

13 Considering Dhaka Art Summit from a CHamoru Perspective: A Walk Through its Institutional History

Diana Campbell

Whenever someone points out that the Dhaka Art Summit (hereafter DAS), one of Asia's premier transnational research and exhibition platforms held biannually in Bangladesh to record-breaking audience numbers, is curatorially led by an American curator, I find the need to clarify that.¹ While I carry a U.S. passport, was born in Los Angeles, and graduated from Princeton University, my maternal family is indigenous CHamoru from Guam and they did not choose to have the letters "U.S.A." tacked onto the colonial name attributed to their island, Guahan.² Many people are unaware that the United States still holds five inhabited territories from the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean that fall under the definition of a colony.³ The power and interests of the U.S. military are given as reasons to deny the people of these colonies the same rights of self-governance that America fought for in the War of Independence in 1776.

Dhaka Art Summit 2020 launched the international career of Gisela McDaniel, a Detroit-based mixed-race CHamoru artist whose DNA, like mine, carries the complex history of colonization on the American territory of Guam. McDaniel's work is based on a process of healing from her own sexual trauma while engaging with other female sexual trauma survivors through the practice of portraiture. Interweaving assemblages of audio, oil painting, and motion-sensor technology, she creates pieces that "come to life" and literally "talk back" to the viewer, giving agency to the subjects of her paintings. McDaniel's paintings subvert traditional power relations by allowing the subject to talk back to the viewer through overlaid audio interviews. As evidenced in the works of artists like Paul Gauguin, power dynamics can be extremely problematic between native women and the men colonizing their lands, and McDaniel's work pushes back against a primitivist gaze. A haunting new series of portraits, *I am M(INE)* (2019–2020), provided a portal into the struggle of mixed-race people to find a sense of belonging and to pick a side in conflicted cultural and political battles for autonomy (Figure 13.1).⁴ The Vietnamese American artist Tuan Andrew Nguyen's work *Solidarities Between the Reincarnated* (2019) similarly drew connections between Senegal and Vietnam during the Indochina War (1946–1954) via mixed-race offspring of Senegalese soldiers who switched sides in the Vietnamese battle for independence, realizing that fighting for the French in Vietnam meant fighting against their own dreams of independence for Senegal.

McDaniel's and Nguyen's works, and the way in which they were framed curatorially in Dhaka in sections entitled "Colonial Movements" and "Independence Movements," allowed these as well as other artworks to be read both as "Asian" and "American." Guam is geographically less than four hours by flight from



Figure 13.1 Gisela McDaniel, *I am M(in)e*, 2019–2020. Collection of the Samdani Art Foundation. Photo: Randhir Singh.

Manila and Tokyo, while it is at least 15 hours away from Los Angeles, for example. Similarly, an installation by American artist Neha Choksi, shown directly across from McDaniel’s work, contextualized McDaniel’s portraits within an ongoing history of American political and military movements through Asia. Choksi, a U.S. citizen born and raised in California, is of Indian origin and maintains studios in Mumbai and Los Angeles. In Choksi’s work *The American President Travels (East)* from 2002 (remade in 2019), an immersive “Pepto-Bismol pink” installation visually configures a scratchy and deteriorated archive of the 20th century travels of nine Presidents of the United States to over two dozen eastern nations, both revealing the paper diplomacy conducted through American newspapers and reveling in the comedy of each President filling his predecessor’s shoes for the public’s family album. A sheen of romantic getaway as well as “I-scratch-you-if-you-scratch-me” of American diplomatic stance is lent to the many recorded moments through the use of sheer silky fabric, backscratchers, and the form of a massage table (Figure 13.2).⁵

While McDaniel’s and Choksi’s works have biographical ties to Asia, the adjacent work of the emerging American artist Adebunni Gbadebo, who, like McDaniel, had her international debut at Dhaka Art Summit 2020, did not previously have a tie to Asia until the artist and the work traveled to Bangladesh.



Figure 13.2 Neha Choksi, *The American President Travels (East)*, 2002 (remade 2019). Installation with wood, bamboo, paint, printed fabric. Commissioned and produced by Samdani Art Foundation for the Dhaka Art Summit 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Project88. Photo: Randhir Singh.

