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CHENNAI
Saturday • February 23, 2019

Think twice

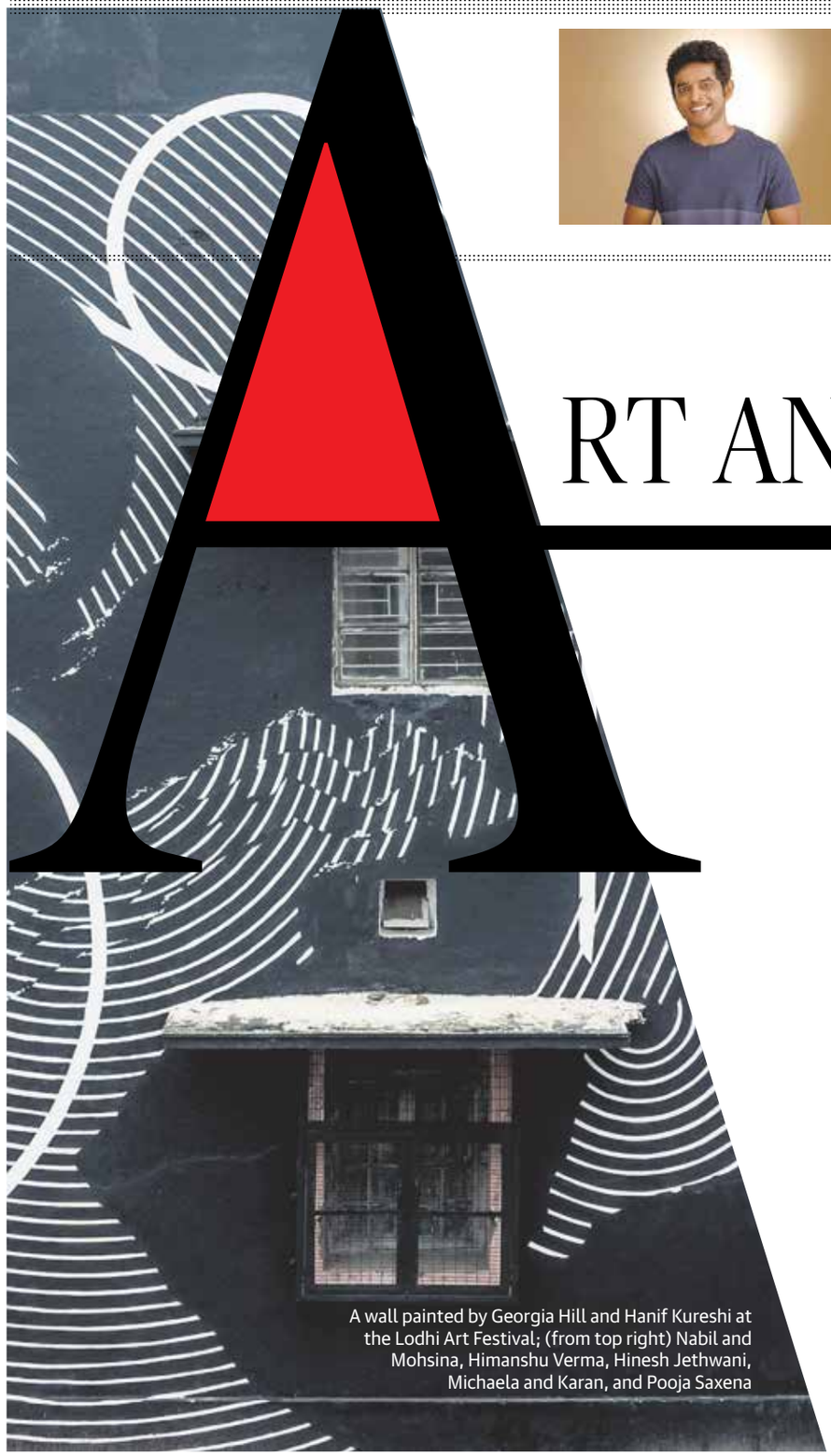
Comedian Naveen Richard débuts on our pages with a take on why he detests the phrase 'be careful' **p2**

