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Forging Artistic Connections:
Stories from the Dhaka Art Summit
By Diana Campbell

My life and practice are held together by the idea that lines of solidarity bound by commitment, trust, and friendship form a powerful, intangible currency that can enable radical change in previously unimaginable directions. These are neither straight, narrow, expedient, or singular, nor are they static; rather, they're moving vectors channelling energy in myriad ways simultaneously. They can move frantically like lines drawn by a seismograph during an earthquake, marking periods of conflict, but can also rest like the fleeting lines of a barely perceptible pulse. Dhaka Art Summit (DAS) is one reflection of this kind of being in the world, and its power lies in the relationships it has built and catalysed over time. It aims to make Bangladesh feel like a familiar friend you return to and grow closer to over time rather than a to-be-pitied-from-a-distance "Other."

Bangladesh's relationship with the rest of the world is relatively new, as this People's Republic was only born in 1971 off the back of a bloody war fought to emancipate itself from Pakistani colonisation, following centuries of British occupation. First impressions are hard to shake, and widely-publicised events, such as George Harrison and Ravi Shankar's *The Concert for Bangladesh* live album (1997)—featuring an image of a starving Bangladeshi child on its now iconic orange album cover—and U. Alexis Johnson and Henry Kissinger's commentary,¹ referring to the young country as a "basket case," brings poverty to the forefront of the global imagination of this half-a-century-old country. Reflecting on this tendency to reduce Bangladesh to poverty narratives, the Bangladeshi modern architect Muzharul Islam once remarked, "In the 2,000 years of our history, we have only been poor for 250 years, and that too because of colonisation. If we do suffer from poverty, we suffer only from one kind of

poverty—economic poverty. But most countries suffer from other kinds of poverty, even today."²

When I was first invited to work on DAS 2012, I knew nothing about Bangladesh beyond the poverty narrative. I was living in India at the time, and there was a rising international interest in South Asian art, in the wake of blockbuster shows, such as *Indian Highway*—a travelling exhibition of Indian art curated by Gunnar Kvaran, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Julia Peyton-Jones, which began at the London's Serpentine in 2008—and *Paris-Delhi-Bombay...* at the Centre Pompidou in 2011, as well as the formation of acquisition committees at museums like the Tate in 2012. At the time, "South Asia" appeared to denote only

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Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XI, South Asia Crisis, 1971, Document 235. Available online: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v11/d235> (Accessed 10.11.2023.)

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Nurur Rahman Khan. *Muzharul Islam: Selected Drawings*. Sthapattya O Nirmar, 2010.

India, along with a dash of Pakistan. Young collectors Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani were frustrated by their lack of encounter with art from Bangladesh on their international travels, and were compelled to put their energy and capital into changing that by building their own relationships with artists, galleries, auction houses, and museums. This led the couple to approach me—via Indian artist Jitish Kallat—to help create an event that would bring the world to Bangladesh and Bangladesh to the world through art and culture. All while being locally rooted and accessible to a Bangladeshi audience who lack the resources or passport privileges to travel in the same way as myself or the Samdanis.

Its organisers refer to DAS as a research platform—an iterative process where artists, architects, writers, curators, and collectors; institution directors, educators, art historians, and the general public alike, are invited and supported in delving into the past to act in the present. It encourages reconsidering what culture has done and what it can do in the world, outside of limiting Eurocentric and North American frameworks. The events are free to attend, and in 2023, the sixth edition of DAS welcomed 577,000 people in nine days, most of whom were first-time visitors to what people reading this text would recognise as a contemporary art exhibition. This figure has grown exponentially since the first summit in 2012, which welcomed about 20,000 visitors. That means that we are also a laboratory for how to engage with the so-called first-time visitors to an “art institution.” We have a locally and internationally-acclaimed art mediation team, which has grown from 25 members in the inception of the mediation program in 2018 to 160-plus members by 2023, and who research and test techniques for animating the concepts of an exhibition with a hugely diverse public, in terms of age, as well as socioeconomic and educational backgrounds.