Gbadebo's work addresses the concepts of land, memory, and erasure. Sheets of paper constructed with beaten cotton lintners and human hair collected from black barbershops serve as abstracted documentations of genetic histories, embedded in the strands of hair. The dominant blue dye traces Gbadebo's maternal family history to three plantations in the United States where her ancestors were forced into slavery. Gbadebo's use of indigo inevitably links her historical inquiry to Bengal, where the plant was grown as a cash crop from around the year 1777 by the British East India Company. The more recent histories of Bangladesh and America are interlinked through the garment industry. The bold, blue color produced from the indigo plant can serve as a reminder of the vast amount of denim clothing produced in Bangladesh for international export.⁶ This work was extremely well received in Dhaka, and this was a transformative experience for an American artist in Asia. Elaborating on the experience, the artist shares,

It was through my invitation to the Dhaka Art Summit, Bangladesh where I witnessed how my exploration of a specific time and space steeped in American landscape could transcend the borders of that landscape. Because my family's history, being enslaved on True Blue indigo plantation in South Carolina was parallel to the volatile histories of Bangladesh's indigo farms, the color blue became the entry point and bridge for empathy and critical understanding from the visitors and locals of the summit. Since DAS and that visit to Bangladesh, I have really understood first-hand how histories that seemingly feel a part are truly connected. This experience and my participation in the Summit showed me how art could be the catalyst for global understanding. I think I take that into my practice.⁷

All of the wall texts in the exhibition lacked any reference to nationality as a statement that nationalities can be reductive, allowing visitors to consider the content of the work when pondering its relevance to the context of Bangladesh, rather than where the artist is from. Nationalities and belonging can always be contested.⁸ Artists whom we consider to be South Asian from Dhaka, such as the Pakistan-born and educated New York-based artists Shahzia Sikander and Huma Bhabha, had yet to have a major institutional presentation in the region prior to their participation in Dhaka Art Summit 2014 and 2020, partly due to local gatekeepers referring to these artists as “American” because it was perceived that they did not engage with the Pakistani art scene.⁹ Given a lack of scholarships and the distance from home, few South Asia-based Asian artists study in the United States. A collective of artists in the 1980s in Bangladesh called the Shomoy Group tried to fight against what they saw as American hegemony in art and culture (which was inviting many of their Indian peers to study in the United States under Rockefeller grants, etc.), and they turned to the social realism found elsewhere in Asia and in the U.S.S.R. for inspiration. If a Bangladeshi artist studies abroad, it is most likely in India at Santiniketan. Installation art is found in the visual culture of South Asia; it is not solely seen as an import from the United States. While logos of American brands can be seen everywhere in Bangladesh because Bangladesh is one of the world’s largest fast-fashion manufacturers, the meaning of these brands and their aspirations are lost on most Bangladesh people wearing them (Abercrombie tee-shirts, for example, are very cheap locally).

Exhibiting American artists in Asia can be more expensive than exhibiting artists from many European countries, such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, and Germany (to name a few examples), because America lacks a national arts council to fund the exhibition costs of emerging American artists. Shipping works from America to Asia is expensive and logistically challenging, given the distance. Consequently, it is natural that beyond blue-chip artists whose brand value carries them all over the globe (often with the support/initiative of their commercial galleries), certain Asian artists based in America, as well as American artists with longstanding engagement with Asia find it rare to have their work exhibited in Asia. The commitment and generosity of Dhaka Art Summit’s founders and patrons, art collectors Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani, are what have allowed so much transnational exchange to occur between the United States and Bangladesh, supplemented by generous grants from galleries and foundations who believe in the work we do (Figure 13.3). The Samdanis founded and initiated Dhaka Art Summit in 2012 because they saw that the world lacked a platform where Bangladesh could be understood as its own rich context distinct from India. They invited me to join this journey with them in late 2012 after the first Summit had already occurred, and in hindsight, the way I developed this platform from a curatorial perspective is closely tied to the way I view the world as a diasporic CHamoru, as a person from one of the few colonies left in the world. For us, a post-colonial discourse has yet to come.

The audience of 477,153 people, primarily Bangladeshi, that visited *DAS 2020: Seismic Movements SHONCHARON* is as large as about three times the population of the entire island of Guam. The struggles and histories of Bangladesh and Guam’s pasts and presents are similar. Thinking across these contexts has been key to the curatorial development of this biannual non-profit event. The summit draws in leading curators, academics, museum directors, journalists, writers, and artists from



Figure 13.3 Huma Bhabha, *Cowboys and Angels*, 2018 (left) and Huma Bhabha, *Untitled*, 2014 (right) at the Dhaka Art Summit 2020. Collection of the Samdani Art Foundation. Photo: Randhir Singh.

