both capitalist and unresponsive to the needs of youth and the downtrodden.

Institute of Aesthetic Studies where he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in sculpture. All these artists contributed to the establishment of Theertha. They added their own particular collective histories and idea of ‘transformation’ with a broader sense of political experience.

One could posit Vibhavi Academy of Fine Arts as the first instance of collectivism to emerge in the 90s informed by the socio-political anomalies of the time and with a spirit of resistance through art. If Vibhavi was interested in art teaching to shape the ideologies of the new generation of art students as proponents to carry on the transformative art of the 90s, Theertha’s larger intentions were to build a base and structure to sustain as well as propagate the products and producers of this knowledge. For Theertha, transforming the taste and then nature of art consumption was of utmost importance. The primary concern for Theertha was to build its own art audience and to expand its ideology so that a large support base for its kind of art could be established. As mentioned earlier, a clear gap developed between conventional art patrons, largely from the English-speaking and Colombo-based cultural elite and contemporary artists, who mostly come from non-elite, non-English-speaking and unprivileged economic backgrounds. These artists went on to produce art that were alien to the prevailing aesthetic norms that guaranteed a disconnect between what they produced from the dominant art-buying audiences.

In 2009, artists closely associated with the 90s Trend and Vibhavi formed the ‘No Order Group’, which organized a seminal exhibition of their work to establish their position on art. Writing on the criticisms and rejections bestowed on their art, I have noted elsewhere, “for the 90s Trend artists, one of the biggest challenges was to move the attention of the art patronage and audience from Keyt⁶ inspired aesthetics, to notice the grim ambience of their art, to convince their audience to read the new narratives beyond the conventionalism of 43 Group’s modernism, overtly established within what Keyt’s art presented” (Perera 2018: 308). It is in this context where contemporary practices, sensibilities and tastes in art-making clashed somewhat violently with the conventional that I recall the discomfort expressed by a well-known archaeologist and art historian after he had seen my 1997 exhibition, ‘the Vehicle Named Woman’, “which was a body of work dissecting the woman’s subjectivity that included

⁶ George Keyt, a modernist painter and a member of the 43 Group had an enduring stylistic influence of Sri Lankan art.

painted car doors hung on the gallery wall” (Perera 2018: 308). The main source of his anxiety was that unlike the work of modernist painters such as George Keyt and others of the 43 Group, “my work apparently did not reflect a rooting to Sri Lanka”, and as he proceeded to critique, “when one relooks at them in 50 years’ time, in the absence of its present context, it will not be able to present itself as an authentic Sri Lankan art or as a body of work emanating a sense of Sri Lankan-ness” (Perera 2018: 308). This was not a simple isolated comment on my work alone. Instead, it was also a comment that was expected to identify the general trends manifest in the art of the 1990s (Perera 2018: 308).

The unequivocal insistence of 90s art and its proponents did not go unnoticed despite the state’s as well as the established art patrons’ distaste towards their activities. In the mid-1990s, the philanthropist and patron of the arts, Ajitha de Costa, initiated the alternative art space, the Heritage Gallery, which showcased the experimental art of the 90s for several years. The Gallery practically became a place where radical artists congregated. Yet another space that was open to the 90s art was Barefoot Art Gallery, earlier known as the 706 Gallery. The patrons, Dominic and Nazreen Sansoni, hailed from a traditional elite background and became the initial collectors to acquire 90s artists’ work. Their endorsement was welcome by the artists’ community in Sri Lanka. The 706 Gallery, before it changed into Barefoot, became one of the early contemporary art galleries where most of the artists from 90s Trend exhibited regularly. These were important factors in the art history of Sri Lanka, particularly for sustaining the enthusiasm of the radical artists to some extent. However, there was a larger share of rejection of the aesthetics (and therefore its art and artists) of the 90s Trend by the conventional art patrons and art audiences. There was a major discontent within Theertha towards the Colombo’s art audiences and the cultural elite that showed a lukewarm attitude towards their art and their collectivism. Therefore, Theertha’s collectivism ought to be understood in this complicated scenario both as platform to react to these rejections creatively and also as a comfort zone to sustain this kind of art, which was not generally popular.

