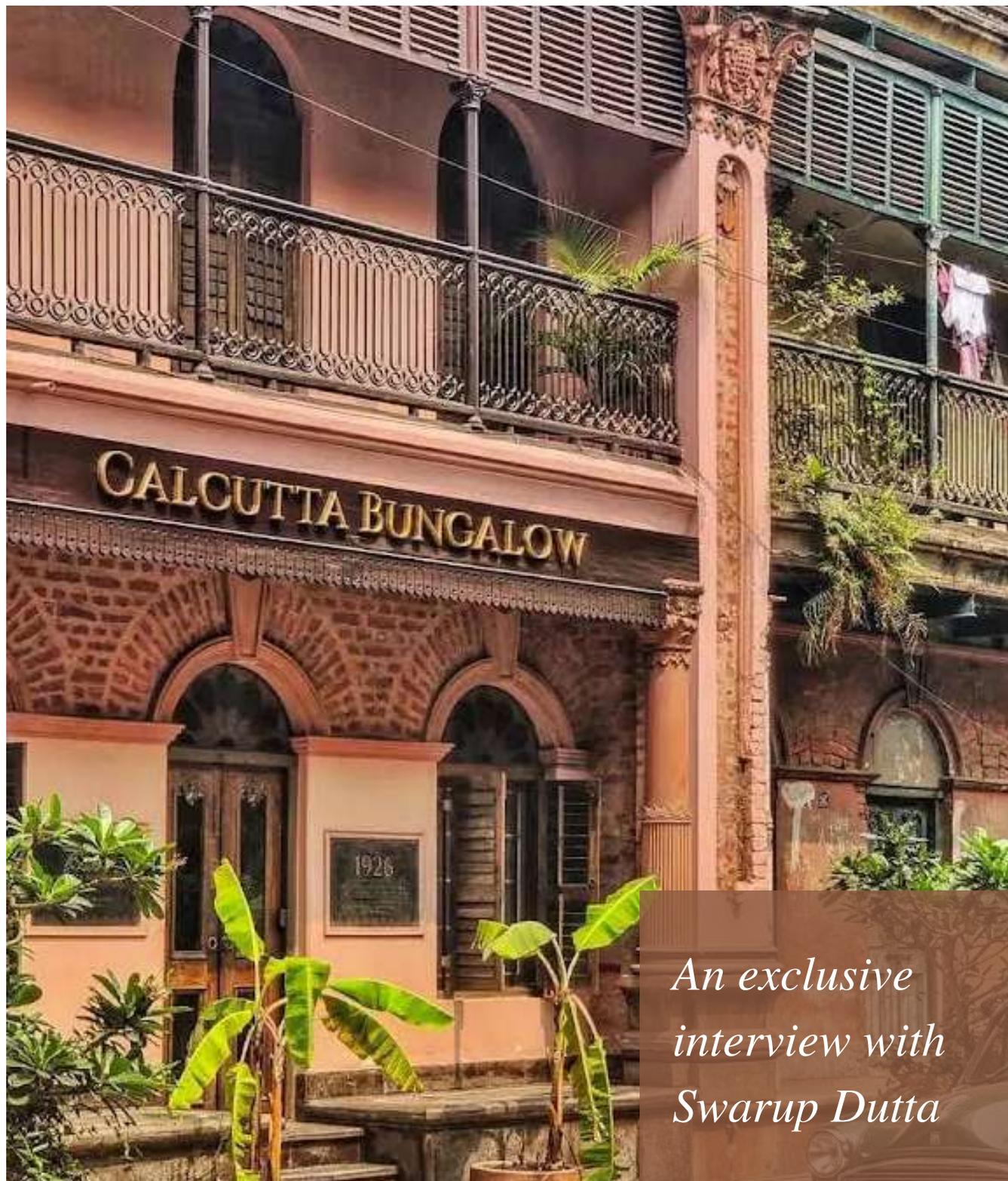


MONOGRAPH

YEAR 2 | VOL. 7



*An exclusive
interview with
Swarup Dutta*



MONOGRAPH

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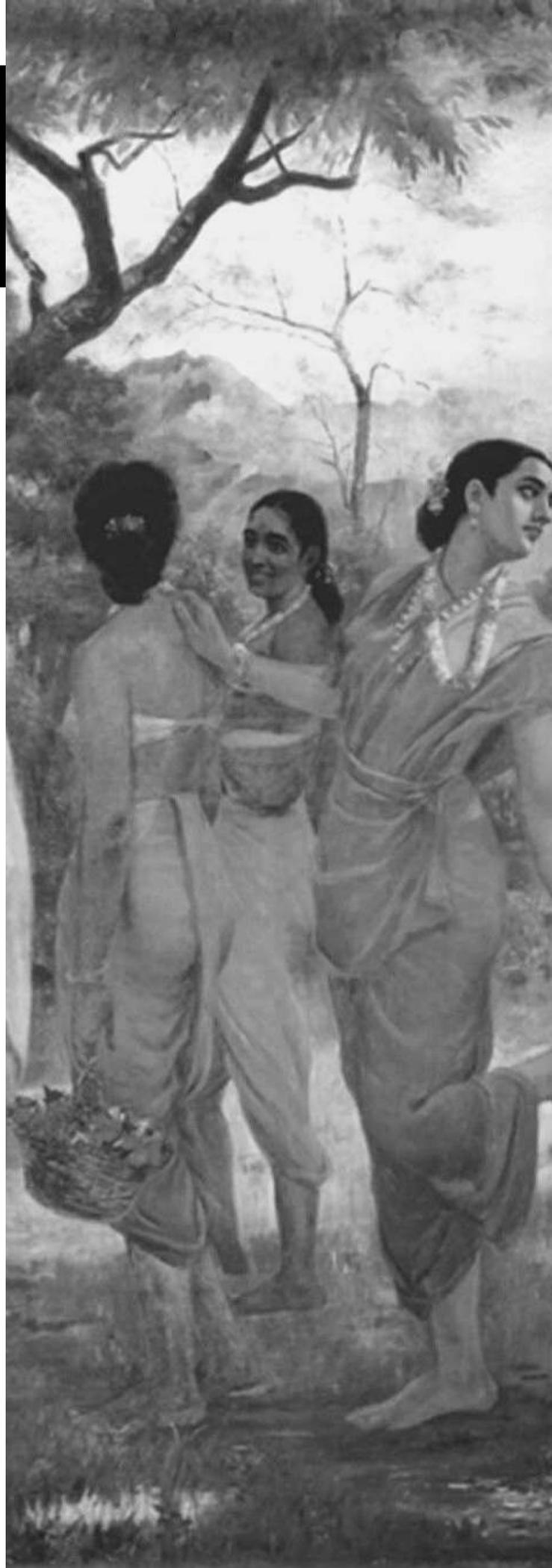
Artists In Focus