all corners of the planet to reconsider Bangladesh, South Asia, and inspires them to articulate how these contexts intersect with the rest of the world. Few people know where Guam is located or care very much about its culture and history, as is the case with Bangladesh. Beyond George Harrison and Ravi Shankar's *Concert for Bangladesh* held in 1971 at Madison Square Garden, which put the words "Bangla Desh" on the lips of a mass international audience for the first time—at a time when the United States was supporting Pakistan's military action *against* Bangladesh—few people knew about the rich art scene of Bangladesh prior to the founding of the Asian Art Biennial Bangladesh in 1981, the oldest continually running biennial in Asia, and the later founding of the Dhaka Art Summit in 2012. Individual voices from small places outside of dominant narratives are easy to drown out, but collectively, the song lines of the *Bangla Desh* single carried far across space and time as we see with the global history of protest music.

Since its inception in 2012, Dhaka Art Summit has exhibited hundreds of artists and hosted hundreds of curators and writers in the planning of exhibitions, talks, and symposia. As a result, Bangladesh and its history quickly began to circulate through a growing global constellation of Dhaka Art Summit collaborators who began to include Bangladeshi references and artists in their work. A key example of how this network has provided unprecedented international mobility for Bangladeshi artists

elsewhere in the world is the realization of Bangladeshi artist Reetu Sattar's installation and performance, *Lost Tune (Harano Sur)* (2016–2018), at Dhaka Art Summit 2018, later developed into a film in collaboration with the Liverpool Biennial and the New North New South, a partnership of institutions from the North of England who collaborated with institutions from South Asia, funded by the Arts Council of England from 2016–2019. This work entails a monumental scaffolding structure that appears to precariously support a group of musicians hovering over the entrance to Dhaka Art Summit, playing a droning note on the harmonium, a traditional instrument found across South Asia historically whose musical presence is dying out due to rising religious fundamentalism and globalization. Through insistently playing a single note on repeat, the performers highlighted the violence and increasing civil unrest in Bangladesh (Figure 13.4). A group of curators from the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York saw this work during their visit to Dhaka, and we re-presented this work in 2019 in the exhibition *Fabric(ated) Fractures* hosted by the Alserkal Foundation in Dubai, where Sattar met MoMA's Chief Curator of Media and Performance Stuart Comer, MoMA's Director Glenn Lowry, and MoMA's International Council. The Museum of Modern Art subsequently confirmed this work (as both installation and performance) as a solo presentation at MoMA for June 2020, postponed due to COVID-19. We never dreamed that a work by an emerging female artist who had never sold a work of art would be invited to exhibit in one of the most important institutions in the international art world. This celebratory journey speaks to the power of ideas and creativity to connect through vast geographies through building long-term diasporic relationships to the Dhaka Art Summit.

I am often asked what is like being “an American woman working in a Muslim country.” Bangladesh is technically a secular country. Its Prime Minister is a woman, and it has the highest female purchasing power in the region. The Dhaka



Figure 13.4 Reetu Sattar, *Harano Sur (Lost Tune)*, 2017–2018 at the Dhaka Art Summit 2018. Co-commissioned by Samdani Art Foundation and the Liverpool Biennial in association with the New North New South and the Archaeology of the Final Decade. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Noor Photoface.

Art Summit team is led by women and most of our Samdani Art Award-winning artists have been women, and our curated exhibitions tend to have gender parity without operating toward any quotas. The American artist Julie Mehretu told me that Dhaka Art Summit 2020 as the “queerest art event” she had attended anywhere in the world, and several groups of queer youth expressed to visiting journalists that Dhaka Art Summit was a space where they felt represented and where they could express themselves. Works by Chitra Ganesh, Raqib Shaw, Gazi Nafis Ahmed, Ali Asgar, Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran, Tejal Shah, and many other artists have opened up spaces for non-binary views of gender and sexuality, and the Dhaka Art Summit contributing curators and artists represent many different gender orientations. While there has been much publicity about gender-based violence in Bangladesh, Dhaka Art Summit prides itself on becoming a safe space to celebrate the full spectrum of sexualities. Since the event is free and open to the public and we have a well-developed outreach program, the exhibition is able to reach people across most socio-economic classes in a country that does not have the caste boundaries of neighboring India. Our Samdani Art Award exhibition operates under an open-call format, so all Bangladeshi artists under the age of 40 are eligible to submit their work for inclusion in the exhibition, and many of the artists who are shortlisted for this exhibition receive international gallery opportunities (including representation) soon after the exhibition.

