

and skies all wrought by war and cruelty. The verse draws a distinction between a collective 'I'—those perishing on boats, the persecuted and the ostracised—and a 'you' that possesses the power to wreak wars and reject differences of caste, creed, gender, religion. It ends with 'I' reminding 'you' that the same red blood runs in them all, and asks 'you' if that doesn't grant them a place in their heart. Who is this addressed 'you', I asked Shahidul Alam. And is Chobi Mela, then, about inspiring empathy?

"We're challenging power structures and the word 'exclusion'," he responds. "Empathy merely helps that process. In this world divided by the sense of the 'other', we, the citizens, have become marginalised by state terrorism and other social issues. This year's theme tries to bring those citizens back into the center and remind others about their place in society. We're addressing all that is external to that conceptual 'place', which can be a person, a thought, a location. By addressing 'you', we're asking 'you' to question themselves."

#### THE AGENCY OF CITIZENS

This act of placing citizens in the center was indeed reflected in many of the exhibitions this year.

Like past installations, a mobile exhibition of the photographs made its way on rickshaw vans across the city, traversing through the masses and reaching even remote corners of Dhaka where literacy is limited. On March 3 at the Goethe Institute in Dhanmondi, a visual history of small-town studio photography in Bangladesh, titled "Celebrating Mofussil Photographers of Bangladesh" was presented by the festival director. The photographers featured have had to struggle to preserve their cameras. It would have been more financially viable for them to sell the negatives to shopkeepers, who extract silver from them for sale. Yet they held on to their work. Their display at Chobi Mela this year brought their expertise and their act of preservation to the limelight for enthusiasts to see, and it allowed us, the audience, to educate ourselves about their practices.

Meanwhile, Taslima Akhter's 'Memorial Quilts', as part of the

"Archives of Persistence" series, displayed quilts, *sarees*, *gamchas*, and handkerchiefs hand-stitched with messages about the victims of the Rana Plaza collapse. They reflect the multiplicity of the victims' backgrounds—"Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim. My Akhi left me on April 24, and never returned", "Hare Krishno Hare Ram, he left us on April 24, we are very sad without him". They also allow their families to actively engage in the cry for justice—"Want punishment for Sohel Rana and other culprits", "We demand changes to the compensation laws", "We don't want another Rana Plaza". Inspired by artist Robin Bergson's memorial quilt made for the centennial of the Triangle

limited levels of literacy, the writing had many spelling and grammatical errors. We made it a point not to correct them and to keep the emotions behind the text intact."

As an artist, a sense of responsibility towards the subject in such projects is crucial. Speaking about her exhibition "Files of the Disappeared", Ashfika Rahman shares, "We need to be sensitive and thoughtful about outcomes. Each of the protagonists in my exhibition [on victims of enforced disappearances] went through PTSD tests to find out about their depression, anxiety, fear. Eventually they started speaking about their experience, which was a

circumstances.

In each of these exhibitions, therefore, regular people were given the access to see the exhibitions on the move, or to present their own work, their own voice and memories. It accords the materials displayed the authenticity of a lived experience. The history presented becomes not one of glory, of wars and political victories, but one of the ordinary people. More importantly, it allows those grassroots people—the mofussil photographers, the Memorial Quilt stitchers, even the rickshaw-pullers driving the mobile exhibitions, to actively shape history as it is presented through Chobi Mela. They become a part of what Alam calls a "transformation of our collective memories."

#### WHAT GOES ON BACKSTAGE

First, Chobi Mela issues a call for submissions online, which somewhat shapes the character of the event to follow. The curators then analyse what is missing from the material submitted, what requires more emphasis. The content is selected irrespective of the artist's identity, so it can come from a local newspaper from Santiago, Chile or from a cover shot of Magnum.

"The focus this year was on the way people the world over are being displaced," explains ASM Rezaur Rahman, one of the curators of Chobi Mela X. "We also made sure to choose Magnum photographer Susan Meiselas' works on Nicaragua and other similar fine art films, which the people of Bangladesh would have had to pay to go see abroad. Providing access was a key objective."

Rahman elaborates on how they incorporated the theme into the very design of the event, using 'place' as a physical space and a state of mind. Artists and curators were asked how they could interpret the theme in their own ways. Zihan Karim, a lecturer at the Fine Arts department of Chittagong University, was commissioned to curate the works of 13 artists at Drik's under-construction site in Panthapath. "The exhibition comprises a moving image which is also a still image. The goal was to show how artists of other medium use photography," Rahman explains.

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PHOTO: DRIK

#### The 'Memorial Quilts' were put together by the Bangladesh Garment Workers' Solidarity organisation and family members of Rana Plaza collapse victims.

Sweater Fire in New York, the project was put together by the Bangladesh Garment Workers' Solidarity organisation and family members of the Rana Plaza victims.

"They chose their own fabrics and personal effects to stitch on," Taslima Akhter, the curator for the exhibition, shares. "The memories and emotions attached to *kathas* in our country was a big element of the project. Moreover, since most of the people stitching the slogans were of the working class, with

meditative/healing process. Professional psychological counsellors, especially Anne Anthonia Baroi, helped me to talk to my protagonists about their pain in a sensitive way. As a result, for the first time, they wrote about their feelings on their own photographs."

Through such exhibitions, introducing these subjects to the public eye as 'protagonists' is a valuable act of handing them agency. From 'victims'—passive recipients of injustice—they become an advocate, a champion of their



PHOTO: VIOLA MAIWALD/DRIK