It is important to note that from 1947 to 1971, Bangladesh was known as East Pakistan—a country which no longer exists—and art from Bangladesh during that period would have been under the label of “Pakistani art.” It was not taken as seriously as what was being produced in what was then West Pakistan, known today as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. This East Pakistani Art is no longer considered to be Pakistani, and one of Bangladesh’s foremost modern artists, Murtaja Baseer, changed the spelling of his name in solidarity with the Language Movement in Bangladesh,³ which also means

that one should be aware that he might be classified as two different people in places such as the Asia Art Archive.⁴

To research artists like Baseer means turning to storytelling and forging relationships with people who know something about Bangladesh and East Pakistan, and not to underestimate the difficulty of accessing information about histories that were neither recorded, nor classified within contemporary frameworks of understanding. We actively decided that part of the term “summit” means a convening of people, especially those who could connect and do the hard work, which is at the

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The Bengali language movement was a political movement in former East Bengal (renamed East Pakistan in 1952) advocating the recognition of the Bengali language as an official language of the then-Dominion of Pakistan to allow its use in government affairs, the continuation of its use as a medium of education, its use in media, currency and stamps, and to maintain its writing in the Bengali script.

4

Asia Art Archive is a nonprofit organisation based in Hong Kong which focuses on documenting the recent history of contemporary art in Asia within an international context.

core of DAS’s mission. Hence, we took curating meetings between people as seriously as curating dialogues between artworks. The remainder of this text will dive into three interrelated vignettes about how relationship-cultivation has opened up unexpected avenues for transnational research.

Story One: SM Sultan, Michigan, and My Sister

Noticing a void in a transnational modern art history inclusive of Bangladesh, we decided to add a modern art exhibition to DAS 2016 for the first time. Entitled *Rewind*,

it explored abstraction developed from practices associated with figurative art from the region. SM Sultan—born Sheikh Mohammed Sultan—is one of the most celebrated and mythologised artists in the country’s history. As legend/local art history has it, he travelled the world, retreated to village life to live among bears, snakes, and other animals he considered friends, and sometimes wore sarees and bent gender norms. While those are all facts, the idea that Sultan exhibited in London with Picasso is likely not true, and his alleged solo exhibi-



tion in Fukuoka, Japan, is certainly not—more on that in the next paragraph. We have an early watercolour of Sultan’s in the Samdani Art Foundation’s collection that was painted during his time in the United States and is reflective of his lesser-known work as a landscape artist. He’s more renowned in Bangladesh for his large-scale figurative works celebrating the strength of Bangladeshi farmers, a style that he only began using in the 1970s.

Sultan travelled to the U.S. as a young artist in the early 1950s on a grant supported by the Ford Foundation

Rewind, installation view, works by S. M. Sultan, courtesy of the Samdani Art Foundation Collection, the Bangladesh National Museum, Farooq Sohban Collection and Enam A. Chaudhury Collection, Dhaka. Photo courtesy of the Dhaka Art Summit and Samdani Art Foundation. Photo by Jenni Carte

and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund as part of a programme called the Institute of International Education (IIE).⁵ During this trip, Sultan visited New York and Ann Arbor, and spent a number of weeks in Vermont, “watching the efforts of young children,” as described by art historians and DAS participants Lotte Hoek and Sanjukta Sunderason. They were referring to an article in the University of Michigan student newspaper,⁶ which

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The Rockefeller Brothers Fund began supporting the Institute of International Education (IIE), a nonprofit organisation dedicated to advancing international education and access to education worldwide, as early as 1950. IIE had been founded in 1919, in the aftermath of World War I, on the premise that fostering international educational exchange would build cross-cultural understanding and promote peace.

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Muriel Claffin. “Pakistani Artist Visits Graduate Student at ‘U.’” from 4 January 1952.

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The words in quotes, used as a scholarly citation for SM Sultan’s travels in the research work of Sunderason and Hoek (“Journeying through Modernism: Travels and Transits of East Pakistani Artists in Post-Imperial London”), link my work, the work of Sunderason and Hoek, and my sister in a constellation of knowledge sharing that opens up further international scholarship into Bangladesh.

described how “Throughout the tour, he stopped at elementary schools where he took notes of the procedures used in teaching art to children.”⁷ Child education would become a strong motif in Sultan’s later work and legacy, tied to this research period and inspiring future generations of artists who draw upon the educational legacy of Sultan’s work for their DAS commissions.