By Monograph

Editor's Note

Anuraag Das Sarma

The usage of seasons to elicit emotion in art is an activity as old as time. What is, however, of interest, is the dichotomous usage of Summer, even in Classical Poetry. The way Kalidasa treats Summer in **R̥tusam̥hāra** is vastly different from the Medieval-English poem **Sumer is icumen in**. This clash between the temperate Western ideal of Summer living and the Eastern ideal of Summer surviving is visible not only in our poetry but all forms of art- from plays to architecture. To us, living in the damned city of Calcutta, the searing heat of the blazing April sun is neither a welcome relief, nor a bringer of joy. And so when Eliot termed April the cruelest month, his reasons might have differed, but with that one sentence he reconciled the West and the East. May this summer pass in haste.





*The furious sun is ablaze.
One longs for the moon.
The pools of limpid waters
Invite a dip evermore.
The twilight hours are charming
When the day dies down.
And Cupid, churning of the mind, is
weary.
This, my love, is the advent of full
Summer.*

***-Ṛtusaṃhāra, Canto 1: Summer
(Kalidasa, 4th Century CE)***





The Double Life of Veronique

Aastha Vandana

Krzysztof Kieslowski's first stand-alone commercial film in western media. Highlighting the start of his subsequent metaphysical films. A remarkable study of death, the duality of life, religion, subtlety and chances.

"The main theme of this film is to live life more carefully. Because you don't know what the consequences of your actions may be. You don't know how your actions may influence them, because paths- the people and their destinies- cross each other all the time, whether we are aware of it or not"- Kieslowski (*I'm paraphrasing him, because I can't find the video and my phone sucks*)

...

The Plot

The screen cuts to Christmas Eve in Poland, and later to Easter in France. We are introduced to Weronika in Poland and Veronique in France, who are physically the same individuals. "That's the star we are waiting for, to start Christmas Eve". Cut to, "It feels like I've always known what to do" says Veronique at the end of the film. 30 minutes in, Weronika dies of a heart attack whilst singing in an Orchestra. In a remarkable transition between death and life, we find Veronique grieving with her lover.



Both Veronique and Weronika are passionate for music, Veronique is a music teacher and she falls in love with a puppeteer named Alexandre, who writes children's books.

They indulge in a little game, in which he tries to win her mysteriously to get material for his novel. He calls her from an unknown number, gives her hints to meet him in Paris, and finally waits for her to show up in a café without any notice. And since she has always known what to do, she follows her instinct, she finds certain to be true.

Although this time, since Weronika is not alive anymore, we see wide shots of her having double thoughts, and when she finally meets her lover, the disclosure of her being just a plot for the novel shatters her. He realizes how bummed out he got her and then they reconcile.

Later, on being asked about what she is like, she shows him the things in her bag, a picture taken by her in Krakow; they spot Weronika looking directly at her. He makes puppets of Veronique, and he makes 2 of them, since he does so many shows, one always gets tarnished.

If it sounds loose, you should really consider watching it, I am not doing half of any favor writing about it.

...

Kieslowski, and a life of chances

A running theme in all his movies, Kieslowski has repeatedly shown the endless choices we find in our lives and what happens if we pursue the ones presented. He simply does not believe that we die without living the life we wanted. Someone somewhere is making the choices we want to make, and is either losing or winning at it.



We are stuck in the complexity of what makes “us”, no one ever is forgotten, an idea we also get to see in **three colors: blue**, Julie is frozen in time, the time spent with her husband and daughter, who died tragically in a car accident, she is liberated to do whatever she wants, but at what cost? We think together and we live together. And we should live carefully, as Kieslowski says, what we choose to do, who we choose to help, and what we choose to speak, since the paths of the people we know are connected in a non-escapable myriad and it affects individuals, almost immediately.

Veronique had always known what to do, because Weronika did it first; Weronika died of a heart attack, so Veronique chose against singing and instead became a music teacher. Someone had lived the life she wanted, “I have always felt I am not alone “Even though the plot might seem lacking in places, Kieslowski believed in reverse psyche, he believed that we subconsciously know what is going to happen, and he has directed reverse shots prior to the plot point in all most all his films. He believes that there is no naivety in the human experience, everybody contributes to the web we have created, everybody and everything, a sugar block dripping with coffee, a tea bag, and an old lady throwing trash, everything.





The discrete dialogues, actions and people, opposite of being underdeveloped, add to the complexity of the protagonist much like our lives, discrete and spontaneous. As Kubrick rightfully said, “he just doesn’t talk about his ideas, he dramatizes them.”

...

GOD

It’s hard to miss the archetypal plots of creation and a creator in double life. At the very end we find Alexander making two puppets, much like Weronika and Veronique, and one just happens to get tarnished. So there probably is a creator in Kieslowski’s world who creates many similar to us, we just need to choose what to do, wisely. Kieslowski’s relationship with God has been that of a personal one, and he has refused to say anything about his beliefs on religion. The juxtaposition of having a higher purpose whilst doing absolutely nothing has been remarkably presented in the film.

...

Shots

Kieslowski has repeatedly used complementary and analogous color schemes to depict weather, emotions and experiences.



