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ART

ROOM WITH A VIEW

Art residencies are offering contemporary artists a lifeline away from the demands and pressures of galleries, auctions and the market

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Getting to Khoj, if you will excuse the pun, can feel like a quest of sorts. But once you reach there, in south Delhi's grungy Khirki village, there is plenty to discover.

From global legends like Subodh Gupta to lesser-known ones like Leone Contini, many artists have graced these premises with often outstandingly original work. If one of Gupta's works at Khoj was a performance by three professional eaters from Bihar (*Spit Eaters*, 2012), Contini, who lives in a village in northern Italy, created a hybrid *mamosa* by crossing the Tibetan momo with the Indian *samosa* and its African counterpart—the last influenced by the immigrant African population in Khirki village, with whom he made friends during his stay at one of the residencies run by Khoj.

Khoj may still be the most coveted residency in the country, but several others are fast catching up. Space 118 and What About Art? (WAA) in Mumbai, Jaaga and 1 Shanthi Road in Bangalore are just a few contenders. The proliferation of art residencies is providing a lifeline to contemporary artists who don't have enough patrons or presence in the market.

Every residency is guided by a vision that is distinctly its own. It may be fully funded or paid for by the participants, it may last from weeks to months, and it usually sends out open calls for applications, which are assessed by a selection panel.

For instance, Khoj, headed by Pooja Sood, has been the fount of avant-garde art and ideas, many of which are the outcomes of the funded residencies and workshops run by the collective throughout the year. "Our priority has always been the Global South," says Sood. "We try to get artists from Africa, the Middle East (West Asia), Korea, and of course, South Asia." She also describes the residency model as a methodology, not an end in itself. "Our mission is to be an incubation space for ideas," Sood says. "The residencies are a means of achieving it."

Usually curated around a theme (food, gaming, environment, gender, and so on), Khoj residences try to grow the local scene. "We provide artists with a safe space to fail," says Sood.

Fashion designer Kallol Datta, who participated in the art and fashion residency last year, agrees. "When you undertake a fully funded residency to work on a project at Khoj (unlike others), you feel extremely secure to create work which might end up being just a work in progress," he says. "There has been a shift in my work across disciplines since the Khoj residency. My attempt at storytelling through fabric, installation and words has become more focused, and the social commentary is now more pronounced."

Periferry in Guwahati is just as flexible. A residency on a boat docked on the banks of the Brahmaputra, it hosts projects that have begun there and continued in other parts of the world. Owned by a group called the Desire Machine Collective, Periferry encourages works that need collaboration with the local environment. In 2010, for instance, Belgian artist Christina Stadlbauer showed *Body Water* there, an exhibition described by Periferry as "a wrap-up of investigations in kitchens, gardens, *gamuchas* (Assamese towels), buses and paths of Assam".

Curator and writer Ranjit Hoskote says the concept of the artists' residency began to evolve after the 1990s, alongside the biennial and collaborative spaces which serve as alternative or supplementary production systems (as opposed to galleries, museums and public commissions) for artists. Apart from being "down time" or repose, such programmes facilitate the forging of fresh connections and help start conversations among practitioners across disciplines.

In India, residencies are naturally more appealing to artists because infrastructure is scant. Sales of contemporary art are weak compared to most other countries, even those in West Asia, despite a vibrant tradition of art education. As a result, residencies become an invaluable resource for artists.

Take Prathap Modi, 31. A residency junkie of sorts, he's completed the PEERS residency at Khoj, open only to emerging artists and fresh graduates, and has been to a few in Europe. His current stop is Space 118 in Mumbai's Mazgaon.

Modi takes two days to settle into the quiet of a residency—"to get around its ecosystem," as he puts it. He has been roaming around Mazgaon, an urban refuge a short drive away from Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, and the city's art district, spread over Kala Ghoda and Colaba in the south. A printmaker, Modi studied in Visakhapatnam and Vadodara, but hasn't had a chance to live and work in Mumbai—until now.

Saloni Doshi's Space 118 is the first art residency that opened in Mumbai, back in 2010. Self-funded, it comes with a room and basic living facilities. Artists from anywhere in the world can spend one-two months there. During this time, they are expected to work on a proposed project, but not necessarily complete it. The artists have to pay her with one of their artworks. Doshi hosts an Open Studio day every four months to show the work of the residents to gallerists, curators

SPACE 118
Mazgaon, Mumbai

JAAGA
Bangalore

KROJ
Khirki village, New Delhi

RATNA GUPTA
at WAA, Mumbai

ARTISTS FROM ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD CAN SPEND ONE-TWO MONTHS AT SPACE 118—DURING THIS TIME, THEY ARE EXPECTED TO WORK ON A PROPOSED PROJECT, BUT NOT NECESSARILY COMPLETE IT

and collectors. She is even happy to facilitate sales.

"My only condition is that the residents should not be fly-by-night operators who use the space to just stay here and travel around, but artists with a serious project in mind." Doshi scrutinizes all the proposals, which keep growing each year, and meets the artists before inviting them.