COSMOPOLITAN COLLECTIVISM

It is worth initiating a discussion on one of the many characteristics of the collectivism that Theertha manifests, with an observation by Strathern and Biedermann. With reference to Sri Lanka’s pre-colonial past, Strathern

and Biedermann note, “well before the arrival of the first European interlopers, a multitude of different peoples engaged in exploits of long-distance travel, trade and pilgrimage, and it was not only ports but also vast areas of the Asian mainland that interacted across the waters. Sri Lanka sits exactly at the centre of the Indian Ocean: an excellent laboratory, one might think, in which to test any ideas about the connected and the cosmopolitan. But it has barely been visible in the resurgence of world history” (Strathern and Biedermann 2017: 1–2). Despite this sense of ‘barely visible’ of Sri Lanka’s cosmopolitanism within world history, it is evident in many aspects of Sri Lankan culture, including its cuisine, music and dance forms. But today, much of this cosmopolitanism is forgotten or ill-understood locally as well within prevailing dogmas of cultural hegemony. However, from the beginning there has been a self-conscious sense of cosmopolitan connectedness at Theertha. Theertha, from its inception, strived to maintain a cosmopolitan view that cut through racial, economic, regional and cultural politics. The collective aspired for and worked towards the fusion of ideas and blurring of boundaries. Therefore, imagining a larger and integrated art world that could transcend national and geographical boundaries was both utopian and a tenable dream. This was an existential and intellectual prerequisite and also a factor in sustenance. Theertha began its journey with the intention of securing this vision.

The idea of Theertha’s cosmopolitanism is of a particular kind, often found within Asia historically. Cosmopolitanism has been defined in many ways, but mostly as something that transcends notions such as national, local, cultural and political boundaries. It underlines the idea of being citizen of the world, with emphasis on a larger sense of ‘humanity’. While there are variations in the definitions of cosmopolitanism, one that I am interested in is Sheldon Pollock’s idea, which underlines “being translocal, of participating – and knowing one was participating – in cultural and political networks that transcended the immediate community” (quoted in Strathern and Biedermann 2017: 4). Strathern and Biedermann elaborate on the idea of Pollock’s translocal as “a conscious participation of people within a very grand ecumene: the Sanskrit cosmopolis, a swathe of societies from Peshawar to Java that used Sanskrit literature to formulate their vision of the world” (Strathern and Biedermann 2017: 4–5).

Admittedly, while there is a large temporal distance between 1200 when the kind of ideas referred to by Pollock prevailed and the 1990s, the cosmopolitan ideals described above had a fluid and absorptive character and hence travelled through time and space to resurface at different times,

including in the present. As such, a similar sense of cosmopolitanism binds and enthuse artists of Theertha for further exploration of cosmopolitan ideals. These artists cherished the ideal and idealized art world that would work within the ‘now’, a world that would not be restrained by the shackles of mono-cultural anxieties or the residues of a colonial or pre-colonial past. The art world that Theertha envisaged is expressed in Pollock’s idea of cosmopolitanism vis-à-vis the expansion of Sanskrit within South Asia. As Strathern and Biedermann explain, “for Pollock too, the concept of ‘cosmopolitanism’ promises to convey a sense of community or commonality that is not structured by any particular kinds of power relationship” (Strathern and Biedermann 2017: 5). But importantly however, the expansion of Sanskrit was “not the by-product of some Sanskrit-peddling empire” (Strathern and Biedermann 2017: 5). Instead, as outlined by Pollock, “adopters of the Sanskrit literary culture used it not to acknowledge the superiority of India as a centre but to reconfigure their own sense of centrality in more impressive terms” (Strathern and Biedermann 2017: 5). This consisted of “an endless string of self-conceived centres” (Strathern and Biedermann 2017: 5). In this imagination, the “vision of the Sanskrit cosmopolis was free not only from empire, but also from the strident universalism of religion...And it is free from ethnicity” (Strathern and Biedermann 2017: 5).

Like this ancient sense of cosmopolitanism that prevailed in South Asia of the past, Theertha’s sense of cosmopolitanism also recognized no hierarchies within the country based on language, ethnicity religion, or regionalism. In its dealings with the world beyond Sri Lanka’s national borders, within South Asia and beyond, this sense of equality guided Theertha’s dealings irrespective of the fact whether others reciprocated this sensibility or not. One of the crucial contributions that founding artists of Theertha made ensured local artists to venture into the outside world, forging new connections and evolving new networks. Khoj International, a Delhi-based artist-run collective, came into existence in 1997 as an “alternative in contemporary art practice” (Sood 2014: 32). As the art historian Nancy Adajania writes, Khoj, a product of its time however did not come into being as a need “of a group of local artists or in response to the challenges of an art-historical moment; rather, it presented itself as a prognostication and possibility” in the context of which “it looked forward to a utopian situation of dialogue among artists from different contexts, who would not otherwise have come into contact with one another” (Adajania 2014).