The double life particularly has saturated yellow and green filters laced throughout capturing the melancholy and leisure in the scenes perfectly. What is any Kieslowski film without Preisner's music! As told by Preisner himself, the music represents characters individually.

The last few minutes, Weronika and Veronique's music layer up, probably signifying either Veronique's awareness of Weronika or her death, and it is all too overwhelming.

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Final thoughts

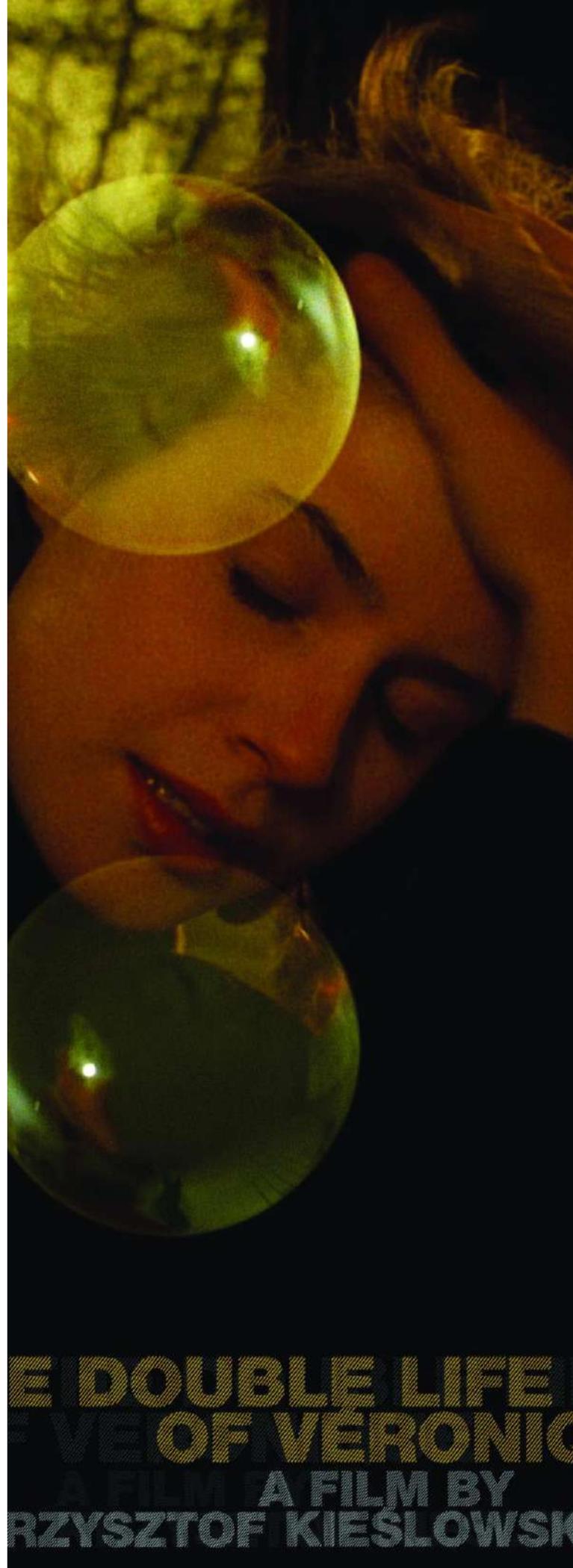
Final thoughts are many, but I have to stop writing. Kieslowski believed that a single film could have different endings, different cuts, different edits, and different interpretations. In fact, the European and American version of the double life are different. I am absolutely in love with him and the school of theatrical cinema he has left behind.

Here are a few things which aren't talked about enough, and I would love to know what you think of them.



1. The lady disproving of Weronika's audition is seen again at the end of the film, when Veronique visits Alexandre.
2. The old lady, who appears in the double life, and the three colors trilogy.
3. Veronique lines the shoe lace given to her on the ECG report.
4. Veronique breaking the fourth wall.
5. The steel ring they rub under their eyes.
6. People like to say Weronika passes away after looking at Veronique, signifying an old belief that says looking at your doppelganger is the omen to your death, and in the last shot we find Weronika's song heaving after Veronique has seen her in the picture taken in Krakow. Is she going to die?

Let me know.





The Trial of Fan Fiction in The Litterateur's Court

Nuzhat Khan

Fan fiction, literary purists would argue, is an unimaginative, anti-original, imitative, substandard writing only meant to be masticated by the aimless youth of the consumerist culture. It is, according to them, the lowest point of art and literature, an apocalypse – the doom, the end.

But fanfiction is not new.

There is no clear evidence on when it started, but a big Homer fan – Virgil – wrote *The Aeneid* based on one of the minor characters in the *The Iliad*. ‘*Divine Comedy*’ by Dante Alighieri – one of the greatest works of world literature - is a nexus of biblical, Virgil and Homer fanfic.

The central objective of fan fiction has always been to engage with the original work beyond or between the author’s telling. It is derivative, but also reflective. Contrary to what is widely believed, fan fiction is not “just sex.” It encourages experimental questions and broadens imagination outside “normal” – what if Harry Potter was Indian? What if Elizabeth Bennett was queer?



Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys is a post-colonialist and feminist prequel to Charlotte Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre*. It is a critical re-imagining, a masterpiece in its own right. But it still has been inspired by Bronte's novel, so why should it be shy of being a *Jane Eyre* fanfic?

...

WHAT IS FAN FICTION?

Before the arrival of pop-culture juggernauts such as *Star Trek*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, there was a Jane Austen fandom. With the advent of modern novels in the 18th century, limitations on storytelling ended. Readers began to prod into the lives of their favorite characters, retell them as per their imagination and shared it among those with similar interests; the fandom. However, the beginning of modern fanfiction is believed to be the *Star Trek* fanzines of the '70 and the '80s. It popularized a lot of neo-age fan fiction genres.

