

Fighting for a public space

SUMITHRA SUNDER

ON 27 March 2016, a group of artists stood outside the Venkatappa Art Gallery in Bangalore, holding printed A4 sheets of paper. On cue, they crumpled the sheets and then pretended to eat them – and choke. The dramatic skit was an act of protest against the Karnataka state government's plans to hand over management of this public institution to a private foundation. The sheets they were unable to swallow represented the agreement between the government and the Tasveer Foundation, which had been granted permission to renovate and manage this iconic state-owned art gallery.

The incident spurred many conversations about public spaces in the city, specifically in relation to art. In this essay, I draw on the struggle around the Venkatappa Art Gallery (VAG) to reflect on what constitutes public resources for the city and why various 'publics' organize around claims to public spaces.

In February 2016, the artist community in Bangalore was up in arms against a proposal by the Government of Karnataka's Department of Archaeology, Museums and Heritage to allow a private foundation to 'adopt' the Venkatappa Art Gallery (VAG). The VAG is a premier public space that embodies the history of contemporary art practice in Bangalore, and has long been a democratic and accessible space for artists from the city and across the state of Karnataka. The fact that the government's decision to 'privatize' this space led to an immediate and widespread protest underscores its symbolic value for artists in Bangalore.

The Venkatappa Art Gallery was set up in 1967 to commemorate the contribution of the artist Venkatappa, and to serve as a museum of modern art complete with auditorium facilities. The VAG has traditionally been an important space where students could hold their first public shows at no or nominal cost. Almost as a rite of passage, students from local art schools as well as from other cities in the state would usually display their work in the gallery after completing their studies. For this reason, the VAG has hosted the work of a number of now prominent artists. It is this status and history that has created an important identity for the VAG in Bangalore, especially as a space that has nurtured young talent.

The VAG Forum was set up by artists and other members of the public in February 2016 in order to contest the adoption of the gallery by the Tasveer Foundation. The MoU, signed in July 2015, was seen as eroding the public status of this space. Subsequently, after they succeeded in

getting the MoU revoked, the Forum focused on reaffirming and taking forward the unique identity of this space: meetings were organized to discuss plans to rehabilitate the space. The Forum also organized public events such as curator talks and art shows, including a curated exhibition of ‘family memorabilia’ meant to reflect the way artists think about the space. The show, titled ‘Private Collections Public Museum’, featured works by Sheela Gowda, Suresh Jayaram, Pushpamala N., Surekha, Dimple B. Shah, Gurudas Shenoy and Babu Eshwar Prasad. Several of these artists had earlier exhibited their work in the gallery and hence felt a strong sense of identity with the space. These events and exhibitions were organized by the VAG whenever the gallery was not occupied by a booked event or show, in order to keep the space active and ensure its continued presence in the contemporary art scene.

The protest that was mounted by the VAG Forum found backing from many members of the public as well. The decision to hand over the VAG to be managed by a private entity was interpreted as the government’s attempt to shirk its responsibility of maintaining a public facility. The leaders of the Forum also felt that the views of artists should have been sought before signing the agreement, and demanded that the state government continue to control the VAG and be responsible for the maintenance of the space. News reports about the VAG case also represented the agreement as a handover of a public art space to a private owner.

A space like the VAG has been shaped by its specific history as an arts centre in Bangalore; it is also located in a central part of the city, making it a valuable site for the artist community which has had a long relationship with the space. While the Forum was open to new ideas on how to rehabilitate the space and renovate the gallery, they were insistent on having a say in the decision-making process and on how this space is to be maintained and curated – given that the state government had taken this step without wider consultations. Senior artists such as Pushpamala N. and Suresh Kumar used social media and other means to create awareness and protest this decision. I now explore why the artist community was so strongly opposed to this move.

Artists and other citizens of Bangalore feared that the MoU would lead to the privatization of a public space and resource. The agreement that was made with Tasveer Foundation was in line with a wider trend of developing public-private partnerships to raise resources for the maintenance of heritage or public spaces in India (and across the world). The VAG Forum was formed to defend the gallery as a public space and to keep it active as a prime space for contemporary art practice. The members of the Forum thus identify themselves as members of the ‘public’ who have a right to control or participate in decisions about the space, and they believed that privatization would exclude them from having a say in the control and planning for the space – a view that can be contested. The concept of public-private partnership is not new and has been tried in other cities. In this case, however, there was opposition to the way this partnership was structured.

The involvement of private bodies in the maintenance and functioning of public spaces is an old trend in India, dating from at least the 1990s. For example, the Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum utilized funds provided by the Jammalal Bajaj Foundation and the resources of INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) to restore the building and the artifacts it contains. Perhaps the Karnataka government had this example in mind when it entered into an agreement with the Tasveer Foundation to restore and maintain the gallery, which relieved the state of some of its financial responsibility. While the BDL Mumbai City Museum is a successful model of a public-private partnership working to sustain a cultural space in a city, this approach was viewed very differently by many citizens of Bangalore and most of the artist community.