Find your way

Navigate the Chennai Photo Biennale and keep track of the highlights with our handy guide **p4**

Kaiser of couture

Karl Lagerfeld has left behind an unmatched legacy. Designer Tarun Tahiliani remembers his 'inspiration' **p7**



A wall painted by Georgia Hill and Hanif Kureshi at the Lodhi Art Festival; (from top right) Nabil and Mohsina, Himanshu Verma, Hinesh Jethwani, Michaela and Karan, and Pooja Saxena

ART AND ITS CRUSADERS

Celebrating the next wave of cultural entrepreneurs who are making a case for local voices and ensuring new talent isn't overlooked

Culture curators 2019

Art and culture have always had champions, but the last decade or so has seen a spurt in ideas, in initiatives, in cultural entrepreneurs. It is not a case of a new order replacing the old, but more a reaction to the times, feels artist and cultural theorist Ranjit Hoskote. "There is no singular, monolithic public anymore. Instead, we have a variety of micro publics," he says, explaining that the new wave of 'warriors' who are reviving old traditions and working with local talent, is a response to this. "There is also a sense that there are no institutions that will support this kind of work. So people are going out and creating their own, which is a good thing," he adds. Examples include artist Jagannath Panda, who revitalised Bhubaneswar's old city with an art trail last year; Anurupa Roy of Katkatha, who works with puppetry; or Junoon Theatre Company's Bombay Local series, that organises talks featuring theatre personalities, which are free to the public.

Even as established platforms, like the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, have started exploring alternative spaces to showcase world-renowned artists, initiatives like five-year-old St+art are taking art projects right to where the people are. The difference: they also have sign artists, Gond painters and local artists painting walls alongside international names. The art scene today is made up of such small, interlocking, occasionally converging groups that create a diverse ecology. We look at a few who are making an impact, preserving our heritage, ensuring local voices are heard.

– Surya Praphulla Kumar, Nidhi Adlakha, Susanna Myrtle Lazarus, Sindhuri Nandhakumar and Lavanya Narayanan

Continued on pages 8-9

Art

Culture curators 2019

Continued from page 1

ROHAN NARAYANA MURTY

MURTY CLASSICAL LIBRARY OF INDIA
Gurugram

A passion for literature may be surprising in a computer scientist, but we're glad he loves words. Murty, 36 (son of Infosys co-founder Narayana Murthy), is supporting the documentation of pre-modern literary works — in languages such as Sanskrit, Bangla, Kannada, Tamil and more. The ongoing series of facing-page translations is published by Harvard University Press.

SPACES

MICHAELA AND KARAN TALWAR

HARKAT
Mumbai

German filmmaker Michaela – you would've spotted her in a cameo in *Gully Boy* – and her husband Karan consider themselves artists "who don't fit in institutions or in bars". And their boutique arts studio, Harkat, is for others like them. "Most of pop culture is sparked off by artists working outside the establishment. So we felt we needed to create such a place," says Michaela, 30. "We are to alternative spaces what *Vice* is to news."

Since they opened in 2014, Harkat – housed in Bungalow #75 under a canopy of mango and walnut trees – has turned its locality in Versova into a "theatre gully". "When we started out, there were no alternative spaces. Now five have opened, following their own variations of our model," says Karan, 31. Audiences are increasing, so are opportunities and venues for artists. "Theatremakers and performers have started thinking in terms of alternative spaces when designing their shows," says Michaela, recalling how filmmaker Suresh Eriyat said Harkat's audience for his film, *Tokri*, was the most receptive he'd encountered in India.