Khoj's⁷ annual artists' workshops were crucial players in propagating group initiatives as a way forward in contemporary art in South Asia and played a catalytic role at the initial stage in the evolution of Theertha. A number of Sri Lankan artists were invited to these workshops including myself in which the need and the urgency for artists' collectives to do collaborative, cross-border and cross-media art projects were discussed frequently. Furthermore, as noted by Khoj, "the idea of Khoj began in 1997 as a gift of possibility given by Robert Loder (the visionary founder of the Triangle Arts Trust). At a time when Indian artists felt isolated and unsupported, Khoj provided the possibility for young practitioners to create an open-ended, experimental space for themselves on their own terms. Khoj would be a space where they could make art independent of formal academic and cultural institutions and outside the constraints of the commercial gallery."⁸ The initial ideas that explain the genesis of Khoj are also applicable to the genesis of Theertha even though their subsequent trajectories were very different in response to local conditions.

Khoj was a creative and enabling response to the alienation felt by artists not only within India, but also within the larger context of South Asia. The formation of artists' initiatives was not exclusive to Sri Lanka and India. Similar interventions into contemporary art and the tendency towards collective activities of artists within the South Asian region became a phenomena in the last decade of the twentieth century spilling over into the new millennium. In this, Theertha's emergence is intrinsically connected to the art fervour and transformations happening particularly within India and the region in general. The need for artists' mobility as a way of art exchanges were called upon to counter or to overcome limitations at the home turfs in these countries in South Asia. Khoj, being one of the first artists' groups to envision a different format for artist exchanges in the 90s contemporary art scene in South Asia, played an inimitable role in mobilizing artists in the region.

Khoj managed to harness the group energies of the artists' collectives from across South Asia, namely, Theertha (Sri Lanka), Vasl (Pakistan), the Britto Art Trust (Bangladesh) and Sutra (Nepal). These were all alternative art initiatives that came up in the new millennium, with assistance and camaraderie of Khoj, to work towards creating a collegiality and cooperation that later became known as the South Asian Network for the Arts

⁷ More information on Khoj can be accessed via its website: www.khojworkshop.org

⁸ <http://khojworkshop.org/khoj-legacy/> (accessed 3 June 2018).

(SANA).⁹ With SANA in place, Theertha found its own peer community within a regional/international setting that understood artists' anxieties, frustrations and aspirations and which in a way was being misunderstood in its own country. Its art found endorsement and appreciation within these groups. With eruptive geo-politics and developmental anomalies sweeping across South Asia, most of the experiences of groups within SANA had similar bearings. Art that was produced by them engaged in parallel themes and approaches.

The initial years with SANA intensified Theertha's energy and credibility. Activities such as international residencies and workshops increased, and international art exchanges strengthened within member groups. The international art residencies and workshops regularly held at Theertha as well as at sites facilitated by other SANA members showcased its experimental approach to art. Performance art, earth works and installations, which were relatively new art forms in Sri Lanka, also had the opportunity to expand and evolve at Theertha-sponsored events.

What is particular to Theertha is its aspiration to be de-centred from the supposed 'West' and relocate itself within South Asia and within the country itself. Often, Theertha was seen to be critical and resistant to undertakings that had a Euro-American bias. This became more pronounced in later years where its attention became more intensely engaged in sustaining the local art scene and when international curatorial projects were presented with a Euro-American interest. It is in this context that many of the Theertha exhibitions were curated by artists themselves developing a home-grown curatorial expertise within the country that was within the purview of practising artists. Weerasinghe, acknowledging the important role played by artists in the Asia region in ushering in a new era of contemporary art in the 1980s and 1990s, which was also evident in South Asia at the same time notes, "while it was artists in the Asian countries who brought in the new era, it was not they who defined and managed the new era into the future" (Weerasinghe 2007: 84). Instead, he further notes, this "directional guidance for contemporary art was set by art curators from the developed world, funded by wealthy museums and galleries" (Weerasinghe 2007: 84). Weerasinghe acknowledges that given the relative lack of exper-