Fanfiction blurs the boundaries between consumption and expression. It is interest-driven, a manifestation of unattended desires. It has expanded the scope of storytelling past the mainstream by including dialogues and discourses. Therefore, it inadvertently becomes a playground for imagination.



Among its various sub-genres, there is recontextualization, expansion or more stylistically, an alternate universe (AU), shifting the focus to supporting characters, changing moral alignment or dislocating by omitting their presence from the original scene (fix-it-fic).

In some fan fiction, primary romance is reimagined. For example: Sir Walter Scott's novel *Ivanhoe* disgruntled W.M. Thackeray so much that in 1850 he wrote a satirical novel *Rebecca and Rowena* where he finally paired Ivanhoe with Rebecca. Little did Thackeray know that he was a 'shipper' – a term coined by the fan fiction community which means supporting two characters – or two real-life people – to be together romantically.

Shipping could be as simple as *The Vampire Diaries'* fans wanting a Klaroline (Klaus + Caroline) endgame, or as complex as navigating the homoerotic subtext in *Moby Dick*. Fan writers often eroticize the original text. There is fan fiction with homosexual pairings known as 'slash', such as Harry Potter/Draco Malfoy and RPF or real-person-fiction, which is fan fiction based on a real person – a genre dominated by One Direction fans!

...



LET'S TALK BUSINESS!

Canonical literature has been the catalyst for many artistic discoveries. Inspiration in itself is a fan-culture appendage. Fan fiction then becomes a classification based on its context, and distribution system.

The Internet has encouraged and expanded fan-culture generally, and fan fiction particularly. It has led to greater connectivity among fans and fandoms, and thus greater proliferation of sub-cultures such as fan fiction. It is highly unlikely for a pop-culture phenomenon today, such as Marvel Cinematic Universe, K-pop/K-drama, Anime or even Bollywood without a significant amount of fan fiction dedicated to them.

Fan fiction is a money-making business. In its most reductive form, it is free advertisement or marketing. Today, the most expensive fanfic could be E.L. James's BDSM extraordinaire *Fifty Shades of Grey* which started out as a Twilight fan fiction called "*Master of the Universe*." The book's film adaptation was practically crucified by the critics, and yet the trilogy amassed over \$570 million worldwide.

...

IT HAS FICTION, SO IS IT LITERARY?

Now the question is: Is fan-fiction good writing by established literary standards? The answer is- could be: Dante? But now there are other questions: Is all literature good literature? What is good literature? If literature is not good, then is it not literature?





The artistic stigmatization around fan fiction is based on the perception that it is not serious, it is “cheap” and is largely porn-esque. However, the understanding of literature changes with society and culture. Literariness cannot necessarily be a systematic construct. It is malleable, changing and very fragile at that. Objective parameters of judging art cannot exist, because it is dependent on individual human experiences which are not monolithic.

For the longest time, a white male’s experience has been the standardized basis of critiquing art. The fanfic world, however, is mainly young women. Thus, the preconditions of largely masochistic literary standards cannot be extrapolated on fan fictions. It is connatural to the digital reality we have entered. The idea of quality is not hinged to the same outdated standard.

It is argued that fan fiction is borrowed writing, but storytelling has always been a shared universe. Plots are anchored to each other, to folklores, to myths, to history, to cultural tales, to personal stories until it culminates into something original. As French literary theorist Roland Barthes argued that all narratives are extracted from older ideas or previously existing cultures; nothing is entirely original.

For instance, Shakespeare's Hamlet is arguably a crossover fanfic based on a Norse legend and a medieval play called *Ur-Hamlet*.

Fan fiction has essentially changed the language and psychology of fiction. Similar to other forms of writing, it has bad work and brilliant work. It cannot be defined by a one-dimensional "hot-take." Its range expands from being an incubator for "real" work to being a creative outlet which does not seek institutional validation. Fanfic does not need a workshop, a professional writing course degree, an agent, or capital investment. It is free, and mostly anonymous. It stands as an exercise of imaginative engagement with a fictional work that is not limited to the time of its consumption. It is underpinned by the idea that readers contribute creative and/or imaginative inputs in the stories they consume. Fan fiction is as much a reading culture as a fan culture. Therefore, while it can be ridiculed for being disorderly or problematic, it is still a compelling case to remodel "canons" for more inclusive human experiences.

EEK ZINE





Rituparna Mukherjee

Secrets

I have been called to Mrs. Mehta's room. I know I am in trouble. I am the strange girl in my class. I am too eager. I answer all questions, in my head. My face barely hides my excitement. Miss know-it-all, my friends mock me. Are they friends? Mummy tells me they are. They are all good students. They are all my friends. The teacher just said she will take an extra class in the last period. Period. My friends laugh. They giggle with secret knowledge. I laugh too. They look at me in distaste. I look away. The tree outside is dancing with joy. There is a breeze today. Soon the leaves will fall. Soon.

I have a secret too. I have learnt we have arteries and veins. They pump blood. To all the corners of the body. But mine are broken. Like the water pipe at the back of the house. Which fills our tank. They are white in colour. Mummy will plant a pink one too. My arteries and veins are broken. Just like the pipe.

I need to be fixed. I think I will fall. Like the leaves in the school compound. I walk slowly to Mrs. Mehta's room. I have to be careful. I have to hold it in. I have tied my sweater. My friends will not see me. They never do. They will not laugh. Soon I will fall.

Last summer my favourite cat fell too. She was golden in colour with white splashes of light. She would purr and stretch and crawl, an absolute delight. She was little. She had blue and green eyes. Like the dolls I have. But larger, warmer, better. She fell sick and went away. She went and fell somewhere. Like the leaves from the togor tree. Crowding my garden. Some blow in the wind. I will go and fall too. But will the winds carry me? Where will I fall?

I think I will fall in the pond beside my house. There is a field nearby. And lots and lots of trees. With red and yellow and lavender flowers. They all look the same with different colours. Like my friends. All different. All the same. I have no colour. I am brown. I think I will fall beside the pond. It is pretty. The sun sets there in oranges and yellows. I sit and read and watch the sun. I think mummy will worry. She will look for me, like we looked for our cat. But she has bhai to play with.



