

COURTESY: ARCHIVES OF PERSISTENCE



CHO BIMELA

2 DECADES OF “PERSISTENCE”

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1. 20 years of anything is a rather big affair. The 10th edition of Chobi Mela has just wrapped up. Here I look to the people who put it together year after year, and the matters that pushed its presence among us through the crevices of this gridlocked city. Bangladesh is a spectacle of interest in global affairs: be it for the incumbent government's liking for neoliberal modernisation and its distaste for opposing views, for the tensions in the country's labour market, or for the crises of climate, environment and refugees. And while many gazes peek at us, here's a deliberate arrangement of visualisations for the world to see. A deliberate exercise of agency (/agencies) by artists, curators, and thinkers to reexamine what we choose to see and to what end.

2. Right off the bat, there are things about this edition of CM that one cannot ignore.

On August 5, 2018, Shahidul Alam was arrested during the student-led movement for safe roads, for “spreading disinformation and inciting violence”, as Gowher Rizvi stated recently. Alam was imprisoned for 107 days before being granted bail, and the charges filed against him under Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT)



PHOTO: TOUKIR AHMED TANVEE / DRIK

Act still stand. His arrest took place in the midst of the preparations for CMX. The team was uncertain whether the festival would still take place at the proposed timeline. After his release, CM was announced to open on February 28, postponed from the original dates only by a few weeks. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs was not officially announced as a patron this time; Bangladesh Shilpkala Academy, the country's national centre for the arts and culture, was not one of the venues, as it had been previously. Given

the press for time and budget, all the venues were kept within Dhanmondi, and Old Town was no longer engaged in the programme. Less than 24 hours before Arundhati Roy's scheduled talk for the fest, the organisers were forced by the police to move from the venue in spite of having attained due permissions.

It only makes sense that James Estrin's piece for *The New York Times* Lens quotes Alam calling CMX “an act of defiance, an act of resistance.”

However, Tanzim Wahab, one of the

curators of CMX, is quick to remind me that the third edition of CM was centred on the theme “Resistance”, and that this is not new to CM.

“I would rather replace the word ‘resistance’ with ‘persistence,’” he says. He borrows the word from the *Archives of Persistence* presented in this edition, in which four different projects on the conflicts of Palestine, Kashmir, Myanmar, and Bangladesh's RMG workers are brought together for a “conversation around the agency of photographs.”

Sarker Protick, the other curator for the event, reminds me that it was decided while Alam was still in jail that CM would still take place, “just as Drik and Pathshala kept continuing their work.”

“The story is not about a single person; the story is about a single person shaping a community so that it continues when the person is absent,” says Wahab.

The curators, who are both notable alumni of Pathshala, also emphasise their need to persist because they do not see themselves in a position where they can refuse to engage with the state. The institute's undergraduate and post-graduate programmes are now affiliated with the University of Dhaka, and as we sit in the under-construction building for this conversation, Wahab is “critically hopeful” for what is to come for the community.

Continued to page 11



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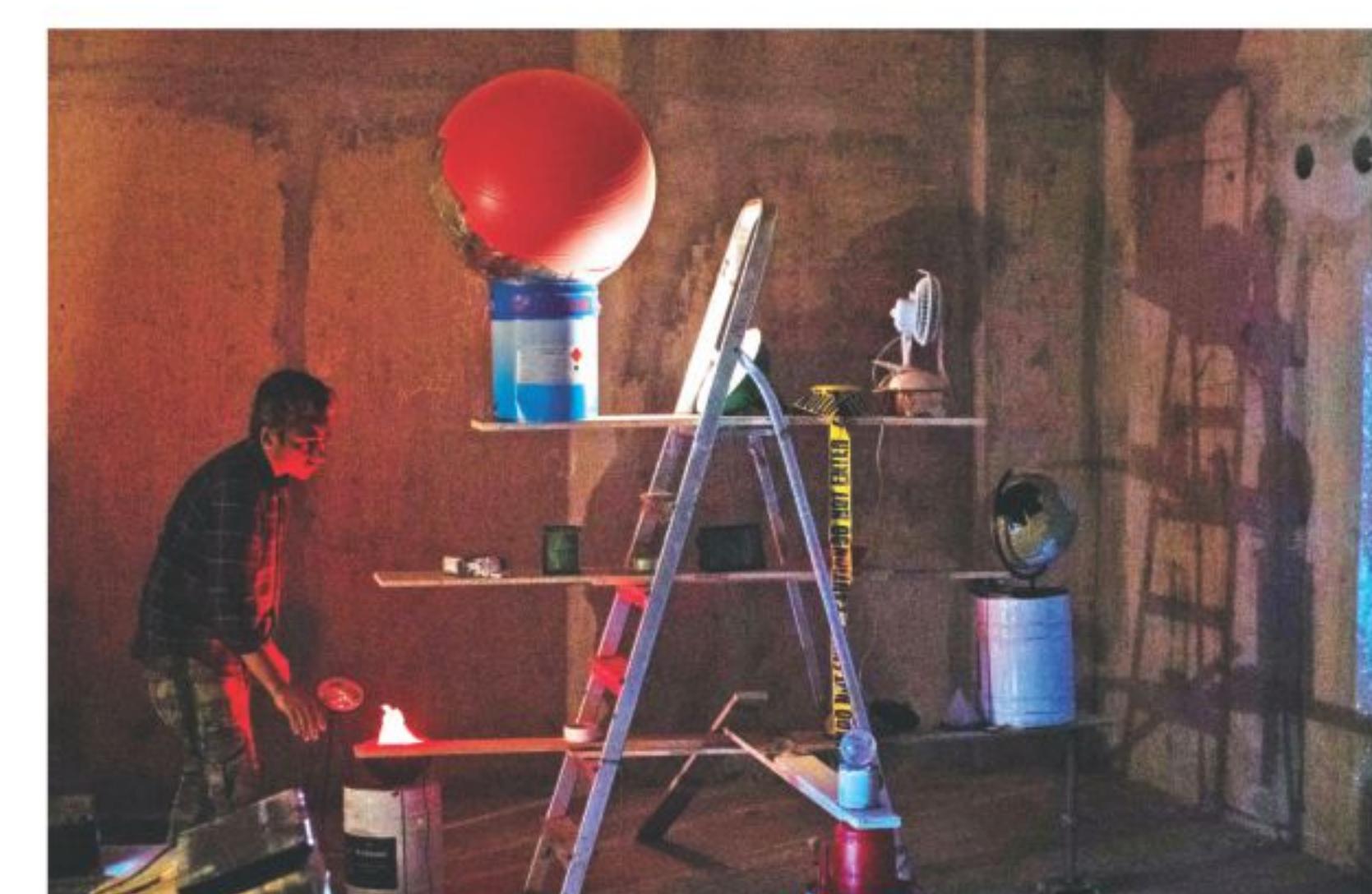


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