Every February, the same month that the Dhaka Art Summit is held, most of the country celebrates its victory in overthrowing foreign attempts to control how its people express themselves, embracing the plurality embedded in their culture.¹⁰ One of the many tactics of colonialism is imposing rules and standards from elsewhere and expecting people with no previous connection to these concepts to adapt their lives to them. In the case of Bangladesh’s history, West Pakistan was trying to claim the need to “purify” Bangla as it originated and evolved from Hindu influences of an ancient Sanskrit language. “Bengali alphabets are full of idolatry. Each Bengali letter is associated with this or that god or goddess of Hindu Pantheon. Pakistan and Devanagri Script can’t co-exist,” said Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988), Central Minister for Education in India.¹¹ As an Islamic modernist, Rahman argued that it was important to introduce Arabic script in East Bengal in a statement from December 27, 1948. “Every Bangla Alphabet Narrates a Bengali’s life,” reads one of the many posters from the 1952 Language Movement in Bangladesh, then still part of the Pakistani province of East Bengal. The Language Movement was seismic with more than 100,000 people in a public meeting to protest imprisonment of students such as those at the University of Dhaka. Bengali people continuously commemorated the demonstration on February 21, 1952 as *Shohid Dibosh* from the 1950s until today. Bangladesh’s independence is directly tied to a desire to think, speak, and act in its mother tongue.

Similar to colonial tactics in Bangladesh, the education of CHamoru in schools on Guam was banned by the United States military between 1917 until the mid-1970s as a means to Americanize the island, and CHamorus today fight to keep their dying language alive as a result of this violent (and sadly not unique to Guam) attempt to strip indigenous people of their mother tongue. Language is therefore a very present theme across Dhaka Art Summit, and will be addressed later in this essay. Another link connecting the histories of Guam and Bangladesh is climate change, which will also be addressed in this essay; rising sea levels put Pacific

Islands and Bangladesh at the front lines of climactic violence as a result of rising sea levels. A third theme explored by this essay is how to reframe how a place is viewed. Guam has a very different cultural landscape when viewed through a lens of ancient Austronesian migrations (linking Guam to Southeast Asia and Oceania), Spanish colonialism (linking Guam with Latin American histories), Japanese colonialism (linking Guam with Asia), or American colonialism (linking Guam with Puerto Rico or Hawaii as well as Native American tribes). Bangladesh has a very different cultural landscape when viewed from the Global South, Southeast Asia, MENASA (Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia), and other geopolitical motivated groupings. Each of the five Dhaka Art Summits has sought to give new lenses for local and international audiences to reconsider a place they thought they understood in the previous edition, allowing for Bangladesh's place in the world to appear vaster and more nuanced than what one previously read about in the news and in history books.

Language

Language has the ability to program us and shape how we see and experience the world; we can be different people in different languages. Ironically, in order to link South Asia, which has so many different languages, Dhaka Art Summit must exist in English as it is a common language. In all South Asian countries, due to their colonial histories, however, instituting a rule that all wall texts and labels would be bilingual in Bangla and English was one of the first mandates I instituted as Chief Curator. I am very critical of exhibitions I see where English is not the dominant language in the local context, yet English is the sole language used to mediate the exhibition; it speaks volumes about the elite audience for which an exhibition is made. Public signage in Guam is increasingly bilingual as well, trying to keep a dying language visible in the minds of people who still remember how to speak it.

While Bangladesh's independence was born out of a will for lingual sovereignty, and the United Nations celebrates International Mother Language Day on February 21st in honor of Bangladesh, it is important to note that at least forty other mother tongues are spoken by non-Bengali indigenous people who also call Bangladesh home. While exhibiting and empowering artists engaging with indigeneity in Bangladesh has existed from the onset of Dhaka Art Summit, the 2018 edition aimed at giving agency to carriers of rich and diverse lingual cultures from around the world at central stage. We invited Katya Garcia Antón, a guest curator of DAS 2016 and the director of the Office for Contemporary Art Norway, to develop a writing program that would bring together indigenous peers from around the world and connect them to practitioners in Bangladesh and South Asia. Entitled "Sovereign Words: Facing the Tempest of a Globalized Art History" and presented within the framework of "Critical Writing Ensembles" at Dhaka Art Summit, this platform included panel discussions, lecture performances, group debates and readings committed to the strengthening of critical writing within and across communities of the world. The project convened artists, poets, storytellers, performers, curators, and scholars of Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous peers to reflect upon the words, writing forms, spaces, and processes through which Indigenous artistic practices, their histories and contact points with the Western canon, have been and should be counter-narrated today.