⁹For more information on artists' mobility in South Asia, read, 'Re-imagining and Re-narrating South Asia: Artists' Travel and the Practice Visual Art as a New Experiential Cartography', by Sasanka Perera, pp. 251–274. In, Dev Nath Pathak ed., *Another South Asia*. New Delhi: Primus, 2018.

tise and critical discourse on matters such as curatorial dynamics in Asia at the time, “international art curators played a pivotal role in consolidating the radical developments in art in Asia during the 1980s and 1990s” (Weerasinghe 2007: 84). The problem however is due to these curators’ locations, training, obligations to their patrons and relative lack of knowledge about evolving and constantly changing local art situations, there were vast gaps in the curatorial decisions they made with regard to art not only in Asia but in South Asia as well as in individual countries.

David Clarke, with reference to this specific curatorial dynamic notes, “few curators have a detailed knowledge of more than one part of Asia (if that), and thus are rarely in a position to ‘discover’ relatively unexposed artists” (quoted in Ali 2011: 9). As Clarke further notes, “those who possess local expertise will be familiar with the role of informant they are often called upon to play, providing jet setting curators lacking contextual knowledge with shortlists of potential artists and other necessary information” (quoted in Ali 2011: 9). Theertha was quite sensitive to these lapses from its very inception. Theertha worked with many international curators and were willing to expand their knowledge when it felt there were serious lapses in situations these curators were receptive to informed and nuanced local input. But it is clearly within this context that Theertha self-consciously and successfully developed its own curatorial expertise which it has by now used widely in Sri Lanka itself and to a certain extent in other parts of South Asia as well.

REDEFINING ARTIST’S ROLE

Within the collectivism of the 1990s, the conventional role of the artists got radically remoulded. Theertha evolved from a mere organizer of international workshops in 2001 to an all-encompassing art organizer by 2018 that ran a gamut of activities including training for art teachers, colloquiums for women artists, community art projects, art publishing, running an art gallery and using art projects for heritage management. In such activities, artists critically engaged with the ideas, such as conception, management and execution of art. Given the manifold transformation of artists’ role, it demands us to look for redefinition of artists within its collectivist vision.

The role that Theertha defined for artists had a built-in phrase which was often quoted by Jagath Weerasinghe as “Personal is Political”.¹⁰ It

¹⁰ Personal communication from Jagath Weerasinghe, 1 August 2018.

evolved around the idea that artist cannot be removed from his/her social responsibilities, and that the artist cannot be dislodged from this equation because they themselves are part of the whole. Weerasinghe elaborating on the artist persona emerging in the 1990s declares that “an artist who was conscious of his or her intellectual and political powers and possibilities. It was this radically new identity, which can be identified as an ‘enlightenment’ in its own right” (Weerasinghe 2005: 188). Seen in this sense, if one cartographs how the artist’s persona was framed within Theertha’s activities during its 17-year history, one would see this persona as one that was quite broad which combined managerial and curatorial roles while also amalgamating with these educationist and interventionist aspects at the same time. To postulate this particular brand of artists’ role, let me look at some of the key activities that Theertha has undertaken during its existence.

To reiterate a point made earlier, Theertha is completely an artists-run organization. Every aspect of its activities has been conceptualized and executed by artists. This is somewhat different from the model of Khoj, where its structure incorporated an art manager who undertook to manage what the core group of artists decided. As mentioned earlier, Theertha was formed by a group of 11 artists. All of them happened to be friends with a shared idealism to promote the changes that took place in the 90s. Furthermore, these artists felt the stifling ambience of the local art scene and were driven by the urge to be part of the larger art scene beyond Sri Lanka that could give them more opportunities to be innovative, experimental and also to be acknowledged for their art. It was a personal quest as much as it was a societal one. Collectivism that proceeded with Theertha in the following years got moulded into what is seen today by the virtue of numerous activities, response to various needs and demands of certain moments in its trajectory. The artists at Theertha organically stepped into the roles, in the spirit of collectivists, as art managers, curators and educators. It ought to be noted that it had many pitfalls and disappointments. It took the group considerable effort and time to consolidate its first international workshop so much so that Robert Loder, the founding member of Triangle Arts Trust, introduced by Khoj to support Theertha, nearly gave up his belief in the group’s credibility to organize anything. If not for Khoj’s director Pooja Sood’s intervention and insistence on group-synergy, the connection would have been lost at the outset. Eventually, Theertha became a part of the Triangle Network’s South Asian partners with a large portfolio of activities of significance to its credit.