I knock on Mrs. Mehta's door. We don't call her teacher like others. She calls me and asks me if something is wrong. I nod no. I will quietly go and fall. There is one more period to go. She looks at me and raises her hand. Will she hit me? No. She puts her hand on my face. It is Warm. Smells like butter. I like it. She smiles. She tells me she knows my secret. I tell her I am a machine at fault. I tell her I will fall quietly today. At the end of the day. With the dying sun. She smiles and pulls me to her. She tells me there are better ways of dying yet. And tells me the secret to my secret. I am glad I won't fall today. Daddy will take us to the sea this Saturday. I like the sea, and its blues and soft greys.





Letter: 22.2.22

Srijoni Mitra

A supposed letter from my future to my past in response to a note I had written conveying my hopes and anxieties for my future.

Beloved Srijoni,

I took a moment to step back from my mundane routine to manage the yard behind our home. I know we haven't talked lately, but I wanted to find time to do so. I had almost forgotten about our secret hideaway when I took notice of the lemon tree that peered into your aquamarine blue and light lilac room. All at once, I remembered our disinterested retaliation to father's multiple attempts to have us garden that plot in the years when we were growing up.



I will never understand why you took on the responsibility to bury your letters to me on your own amidst the filth under that faithful lemon tree. And yes, it is still as damp and cold as it was then. Father said that the pipelines below burst sometimes, therefore your fears of soiling that letter you wrote to me were founded on solid ground!

Jokes aside, I was thinking of you on the flight home. Things were comfortable when we would check each other's outfits or write letters with poems, sign them with the pen name 'Jacques'. It was a slow time. Nu used to feed us curd and rice with generous servings of sugar and two bananas; Ma-Baba would watch movies in cinema halls and sometimes take Didi and me along after thorough research on the background. Now we barely talk. Dinner table conversations have been reduced to Netflix time with a lonely bowl of cereal. Didi visits me sometimes and we watch Netflix together. Reminiscing about these ordinary tasks from my time abroad, it struck me suddenly how we had not talked in a while, how I wrote to you last in the year that Dada passed. That was a long time ago. All of a sudden my realization turned to sadness. Losing family was inevitable. Then Bimpi left and Renu Mashi passed away, and Keating had been buried under that tree within the year of his arrival. I have experienced so much that has made me resent human life. It has been so long since I have been discontented with life's faculty of change, but I am most dismayed to have lost you to it.

I still have our letters from before when my life turned around. As close as we were, you, too, stopped writing after Dada's passing. Thereafter, you stopped reaching out to me - maybe it was the pain of thinking that there will be more to come that had made the future unbearable.





Had I the chance, I would have told you that it was not the time to look ahead but a time would come when we both have the luxury to look to each other. But I guess time had already played the mischief - crept up to us and caught us unaware. We had both grown cold and damp, absorbed in our own waters from under the surface.

I often find myself melancholic, thinking about all the memories we made aeons ago. I realised that not much has changed, I am still the same as you are - same hair, baggy clothes, the same sense of humour. I still do as you taught me - I write to myself regularly. To you, the occasional notification would consume my time that I thought not to write again. You needed me for strength and I let you believe that I was there. In that way, I have wronged you. I should have led your path to you. Not because in the end that's all we need but because that is all we have.

Through it all, we continue to condone our wrongs for regret gives way to too much agony and for that, life is too foolish. And however silly life is, we continue to live, love and laugh through the rain merely because that is the rhythm for which it exists.



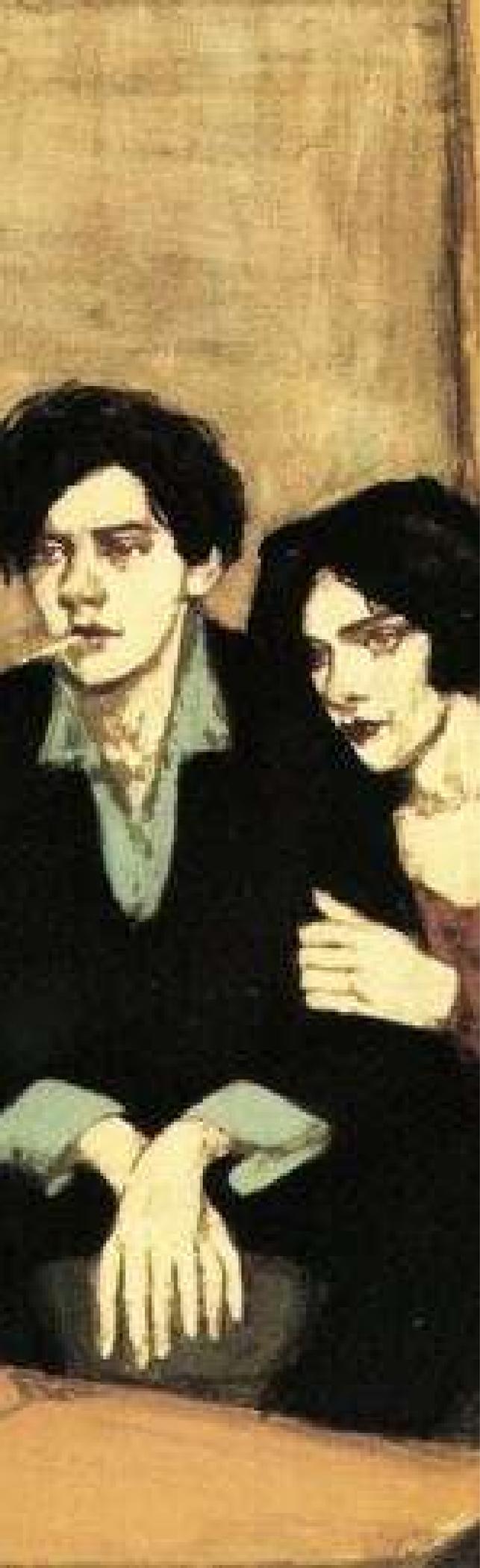
The pitter-patter of the pane and the iridescence in our hearts were created for one another, and as the elements of ourselves synchronise with the world around us, we continue to breed degrees of agony within ourselves anyway - over the talking of the leaves in autumn, the crust of the earth that is about to explode, the moments of small deaths in and around us all.

