NJP Reader

Contributions to an Artistic Anthropology
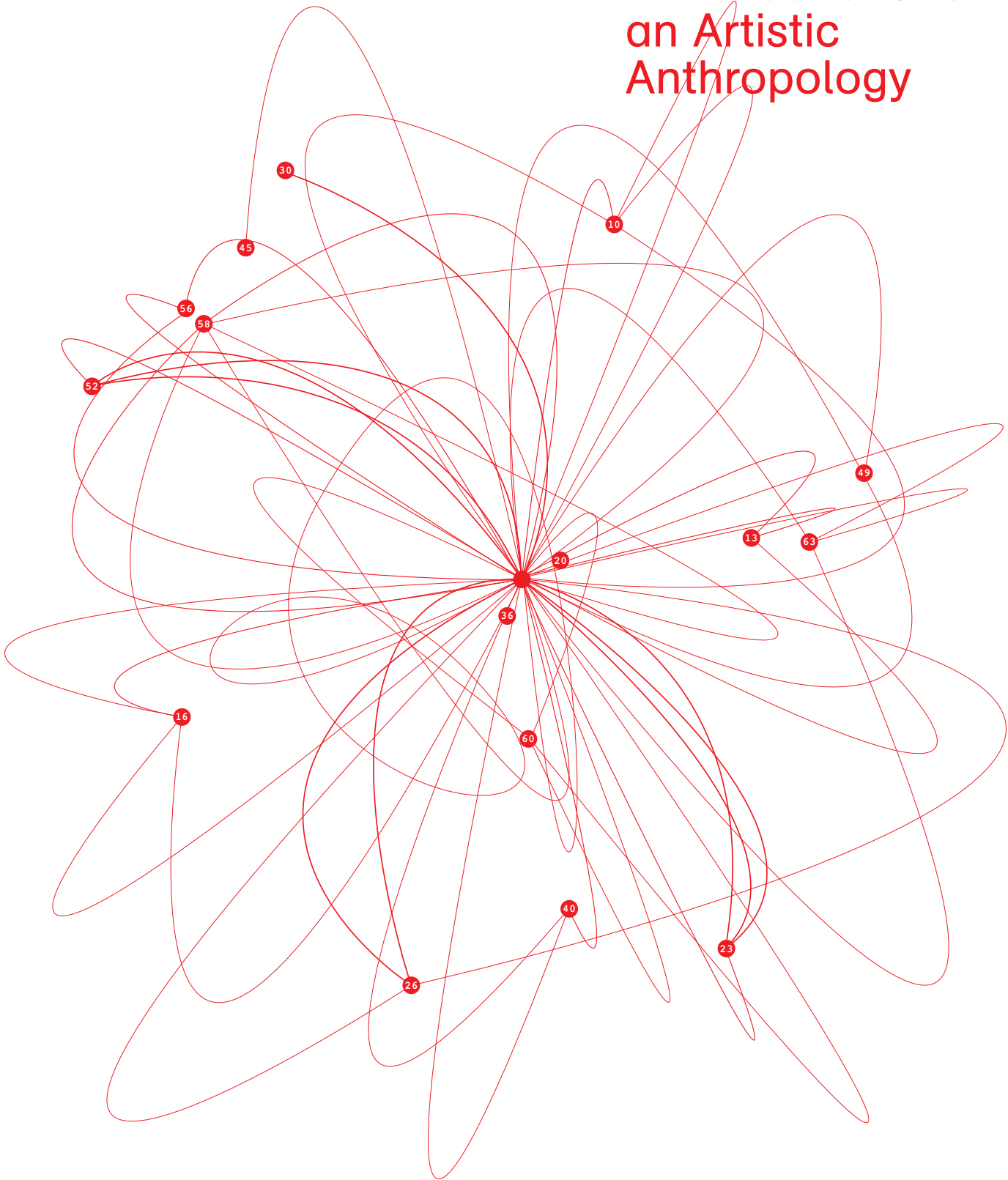
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Ranjit Hoskote is a poet and curator. In addition to having published work in numerous Indian and international journals, Hoskote is the author of four collections of poetry, has translated the Marathi poet Vasant Abaji Dahake, co-translated the German novelist and essayist Ilija Trojanow, and edited an anthology of contemporary Indian verse.

Nancy Adajania writes and lectures extensively on contemporary Indian art, especially new media art and its political and cultural contexts. As Editor-in-Chief of Art India (2000-2002), Adajania developed a discursive space, in an Asian context, for emergent new-media and interactive public art practices and social projects on a global level.

1

A pioneer of the networked world, Nam June Paik was an exponent of globalism decades before the advent of globalisation made transcontinental mobility and transcultural fluency practicable or even truly imaginable.

Important as the revolutionary advances in the technology of communication were to his art, it is possible to see his experiments in the bridging of distance and the destabilisation of proximity - through the melding of cultural behaviours, philosophical ideas and evolving media - as having been inspired by Buddhist models of the mind, experience and illumination. A recurrent motif in his art was that of a global community of practitioners: this bears a strong affinity with the vision of the infinitely many yet mutually reflecting and interlinked nodes of the "net of Indra", in the key Mahayana text known as the *Buddha-avatamsaka-sutra* or Garland Sutra.

