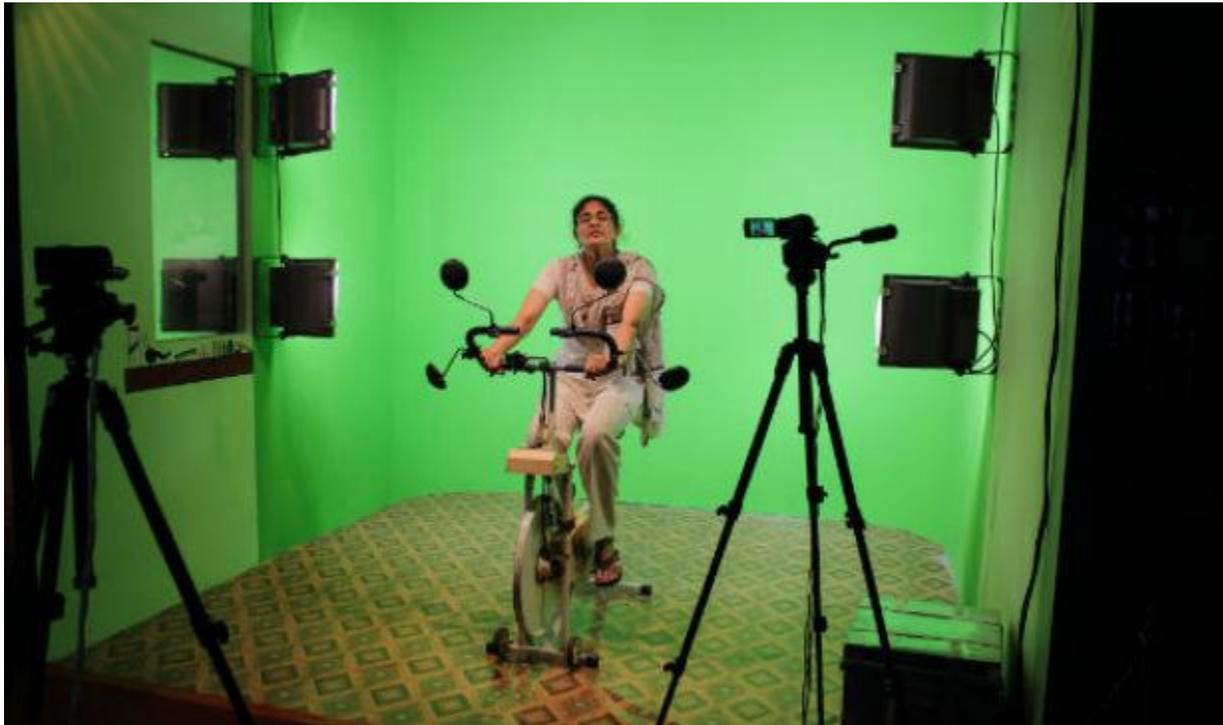


BLOUIN ARTINFO

Cinema and the City: Madhusree Dutta on Curating an Art Show Inspired by the Silver Screen



"Of Panorama," Archana Hande's interactive installation at "Project Cinema City"

June 20, 2012

"Research Art and Documentary Practices" is the rather highbrow tagline of the impressive show "Project Cinema City", currently on view at the Mumbai wing of the **National Gallery of Modern Art** (NGMA). What's on display is, in fact, a wonderful range of artworks that each play with the city's connection to Bollywood as an industry, examining, in the process the economy of labor and themes like iconography, history, and stardom in an unimaginably accessible, approachable, and exciting way. The show is the result of a collaboration between the Ministry of Culture, NGMA, **Majlis** and **Krvia**.

ARTINFO spoke to Madhusree Dutta, who was the brain behind the show and was instrumental in putting it all together. She told us more about the ideas that led to the exhibition, the process of curating it, and the show's overwhelming concerns.

Tell us more about the premise of this show? While 100 years of Indian Cinema seems like a great peg, from what I've seen it is beyond just celebration, there's a huge element of introspection, self-reflexivity and playfulness. Also, what was your role in making this happen?

The City and Cinema are twins in the large clan of wars, moving peoples and goods, technology-based modernity, and colonial and post-colonial identities of the 20th century. They have never been separated in a crowded fair, and so have never got a chance to rediscover each other at the peak of their youth and at the height of their adrenalin rush. Instead, they have spun a thicker plot in which to impersonate each other, hawk moulds of one another and, most importantly, lay down a set of signs to codify the other.

The relationship between the city and its cinema is imaginary yet tactile, complementary and also ambivalent, momentary and still recyclable – in short, it speaks of a form and its apparition as well. Their relative size and perspective, however, remain fluid and interchangeable, often making the apparition seem much larger than the form itself.

“Project Cinema City: Research Art and Documentary Practices” is a collaborative endeavor in search of the joints between the form and its apparition, between the city and its cinema. The collaboration is modeled on contemporary, urban systems of post-industrial production: networks of assembling, processing, manufacturing, recycling ... all independent and yet interdependent. In this show, we display works that are simultaneously products of research, collation, pedagogy, creativity, criticality, and then, an attempt at archiving. In this endeavor of inter-disciplinary collaboration the authors are many, but they are distinct and not faceless. We have attempted a methodology whereby each one's work exists independently, and yet attains fullness and exuberance only in relation to the works of others.