Life is too simple and thoughtless. Your caution in counting each step and measuring its worth will not amount to anything, as you suspect. But that is all right. As you grow, you, too, shall forgive the world for its foolishness and partake in its ways. This is a reminder for you to terminate what does not belong to you nor here. If it would, a sign would have pointed no means to its end. For one, it would not hurt; another - it would not beg you to leave nor change you. Though, indeed, we all change eventually, it should be born of self-determination, not its contrary.

Change is real and very much alive in us. Yet, our joint goals remain the same through that self-same initiative. That is some consolation. Then - you were looking up to me; now - I idolize you. Ironic isn't it? It was then that you used to pine for my company, my values, hoping for me to find meaning in your words and actions, to make sense of the profanities of your life.

Now, I look to you for your integrity, your childlike innocence,





your sacred rituals of fun though God forbade you to enjoy the company of mundane things. How you shook loose of anxiety and gave in to the conformities that life demands with utmost dignity and pride in your moments of moral superiority still astounds me. You were content with your momentary uniqueness, content, no matter how the moment afflicted or represented you - a laughable fanatic or crazed for eccentricity. I was always fascinated by your maddening interpretations of the mundane things in your life and how you carved a haven in that insensitive world for yourself.

As I sit in a room and shortchange my superiors or when I cut the ground from under my peers, I am reminded of the virtue you swore to instil in me. I am grateful to you and the comfort that bred me but people say that righteousness does not make a winner. When you longed for success, I told you that it comes at a price. I have paid it, then I have taken a long hard look at you and I cannot help but measure the difference between us. We were bred the same, you and I, so I cannot fathom why there is a world between us. The longitudes between us don't mean anything. Our native virtues lost the war. The world has won us over.



All these years that went by and I still have so much to learn from you. I am your reflection but so much less in amount, so abstract and inconsequential. I am a “cog in the murder machine” but I have faith that you will show me the path to myself where I am more you, more them, more of my parentage, more normative, more salient in my values, reliable and dependent, more me. I yearn for a piece of you so that I can slip it on, embody it. I am asking you to do for me what I failed to do for you. And once you show me my path, I will find one hundred ways to walk one hundred miles on it. But I am not so lucky as to hold the power to appeal to destiny, change the course of our paths so that you can write to me. I do, however, have the strength to plead with you to act in our best interest. I urge you - open your mind to the possibilities of your future. You do not need me to console your heart, rid you of the anxieties of the present.

The world reminds me of the duality and dialecticism attached to the various connotations of the self. One needs self-reliance at a young age and foregoing that, reliance on others when it is older. One is trained in skills as financial independence or success but when that is sought, the objects of its wonder have passed. Or that when one seeks to be gratified, one is always left without. What is hoped to be, seldom is. What is unique is seldom uncommon... These are a few of life’s greatest mysteries and ironies - ones that you have left me with. In the pursuit of understanding and explaining these things, what’s pining to be understood is lost.





Occasionally, when I look at myself in the mirror, I don't recognize myself, I recognize you - what you looked like, what you felt like, the things you used to do. Once, I advised you to look inward and said that your roots will sustain you - it's where you come from and where you eventually return. I keep telling myself to distil these moments with you for their worth as I plead with you to hear my words: Nu won't always be there to feed you, you must learn to feed yourself. "Do not sacrifice your ethics in the name of a better tomorrow," I implore you as I tell myself to not look back, wiping tears from the past. Furthermore, do not let the present pass you by. Do not lose yourself in the pursuit of the past and the future but do so in the search for the one who is right next to you. But "Don't gain the world and lose your soul," as Bob Marley once said.

Be unselfish. You can grow flowers in the backyard as father wished you would or you can move abroad, so long as you don't write to me.

Hope you find this letter.

Signed,
Jacques



Khejur

Jaggery palm staring down a country road
A pitcher round my neck, my better half
trickles good and slow

The rest is left to sway in drunkenness of my
own deeds

When the last man has wheeled away his
cart,

Wheeled away with the purest form of me.

The tree I have known and been all my life
Is grown old and gnarly, twisting beyond
doubt

Like some terrible conscience that overturns
every moral

And fibre of this summer's raw thirst for
amends.

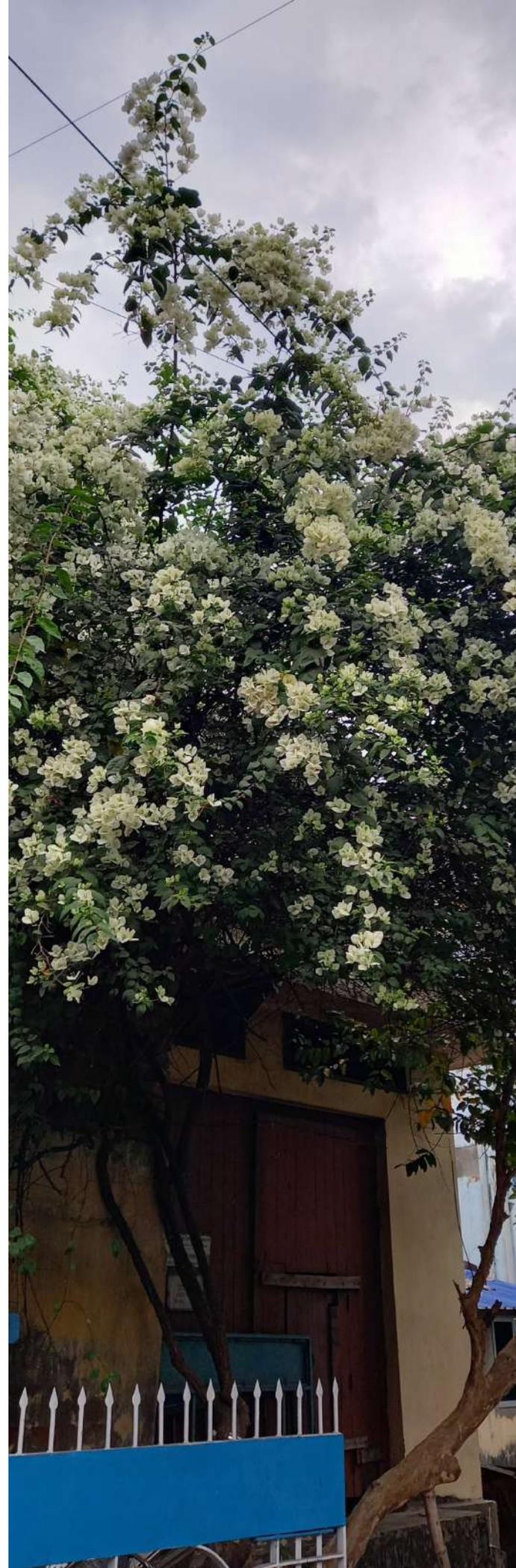
Who was the last bird to have flown its nest,
One last peck on my body in gratefulness
for my love

