

A Symposium on International Exchange of
Students and Teachers of Fine Arts

I am very honoured to have been invited to this Symposium on the international exchange of students and teachers. I am also personally very happy to be back in the familiar surroundings of the art school of Braunschweig. Less than two years ago I participated in the workshop of Indian and German artists, held here.

The Rector, Professor Welzel, has asked me to speak about my experiences of the Indo-German artist workshops and also to give suggestions for further collaboration.

I Background of the Kasauli Workshop

Since 1976 I have been organizing summer workshops in a small Himalyan town, called Kasauli. In 1979 I approached the British Council to sponsor an English artist with the stipulation that I would suggest the name. John Davies, the internationally known sculptor, attended the workshop. Although a virtual recluse in England, Davies's most enthusiastic support of the idea of living and working with Indian artists gave me the confidence to give the workshop a consistently more international aspect. I approached the Max Mueller Bhavan (The name of the Goethe Institute in India) in 1980, and made the proposal to invite a German artist whose name I would propose.

After going through many catalogues of contemporary German art, I suggested the name of Arwed Gorella, who agreed to come. In a short span of less than three weeks

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Gorella had established a close rapport with the majority of artists discovering to his surprise that many of his concerns, in art and ideas, had parallels with Indian artists.

International cultural programmes certainly must introduce new or unexpected encounters but it is equally important to locate related preoccupations between artists, and a art language in order to establish a sound base for an ongoing dialogue. A modern consciousness exists in India but it does not necessarily correspond with the avant gardist art production in the West; therefore, perhaps, we relate more meaningfully to Western artists who are critical of certain tendencies of the international mainstream, or at least in the institutional set up which backs it. I would like to be presumptuous and say that Gorella, like some other artists, made within such a link.

When Gorella was present in Kasauli, I had organized for the first time during the workshop days, a three-day Seminar to which a film maker, an art critic, a theatre director and a musicologist were also invited. A considerable part of the seminar was spent in discussing the works of the artists present, where responses from persons of other disciplines, and from Gorella, were most illuminating.

Gorella could not have suggested a better name than Sregfried Nenenhansen to attend the following year's workshop. Nenenhansen, like Davies, worked in clay and found the wood firing of the terracottas, in the instantly built brick kiln, particularly fascinating.

Nenenhansen also worked with a traditional ritual Mask Maker, specially invited to the workshop, and studied his technique for making large, very durable paper mache masks. He also worked briefly on a simple hand loom with the assistance of an expert weaver and designed a small tapestry rug. There were for the first time artists from England and France also present at Kasauli. These were Ken Kiff and Bernard , both well known names. There was also a street theatre group that did a workshop with some of the artists participating.

II The Indo-German Workshop

It is at this time that Nenenhansen conceived the idea of an Indo-German Workshop on this rather grand scale; seven artists from each place participating in a workshop in both countries. When he mentioned this idea I could never have believed that in the following year seven of us would be here in Braunschweig and a year later seven German artists would be at Kasauli. Because of Nenenhansen's exceptional financial organizing capacities, he has in a short while forged the link into a substantial chain.

The novel aspect of the workshop in Germany, was that the work days at Braunschweig were by visits to traditional small towns to cities and their important museums. Also included was a wonderful trip to Italy, living in a farm house in Tuscany and visiting several important art historical sites. This was a most splendid extension of the workshop programme.

Visiting Goslar with architect Dorn, Hamburg with Nagel, the Documenta with Brus, and Italy with Gorella made the European experience all the more personal. It is the day-to-day reactions, communicated informally, which establish a complex range of responses that gradually evolve into cultural exchanges and friendships. Our German colleagues and Gorella in particular, saw to it that the ritual part of the trip, the eating and drinking together, was a continuing festivity. We were overwhelmed by the hospitality.

For the return visit of the German artists we had organized a visit to three very different places spread over a thousand kilometres South of the workshop location.

Arrival in Bombay, coincided with a major religious festival which the artists witnessed the immersion into the sea of the elephant god, Ganesh. From Bombay they went to the sculpted and painted cave shrines of Ajanta and Ellora (1st to 8th century A.D.; situated in the ancient Deccan plateau of India). The artists then spent four days at our most important art school in Baroda, giving talks and briefly working with the students in the painting sculpture and graphic departments.

Considerably saturated with experiences, images and the heat the artists reached the cool and quiet of Kasauli which is situated at a height of 2000 metres in the Himalyan ranges. Here they settled down to 18 days of work and living together with Indian artists.

In Delhi a large exhibition of over hundred works of the German artists (done in Kasauli and some brought from Germany) took place. The exhibition had a very special character because the majority of the artists

reflected in their work a range of responses to India.

III Organisational Suggestions

From my short account I think I have made it amply clear that it is the artists who conceive, organize and participate in the exchange programme. If we are to work towards genuine and equal exchange, the artist must always remain in the centre of the picture. Thus the chances of being exploited by vested interests get considerably reduced.

Now if artists from the third world conceive the idea of such an exchange, the financial control will tend to be in the hands of the establishment, and a greater part with the industrially developed countries. The question, which concerns the third world participant, is how does one resist the subtle interpenetration of cultural imperialism? We have to work out ways to appropriate the funds for a socially relevant programme but not become dependent. Artists cannot change political realities but they can be ideologically conscious, raise questions and remain alert to the implications of encounters which have, unfortunately, political inequalities built into it.