Rewind, installation view, works by SM Sultan, courtesy of the Samdani Art Foundation Collection, the Bangladesh National Museum, Farooq Sohban Collection and Enam A. Chaudhury Collection, Dhaka. Photo courtesy of the Dhaka Art Summit and Samdani Art Foundation. Photo by Jenni Carte

The quoted text above comes from an article by Lotte Hoek and Sanjukta Sunderason (published by *British Art Studies*, a journal in the UK, entitled “Journeying through Modernism: Travels and Transits of East Pakistani Artists in Post-Imperial London”⁸)—art historians who have both participated in DAS. They refer to an article from the student newspaper of the University of Michigan by Muriel Claflin, “Pakistani Artist Visits Graduate Student at ‘U’” from January 4, 1952.

I wrote to the IIE looking for traces of SM Sultan, and they could not find or provide me with this information, perhaps because they were looking at Bangladesh—while in his time, Sultan would have been from Pakistan—

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Lotte Hoek and Sanjukta Sunderason. “Journeying through Modernism: Travels and Transits of East Pakistani Artists in Post-Imperial London,” in *British Art Studies*, Issue 13. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-13/hoek-sunderason> (Accessed 02.08.2023.)

9

Ibid.

but also because this was not a priority for them to look. My sister, Lisa, was working at the University of Michigan at the time, and I asked her to search for records of Sultan at the University’s Library. She came across Claflin’s article as a clipping in a box on campus—not something that could be located electronically. My sister would use this research as a case study with her students to inspire them to look outside of electronic sources, and I connected her with media anthropologist Hoek and art historian Sunderason for their ongoing research, which takes form in the aforementioned paper.⁹ It is worth reading to get into the mythology proliferating in art history books and articles used as points of reference in Bangladesh,



Rewind, installation view, works by SM Sultan, courtesy of the Samdani Art Foundation Collection, the Bangladesh National Museum, Farooq Sohban Collection and Enam A. Chaudhury Collection, Dhaka. Photo courtesy of the Dhaka Art Summit and Samdani Art Foundation. Photo by Jenni Carte

which often have fuzzy relationships with fact—such as the much discussed exhibition history linking Sultan and Picasso. Similar mythology around Sultan led me on a trip to Japan in an attempt to trace his footsteps, which I will describe in the next vignette.

Story Two: From Dhaka to Fukuoka and Back

The Dhaka Art Summit is hosted in the building of the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, a government-run institution founded in the early 1970s, soon after the country



itself was founded, in order to nation-build through art and culture. DAS happens every two years, but it is not a biennale. Although not common knowledge, Bangladesh hosts the oldest continually-existing biennale of contemporary art in Asia, the Asian Art Biennale, which was founded in 1981 and continues to be produced by the host of the DAS, the same Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy. In 2023, the Asian Art Biennale and DAS ran back to back. Today, the flags of participating countries (not only Asian) are used, rather than the names or works of artists,

to market the Asian Art Biennale, which reveals that this is a platform run by governments and their embassies, with curation as an afterthought to cultural diplomacy. This was not always the case—which I would learn through a misguided but essential trip to Fukuoka in 2016, just after the third edition of the DAS.

I applied for a research residency at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (FAAM) to follow the trail of SM Sultan, who was said to have had a solo exhibition in the Japanese city in a monograph on the artist by the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy. Upon arriving in Fukuoka, meeting with past museum directors, and consulting archives, it became clear that my experience was part of the many myths enshrouding Sultan's legacy. The FAAM has one of the most extensive libraries on South Asian and Bangladeshi art in the world because the curatorial team has been doing research in Bangladesh since the early 1980s, as part of the museum's commitment to stage the Fukuoka Asian Art Show—an early example of pan-Asian artistic solidarity. The FAAM's library also has all of the early catalogues of the Asian Art Biennale in Dhaka.

Though never actively discussed in either Bangladesh or Japan, it became apparent, through both the archive and the checklist of the second part of the First Fukuoka Asian Art Show,¹⁰ that in 1980 there was a close connection between the activities in Fukuoka and those in Dhaka. It's one that went deeper than FAAM's long-standing role in commissioning Japanese participation in the Asian Art Biennale in Bangladesh. Yasunaga Koichi, the museum's first director, fondly recalled a “clever Jahangir-san” networking and passing out business cards to fellow artists and visitors at the November 1, 1980, opening in Fukuoka. However, he could not recall the museum having had a

formal or active role in developing the biennale as an institution—other than his role as commissioner and curator of Japan's contribution to the second edition of the biennale in 1983. The Jahangir-san he was referring to was artist Syed Jahangir, whom I had known in Dhaka as an adversary of DAS. As the long-since-retired founding director of the Asian Art Biennale, he would publicly say that he thought the Summit was not necessary given the existence of the Asian Art Biennale. However, when looking at the photo albums in Fukuoka and seeing one image of him wearing sunglasses inside, in front of a tapestry by Rashid Choudhury, I could see how similar our spirit was, in the sense of being young people trying