In the same vein, Paik's insistence from the 1960s through the 1990s that there was no centre or periphery, no subject or object, no technology or nature - in defiance of the obvious barriers established, variously, by Cold War geopolitics, the devastation of the

environment by industry, and the widening rifts between individuals and communities in transitional societies - suggests a specific position from within the Buddhist philosophical spectrum towards the dogma of polarity. It is possible to read his negation of the standard binaries of Western philosophy and culture as expressing a viewpoint articulated by the Yogachara school of Buddhist psychology. The fundamental doctrine of the Yogachara is that of *chitta-matra*, or "mind-only", meaning that since reality is apprehensible only through the mind, and all experience is made possible only by the mind, it is by purifying the mind rigorously of all polarities that we can eliminate all the defilements of separateness and difference, passing beyond the constructs of space and time to achieve a true and illuminating embrace of reality.

As a shape-shifter and context-changer, Paik worked from the principle that environments are not inherited but can be configured through unpredictable encounters, dialogues among dissimilars, transcultural journeys. His own movements across milieux, from Korea through Japan and Germany to the USA, reflect this belief in a world unconstrained by borders. He was able to carry forward his preoccupations, informed by Buddhist and shamanic ideas, into a space of dialogue where his interlocutors included John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen, with their specific interests in randomised order and the aleatory de-construction of an experience pre-formatted by normative conditioning.

2

At least five clear elements may be discerned in Nam June Paik's complex practice: performance, technology, collaboration, research and dialogue. Taken together, these five elements weave into an artistic anthropology. Such an anthropology obliges the practitioner to amplify the solitary and even narcissistic expressive action that lies at the core of art-making by reference to two mandates premised on sociality. First: the blurring of the line separating the artist's consciousness from those of her or his viewers. And second: the embrace of an explicit self-consciousness concerning performance, reaction, feedback loops and the interaction of affects and desires, which is generated

by the use of new media technologies in art.

Correspondingly, Paik's lasting legacy to emergent art practices, through the wide acceptance of this artistic anthropology, is two aims. First: the production of art as a mutable and self-disruptive interface between artistic desire and its recipients and contexts. And second: the continuous activation of new audiences that are, in fact, participants in the artistic process - whether as respondents to surveys, subjects of interviews, providers of testimony, interrogators of artistic intent, or collaborators in installations, performances or discursive works.

An orientation towards artistic anthropology transfers the emphasis from the art-work to the work of art, which can be an act of discursive as well as expressive performance. This choice commits the artist to disclosing patterns of insight, knowledge and co-production rather than refining the use of one medium or another. The medium is, eventually, determined as a function of the specific conceptual logic of the work; it serves, rather than eclipsing, the democratising impulse of the work of art.

3

We would offer two examples of such an artistic anthropology: the ongoing project, convened from Berlin, titled *The Dictionary of War* (www.dictionaryofwar.org), and "Khirkeeyaan", a 2006 project by the Bombay-based artist Shaina Anand.

The Dictionary of War is a globally nomadic platform that re-stages itself with every edition as a locus where the most urgent political concepts of the epoch, revolving around conflict and dissensus, are subjected to scrutiny through a spectrum of approaches including the scholarly, the artistic, the critical, the ludic, the expository and the epigrammatic. The Dictionary thus produces an incremental encyclopaedia of global unrest by collaborative means, extending itself along a potentially planet-wide network, manifesting itself both as a theatre of nuanced rhetorical performances as well as an open-ended online video documentation of these. The Dictionary operates through the structural principle

Shaina Anand
Khirkeeyaan, 2006 (video still and/or working still).
Courtesy of the artist

of the swarm or the cluster, building up and sustaining a critical momentum of research through successive gatherings. It experiments with the generation of new and intersecting global publics, while renewing a collegial as against a hierarchical pedagogy.

In April 2006, Shaina Anand intervened in the settlement of Khirkee at the semi-urban, semi-rural margins of New Delhi, to assess the possibilities of sparking off a sense of community, however provisional and ephemeral, among its denizens. These were segregated, not only by sectarian and class interests, but also by the typological divisions of the settlement's informal economy: its residential, commercial, licensed and illegal-migrant sectors. Anand opted to link Khirkee's constituents by deploying a micro-media solution: in a remarkable community art intervention, she short-circuited the passive logic of televisual reality and the NGO-driven pattern of community networking. Crafting an open-circuit TV system from available TV sets, cheap CC-TV equipment, and several meters of cable snaking through the streets of Khirkee, Anand produced conversations and performances among friends and strangers living in different neighbourhoods within the settlement. While these self-generated, "real" reality shows contoured the fault lines of caste, class, religion, region and gender, they also allowed invisible desires and aspirations to surface, for the first time, from behind the doors of the sweatshops and the windows of the women's quarters.

Anand created a situation where her "film" was made instantly, with neither cinematographer nor editor involved; here, the participant was also the witness, the viewer and the user. Not only did she stand the genre of classical documentary on its head, but she also poked a hole through the specious claims of the televisual medium, which doles out a cheap democracy through its SMS polls and rigged talk shows. Anand politicised an existential situation dominated by the themes of hopelessness and routine: she actively created a public sphere and prepared the ground, in an unpromising situation, for what Nancy Adajania has elsewhere called "performative democracy."