Who was the last woman on earth left
Scattering date seeds like a childhood ritual?

A vertical painting of a tropical landscape. On the right side, a large palm tree with green fronds and brown, dried husks at its base stands prominently. In the middle ground, a white bird with dark wings is captured in flight, moving from the left towards the center. The background features a hazy, golden-brown sky and a body of water at the bottom, reflecting the light. The overall style is impressionistic with visible brushstrokes and a warm, atmospheric color palette.

Moumita Sinha

To vermillion-smeared dark, lithe
bodies
Beating the percussion of gods,
strumming music of rising sea-storms
and vanquishing of demons,
Before a gawking truckload in tourist-
season
What divine council of artistes banned
them thus?
Raised on the soil bathed in princes'
blood
Sages neither bow nor claim praise
Nor rest nor lay down in death;
Evening dipped in cruel saturation
passing by,
I stand silhouetted in charcoal against
Slow devouring of shadows and cattle
driven
Home, where tired wrists stir the great
earthen pyre.



Love, And Its Swan Song

Ritobrita Mukherjee

the love you leave behind
in the corner of an old bookstore
stays in your brain like rot
slowly spreading over a dying kitchen plant
the love lets go of you
with a witty repartee you'll chuckle at someday
but for now you are shocked
at the absolute nonchalance
of the love you walked on broken glass for

the love you left behind
in the corner of an old bookstore
all those years ago is selling her songs
for silver coins in the subway tonight
you, with a hint of coco mademoiselle
in the folds of your kataan silk saree
should be having the last laugh
in the wake of poetic injustice
that lends fire to the masses
but a wry smile is all you can muster
when you see her reach the high notes
with the ease you'd lost a decade back



the love you left behind,
the love whose salty tears had left lines
on a dusty volume of tennyson
when you'd stepped out into the pouring
rain,
the love who threw away her life
with the reckless abandon
of a fictional heroine with nothing to
lose,
the love who still remembers
the way you like your coffee,
is lying dead in the gutter
with the rats, rotting roses and your
name on her lips.

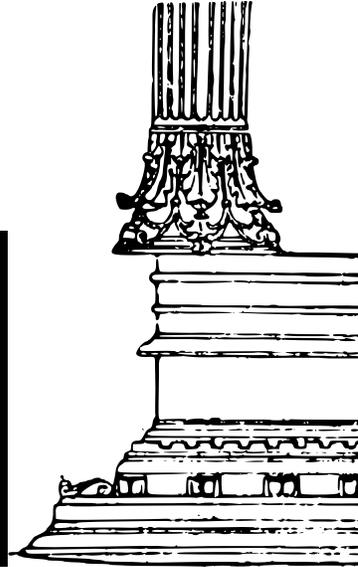
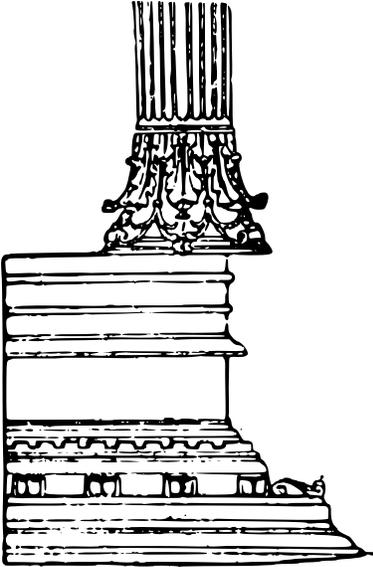


An Idea

I have an idea,
I have a feeling it's new,
it doesn't have to be new,
says my mind, side-eyed.
Gruelling & irresistible,
hours ago,
it was a pink cube,
a red lamp & a teal blue pool.
Now,
It's just my room,
my heart & my plastic bottle.
Most of the times,
it's just red drapes
listening to devil's trill,
no mystery, no muse,
no ears, no use.
An idea,
is just a mosquito
you have to kill.