Given the current lack of inclusivity in most media, it is heartening to note that almost everything they curate or programme passes through a 'politics filter'. Proposals problematic about gender and the like are rejected, and in-house curations actively contribute to the conversations. Up next, expect their second in-house play, *Jenny and Karl Marx*. *Details: harkat.in*

A performance at Harkat

KAVERY POOVANNA

WANDERING ARTIST
Chennai

A lack of places that promote creativity led Poovanna, 40, to launch Wandering Artist two years ago. The intimate space in RA Puram, which has hosted artistes such as art director Thotta Tharani, *sitarist* Pandit Deobrat Mishra, and pianist Anil Srinivasan, is the go-to place for workshops and performances today. "We also provide a stage for up-and-coming artists, free of cost, to render intimate performances, gather experiences, and hit mainstream media,"says the visual and performing artist, adding that they regularly host training programmes on theatre, art and dance to mentor new talent.

But the journey has not been easy. Sustaining the arts is a challenge and looking for patrons is no mean feat. "Arts appreciation is important to encourage and preserve traditional art forms. At some level, we also feel that the notion that arts must be offered free of cost needs fine-tuning as every artist needs their bread and butter," says Poovanna, who launched Bhuhu, an immersive traditional Indian fine arts course, at the cultural space this month, with modules in murals, sculpture, puppetry and more. *Details: wanderingartist.in*

NABIL AND MOHSINA

THE VILLAGE STUDIO
Goa

The alternative art space, which opened its doors in 2017, recently changed hands – with founder Laila Vaziralli handing the reins to Nabil and Mohsina, erstwhile professionals from Bengaluru. While a shift in Goa's music scene, from EDM and raves to live music and artistic communities, is what convinced the couple to make the move, they assure that Vaziralli (who is behind projects such as Kitsch Mandi and Junta) still curates all the events at the studio. This includes performances by poets and indie artists, painting exhibitions, and projects involving the local community that take forward the photographer-turned-artist's vision of a space that is not only for artists to showcase their work but also "where skills can be taught and learnt".

Their annual music fest and workshops on themes like Sufism were the highlights in December. "Hosting artists such as Papon, Benny Dayal and bands like Thakara has been fun and social media has played a huge role in connecting with them," says Nabil, adding that costs are always a concern. "[Much of it goes] from our pockets. We don't have sponsors or funders; we bring in a new gig every week to keep the studio engaging."

ON THE STREETS

AKSHAT NAURIYAL

ST+ART
New Delhi

The walls of Lodhi Colony are awash with colour. Large murals with themes like women's empowerment and climate change, are attracting residents and tourists alike. The first edition of the Lodhi Art Festival (on till March 15) features 30 new artists, from Sameer Kulavoor and Hanif Kureshi to international names like Daan Botlek (Netherlands) and Brandon Tay (Singapore).

This is the latest initiative by non-profit St+art to embed art in streets. "When we began in 2014, art was, to a certain extent, the commodity of the elite. The only exposure people had was if they went to a museum or gallery. So we wanted to take it out of the 'white cube' and embed it in public spaces," says Nauriyal, a drummer and new-media artist who's always had "an affinity to the alternative underbelly of the city". In the last five years, they've organised 15 festivals in seven cities (including Coimbatore, Chandigarh and Goa), partnered with over 250 artists, painted over 275 walls across the country and started three art districts – in Lodhi, Maqhta (Hyderabad) and Mahim (Mumbai).

The larger idea is also to create an ecosystem for local artists. "There is enough talent out there, it just needs a push and a framework," says the 34-year-old. Rooted in social activism and urban design, their work "draws from the space, the project and the artists' curation". There is also an emphasis on working with Indian artisans and art traditions. "We've worked with sign painters, Gond and Madhubani artists... putting their amazing art forms on the same contemporary platform as the rest. This leads to an exchange of ideas, cultures and techniques," he says. If you can't make it to Lodhi, check out the festival in Maqhta in March-April. *Details: st-artindia.org*

(Left to right) Co-founders Nauriyal, Hanif Kureshi, Giulia Ambrogi, Thanish Thomas and Arjun Bahl; (top) walls in Mahim and Coimbatore ▪ NAMAN SARAIYA, SURAJ KATRA, PRANAV GOHIL

HIMANSHU VERMA

RED EARTH
Jaipur

He moved to Jaipur a year ago, to escape the bustle of Delhi, but that's the only shift Verma, 38, is making. He continues to be India's 'sari man' – exploring contemporary masculinity and its fluidity through the "open-ended garment" – even as his travelling show, The Saree Festival (started in 2014), explores the drape's various styles and design-led interventions.

