A Reflection by Khayal Trivedi

Cultural and artistic networks have historically been key nodal points for the exchange of social, political and cultural ideas. They have sparked revolutions and have sustained them too. While these networks are often driven by common beliefs and value systems, they are greatly affected and guided by external factors such as socio-political situations, access to technologies, economical conditions, amongst many other factors.

When the ISGS invited me to join the workshop and reflect on the precarities of independent art and cultural networks in Asia, I was excited to share and exchange ideas on my ongoing research networks that engage with new media art in South Asia. Artists and cultural practitioners have long carried out experiments with early technologies in their work in the Indian subcontinent, but these explorations and the wide ongoing movements in the field of new media art are little known and accessed by wider public audiences. Eager to work on the same, I was keen on spending time with my fellow participants to learn from their experiences and projects. The Covid-19 pandemic, however, had different things planned for all of us, as it never let us meet in a shared physical space.

Adapting to the changing times, we were assigned into small teams to exchange and work together virtually, for almost a year. In hindsight, instead of reading other cultural networks, the project became an opportunity for us to form our own cultural network and experience the precarious times of global pandemic, through each other's eyes. The initial conversation in the group was about creating a body of works by looking at 'masks as a metaphor' - how masks were imposed and perceived by different populations, the differences between social distancing and physical distancing, the relation of masks with the virus, and the approach of our respective governments to the global crisis. The many conversations that unfolded over months became not just a place of sharing but also of understanding several other living conditions and states of mind of every group member.

But while these moments were enriching, the collective 'work' of the group was overshadowed by the degrading mental health of the group members with the constant incertitude over what would happen next. The fear of the virus, the fear of others, digital fatigue, the constant pressure to perform, earn, and look out for loved ones were far too overwhelming to produce another body of work. Despite sharing a desire to collectively work together, there was a lag in its implementation, a lag in reconnecting and also in producing a new project. This experience brings forth some crucial questions with regards to cultural and artistic networks.

Do these networks need to be performing and/or producing to be called a "network"? What is the primary function of an independent art or cultural network? Is "work" only the act of producing in a chosen medium? This capitalist idea of 'always producing' is so pervasive that all of us have internalized it, knowingly or unknowingly. If a network becomes a space for exchanging knowledge and perspectives, and not a space for production in the sense that we perceive it in our societies, can it be said that members did not perform or work? And what if the exchange significantly changes a member's perspective and influences he/she/them to later produce something - is the group work then, "work"? These questions have plagued me through the many conversations we had in our group.

It made me realise that I do not want to adhere to the capitalistic idea of 'producing' for the sake of production and work as tangible physical or virtual outputs in terms of content. The world, in my needs conversations that create a space for empathy in these difficult times, more than it needs "work". Therefore, the experience of working in the group was enriching for me. For this I genuinely thank Chen, Ahmed and Melodie. They grounded me in my approach of looking at the world during this crisis with their distinct experiences. While I travelled the world with my mask on, dealing with the never-ending administrative paperwork and covid-tests, my group members were confined to their spaces,

with their masks on, struggling at their end. Isn't this the beauty of cultural networks that subvert individual egos and truths by bringing in other perspectives on living?

From reading independent networks to becoming one in possibly one of the most difficult times, I realized how external factors affect its members. Sometimes they become the reason of the formation of nodal points, and sometimes these networks survive despite the external factors, and sometimes they disintegrate because of precarious circumstances. That is but natural in the cycle of formation and reformation of networks, as there is a beginning and an end to the process. I also came to an understanding that the process does not need to adhere to the norms of the production driven society that we are living in. "Work" or a "product" can very well be an experience, and in fact is, as the collective experience and exchanges bind the independent network together. The ISGS Masterclass gave both its conveners and its participants an opportunity to create new spaces and networks to foster dialogue and exchange.