Garcia Antón elaborated that

indigenous thinkers are not seeking acceptance from the Western canon, but recognition as an ancient, highly influential and neighborly body of discourse. The so-called “Indigenisation” of the global arts world is much referred to, as artistic and other creative voices from Indigenous communities are increasingly sought after for exhibitions, festivals, biennials and art fairs, and as museums race to consider the global reach of their museological practices. Within this context, cultural workers (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) are facing the challenge of engaging meaningfully and ethically with the history – both present and future – of Indigenous arts and thoughts.¹²

Strands of thought raised within “Sovereign Words” were picked up again in Dhaka Art Summit 2020, bringing together indigenous practitioners from Bangladesh, Bougainville (autonomous region of Papua New Guinea), Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (Gisela McDaniel, CHamoru) to discuss sovereignty and collectivity through the exhibitions and discursive programming.

Climate Change

In addition to the challenge of holding onto language, holding onto physical land is also a challenge for Pacific Islands and Bangladesh as a result of rising sea levels and tropical storms that break off the coastlines of Bangladesh and dissolve them into the Bay of Bengal. While these contexts are separated by vast distances, they both share the looming threat of being swallowed by the sea. Shipping artworks across the world, building false walls, and installing air conditioners to achieve Western museum conditions contributes to the problem, and I realized that while the program of Dhaka Art Summit addressed the climactic challenges that Bangladesh was facing, it was also contributing to the problem. Exhibition design is not a developed field in South Asia, given a lack of demand for this kind of expertise. After asking leaders from The Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia about whether we could convene a think-tank to design Dhaka Art Summit while considering its impact, we received a grant to build a transnational team of designers, architects, and engineers to re-think how the entire exhibition was constructed. In Dhaka Art Summit 2012–2018, we created purpose-built rooms to replicate the feel of walking through a museum in North America and/or Europe. At times, the construction cost of the rooms exceeded the production costs of the artworks in the rooms, and young artists expressed stress about our limited production budgets. Artworks in South Asia are not produced in museum conditions; why were we replicating museum conditions for a temporary art exhibition? Could we not instead curate *for* the context and *for* the possibilities offered by the building and unlock new possibilities for artists with slightly more generous budgets, rather than putting our resources to try to appear like art spaces in more developed parts of the world? Our think-tank for Dhaka Art Summit 2020 was entitled *Srijan Abartan* (Creation in Bengali) and offered a workshop for exhibition making and un-making. This was a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary research project aimed at developing new tools and methodologies for creating culturally rooted, ecologically sustainable, and socially responsible exhibition displays. We published our findings and methodologies as an

open-source example that new forms of exhibition making and unmaking—what happens when exhibitions are de-installed—are possible from drawing inspiration from the local, climatic, and ecologically sustainable context. Instead of building false walls in the main plaza of the Summit, we built walls made from jute fabric held up by rented metal scaffolding, which was later returned to their construction sites. The jute fabric walls became a monumental artwork where cinema banner painters collaborated with researchers from Jothashilpa in Bangladesh, a center for traditional and contemporary arts, and Savvy Contemporary in Berlin, a laboratory of artistic ideas and experiments, to create a timeline of Afro-Asian solidarity movements. While many artists in Bangladesh have incorporated motifs from vernacular “street arts” such as rickshaw and cinema banner painting into their work, this collaboration was unique in that all of the artists were credited and compensated in the process and celebrated as artists in their own right, rather than inspirations for or fabricators of a more famous artist’s work. Cinema Banner painting is a dying art in Bangladesh with the rise of cheaper digital modes of promoting movies, and this project at Dhaka Art Summit realized the largest cinema banner painting the country has ever seen by stripping the budget from wooden walls and redistributing it to a community of talented artists who needed a public platform like Dhaka Art Summit to keep their way of working alive (Figure 13.5).



Figure 13.5 Geographies of Imagination, Dhaka iteration by SAVVY Contemporary and Jothashilpa at Dhaka Art Summit 2020 as part of Srijan Abartan Exhibition Making and Unmaking Workshop. The project was produced by the Samdani Art Foundation and supported by Goethe Institut and Pro Helvetia Swiss Arts Council. Photo: Randhir Singh.