For over a decade now, his multi-arts initiative, Red Earth, has also been creating conversations on Indian aesthetics. "A lot of my work is centered around seasons and festivals, to keep the connection with Indian aesthetics alive," he says. The last edition of the Monsoon Festival had digital miniatures by graphic designers, alongside traditional oil canvases and contemporary works from artists like Anjana Mehra. His latest is the Cabinet of Curiosities, which he débuted in Jaipur last month and plans to bring to Mumbai and Chennai soon. "We created our version of the cabinet, with a mix of design, crafts from Jaipur, and works of contemporary artists like Olivia Fraser, Jyoti Bhatt and Akanksha Agarwal. The curation challenged how things [are perceived and] should be." *Details: redearthindia.com*

POOJA SAXENA

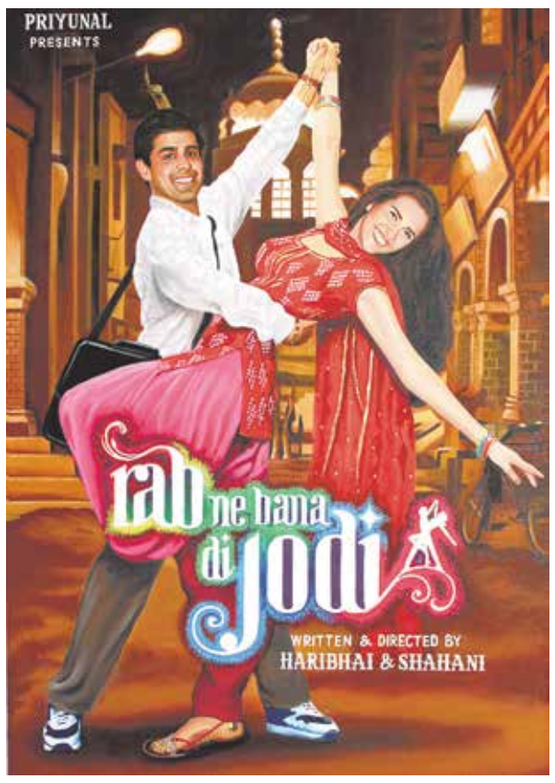
MATRA TYPE WALKS,
New Delhi

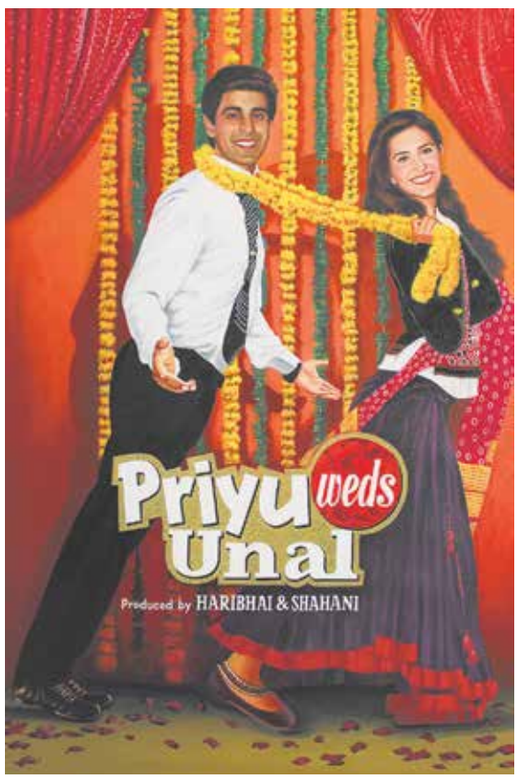
The typeface and graphic designer has been documenting street lettering on her Instagram and Twitter for several years. Her latest project is indiastreetlettering.com, a map-based photographic archive of street lettering from across the country. "Letters in public environments have always interested me. They make an essential part of our visual culture," says Saxena, 31.