Theertha's first encounter with the funding of culture and art came with the International Art Workshop in 2001, which had received a substantial grant from the Prince Claus Fund that supported art exchanges across artistic, geographic and ethno-religious borders. The workshop was held at the Lunuganga Estate of the renowned Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa hosted by the Geoffrey Bawa Trust. The success of this workshop propelled Theertha to continue the cause for a more engaged practice of art. Theertha managed to attract funding from HIVOS and later from Arts Collaboratory, Netherland-based funding bodies and Ford Foundation, for larger part of its programming. In this wake, it was evident that artists had to also work towards the exploration of funding opportunities for the sustenance of the art practices that they as a collective strived for.

Although Sri Lankan art had changed ideologically by adjusting to contemporary anxieties and the art community had expanded over the years, the infrastructure, art education and the overall perceptions and attitudes towards the visual arts did not change to accommodate the demands of the new art. Neither the government nor private patrons were forthcoming in a progressive way. State sponsorships were embroiled in parochial politics and corporate attention was directed at high-visibility events such as cricket matches. A handful of art galleries had emerged since the 1980s, although they mostly functioned as retail shops to sell art rather than representing artists in an organized manner. At the same time, the state was not interested in art other than what was defined as 'traditional' or related to what it perceived as 'heritage'. Burdened with the long-drawn armed conflict in the North and North East, education had a very low priority within the state's education and cultural policies. Within this complex context the new art being produced in the 1990s, presenting a different aesthetic sensibility, did not find enthusiastic endorsers. Theertha's art activities were shaped and defined in an attempt to navigate within this regressive environment, and therefore the role of artists was more complex than ever before.

The primary concern for Theertha was to build its own art audiences and to expand its ideology so that a large support base for its kind of art could be established. One of its key programmes included art teacher training around the country. The argument for this was to change the way art teachers think about art, so that a change of perspective was set in the minds of art students. The other purpose of this endeavour was to create a network of artists across the island enabling them to become propagators of Theertha's ideas of contemporary art. Theertha went on to engage

in a more holistic approach to facilitating art exchanges. Operating with the ideal of democratizing the art knowledge and access to training, it consciously located the teacher training programmes in the regional and economically backward areas. Sometimes using their university peer group connections, Theertha artists purposefully linked with regionally located art teachers, government educational officials and so on. With a background in students' politics and their ideological commitment to the idea of 'contemporary art', the Theertha artists became savvy in 'selling' their training format to school administrations in different parts of the country. Teachers allowed Theertha to hold the training workshops at various locations across the island, which came to them free of charge. Theertha art teacher training programmes caught the attention of educational zonal offices of the state in some of these regional areas, and Theertha started receiving invitations to organize art teacher training sessions with government help in some locations. As such, teacher training was held in Dehiattakandiya, Kegalle, Kandy, Ampara, Matara and Aludeniya.

While Theertha did not associate with political regimes either as an endorser or opponent, it was concerned with the effects and affects of the Civil War. The artists were mindful of the repercussions of the war, the divides it had created and the day-to-day conflicts and anxieties the war had embedded on society and its human predicament. Coming from the south of the country, and with predominantly Sinhala and Buddhist membership, Theertha was burdened with the same guilt that most progressives and liberals in the country were feeling in the face of the intense violence inflicted by the conflicting parties, Tamil insurgent groups and the Sri Lankan military. The guilt was more intense with no real solution in sight. The emergence of extreme ideologies of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in the south, general socio-political intolerance towards Tamils as 'enemies' within the dominant 'national' psyche and the virulent forms of Tamil nationalisms that groups such as the LTTE propagated demanded counter-discourses with a more nuanced understanding. The artists within a group such as Theertha, critical of chauvinist politics and their representations in the cultural domain, had to be intellectually awake in this wake. Well aware of the divisive politics during the war, Theertha initiated its series of publications, sometimes through partner organizations, on the issues of art and culture with a critical edge. Published in Sinhala, Tamil and English, much of the content of these publications focused on the arts and 'culture', such as *Patitha* (in Sinhala), *Panuwal* (in Tamil), *Artlab* (in Sinhala and Tamil) and *South Asia Journal for Culture* (in English). These

publications became key texts presenting alternative readings on culture and art for students at the university level and beyond.