Guam: Considering a Context Through a Different Lens

Growing up in Los Angeles, I always considered Guam to be Asian because of its geographic location and the existence of “Asian-Pacific Islander” groups that I would be invited to identify with. It was not until I lived in the Philippines from 2016–2018 that I began to realize that the Philippines and Guam had so much in common with Central and South America, given their shared Spanish colonial history. Further, to understand these contexts fully, I argue that if one could not consider them within Southeast Asian and/or Oceanic frameworks, it belied the full complexity of the story. I was commuting between the Philippines and Bangladesh between 2016 and 2018, and also started to see relatively invisible communities of South Asian migrant workers traveling on this route between South and Southeast Asia with me. This was also the time when the Rohingya Crisis was flaring between Myanmar and Bangladesh, and it became evidently apparent to me that there was a bottleneck between cultural discussions between South Asia and Southeast Asia.¹³ Bangladesh borders Myanmar, which is counted as South Asian under some definitions such as that of Harvard University, but it is not a member of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and is generally considered to be part of Southeast Asia. Given this ambiguity and the flexibility of a format like Dhaka Art Summit, we framed Dhaka Art Summit 2018 to be a bridge connecting regions, rather than a site defining a region of South Asia as it had claimed to do before.

By looking at the space between South and Southeast Asia and collaborating with Para Site, a contemporary art center in Hong Kong for a touring exhibition entitled *A Beast, A god, and A Line* curated by Cosmin Costinas, which traveled to Yangon, Hong Kong, Warsaw, Trondheim, and Chiang Mai in addition to its debut Dhaka, we suddenly dislodged India as the center of South Asian discourse. The international visitors and participants of Dhaka Art Summit 2014 were primarily from India or from the Indian diaspora, but when considered next to India, Bangladesh will inevitably be considered a “smaller cousin” and comparatively less developed. However, Tarun Nagesh, a visiting curator from the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, Australia, pointed out that the art scene of Bangladesh was more similar to that of Indonesia than to India, due to the fact that most artists worked collectively as well as individually, and did not have their own studio spaces. One of the key differences I could sense growing up between American values versus CHamoru values was the dissimilar emphasis placed on the importance of the individual. Whereas Americans celebrate individualism, CHamorus shun it because it comes at the expense of the community. Conformity and individual sacrifice are seen as values to be celebrated, as they contribute to the stability of the community and a sense of “greater good.” With a strong value placed on cultural achievement in Bengali culture, there is an interesting balance between the need to support the talent of an individual while nurturing the well-being of the group. Many of Bangladesh’s most successful artists, such as Tayeba Begum Lipi, Mahbubur Rahman, Munem Wasif, Ayesha Sultana, and others, are also members of collectives, supporting the development of their peers’ work. While this sort of collectivism can be found in European movements such as Surrealism or Dada, Bangladesh’s is not even fifty years old and its institutional artistic infrastructure is nascent, so the ripple effects of the solidarity of today’s contemporary art scene can be felt more acutely across the whole country as its art scene opens up to the world.

Creating a central hub to discuss collaboration, coming together, and building community, the Sydney-based Bougainvillian artist Taloi Havini created a new work (co-commissioned by the Samdani Art Foundation and Artspace Sydney) titled *Reclamation* (2019–2020) that was produced in Bougainville with her Hakö clan members. Havini drew from recent historical movements of conflict as well as acts of resilience and self-determination experienced within the social fabric of her inherited matrilineal birthplace, which was voting for independence from Papua New Guinea at the time the work was in production in 2019. The installation was a monumental meeting space, a site-specific assemblage of natural materials, harvested from the artist's own matrilineal Hakö clan land. Havini traced the significance of impermanence in traditional Hakö architecture. Individual panels were shaped, cut, and lashed within an arched form to reference formal Indigenous knowledges and map-making, echoing temporal spaces created for ritual and exchange to assert a space for collective agency. Havini's work directly linked the contexts of Bangladesh and the Pacific Islands. Other collectives from Bangladesh (Gidreebawlee Foundation for the Arts) and New Zealand (Mata Aho Collective) activated this space, in turn producing a dialogue with Havini's work. They all spoke to the geographic and cultural specificity of situations with global implications and worked at a time when communities across the globe were trying to position themselves at the tipping point of environmental and social change.¹⁴

Interventions by collectives organized by Gidreebawlee Foundation for the Arts and Mata Aho Collective at Dhaka Art Summit came to life within the framework of an ambitious exhibition and discursive program entitled "The Collective Body." Co-curated by myself and Kathryn Weir, assisted by Kehkasha Sabah, this program linked socially engaged practices from across the global majority world, the world outside of North America and Europe which hosts most of the world's population. By starting to find new points of comparison that were not reduced to geographic or regional definitions, but rather centered on expressions of community and connections that precede the neoliberal individual and the nation-state, we were able to open up new readings into the specific context of Bangladesh. Dhaka Art Summit 2020 collaborated with Raw Material Company in Dakar to present Condition Report 4: Stepping Out of Line, Art Collectives and Translocal Parallelism (CR4). Between the Collective Body and CR4, over forty collectives from Africa, South America, Australia and Oceania, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Europe came together to share strategies for strengthening the conditions for great art to be created from a grassroots level.

