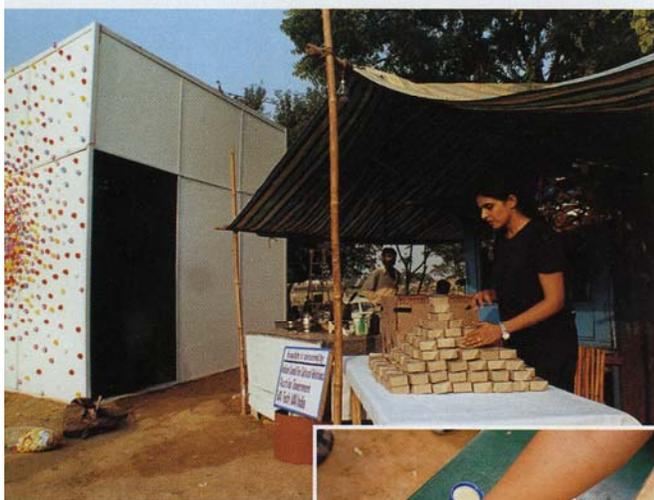


Art En Route

A petrol station on the Delhi-Jaipur highway is the location of *Boxwallahs*, an experiment in taking art into a public space. **Meera Menezes** stops by to gauge the interaction between the artists and visitors.



Bharti Kher serves tea and a message in a box at *Boxwallahs*.
Inset : A close up.



“The meaning lies not in its origin but in its destination”. Hardly the sort of message you’d expect to find on top of two Marie biscuits in a box handed to you by a *chaiwallah*. But this is *Boxwallahs*, a project where you can expect the unexpected and where the meaning of the work reveals itself in the physical interaction between the viewer and the art work.

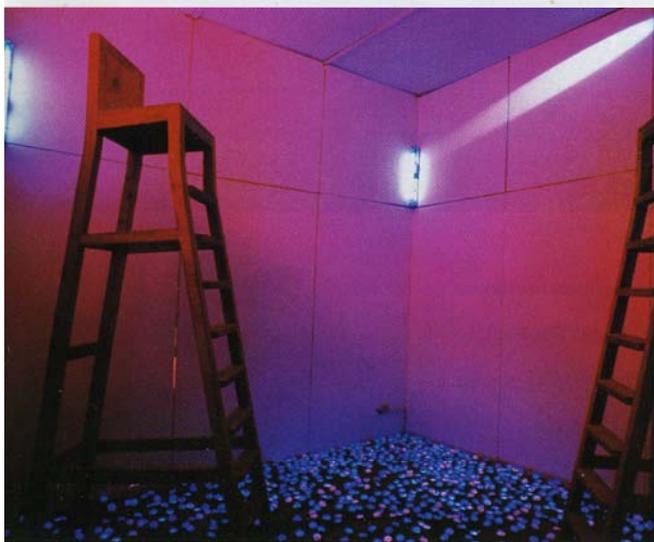
By situating the project at En route - Sahay’s Filling Station, a petrol pump on the National Highway 8 linking Delhi with Jaipur, the conceptualisers of *Boxwallahs*, Austrian artists Michael Worgotter and Angelika Fitz have consciously chosen to move away from the rarefied atmosphere of an art gallery and into a more public arena. This is very much in keeping with the philosophy of the DeEgo group to which they belong. DeEgo seeks to extend the parameters of an individual’s artistic practice by initiating a dialogue between different disciplines and with the public at large.

The DeEgo Cube, a 12 x 12 x 12 feet white sculpture which they have created next to the petrol station is the site for artistic interventions by seven Indian artists over a span of four months. Situated across the road from the disco, Fireball, the gas station possesses a dynamic of its own. Open 24 hours a day it attracts a floating population which cuts across class barriers. Yuppies sporting their mobiles are found cheek by jowl with long distance truckers and local villagers.

The inaugural project of *Boxwallahs* was the artist couple Bharti Kher and Subodh Gupta’s first collaborative work *Garam Chai* (3000 biscuits). This was followed by Satish Sharma and Ranbir Kaleka in *Apka Photokhana*, with Sheba Chhachhi’s *Buri Nazar Wale Tera Bhi Bhala* and *Teach Us* by Inder Tickoo and Shantanu Lodh slated to occupy the white cube in the near future.

Relocating art in this way came with its own set of challenges and tensions. Far away from the clearly demarcated and hallowed art spaces in museums and galleries the work had to vie for attention with popular cinema hoardings, advertisements and flashing neon signs. A number of visitors to the cube were attracted by the large ‘Boxwallah’ banners on the highway and by the sheer explosion/ implosion of coloured plastic flowers on one of the walls. Shyam, the local *chaiwallah*, whose stall is next to the cube, was instrumental in persuading his clientele to go in for the interactive experience.