Although she feels that the walks she organises are not "needed", they are interesting because they allow participants to see a place with a new perspective. "I liken them to a design appreciation course, condensed into a couple of hours and conducted in the wild," she says, adding that similar walks are conducted by Tanya George in Mumbai and Zenab Bastawala in Bengaluru.

Being a one-woman operation limits the scope of expanding her work to different neighbourhoods and conducting them more often. But each of the walks she organised in 2018 – from the Paharganj Airbnb Experience to Nicholson Cemetery Type Walk – has been sold out. "I feel confident that non-designers enjoy seeing and discussing design, and sometimes it is us, designers, that couch it in so much jargon that it becomes unapproachable." *Deatils: matratype.com*

and its crusaders





HINESH JETHWANI

INDIAN HIPPY
Mumbai

When Jethwani's career hit a bump in 2008 – his IT business tanked during recession – a collection of newspaper clippings and a fascination for the dying art of hand-painted movie posters gave him new purpose. "It didn't start off as a business plan; I had a lot of time on my hands and I wanted to do an experiment, to see what the artists were capable of and how people would react to it," recalls the 38-year-old. An unusual plan for someone who does not enjoy Bollywood films!

Tracking them down was the difficult part ("I walked around Dadar, Matunga and the Shivaji Park area, which had had a lot of art studios"). The ensuing conversations found form in Indian Hippy, a collective of 12 poster and banner artists. In the last decade, they've succeeded in popularising the art form, creating everything from customised posters to 20 kg canvases for hotels like Stillwell Hotel in Los Angeles. "Restaurants mostly want hand-pained art, like wall canvases, or memorabilia (his website, bollywoodmovieposters.com, is dedicated to the latter)," says Jethwani, adding, "We also use digital to our advantage, like at a recent wedding where the client ordered nine posters of the bride and groom (in movies like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* and *Tanu Weds Manu*) and blew them up into 10x12 foot banners."

However, he is aware there is an expiry date to his venture. Of the original collective, only five artists remain and "age has caught up with most of them". The attempt now is to ensure continuity. "We want to get the younger generation fascinated about this beautiful hand-painted art," he concludes. *Details: hippy.in*

MUSIC

UDAY KAPUR AND MO JOSHI

AZADI RECORDS
New Delhi

Given today's socio-economic climate, Kapur, 26, feels that an independent record label promoting local artistes is the need of the hour. "We wanted to create an organisation that helps bring music (the forward-thinking, politically conscious kind) from marginalised sections, and introduce new stories to the music industry. Such as Prabh Deep's, and the affects of the anti-Sikh riots on his community," says Kapur, who was inspired to start Azadi Records after writing his thesis on Indian protest musicians such as Indian Ocean and Imphal Talkies and The Howlers.

Established in 2017, their current roster includes names like Sez On The Beat, Seedhe Maut, Tienas, and Swadesi, among others. He says the impact of their releases (all well received) has stretched beyond the music industry. "People within Tilak Nagar have started conversing about substance abuse after Prabh's album dropped. We hope the Aarey [deforestation] movement will get a push with Swadesi's track. Overall, we hope to paint an accurate, nuanced picture of what's going on in the country," he shares.

While money is always a challenge – "we've only put our own money in so far," says co-founder Joshi – digital is key to getting their music out. "We're still small footprint-wise, but we get relatively good engagement and are growing at a good pace. We've collaborated with different platforms (Saavn, SoundCloud) and plan to do more this year," concludes Joshi. *Details: azadirecords.com*

Joshi and (right) Kapur

SONIA ACHARYA

WOMEN OF RHYTHM
Mumbai

As percussion is highly male dominated, Acharya, 29, wanted to motivate more women to enter the mainstream. The first edition of Women of Rhythm was held in Mumbai in 2016, and was dedicated to the first ladies of instruments like the *ghatam, mridangam, pakhawaj* and *tabla*. "At the time, I looked at it as a one-off concert, but we ended up building it. The initiative is geared towards breaking gender disparity, giving visibility, creating awareness and, most importantly, showcasing talent," she says. "We've worked with some phenomenal artistes like *vidushis* Sukanya Ramgopal and Dandamudi Sumathi Ramamohan Rao, and younger artistes like Charu Hariharan, Neesha Mokal and Mitali Vinchurkar," she adds.