The exhibition is only a part of the project. Project Cinema City is much larger in volume and scope. In terms of output, other than the art works, we have also produced nine short films and a feature length documentary, and two volumes of publication that are in the press. The project enquires into the labor structure, viewing conventions and materiality of cinema. The project has steered clear from the standard practice of narrative study and Bollywood revisitations. It looks into cinema as a compound form that was born out of the modernity in the 20th century. Hence it is as much about the city that produces cinema as it is about the production of cinema.

The project is conceived by me. The core group that have worked with me on realizing the project over four years are visual artists **Archana Hande** and **Kausik Mukhopadhyay**, architect **Rohan Shivkumar** and film historian **Kaushik Bhaumik**.

I'd love to know about the actual process of putting this show together...

All the works exhibited are created especially for this project. In certain cases we invited a few artists and filmmakers to join in the project and create new works within the parameter of the project. The selection of the invited artists is made by their ongoing engagement with public culture and urban issues. Each artist (**Atul Dodiya**, **Anant Joshi**, **Pushpamala N.** and **Shreyas Karle**) instantly agreed to be part of the project and their respective works have evolved through long-term interactions with the core group. Kausik Mukhopadhyay and Archana Hande are part of the core group and their works have come out of the project research.

Another set of works (that constitutes 60% of the exhibition) is more integrally evolved through the project. These are interdisciplinary and collaborative works and not attributed to any single artist. For example, a work titled “Cinema City Lived: Pipeline Network”. It is a large installation of 30 feet by 20 feet made of PVC pipes and miniature models and 3D maps. I quote from the exhibition flier, “A compilation of the marks of cinema on the body of the city. The pipeline network is conceived as the stitching pattern that holds the map of the cinema city together — tracing production units, shooting studios, exhibition theatres, locations of desires and utility and their interfaces.” This work is a result of long-term collaboration between a group of filmmakers and architects. First the filmmakers identified the various

sites that can be termed as spaces of cinema and video-documented the locations. Then the architects created a spatial representation of those establishments through maps and graphics. At the third stage the representational images and the spatial graphics were turned into models and objects by visual artists. Then the pipeline was designed as a map of the city by the architects, and the objects displayed within the structure. So this installation has evolved over time through interfaces between different disciplines and methodologies. "Project Cinema City" is distinct in its inter-disciplinary collaboration in producing art works and research material.

The Calendar Art section of this show, whose idea was it?

The calendar art was conceived as a collaborative endeavor to speculate upon the past. It is a pictorial dateline of urban iconography in the 20th century. It was first conceived by Archana and me to facilitate multiple readings of the past. The entire project is based on a Timeline text that has been evolved by me as the spine of the Cinema City project. The text is a playful juxtaposition of facts, fictions, memoirs, gossips and urban lore around city-cinema-modernity. The text, along with found image visuals (written by me and designed by artist Shilpa Gupta), makes one volume of the forthcoming Cinema City publication. This text was shared by a large number of visual artists. They were requested to choose a year in the 20th century and design a calendar as a subjective interpretation of the timeline. The artists were also requested to use certain amount of found images in their design and also imagine a consumer's product as the possible producer of such a calendar. Some artists have used their old works as found image. For example, **Vivan Sundaram** has used an image of his previous installation "Trash" to create an advertisement for the digital cinema industry of Malegaon dated 2000.

The project culminated in a spectacular collection of 56 calendars that present a complex overlap between the past and the present. Quoting from the exhibition flier, "The inconspicuous-looking individual works gain temporality and attain a special kind of exuberance when collated and placed together."

What do you think are the show's overwhelming concerns? The means of cinematic production seems to be one, iconography another. What are some of the others, given that this does seem like a really tightly curated one?

One of the major concerns of the project is to foreground the hidden faces, hidden spaces and hidden processes of cinema making and cinema viewing. The project also attempts to take the cinematic experiences beyond the binaries of films. Cinema as the main public culture in urban India influences the living experiences to such an extent that the viewers often negotiate their real lives and real spaces through the tools provided by cinema.

Allow me to narrate two stories that have, in a way, formed the two ends of this project. One woman in her 60s, a stunt artist who has been working in the film industry for 40 years said, "Humme muhn chhupane ko do hazar milta hai aur muhn dikhane ko ek hazar," which means she earns more as a body double of a heroine where she needs to hide her face than when she plays a small yet original role as a junior artist. In a way that was the beginning of this project — the logic of invisibility in cinema.

Three years into the project, another woman, in her mid 30s who lived all her life in this city says, "Last year I went to town... you know town —Nariman Point, the sea, the wide roads... I have seen them all... they are like pictures. I even told my children, 'See aren't these places exactly the same as what we saw in films.'"

So she negotiates her own city through the memories of cinema. That was the other end of the project.