

TANGLED VEINS

Ten years on, the Kochi-Muziris Biennale has placed India on the cultural world map. But it has cost it much

BY ANJULY MATHAI

The Kochi-Muziris Biennale—which is now a fixture on the cultural landscape of the country—began as a government initiative, when the department of cultural affairs of the Kerala government approached artists Riyas Komu and Bose Krishnamachari in 2010 to organise an international art extravaganza. The challenge was mammoth. There was no existing infrastructure necessary for an exhibition of this scale and no institutional support structures.

“There was no weather-controlled spacing available in Kochi for exhibiting artworks,” says Krishnamachari. “That is when a friend suggested that Aspinwall House was up for sale, why did we not try speaking with the buyers, DLF. I also consulted with a few directors of other biennales like the Lyon and the Gwangju Biennale to understand how to structure one and how to find the funding. Then we put together a report and went to Delhi for the funds.” In their initial report, they had asked for a funding of ₹102 crore. After all, as Krishnamachari points out, it took nearly 40 million Euros to organise a prestigious art event like Documenta in Germany. In the end, the first Kochi-Muziris Biennale was organised with ₹17 crore, with Komu and Krishnamachari putting in much of their personal savings into the project. “We spent very little [compared to other

biennales] and got much more,” says Krishnamachari.

The first edition of the biennale in 2012-2013 was an undisputed triumph. Showcasing the works of 94 artists from 23 countries, the event attracted a footfall of 4 lakh visitors from all over the world. It was the only one from India listed that year in Forbes’s ‘13 Cultural Events to be Seen in 2012’.

Since then, the subsequent editions grew in stature and scale. While the first biennale concentrated on the larger history of the site, the second edition curated by artist Jitish Kallat—‘Whorled Explorations’—brought in the theme of universality. It looked at art through the lens of science and cosmology. That year, the government funding dropped from ₹9 crore to ₹1 crore. Despite financial woes, the biennale managed to find its feet.

“There is a poetry to this,” Kallat told THE WEEK then. “While the rest of the global art world seems to be over-managed, institutionised and supported top down, this biennale is struggling to grow from the ground.” The real strength of the project, he said, was its fragility.

While the next curator, Sudarshan Shetty, took resort in abstraction with his theme ‘Forming in the Pupil of an Eye’, Anita Dube focused on women, the marginalised and inclusiveness in the fourth edition that she curated, themed ‘Possibilities for a Non-Alien-



NEW FRONTIERS
Saju Kunhan's 'Banglavukunnu-Thookkuparamb Road'
Medium: Image transfer, charcoal and varnish on teak wood

ated Life’. While Dube was clear that she did not want to overtly politicise the biennale, the current curator, Singapore-based artist-writer Shubigi Rao, seems to hold the conviction that art is political, and there is no getting around it. Accordingly, she chose the theme, ‘In Our Veins Flow Ink and Fire’. “The theme is a response to the way we try to oppress, control and eliminate, and how to resist that through story-telling and sharing,” Rao told THE WEEK. “Art forms—whether theatre, music, art or film—are powerful, and that is why

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SPELL-BINDING
William Kentridge's performance of Kurt Schwitters' sound poem Ursonate

people try to control them. You can immediately relate to art, even if you are not from the region that produced it. It can break barriers, sometimes even more than writing. The ‘fire’ represents justifiable anger. We should not become apathetic to what is happening around us. Eventually, we all care about the state of the world,

and we all want change.” Aligning with the activism in her theme, Rao chose artists like the Ukrainian Zhanna Kadyrova, who fled Kyiv when Russia invaded. She exhibits a rock collected from the bed of a Ukrainian river as a sign of hospitality. Then there is Finnish artist Martta Tuomaala, whose video ‘Fin-

nCycling-Soumi-Perkele!’ satirises Finnish politics through protest rap. Artist Seher Shah explores the concept of a city “through sites of fissure, complexity and contradiction”. Each curator has stretched the biennale in different directions, thematically and ideologically, and like a ship in a storm, it has tilted this way



INSTAGRAM / KOCHI BIENNALE

SHOW TIME
A performance by Seo Jungmin & Ensemble, inspired by the Gut, a shamanistic ceremony from Korea

and that, but managed to stay afloat. It has not been easy; from the beginning, the biennale has been mired in controversy. There was an initial protest against the organisers for mis-using public funds and not allowing “poor artists” to exhibit their works. Then there was the #MeToo controversy in which Komu was embroiled, which led to him stepping down from the Kochi Biennale Foundation. This time, there was a hue and cry over the foundation postponing the opening of key venues—Aspinwall House, Pepper House and Anand Warehouse—from December 12 to December 23.

“We entered this biennale edition with a debt of ₹4.9 crore,” says Krishnamachari. “From the allotted budget, we had to pay the salaries of nearly 400 people working on the biennale. When the pandemic struck, we were forced to cut salaries. There are so many aspects to take care of when you do an international project of this scale—from insurance of the artworks to international transportation. Earlier, we had to keep ₹70 lakh as bank guarantee for foreign artworks which needed to go back in six months. According to the new customs law, the bank guarantee has to be 25 to 30 per cent of the

value of the artwork. This means that we spent nearly ₹4.5 crore just on the guarantee. This is dead money which we get back only after the works are shipped back. We had to take loans from gallery friends. The money offered by the government—around ₹3 crore—came very late. I feel bureaucracy is killing business. It can kill your energy. Sometimes I feel terrible when the media uses terms like ‘mismanagement of funds.’ The ground reality is so different.”

Despite its woes, the biennale this time has much in store for art lovers. The students’ biennale, for example, is top-notch. Seven curators visited a minimum of three states each for their research, workshops and student-project shortlisting. Together, they present 50 works. The invitations programme, too, this time is excellent, says Krishnamachari. These include ‘Tangled Hierarchy’ curated by Jitish Kallat, an exhibition around independent publishing curated by Kayfa-ta and one on contemporary art practices from Kerala curated by Gigi Scaria, P.S. Jalaja and Radha Gomathy. HH Art Spaces in Goa has been invited to curate the performance programme of the biennale. Already, a myriad of arresting performances has lit up the shores of Fort

Kochi, from an enthralling show by Seo Jungmin & Ensemble, inspired by the Gut, a shamanistic ceremony from the historic Korean province of Jeolla-do, to William Kentridge’s part-performance, part-lecture and part-symphony of Kurt Schwitters’ poem, Ursonate.

In spite of everything that is ailing it, the biennale has benefited the country in immeasurable ways. “Before the first biennale, I was mostly involved in painting objects,” says artist Saju Kunhan, who is exhibiting his work at this edition of the biennale and was part of a group show in the 2012 edition. “It was only after the biennale that I deviated into research-oriented works based on history and archives. The biennale was a starting point for me. It gave me direction and influenced the way I approached my work. It has done a lot for me, but I am worried about future editions. Things like postponing the show on the last day are bound to impact trust. You need funds from collectors, museums, and galleries. Once you lose the trust it is difficult to get it back. But I am hopeful that they will solve all organisational issues soon. This edition has to run smoothly. We want it to go on. And I’m speaking for the artists’ fraternity.”