In the case of the BDL Museum, there was little public resistance although there was some objection from the Municipal Corporation of Mumbai when the renovations and restoration work began (which could be read as right wing opposition to progressive work in the city). But the most important difference between the BDL Museum and the VAG case is that the latter was seen as a public resource which would be closed to free public use and access by this move.

As noted earlier, the artists tend to equate themselves as the 'public' and therefore as having a right to control this space. While the BDL Mumbai City Museum is open to the public and charges a nominal entrance fee, VAG has always allowed free entry. However, in the case of VAG, the concerned artists and citizens or the 'public' felt that the agreement would allow the space to be curated by a private foundation, which would run the gallery and thereby restrict its use as a public resource. Members of the Forum also believed that it is the artist community which should manage such a public gallery space.

In Bangalore, the VAG has been iconic as an inclusive and democratic space which can be hired cheaply by young artists. It was also viewed as an excellent space for non-commercial and experimental art projects, festivals, workshops, seminars, talks and meetings. Most of the artists who came together in the VAG Forum had mounted their first solo shows in the gallery. Over the years, the VAG has been the venue of various group shows, collective projects, eight state *kala melas*, a retrospective on R.M. Hadpad (2015), the International Live Art Festival (2016), Co-Lab and Ananya Drishya artist talks, and recently the IFA Public Art presentation, to name a few events – all of which were open to the public and were well attended.

Thus, the artist community who protested this move believed that the VAG was really 'their' space and that they were therefore responsible for protecting and managing it, hence it should not be handed over to a private entity that may or may not have the same interests or priorities. Here we may ask why the artist community had this sense of entitlement and seemingly identified themselves as the concerned 'public'.

Whether this reflects a kind of condescension towards non-inclusive art galleries or a connection with the 'publicness' of the space itself (VAG), the artists heading the movement to contest the MoU had a specific identity in their minds. They see themselves as the public that ought to have

full and free access to the space as they always have, an attitude that is clearly seen in the way they went about rejecting the understanding between the government and Tasveer Foundation. One can read this as a reluctance to ‘give up’ a space that has been part of the coming of age process for young artists for a few generations, but one also perceives that the artists felt that they know best what should be done with the space.

To understand why the proposed ‘privatization’ of VAG evoked such a quick and strong response, we need to look briefly at the history of arts practice in Bangalore. The city has nurtured a novel art culture and a variety of arts movements, in most of which the state has had little role. Beginning in the 1980s, artists have worked towards creating art in public spaces and also trying to engage the public in different ways. Since the 1990s a number of artists have engaged with the city and its ecology and politics, highlighting the diverse histories of different locales or how the recent pattern of ‘development’ has adversely affected Bangalore and its inhabitants. For instance, Surekha and Suresh Kumar Gopalareddy’s work in the Bengaluru Habba of 2000 spoke of the various parts of the city that have been affected by this development. Here the city becomes a site as well as subject of study for artists.

Artists no longer just ‘exhibit’ in the art gallery, rather they look at engaging with various aspects of urban life and communities. There is a conscious rejection of the ‘white-cube’, with artistic work taking on more temporal forms such as performances and festivals. A good example is the work by artist John Devraj (1994) in which he used the collective skills of 3000 school children to create sculptures. Another is the more recent Neralu festival (begun in 2014) that focused public attention on the degraded environmental condition of the city. The festival was dedicated to the trees of the city and called on artists, activists and other urban practitioners to speak of various ways to protect the city’s dwindling tree cover and green areas.

A prime example of the trend is *maraa*, a media arts collective, which has been working in and on Bangalore since 2009. In less than a decade, their ‘trust network’ has produced festivals rich in content and diversity. Ranging from powerful performances about the policing of the body set to music that calls out to people to reflect, *maraa* has successfully created a niche for themselves in the city. *Maraa* is just one example of a group of creative practitioners who work with communities in order to address urban issues. The temporal nature of such work also reflects the nature of arts practice in Bangalore which has a legacy of temporality since the 1980s. *Maraa* uses the festival as a tool to mediate art practice and issues of urban concern to the public. From exploring the textured experience of time retelling known stories, viewers are taken to a space of reflection. One of the key features of their practice is the ability to make people reflect.

In the festivals, the language used by the performers, whether it is Sheetal Sathe’s songs from Maharashtra or the Bhojpuri songs of Kalpana Patowary, speaks of a questioning of authority. They bring to sharp focus the issues faced by the urban poor, of state oppression and the loss of access to land/space in the city. Then there is the subject of the formation of the city. As much as

a city transforms the people who inhabit it, there is a transformation brought about by the inhabitants as well. Stories, desires, memories – the intangible – leave a trace on the tangible, creating a tapestry that is the present city. In the eight years of its existence, maraa has catalysed and brought together a range of creative practitioners. What maraa leaves behind is a textured canvas of varied arts practices that resonate with the politics of the group.