Visitors to the cube during the first exhibition were often greeted by the artists themselves who performed a small tea ceremony by handing them little brown boxes containing two biscuits and a message printed in Hindi and English



A surreal experience. A look at the 8 feet high chair sculptures and plastic flowers inside the DeEgo cube, that formed part of *Garam Chai* (3000 Biscuits).

served with a glass of *chai*. Said Michael Worgotter of the gesture, "The way of serving tea as Bharti does it is high art because it is so conceptual. But it also invites people in and thereby breaks the barriers to high art".

Conceptualised as a sanctum of peace and calm which offered travellers a chance to get away from the stress and aggression of the National Highway, *Garam Chai (3000 Biscuits)* also incorporated elements of Subodh's preoccupation with the combination of inner and outer spaces and letting the outer seep into the inner. Bharti saw her contribution mainly in the obsessive, repetitive creation of the boxes which she likened to a cathartic ritual.

Once the visitors crossed the threshold they were in for a surreal experience. Slicing through the space were two tall 8 feet high chair sculptures which were more intimidating than welcoming. Those who braved the climb were treated to interesting perspectives of the space. Two holes in the roof offered a view of the stars which seemed to be reflected when one looked down. For strewn on the floor were kitschy plastic flowers which glowed in the neon light, emulating a star spangled sky. One had the feeling of being in limbo, afloat in a stellar constellation.

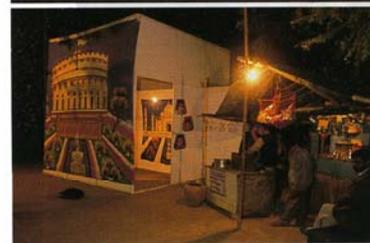
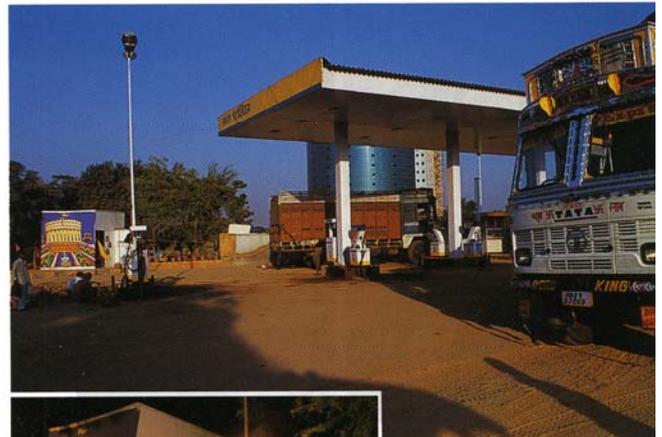
Initially Bharti and Subodh decided to treat their work as a site-specific installation – once completed they moved away leaving it open for the viewers' interpretations. However, they soon found their intervention necessary for they were inundated with queries about their work. This also led to a lot of soul searching and fine tuning of the project.

For a number of visitors the cube was magical especially when they found their white clothes glowing in the dark. Said P.K. Gupta, an employee of Usha India Ltd., "I feel very happy after seeing this Boxwallah. Here is very glowing flower, just like natural flower. And all our clothes are become very crazy". Yet others spoke of the spiritual experience they had in the space or of the sense of solitude and peace of mind they attained.

While the magic was clearly at work during the night, the subtle nuances of the light filtering in and casting ellipses on the walls were lost on the populace during the day – pointing to the holes in the roof they'd ask in a baffled sort of manner, "Is that a skylight or what?" Said Bharti Kher of her experience, "It is very different when you are working with a public which is unfamiliar with the codes of art practice. The kind of people who come into this space want something to happen. So the level of artistic discussion has to come down to a very basic and clear level".

The responses of visitors revealed an interesting dichotomy. While those familiar with 'viewing' works of art gingerly examined the space, ascended the chairs and gazed at the flowers, the 'uninitiated' had a very hands-on approach. The artists related anecdotes of people spraying the flowers with perfume or taking some away as souvenirs.

Apna Photokhana, the second stage of the project saw the creation of a photo studio appropriating its imagery from *mela* photography. For a mere Rs.10, you could get yourself clicked before the goddess Durga or transport yourself to touristy venues like the Taj in Agra, the Parliament House in Delhi, a sleepy backwater in Kerala or to mountainous Kashmir by posing against garishly painted backdrops.



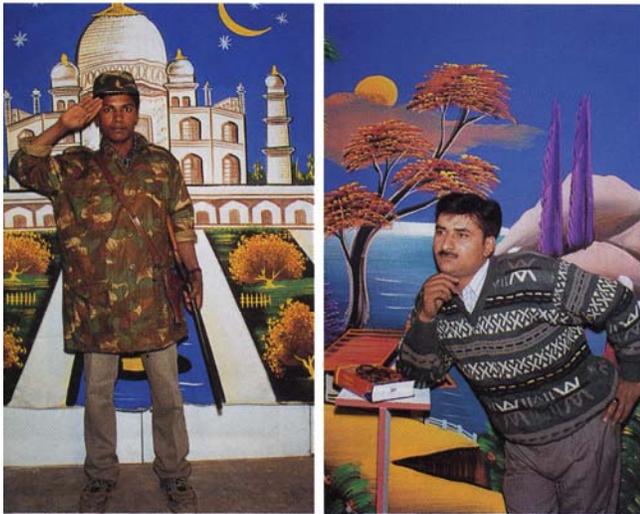
An exterior view of Satish Sharma and Ranbir Kaleka's Apna Photokhana, located to the left of the petrol pump. Inset: A view of the photo studio at night.

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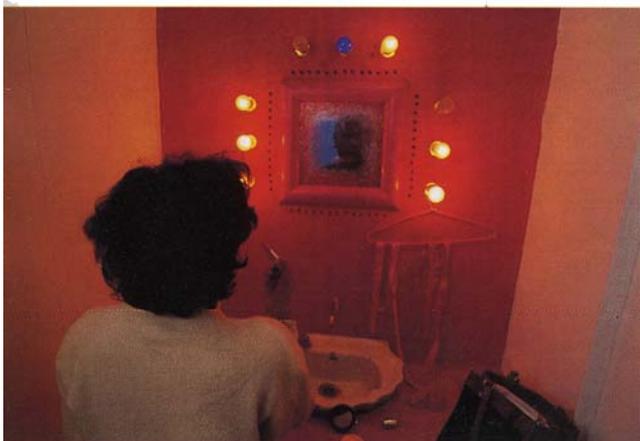
Visitors adopt various poses in Apna Photokhana.

SPECIAL REPORT



Two visitors at Satish Sharma's photo studio, Apna Photokhana.

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Ranbir Kaleka's video installation in Apna Photokhana.
Photos by Satish Sharma.

Quite in contrast to these idyllic surroundings were the props on offer, army fatigues and caps and a variety of weapons, besides the colonial and *netaji* type attire.

Elaborating on his concept, Satish stated, "The studio is a more democratic and level playing field than the world of documentary photography. It becomes a stage that resets the terms of the photographic exchange between the photographer and the photographed. The subject's right to self-representation becomes a reality".

And how they wanted to be represented clearly highlighted the class and caste distinctions. While the camera savvy clowned around and treated it all like a big joke, it was serious business for the rest. The Muslims steered clear of Durga and most of Satish's clientele insisted on full-length frontal photographs. For them having a photograph taken was a big event, so they posed and tried to create a persona for themselves. While the concept in itself was interesting it unfortunately didn't go beyond recreating a photo-studio, the likes of which you find dotted around the country. Moreover the studio came alive only between 5 and 8 in the evening when Satish was present and lay vacant for the rest of the day.

Leading out from the photo-studio into the 'rest-room' was Ranbir Kaleka's artistically and visually stimulating video-installation. If in Satish's studio visitors could create an 'image' of themselves, here they found one created for them. Pressing a red button on entering a room triggered an array of bulbs arranged around a mirror giving it the feel of an actor's green room. A box of tissues, a pink hanger with rolls of ribbon, lipstick, a comb and powder compact lay scattered around the wash basin and invited the viewer to beautify/ transform him or herself. But before one could do so the metamorphosis had already begun. For, superimposed on the viewer's face in the mirror, was an image (created by the artist on video) of a bald and ageing man who ducked out of the frame. Other visages appeared, disjointed sentences floated through space and there was the sound of something crashing. Suddenly the lights would go out, plunging the room into darkness.

The combination of moving and static images, the metamorphosis of the Self into the Other and the feeling of being in a drama over which one had no control created a tension in the work. While both projects revolved around the representation of the self, Ranbir's sense of theatricality ensured that his video-based installation worked at many levels.

Making the project work at a creative level was not the only challenge artists had to grapple with – there were infrastructure problems to be dealt with as well. A power surge on Diwali night blew out all the light bulbs in the *Garam Chai* project, robbing it of its magic. Keeping the space open 24 hours also meant that the artists had to risk people walking away with objects.

But by far the greatest problem was to be able to touch the viewer. As Bharti ruefully noted, "I realised again that art is definitely very elite in India and to move into the public domain is actually very difficult. You have to face up to the fact that a lot of people are not necessarily interested in what you are doing or in what you have to say".