The long-term associations with members of the Tamil artists' community in Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka and the sympathies towards the predicament of Tamils as a besieged ethnic community in the country ensured that Theertha continuously maintained collaborative art programmes with Jaffna artists. These collaborations allowed Theertha to organize the seminal exhibition, 'Aham-Puram', in 2004 at the newly rebuilt Jaffna Public Library. Seventy-two experimental artworks were shown amidst the war-torn area partly run by the state military and partly by the Tamil Tigers in the backdrop of a faulty and short-lived ceasefire. While such attempts were seen by some as anti-patriotic, and Theertha and its members were castigated as traitors by extreme elements in the artist community and elsewhere, these remain among Theertha's intensely cherished, ambitious and most impacting activities.

In the same breath, it is also pertinent to mention the emergence of a feminist stance among Theertha artists. The feminist criticality in art that started to emerge with the '90s Trend in particular found continued support through Theertha. The exhibition, 'Reclaiming Histories: Retrospective Exhibition of Women's Art' (2000), curated by myself and showing the works by 50 female artists under the patronage of the Vibhavi Academy of Fine Art, can be seen as one of the early attempts at building awareness of women's art influenced by the '90s Trend. While the feminist lobby in Sri Lanka was active for a long time, their involvement with visual art remained somewhat aloof. As such, even if artists attempted thematic investigations of women's issues, there was no consistent discourse or an orientation within the larger feminist sensibility. It was difficult to find role models for women's art, guidance or cues to indicate a particular direction to a locally rooted feminist approach. Due to this, during the initial period, some women's art reflected *ad hoc* appropriations of theoretical elements from Euro-American feminism without really reworking these to merge with local experiences. It has to be acknowledged that the ideological liberalization that came with 90s Trend allowed feminist discourses to be absorbed into the thinking processes of art, artists' conceptualization of artworks and overall art practices. This liberalized approach also gave rise to the radical use of imagery, art methods and narrations with a high sense of criticality that needed a certain boldness and an element of risk-taking. This added extra pressure on women artists to go beyond their conventional roles, as artist and as woman, and to be radical and work within the art discourse of

90s Trend. Theertha's contribution to the evolution of contemporary women's art has been to provide the much-needed intellectual basis and the subaltern/localized approach informed by feminism. The artists had to go beyond the theoretical definitions presented by Euro-American feminism and its art trends. The personalities and works of female artists associated with Theertha and its overall support for women's art through exhibitions and art publications have also helped to establish a certain identifiable particularity associated with women's art. Many female artists of the younger generation are influenced by this particularity and the thematic of such art. Between 2005 and 2008, Theertha's art programmes emphasized supporting young female artists who were graduating from art colleges to continue their practice and experiment with new ideas. This allowed them to initiate a process of forming their own identities as artists. The Women Artists' Colloquiums and the International Women Artists Residencies were initiated during this period.

In 2007, frustrated with the lack of flexibility in private galleries and their inability to understand contemporary art needs, Theertha transformed part of its office building into an exhibition space that was called the Red Dot Gallery. Since then, Theertha has been concentrating on establishing Red Dot Gallery as an experimental art venue and to build its audiences and patronage. With an eye on standards in its gallery practices, it introduced the annual gallery season *Pradarshana Wasanthaya* (the summer of exhibition) in 2007 for three years to showcase innovative solo exhibitions and present new and cutting-edge works of young and mid-career artists.

CONCLUSION, AS THEERTHA CONTINUES

In many ways, Theertha's numerous activities have managed to propel the 90s art into other directions. Many of its members, some of whom were instrumental in initiating the 90s Art Trend, have been active in sustaining the criticality and experimental nature of their art-making, presenting extremely innovative and seminal exhibitions. Jagath Weerasinghe's exhibition, 'Celestial Fervor' (2009), presented a deeper and more sophisticated elaboration of the thematic he has engaged with since his 1994 show 'Anxiety' that essentially provided the new parameters for 90s art. Similar attempts have been seen in exhibitions by other Theertha artists such as Sarath Kumarasiri ('Kovil-Pansal', 2009) and K. Pushpakumara ('Goodwill Hardware', 2009) as well as the younger generation of artists, Anura

Krishantha ('Chairs', 2007), Bandu Manamperi ('Numbed', 2009), Sanath Kalubadana ('My Friend the Soldier', 2007) and Pala Pothupitiya ('My Ancestral Dress and My ID', 2008). After the end of the armed conflict in May 2009, that had continued for 30 years, Sri Lanka experienced a sigh of relief despite the immense losses. The end of the massive human and material destruction that had gone on for so long, which paralysed as well as brutalized the entire island's society, was a landmark political moment. While this was a major change that allowed artists to connect and work together much more easily with the North and North East, it also ushered in unbearably nationalistic political rhetoric from the victors that seemed superficially and patronizingly inclusive. But in reality, these remained racist, anarchist and violent. Some of the exhibitions mentioned above such as 'Numb', 'Celestial Fervour' and 'Goodwill Hardware' by Theertha artists responded to this post-war socio-political situation in the South and recorded their suspicion, anxiety and frustration.