Among the artworks crowding her office is a stunning abstraction in oil painted by Ankush Safaya during a recently completed two-month residency. It shows a cluster of overlapping geometrical shapes in primary colours, inspired by the new Mumbai landmark Antilla, industrialist Mukesh Ambani's home. "Safaya is from Hoshiarpur, in Punjab," says Doshi. "He is mostly self-trained, with a lot of talent. Surprises like these make residencies so rewarding."

Serendipity is often inspired by the setting. And as far as location is concerned, few residencies can beat the stately charm of the Sanskriti Foundation in Anandgram, off the Mehrauli-Gurgaon Road in New Delhi.

A sleepy green island, Sanskriti is sprawled over 5 acres, and was established more than three decades ago by art curator and philanthropist O.P. Jain. It has three museums on its premises, dedicated to terracotta works, everyday art and textiles, and curated by art historian Jyotindra Jain. Artists from far and wide, working in fields as diverse as performance, painting, ceramic, pottery and other crafts, go there every year to soak in the elegance of India's rural and tribal traditions. Anindita Dutta, whose performance around a clay structure at this year's India Art Fair was much remarked on, worked on it at Sanskriti.

"That banyan tree there," says Sanskriti Kendra coordinator Ravinder Dutt, pointing to it, "was planted by musician Kumar Gandharva, some 25 years ago." Regal but reserved, it is a testimony to the growth of Sanskriti and embodies its serene ambience. From being just a stretch of arid land, with nothing but straggling bushes, to the finely landscaped grounds it now boasts of, Sanskriti has come a long way.

Sanskriti happens to be one of the rare places in New Delhi with full-fledged facilities for ceramic and enamel workshops, fitted with sophisticated kilns and run by trainers who come in to teach pottery and jewellery design. Every morning, there are yoga classes and meditation assemblies. Special wellness sessions are organized for children.

"We have eight sets of studios and facilities to host as many as 25 artists at any time," says Dutt. Usually residents come between September and April. A paid residency ($55, or around ₹3,300, plus taxes, a day for food and lodging), Sanskriti hosts artists and writers for anything between 20 days to a few months, depending on their resources and, in some cases, the duration of the visa. The foundation also facilitates interaction between incoming artists and local artisans, as it did for British artist Andrew Burton, who worked with the *bithoora* makers of nearby Ghitorni village. *Bithooras* are fuel stores made from thousands of hand-sized, cow-dung cakes.

The WAA in Mumbai's Bandra (West) presents a striking contrast to the pastoral idyll that is Sanskriti. There are two adjoining flats in a rundown apartment complex. Over 15 artists have used the studios, which are given out for a period of three months, since the launch of the residency programme in November. The space is meant specifically for displaying video art.

Curator Eve Lemesle started the WAA in 2011 to fill what she feels is a gap between artists and the market. The firm is supported by the Council of Arts and Letters and the ministry of internal relations of Quebec, Canada, apart from The Bandra Base, a Mumbai-based performance and cultural hub, among other institutions and individual patrons. Lemesle, who ran another residency in the city before this—the Last Ship—says the residency is an organic progression for her company, which manages public art projects, helps artists with a network of fabricators for large-scale installations, and lends its expertise to galleries.

When we visit, local mixed-media artist Ratna Gupta and New York-based Venezuelan sound and media artist Ernesto Klar are at work. Of the two adjoining flats, both two-roomed structures with a fairly large kitchen that also doubles as the verandah, one has been completely taken over by 35-year-old Gupta's resin and fibreglass casts of her own body. Hands, torsos, knees are strewn about, remnants of Gupta's work that dates back to 2005, when the artist began addressing issues of body image and anorexia.

"I would wrap myself in plaster, and make a resin and later fibreglass mould of my body. This enabled me to see myself not in two-dimensional or in a limited way," says Gupta. The results were beautiful sculptures that looked fragile and layered. The studio is also filled with her new work—tapestries made with latex dropped over the bark of the tree.

Starlyn D'Souza, a 25-year-old graphic designer who lives in Bandra, the city's hipster destination, is assisting Gupta and simultaneously using the studio as his laboratory: He collects organic detritus along Mumbai's coastline, such as crab skeletons, shells, coir, fish scales and dried-up sea urchins. Using these dead and decayed objects he pieces together *new forms—memorializing fragments of the city* in art.

Like the WAA, Jaaga in Bangalore, which brings together community activists and creative artists in design and technology, combines the generous gift of space with unfettered creative licence. At the moment, Jaaga is split into three very disparate addresses: a penthouse in downtown Bangalore; an apartment in residential Malleswaram; and a work-in-progress campus on a banana plantation at Kanakapura, a short drive from the city.

Co-founded in 2009 by Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath graduate Archana Prasad and tech evangelist Freeman Murray, Jaaga's growth so far has been organic, almost need-based, rather than planned. Rather like the revolutionary, "Lego-like" pallet-rack architecture that has variously defined its successive spaces (and currently shelters the Kanakapura outpost), Jaaga, which began as an artists' collective, has now evolved into three verticals: Study, Startup and DNA. They focus, respectively, on helping software developers, incubating new tech companies, and creating an interdisciplinary platform that segues into art, design, research and community-build-

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