The curating process for the collectives platform at Dhaka Art Summit 2020 stemmed from articulated conversations from which emerged common interests and preoccupations; these include the transmission of long-standing aesthetic forms, relationships between rural and urban contexts, labor movements across agricultural and industrial domains, climate change and environmental toxicity. An emergent network of initiatives came together at DAS to address, through puppet shows, concerts, debate, installation, documentation and performance, issues ranging from land rights and resource extraction, to strategies of visibility and contestation, to analyses of the intersection of gender, caste, and ethnicity.¹⁵ Complementing the artistic program, we also co-organized the collective scholarly symposium *Modern Art Histories in and across Africa South and Southeast Asia (MAHASSA)* in collaboration with the Asia Art Archive, Cornell's Institute for Comparative Modernities,

and the Getty Foundation. This program addressed our collective desire to shift how Bangladesh's and other art histories from Asia and Africa are perceived in a space of discourse where North America and Europe were not the central connecting spaces. Dhaka Art Summit ended on February 15, 2020, so this may have been one of the last large-scale embodied international convenings of this nature from the pre-COVID-19 world. It felt like convening a diaspora of practitioners whose shared heritage was their success in developing local art scenes (with festivals, art spaces, schools, and interdisciplinary initiatives) across the world in contexts that lacked centralized formal institutional support structures for contemporary art.

The question of how to engage with “the diaspora” is an interesting one that we have been asking across all editions of the Dhaka Art Summit. In a panel discussion at Dhaka Art Summit 2014, an audience member asked why artists of South Asian origin, who were raised, and educated in Europe or North America, would find a platform in an exhibition like Dhaka Art Summit, yet a “Western Artist” who had committed a significant portion of their life to South Asia would be excluded from such a platform.¹⁶ I found this to be a provocative and generative question, and immediately went to work trying to complicate how we defined who could or could not be a part of this platform. A key example of such an artist would be Lynda Benglis, whom most people would define as an “American artist,” born in Louisiana in 1941. Yet Benglis maintains studios in Kastelloriz, Greece and Ahmedabad, India, which are both locations tied to her sense of identity. Benglis's life partner was Indian biologist Anand Sarabhai (1938–2013) from the prominent Sarabhai family of Ahmedabad, who notably welcomed American artists (and European artists as well) such as Benglis, John Baldessari, John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Merce Cunningham, and many others to come to India to produce work as part of a residency in their family compound from the 1950s until the early 1980s.¹⁷ We worked in close dialog with Lynda Benglis for Dhaka Art Summit 2016, where she created a new body of paper sculptures inspired by her time in India to exhibit in her first major presentation in South Asia. The artist repeatedly cites India as an inspiration for her work, from form to color. From a younger generation, American artists such as Lucy Raven and Amie Siegel, who have no ethnic ties to South Asia, have made and exhibited major bodies of work inspired by the time and research they embarked on in this context. Most national museums in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan take a nationalist approach as to which artists should exhibit in and form their collections, so there are few opportunities for this meaningful work to be shared with the audiences whose histories inspired artists like Benglis, Raven, and Siegel. From a Dhaka Art Summit perspective, this American Art from Asia is as relevant to exhibit in Asia as Asian Art from America is (as some might define works made by artists Shahzia Sikander and Huma Bhabha, who are also part of the Dhaka Art Summit exhibition history).

Conclusion

I am inspired by the irony that I have been developing a transnational exhibition and research platform called the “Dhaka Art Summit” in a country that lacks the summits of mountains, and that the perspective I have taken in reframing Bangladesh comes from my matrilineal links on a small island claiming the tallest mountain in the world from base to summit (because it descends deepest into the abyss of the Mariana