While its preoccupation with supporting contemporary art continues intensely in the post-war period, Theertha's activities also focused on interpreting the artist's role in a broader platform for intervention to include heritage management as art projects. Bordering between community art, heritage management and archaeology, through programmes such as Ape Gama (Our Village) and Let's Take a Walk, artists worked with selected communities to rediscover their own contemporary heritage and proceeded to make cultural maps of their own localities. These programmes brought to the surface issues such as ethnicity and religion, how different groups have spatially integrated within their localities and so on, which were no longer aspects of quotidian conversations. In other words, they were means to understand a community's own history as well as the present more inclusively. These programmes appealed to the same interventionist sentiments of Theertha which inspired it to undertake projects such as 'Aham-Puram' exhibition in Jaffna in 2004. Such projects involved negotiating with many government and private institutions, individuals and groups in the communities where the work was done. This role of the artist as a negotiator, educator and heritage manager was something that came out of long-term engagement with a spectrum of art activities that Theertha was engaged in during the 18 years of its existence. The evolution of contemporary art in the post-1990s decade has also seen this particular role emerging for the artist, a role that is combined with a sense of social responsibility and a belief that art is a civilizational tool, and therefore that artists have the power to transform and intervene in the perceptual process of art audiences. The massive emotional and physical destruction of a long-drawn-out

ethnically coloured civil war that ended in 2009, as well as the extensive need for developmental activities and a heightened awareness of human rights and cultural rights have dictated the overall public debates in Sri Lanka. Being inheritors of an art ideology that equated 'personal' with 'political' and by considering critical engagement as an integral element in its art, Theertha has been highly receptive to the nuances of these debates. This receptivity is reflected in Theertha's myriad activities where it has combined certain aspects of social services with art, thereby producing a unique image of the artist as a socio-cultural entrepreneur.

Colombo held its first biennale in 2009 (Colombo Art Biennale) with the theme 'Imagining Peace', inviting artists to think beyond the initial 'relief' of ending the civil war and the much-celebrated 'victory'. The second Colombo Art Biennale held in 2012 February titled 'Becoming' continued this attempt of contextualizing art within the current mood of the country. The initial ideas for the biennale as well as the selection of themes for both events were formulated by Jagath Weerasinghe, and a number of other Theertha artists were members of the Biennale's Artistic Advisory Board. This has allowed Theertha to be closely affiliated with the Colombo Art Biennale and its activities. By now, the local art scene has grown to include new patrons and galleries even though the need for more is still acute. Other groups such as COCA and Colombo Artists have emerged taking visible stands in terms of presenting current inclinations of contemporary art and connecting with other art communities in the South Asia region.

At the end of 18 years since its inception, Theertha's initial purposes for establishing itself as a platform to allow art exchanges to take place across geographic, ethnic, religious and artistic borders have been overtaken by other priorities such as art knowledge production and dissemination, need for effective art educational programmes for higher learning, gaining visibility for Sri Lankan contemporary art to be represented in international forums and opening of interesting platforms for contemporary artists internationally to undertake collaborative work and so on. Such needs require an approach with different emphasis and forging of new partnerships. Colombo Art Biennale, Theertha's long-term art initiative, 'Sethusamudram Art Project' and with No. 1 Shanthi Road, Bangalore, and 'Tale of Two Cities' with Gallery Espace, New Delhi, have been few such 'new' partnerships. Theertha which started in 2000 as a young artist group remains at present a matured and well-seasoned group of artists with much more personal commitments and priorities in their lives than earlier. Their art is

constantly scrutinized for maturity and innovation by their peers. Therefore, Theertha's future existence depends on its ability to get the continued support of its senior members, understand new demands of contemporary art in the country and beyond, sustaining fresh energy and finding new relevance in an art scene that has the potential to boom.

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