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This show is now known as the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale—but it used to be the Asian Art Show—and there were different parts before it became that. See this timeline by the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, which gives more information. Available online: <https://faam.city.fukuoka.lg.jp/en/about/history/> (Accessed 02.08.2023.)

to inspire others to get to know more about Bangladesh and its culture.

Seeking further clarity about the relationship between the first Fukuoka Asian Art Show and the birth of the Asian Art Biennale, I interviewed Mr. Jahangir during the opening week of its seventeenth edition for an article published by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. For him, the biennale has kept the name of the institution that he founded in 1981 but lost its spirit in trying to be more “international” at the expense of artistic quality and integrity. This opened up a charming friendship between us that continued until he died in late 2018. It was almost a year after we staged

a beautiful exhibition,¹¹ showcasing works from the early Asian Art Biennales and emphasising the friendships across Asia that made this institution so successful under his leadership. The exhibition also highlighted Choudhury's work, which leads us to the next vignette.

Story Three: A Bangladeshi Donation, a Call to the Operator, and a Princeton Reunion

Hoping to further the reach of Bangladeshi modern art in the world, the Samdanis donated a tapestry by Rashid Choudhury to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2019,¹² where it was displayed alongside a loan

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The Asian Art Biennale in Context. Available online: <https://www.dhakaartsummit.org/the-asian-art-biennale-in-context> (Accessed 02.08.2023.)

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See an article by Shanay Jhaveri, "With Rashid Choudhury's Untitled Tapestry, a Prominent Bangladeshi Artist Enters The Met Collection." Available online: <https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/collection-insights/2019/rashid-choudhury-tapestry> (Accessed 02.08.2023.)

of two other tapestries by the artist from the Samdani Art Foundation collection. Our long-term DAS collaborator, Shanay Jhaveri, had assumed the role of Assistant Curator in the Modern and Contemporary Art department with the Metropolitan Museum, specialising in South Asia, and played a pivotal role in displaying Choudhury's work alongside other modern artists, such as Paul Klee and Francis Picabia. One day, an operator on the museum's general telephone line connected someone with Jhaveri. It was a "random caller" who had a Google alert on Choudhury, and wanted to learn more about the exhibition. That random caller was the artist's daughter—

who was living with her mother (Choudhury's wife, who also contributed to the makings of these tapestries) in Princeton, New Jersey, the city where I went to University. The Choudhury-Khan's were not connected to the Bangladeshi art world for various legitimate reasons. The relationship between the Samdanis, Jhaveri, and the reach of a place like the Metropolitan Museum of Art brought the family into contact with DAS, and we are still in touch, planning how best to do justice to this incredible artist's legacy.



Parting Contemplations

These are just three of many incredible vignettes about how to encourage many actors from many cultures to write a richer version of history, one that reinscribes people who might have once been considered non-essential—such as Annie, the wife of Rashid Choudhury, who was also an artist in her own right—and one that corrects rumours that proliferate in published material as facts by searching in unlikely places, like Sultan's tall tales of exhibition histories. Also, one that empowers

new generations¹³ to take pride and initiative in telling their own stories on their own terms, outside of western-dominant scarcity narratives that seem to dominate descriptions of the “Global South,” for lack of a better word. History and the people who make it up are abundant.

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My curator colleagues, Ruxmini Reckvana Q Choudhury and our new assistant curator Swilin Haque are core parts of this empowered young generation of art professionals in Bangladesh, and I am encouraged with how much passion and attention they give to contributing to the field.



Rewind, installation view, works by Rashid Choudhury, courtesy of the Bangladesh National Museum, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, Anwar Hossain Manju Collection, Dhaka and Farooq Sohban Collection, Dhaka. Photo courtesy of the Dhaka Art Summit and Samdani Art Foundation. Photo by Jenni Carter



Rashid Choudhury at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019.
Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

**A Letter to Collective Leadership:
Building Co-responsibility and Embracing Vulnerability**
By Miguel A. López