Trench). As a child, I would ask my mother why we did not have collections of Micronesian objects in our family. She responded that due to typhoons and other recurring natural disasters, in our culture, the object itself does not hold its value, the value lies in knowing how to make the object. Dhaka Art Summit is a temporary event—the exhibition comes down after a few action-packed days because we cannot afford to keep the exhibition on for the duration of a “biennale type of show.” The “objects” cease to exist, but a museum of stories is born in the minds of our visitors. Dhaka Art Summit speaks to the power of ephemerality and the coming together of the public during these nine days. Conversations and experiences that can never be captured in a publication or video are priceless parts of this immaterial museum of stories that can only be experienced by those who physically visited the event or hear about it from a first-hand visitor. With over 500 active participants in the 2020 edition, we look forward to feeling the aftershocks released from the energy built up from the epicenter of Dhaka in February and how they register themselves in archives and publications and the creation of new institutions around the world. Speaking to the institutional impact of Dhaka Art Summit, it is telling that the first museum for modern and contemporary art in Sri Lanka, The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka (MMCA), was inaugurated in 2019 with a Dhaka Art Summit 2018 exhibition, “one hundred thousand small tales,” curated by Sharmini Pereira.

Notes

- 1 Ben Luke, Donald Lee, and José da Silva, “Ranked: The Top Ten Most Popular Shows in Their Categories from around the World,” *The Art Newspaper*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/feature/ranked-the-top-ten-most-popular-shows-in-their-categories-from-around-the-world> (accessed November 3, 2020).
- 2 While I lead the Dhaka Art Summit as the Chief Curator, it is very much a Bangladeshi initiative, founded, supported, and held together by the Bangladeshi patrons Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani and our core Bangladeshi team, especially Ruxmini Reckvana, Q Choudhury, and Mohammad Sazzad Hossain who have worked across nearly all the summits together.
- 3 Rooted in oral tradition, Romanized spelling of the CHamoru language (as it was spelled when I grew up learning it) is relatively new, and this text uses the 1993 spelling of CHamoru and the American term Guam to define an island that many of its indigenous people refer to as Guahan.
- 4 Diana Campbell and Teresa Albor, “Colonial Movements,” in *Dhaka Art Summit: Seismic Movements* (Dhaka: Samdani Art Foundation., 2020), 24.
- 5 Campbell and Albor, “Colonial Movements,” 28.
- 6 Campbell and Albor, “Colonial Movements,” 20.
- 7 Adeburni Gbadebo, email message to author, October 23, 2020.
- 8 For this sentiment, see James Jack, “The (im)Possibilities of Cultural Collectivity: American Artist in Setouchi,” in this volume, *American Art in Asia: Artistic Praxis and Theoretical Divergence*, edited by Michelle Lim and Kyunghee Pyun (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), xx–xx.
- 9 Faisal Devji, “Little Dictators,” *Newsweek Pakistan*, March 1, 2015, <https://www.newsweekpakistan.com/little-dictators/> (accessed October 1, 2020). This is in reference to Shahzia Sikander, and in initial meetings with the Karachi Biennale Foundation as part of the New North New South Network in Dhaka in February 2016, the Pakistani organizers were unaware of who Huma Bhabha was or the importance of her work even though she grew up in Karachi.
- 10 Diana Campbell, “Thinking at the Edges of Language,” in *Dhaka Art Summit: Seismic Movements* (Dhaka: Samdani Art Foundation., 2020), 9.

- 11 Fazlur Rahman, Statement, Central Minister for Education on December 27, 1948. He became head of the Central Institute of Islamic Research of Pakistan in 1963 but resigned the post and left for the United States in 1968.
- 12 Katya Garcia Antón, “Sovereign Words at Dhaka Art Summit,” Office for Contemporary Art Norway, February 2018, <https://www.oca.no/programme/notations/sovereign-words-20180202-1000> (accessed November 3, 2020).
- 13 For cultural exchange between South Asia and Southeast Asia including the Indochina, see Việt Lê, “Interstates and Inner States: Howard Henry Chen,” in this volume, *American Art in Asia*, xx–xx.
- 14 Campbell and Albor, “Colonial Movements,” 53.
- 15 Campbell and Albor, “Colonial Movements,” 58.
- 16 For this inquiry, refer to Michelle Lim’s discussion of artist Ray Langenbach’s practice. Michelle Lim, “Out of the Center: Remapping Points of Encounter,” paper given at the panel, “American Art from Asia,” at The 105th College Art Association (CAA) Annual Conference in New York City on February 15–18, 2017. Born in Boston and currently working in Helsinki and Kuala Lumpur, Langenbach moved to Singapore in the late 1980s and documented works by The Artists’ Village and Fifth Passage in 1990s Singapore. The Ray Langenbach Archive of Performance Art is now stored at the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong. He continues interaction with art communities in Southeast Asia through his art practice, writings, teaching, and documentation.
- 17 For more information about this period, see Shanay Jhaveri, *Western Artists and India: Creative Inspirations in Art and Design* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013).

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