This history has resonated strongly in the art produced by practitioners in Bangalore. This background helps to explain the urgency that was felt by the VAG Forum members, in their insistence that support for the arts should be a significant part of the state's agenda in providing resources for the public. Perhaps it is again this feeling of ownership they have for the space, and the fact that they received some support from the government through the Department of Archaeology, Museums and Heritage (which supports both the VAG and the adjoining State Archaeological Museum), that provoked this strong protest. While artists in Bangalore have worked independently for many decades, often using trusted networks rather than state support, spaces like the VAG are important to their identity as artists of Karnataka.

The ethos in which Bangalore's art institutions were built contributed to a strong sense of community participation among contemporary artists of the city. This arts community presumably benefits from the VAG, as it would from the other heritage and cultural structures that are under the care of the state. Therefore it was even more important for the artists to ensure that the space should be managed and held on their terms.

The opposition to the 'takeover' of VAG drew on a wider concern about the loss of public spaces in Bangalore to 'development' projects such as road widening and the handover of lake management to private corporate bodies. The ideological motivation for reclaiming this gallery was reflected in the work of several urban arts groups and media collectives, who opposed this move because of the elitism that comes with privately owned spaces. At the forefront of the VAG Forum are artists such as Pushpamala N., who curated the show 'Sthapapuraganagu' in 1999. This was perhaps the first time an artist engaged with the city as an art space, a tradition that has continued till date. This form of intervention is seen in the Found Spaces Initiatives of India Foundation for the Arts as well as groups such as maraa and Samuha. For these artists, the city becomes a canvas.

Bangalore's citizen artists have used creativity to respond to and critique certain urban problems as well as larger cultural ones. They believe that when the state forms partnerships with private agencies or corporates, it turns into a matter of land or property grabbing. Ideologically, the group tied the rapid disappearance of public space in Bangalore to the takeover of public institutions and resources more broadly.

Thus, a city that houses these creative spaces often sees artists using their work to speak for a cause. The work presented by these groups reveals a desire to question and resist existing

authority. This is perhaps what makes the case of the VAG unique in the larger story of privatization of art and culture spaces in India. The VAG Forum employed the means of embodied protest, where artists and citizens used their presence to mark a cause. For example, the protests were unique in that no sloganeering was used. They were silent, and used symbolic performances such as whistle blowing or creating a human chain around the gallery.

The symbolic act of whistle blowing is to sound an alert. Used in performance or in the performative mode of protest, it is a call to stop and look at what is happening. At the Kochi-Muziris Biennale that just ended last month, students from the Ambedkar University, Delhi, performed a piece that was a comment on the violence committed by the authorities. The whistle is a signal of the police cracking down on an area or on a group of citizens. Therefore the act of whistle-blowing becomes symbolic of calling to attention a matter of great importance. It is such examples of activism that define Bangalore as a creative city. A long history of collaborative practice and aware citizens has created an environment that fosters the use of creative means to address various urban issues.

The protests began in February 2016 and continued until the MoU was scrapped a few months later, in June. Following this, a number of events and shows have been conducted in the gallery, including a recent celebration commemorating the VAG Forum's first anniversary. The revocation of the MoU is being touted as a victory for the artists of Bangalore, who have ensured that the space that they once used is retained as a public space. But the future of VAG is unclear: between the first protest in February of 2016 and early 2017 there have been efforts to activate and sustain it as a space for contemporary art, and while these efforts have succeeded to some extent, there does not seem to be much discussion about, or progress in, rehabilitating the space. In this context, one would imagine that the rehabilitation of the gallery would be foremost on the minds of those who fought to reclaim it. Indeed, when the VAG Forum met in March and April of 2016, along with other practitioners and concerned citizens, there were many discussions about how to renovate the building and renew the space. These plans were made keeping in mind available government resources and under the condition that the space remains a state-supported public resource. It was even suggested that it should be run by a trust that will protect the significance of the space as well as the artists' interests in it, but so far it is not clear how this will pan out. Although a number of events and shows have been conducted in the gallery since February 2016, there has been no further public discussion about how the space should be renovated. Going with the way the VAG forum has been engaging with the space, this discussion should have also been a public one.

In conclusion, the protests around the Venkatappa Art Gallery raise several questions: What exactly does it entail when artists run a gallery space? How do the artists see themselves as administering a space like the VAG? Was it enough to organize around this issue and get the MoU revoked, while not addressing the issues that led to the MoU in the first place (viz., the building's dilapidated condition)? If private funding and custodianship will indeed estrange the public from using a space like the VAG, then what solution can ensure that the space is protected for artists and the public? Ending this piece with some questions will allow for further discussions on how the artist community of Bangalore identifies itself today.

* This article is a part of a larger study of art practices in Bangalore, which is part doctoral research project on the history of Bangalore's contemporary art movements being carried out at National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore.