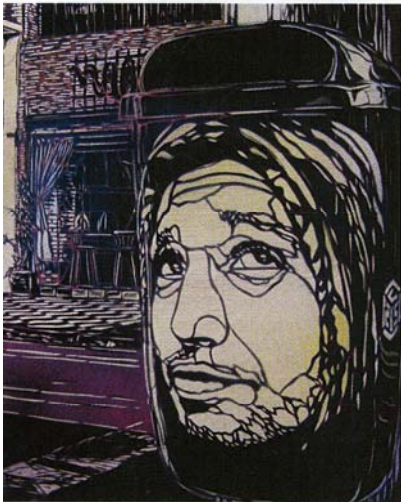


Artists at work

While Delhi gears up for 48 Degrees, these artists have already quietly gone about putting their work in the public domain.

C215 aka Christian Guémy

This French stencil artist travels around the world, leaving a very special mark behind him: paintings on walls. Unhindered by the curious crowds at Karol Bagh, Guémy stencilled around 30 paintings in the area, on abandoned autorickshaws, mailboxes and even the boxes of shoe shine boys.



When did this project start and why are you travelling around the globe?

I have always been drawing and I painted in the street with a spray bomb for the first time almost 20 years ago, when I was around 15. It was the image of life-size scooters. I still paint them today, like in New Delhi, but with stencils, not freehand, anymore. I have been a professional painter for two years, doing it mainly in the streets. But street art is like surfing and we have to travel to meet new people and get new experiences. So I began a world tour one year ago, preparing dedicated stencils for each country, so that I could really interact with the local context, in terms of architecture and local culture.

So what stencils did you make for Delhi?

I worked on friends' pictures or photographs



Different strokes Guémy's trademark self-portrait (left) and a stencil work in Karol Bagh (above)

that I admired. The stencils were focused on portraits and animals. I tried to reflect Indian cultural diversity with the portraits, while the animals were painted for the kids.

Why Karol Bagh? What was your experience there like?

Karol Bagh is the place where my hotel was located. I did not want to go to a touristy place to paint. I preferred to soak in a strong urban atmosphere for ten days. [Since] Karol Bagh is a big market, I was sure I would get a genuine Indian urban feeling. Painting in the middle of such a crowd was unusual for me, sometimes funny, but it could also be very oppressive. Sometimes, I was painting in very small streets, crowded by kids and watched by people. It was a powerful experience. During that time, you have to stay focused on your "job".

How do you choose your "spot" in a city? We read that you paint on abandoned buildings mostly... Why?

In Western countries, and even in other places, most of the faces I paint are in a certain way broken people, rejected by the society and capitalism. To make viewers empathise with these poor people, I try to capture a context that reflects their social condition. I place these images in "non-places", in the streets and on devalued supports, rusty doors, torn

posters, broken or burned walls and even some garbage bins that I particularly liked. In abandoned buildings, my paintings remind us of the people who used to live there and provide a kind of soul to the spot. Passersby are (hopefully) moved by this. Time passes so quickly, leaving almost nothing behind.

Would you call this public art?

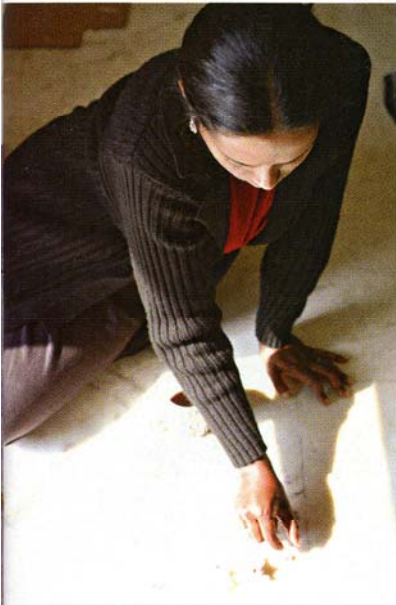
Yes... It is important (for me) to feel responsible for what we paint and express in public spaces. Passersby could be poor or rich, kids or older people, and you have to say something that can be positively interpreted by most of them. To have a positive message is also important, socially speaking. Showing solidarity and respect for mankind is my main message everywhere I go.

How many cities have you "stencilled" so far?

I spend most of my time travelling to other countries: this year I went to paint in Morocco, Israel, USA, Brazil, Poland, Slovakia, Italy, Austria, Spain, Netherlands and England.

Why C215?

C215 corresponds to my name Chris, but also it could be a code, a product reference or a jail cell number. In a certain way, are we not just anonymous numbers in the city? *Janice Pariat*



Mithu Sen

This artist's version of public art was rather unique: an interactive art project where all you had to do was send her a "letter of love" requesting an artwork made especially by her. The best part? It was all free.

What was your idea behind the Free Art Project?

This project is about thinking of those friends who cannot afford an artwork they truly desire. Here, the definition of "afford" goes beyond purchasing power. It could be anything – time, sincerity or passion. I am using popular, traditional, commercial artwork as a tool to attract people's attention to a different form of art, to raise their consciousness, to watch their reaction, their individual experience. Is it intrigue? Fear or suspicion? Delight? What did the unexpected feel like? Is it a positive, negative or neutral experience? Basically it's a game between mass-market psychology and basic human values and the diverse nature of their impulses.

So the artworks are all "gifts" to people?

When we give or receive a gift, it establishes a personal bond, a feeling between two people. This bond may not be social; it could be spiritual or psychological as well. A commodity has commercial value but a gift does not... a gift has "worth". Unlike commodities, a gift is not perceived in terms of power and debt. Those donors who prize their closeness to the recipient are careful to make it clear that the gift is not conditional with a similar market exchange value. Recipients are likewise aware of their relationship to the donor as it exists over and above this particular gift. And

Ravi Agarwal

Agarwal is an environmentalist and director of the NGO Toxics Link, a photographer and an installation artist. He writes about his recent onsite installation on the banks of the Yamuna near Palla, which was made up of girders that mapped the land as well as rows of gigantic steel knives plunged into the riverbank.

The riverbank is a site for construction. Urban planners grid the landscape to impale it with their vision of the future. The porous soil, infused with impervious concrete, bears the weight of the city. The fertility of the capital overtakes the fertility of land and water. People pass by, unquestioning, unperturbed. The future seems like it always has been. Only there is no past anymore. The new crop is manufactured elsewhere, in a factory, on a machine, and it does not matter that it is not of seed. Sustainability is spelt out on the drawing board.

The installation criticised the "gridding" of land, as a comment on the

their gratitude is not a response to the gift so much as to the affection it carries.

Would you say your project falls within the realm of "public art"?

Yes and no. On the one hand, it does fall within public art because it's an extremely interactive project, one that has been planned and executed with the specific intention of being sited or staged in the public domain, which can attract people through an accessible mode (the Internet). It is easily accessible. On the other hand, just because it's "free" doesn't mean that it's endless. If something is endless, I think it loses its value. In that way, my pro-



taming and control of nature. The knives and girders were installed in a physical grid of construction rope, stretched on the ground. The knives were symbolic of violence: they also echoed the sugarcane crop across the river. The girders were put as if there is something being constructed. The audience – river bathers, ritual participants and local villagers – came and while they were curious about the knives, they did not react to the girders, as if this were nothing unusual.

ject is not accessible to the public at all times. It has to end somewhere, I have to decide how many letters to accept and respond to. JP

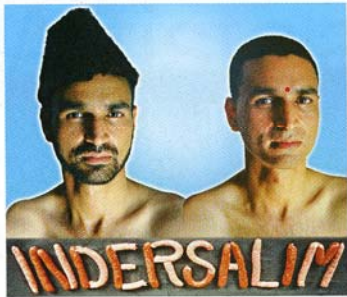
InderSalim

This Delhi-based performance artist employs public spaces for projects that veer toward the controversial.

I would not call myself an "activist" because such a person is only concerned with one thing – activism. I think people are or can be rebels through art. Protestors all over the world use some sign or the other; there is no split. The protest is embedded within the art.

Feel the love Mithu Sen's Free Art Project was fabricated for an online public audience

Public art



My first "public art" project, which is also my favourite piece, was one I did in '99 called *Hum tum ek gallery mein bandh ho, aur chaabi kho jaye* and *Hum tum ek kamre mein bandh ho aur reality bhool jaye*. We got an artist who painted film posters to paint huge banners and exhibited them all over Delhi.

The next project was a more personal one. When I was living in Kashmir [the artist is ethnically Kashmiri], I had two very close friends – Noor Muhammad and AK Bakshi. We were a trio. But with all the trouble there, we got split up. I found a picture of the three of us up on a tree. It was taken a long time ago, when things had not gotten so complicated. I had the image painted with text that celebrated friendship. Then, during the SAHMAT festival, I distributed food by the roadside. It was a special type of food, something called *tehri*, which is very popular in Kashmir during



Conscientious protester Inder Salim's poster, in which his name is written in beef and pork sausages (far left); he imitates the image on an old miniature to protest the felling of trees in the capital (left and above)

social occasions, whether in Hindu or Muslim families. It's a mixture of turmeric, salt and rice. About 300 to 400 people ate and, along with the plate, I handed out a print of the photograph along with the text. The most special

part was that Noor Muhammad came [for the event] from Kashmir.

After the Gujarat riots in 2002, I made thousands of posters (funded by no one of course, I used Rs 5,000 of my own money) of an image featuring myself with a bindi and myself with a cap. I pasted these posters everywhere... Mandi House, Connaught Place, on the backs of buses. Without any text, I think, it managed to convey a very important message – that, really, we are all the same. After all, it was the same person, with different accessories. Last year, I performed *On a Root of 40,000 trees to be Felled for 2010 Games in Delhi*. I draped myself nude over the root of a dead tree to protest the felling of trees at Mandi House.

My art always raises the question of permissions. In London earlier this year, I wore a brass band uniform with "India 1857" pasted on the back and recited my poem *In Trafalgar Square: The Other 1857*. The police intervened, of course. The same thing happened at India Gate. I was there with some other participants from Amnesty International India. I had a noose around my neck and had brought a hanging post made of foam. The idea behind that is that protest comes from within the structure. If anybody were to hang from it, it would bend. The police intervened and arrested us. Of course, what made it worse for the authorities was that we were at India Gate, one of the most symbolic monuments of the city, like Trafalgar Square is in London.

Unlike with other art forms, it is very difficult to save or document a performance. A performance is ephemeral; it is of the moment, something that is born of motivation in a particular time and place. You have to be there. *As told to JP*

Pradeep Sachdeva

The designer of Dilli Haat and the Garden of Five Senses tells us about the government's role in the arts and what it could be doing.

Do we have enough spaces here that are suitable for public art?

No. But we can perhaps bring about a change if we start treating our streets as public spaces. This can be brought about by making them inclusive – pedestrian and bicycle friendly. They also need a rugged and durable infrastructure, such as good lighting, shady trees, garbage bins, public toilets, drainage etc. They also should be designed for the activities that happen on our streets – hawkers, children playing, people just hanging around ...

Do architecture and public art installations have a lot in common?

By their very nature, both would be high visibility. Apart from that, they do not have a lot in common. Building design has to be extremely functional and not necessarily of artistic value. That is not necessarily the case with public art.

Do you think you have managed to bring public art to the city?

We had worked on making a pedestrian street in Delhi University a few years back.

This street, between the arts faculty and the library, used to be full of cars. While developing a pedestrian plaza, we managed to involve Dhruva Mistry, the renowned sculptor, who is based in Baroda. He made two sculptures for the plaza. These have brought about a lot of life in the space. These sculptures were commissioned by Delhi Development Authority based on our recommendations.

So the DDA is promoting public art?

The public art policy has taken a backseat in DDA's scheme of things. We could thank the Commonwealth Games for all the buzz that has started about beautifying the city. But even then, the government is more taken up with infrastructural maneuvering than art installations.

What sort of public art would you like to see in the city?

The murals inside the Barakhamba Metro station certainly add colour to its drab surroundings. Similarly, public art does not have to be large-scale: little fixtures brighten up the city. The government should commission students from art schools (as it has in the past), so that there is innovation and it's not costly. *Janice Pariat and Ishanee Sarkar*