For Acharya, one of the successes is that "almost all the percussionists featured in WOR have started to get regular, well-paid, quality work. I'm looking forward to the edition where we can get international artistes and have them collaborate with Indian artistes". Currently, WOR is undergoing structural changes to create more video content. This year, they are also planning to take the property to different cities, with collaborative, theme-based concerts.

ABHISHEK MAJUMDAR

PLAYWRIGHT AND THEATRE DIRECTOR
Bengaluru

In the 10 years since he co-founded theatre company, Indian Ensemble, with Sandeep Shikhar, Majumdar has seen his plays staged across the world. Dealing with topics such as conflict (*The Afterlife of Birds*) and communalism (*The Djinns of Eidgah*), his work has gained acclaim for presenting the nuances of Indian life to a global audience. But the company is, at its core, an ensemble, with an emphasis on making theatre training more accessible, encouraging linguistic diversity, and helping promote the livelihoods of theatre practitioners. "We failed and succeeded at plays, but I don't think our values wavered," says the 38-year-old, whose upcoming works include *Baatin*, a play about the *Quran* being developed at the National Theatre in London.

Currently he is focussed on setting up a new company, Bhasha Centre of Performing Arts and Research, which will focus on making multilingual theatre, with a special focus on works inspired by gender studies and Dalit studies. The organisation will also focus on diversity and insurance for theatre artistes.

RASHMI DHANWANI

THE ART X COMPANY
Mumbai

"How do you articulate a sense of value for something as intangible as culture?" The question led Dhanwani, 34, to the National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA), Mumbai, where she was instrumental in launching its first outreach department, creating direct engagement with the audience. This also helped her set the stage for starting Art X in 2015. "I wanted to create an organisation that was genre-agnostic when discussing access to the cultural sector. One that could create tangible points of engagement," she explains.

From understanding the demands of the audience to what sectors of the community haven't been included in performance culture, the last three years have seen her curating ventures across the country where, she says, the amount of talent is "immense".

This year, she's also looking ahead, organising culture meets in eight of India's metros and gearing up for a host of interesting projects. "We're working with the Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa and seeing another client that's interested in research and curation," she says. *Details: art-x.co*

AISHWARYA TIPNIS

AISHWARYA TIPNIS ARCHITECTS
Delhi

In Delhi, she restored a haveli *in Kashmere Gate; in Madhya Pradesh, it was the Mahidpur Fort; and in West Bengal, she is preserving Chandannagar's French heritage. Currently working on the over 130-year-old Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (with UNESCO), the 38-year-old conservation architect was conferred the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres last year.*

BABITHA GEORGE

UNBOX FESTIVAL
Delhi-Bengaluru

Yes, the festival explores the intersection of art, technology and design, but it has fun doing it – with talks on the anatomy of an AI to experiments in a food lab, and even a session on conspiracy theories. "We noticed that people tend to keep going to the same spaces and communities. So we wanted to create a space where a person could address a question with someone they'd never have been able to work with," explains George, one of the co-founders.

Begun by interdisciplinary consultancy, Quicksand Design Studio, in 2011, the fifth edition (it took a break after 2014) recently concluded in Bengaluru. One of the many highlights was a workshop by professor Justin Marshall, of the University of Northumbria, which expanded on his work with block printers from Jaipur, looking at how conductive ink can be used to think of new manifests for block printing. "This year we had around 100-odd pieces of programming, which sparked a lot of discussions," shares the 38-year-old, adding that, going forward, the festival will continue to help create a vibrant network between Indian and international artists, thinkers and performers. *Details: unboxfestival.com*