The Finances: About the financial part, which is the concrete basis for such exchange, I would like to make the following observation. The establishment would like to financially support radical activity, gradually making the organization indebted to it. A marginal manner of countering this is (1) to organize funds in such a

manner that they do not come entirely from the more affluent country -- and from the third world country the finances are raised from both the public and private sector. For example, when I have approached the official agencies to the three European Governments to sponsor artists all I have asked them is to pay their air-fare. (2) A further step to avoid dependency is for the artists themselves to assist the programme financially. From 1976 all the Indian artists have financed each workshop by agreeing to give a painting, or sculpture, or drawings. I approach different museums who agreed to purchase the works of the participating artists, and advance the money to run the workshop. The museum benefits by getting works at a somewhat lower price and it also gets the credit of indirectly sponsoring an activity. But the main activity is self-financed by artists is, therefore there is much greater involvement.

The Environment: I believe it is this very personal nature of the workshop (which in this case happens to be in a large house in the mountains) which establishes a situation in which the private and collective, the creative and intellectual selves freely interact. In a matter of a few days, the artists creates their own private area, their own studio atmosphere, often extending this into the collective space.

The Western artists who have come to Kasauli have generally demonstrated a greater need for a private time-space and then proceeded to work with great industry. Some of them have kept the doors of their studios open

in which people come and go. Then artists like Inge Main and Johannes Brus have worked almost entirely in a public space, the former ending up by making an environmental step sculpture. The Indian artists have been deeply impressed by their disciplined work schedules.

The Indian artists, still have a sense of being able to participate in a collective activity with, possibly a greater sense of spontaneous interaction, than their Western counterpart -- therefore they can contribute to a much needed sense of community of learning to live and work with others even if for brief periods. I think the German artists would agree that a surprisingly easy and quick rapport was established in living-and-working-together.

The German artists who attended the workshop represented a considerable cross section of tendencies (from Peter Nagel to Johannes Brus, Arwed Goralla to Inge Main, to Peter), unlike the Indian artists whose work was relatively more homogeneous, and who also happened to know each other fairly well. Many of the German artists had never met before. They would probably have thought there would not be much point in coming together on their own in Germany, but with Indian artists, their diversity made an interestingly viable proposition.

IV The meaning of internationalism for us

Just as artists from the world metropolis may assume their advanced positions in world art, artists from the third world are likely to dismiss internationalism from a defensive chauvenism. To counter such ideologies the sensuous experience, of art activity in a mutual

encounter, is absolutely essential. A personalized artists workshop assists in demystifying art as a consumption object projected in international art exhibitions by a highly organized institutional media and the museum .

For many centuries European artists have been influenced by elements of Oriental or African art; some of them have visited and lived in these countries. Even to this day, avant garde European or American artists will visit India to see some traditional art, music, dance; to appreciate or poverty! Indian contemporary culture, intellectual preoccupations or politics are often of little interest to them.

On the other hand, in the post-Independence era, Indian artists have lived and worked and even settled down in Paris, New York, London and West Germany. During the early fifties, the first wave of artists went on to Paris to establish their modern identity; a few years later American art internationalism took them to the United States. The next generation from the mid sixties, made a critique of and revitalized the movement of national cultural identity -- producing a lively contemporary indigenous art. After a decade and more, the movement has taken on some of the predictable characteristics of inbreeding chauvenism and a defensive rejection, or indifference to world culture. Ironically in recent years cultural imperialism has supported this position of an ethnic/regional/exotic art.

A younger generation of Indian artists who have gained understanding of their own culture and taken what

is relevant for sustaining their identity, will imbibe elements from world culture if they feel it enlarges their vocabulary and vision -- so the source could be a Japan print, a 14th cent ~~sic~~ painter, a post-impressionist Matisse or Beckman. This generation of artists considers itself possessed of a modern consciousness making a contribution to contemporary world culture. It has evolved a non-parochial but critical understanding of the mechanics of Western avant gardism. It is this generation that will be able to evolve a genuine debate with their contemporaries in the West.

It is in this background that we have to work towards removing the bias of the ~~of~~ of one culture over another. Western superiority has been imposed through colonialism. To cope with this Indians often develop a stance of spiritual superiority which unfortunately leads to a righteous complacency, both at a personal and institutional level.

Also, increasingly national culture is promoted for diplomatic and narrow political purposes. In order to counter these tendencies it is artists who have to initiate programmes where the participants can come together under the least amount of exterior pressure, to witness to debate and disagree and then to evaluate accordingly.

I think that in this context it is unique that internationally known European artists have come to work and live with ~~fast~~ fellow Indian artists, and return with an awareness that there are in India colleagues

whose work is culture specific yet imbued with a contemporary consciousness as alert as in any part of the world.

We hope that from this small beginning, where a few contemporary West German artists of substantial reputations have, in a spontaneously and self-consciously enlightened way, related to Indian art and artists, will be followed by an equally open and intelligent exchange of artists, students and teachers.

V Future Projects