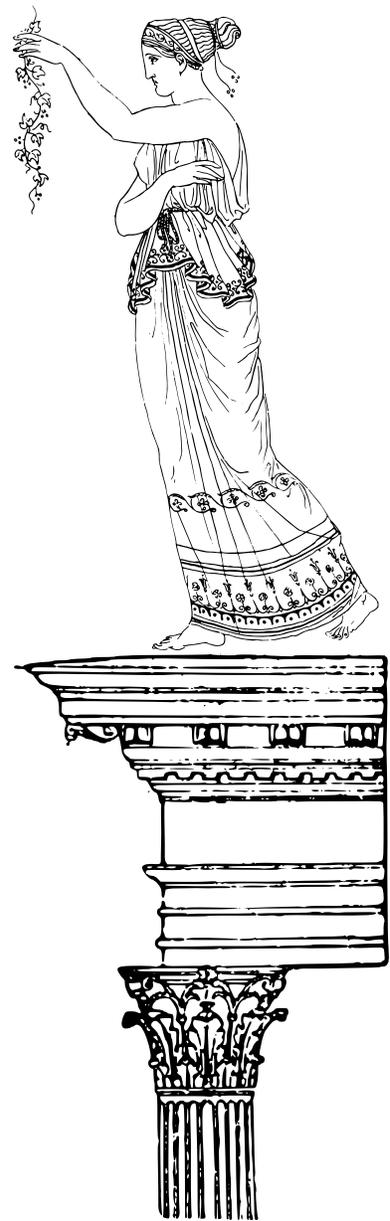
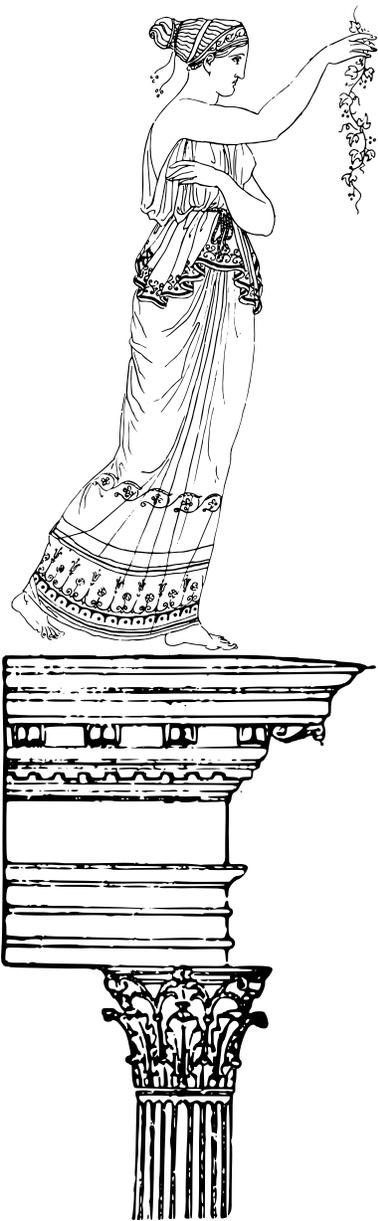
Aastha Vandana



Monograph Interviews: Swarup Dutta

Swarup Dutta is a multi-disciplinary artist, shifting effortlessly from scenography to photography and more. He recently worked on Calcutta Bungalow, a newly restored townhouse in Shyambazar from 1926. Monograph sat down with him this month for an exclusive interview.

This was an in-person interview and the video will be uploaded on our Youtube soon. What follows is a transcript of the entire conversation.





Monograph Interviews: Swarup Dutta

Anuraag: Welcome to Monograph Interviews. We are back after quite a long break and with us is multi-disciplinary artist Swarup Dutta. I personally came across your work when I was scrolling through Instagram honestly and came across a page for Calcutta Bungalow, and I've personally been a huge fan of heritage conservation and I believe it's really needed in a city like Kolkata. But I wouldn't want to talk only about Calcutta Bungalow, but I'd like to begin with it. To give a little bit of introduction so that the people at home know, Calcutta used to be known as the City of Palaces but right now most of the buildings I see around me, the older buildings are crumbling mansions, and Calcutta Bungalow was one such crumbling town house – I think it was built in 1926 – but it's had a second birth, and it is thanks, in large part, due to you. So, I'd like to ask how you got tied in to this project and how it all started.

Swarup: Well, Anuraag this project started with Ifteqar, my friend who runs Calcutta Walks, and he's basically been having this vision for a while to retain guests who come for the walks into the city. In most cases he would always complain whenever we met before like, Listen, people come from their own bubbles, come for the walk and then go back into their own bubbles, and it would be lovely to retain them as part of the city and experience old Calcutta. And that's how the project came about, the idea was to retain people and give them a flavour of Old Calcutta, in Old Calcutta.



Anuraag: And what was the thought process, behind the designing of Calcutta Bungalow? Because its an absolutely beautiful place.

Swarup: Thank you. We went through many processes for ideation. One of it was that we invited people from different backgrounds and nationalities to come in and see the space and react to it and give us ideas of what they felt would be the ideal, you know, sort of space that they would like to see at the end. And we got very interesting ideas. A lot of our Scandinavian friends said that it would be lovely if it was spartan, would be a lovely contrast to the rest of the city, which is fairly maximal. We had a lot of friends would come in from France and Italy who said they would basically like to seep into the culture and it would be interesting if we create something which is fairly lived in, and that's actually an idea that me and Ifte were also exploring. It's a humble home, where you would come and stay, it's not a sort of a pretentious palace of sorts. It's a town house and the idea is that you've come to somebody's home to stay. We also worked on the fact that, Ifte because he gives walks of different neighbourhoods, we wanted to incorporate the neighbourhoods into the building itself. So, each room was themed on different neighbourhoods. So, yeah, that was the whole idea, and we basically kept the scape as vintage-modern. So, while the space is old and when you walk in, it reminds you of that, it also needs to be modern, in the sense – especially from utilitarian aspects. So, we've kind of woven in a story that-

Anuraag: A touch of both.

Swarup: Yeah, a touch of both.

Anuraag: My next question – what really caught my eye while I was going through your work was you calling yourself a scenographer. Now this wasn't a term I personally had come into contact with much, and I honestly wanted to ask you this, what exactly is a scenographer, and what goes into scenography as a whole, as an art process.





Swarup: Traditionally, scenographers were people who used to paint the scenes, and that's why it's a theatrical term basically. We reimagine it now as a theatrical scape, and then embed different kinds of experiences so that you see it differently and a lot of it is multi-sensory. So, the idea is to look at spaces from an experiential perspective and that's the kind of work I'm doing, be it a residential project, or a hospitality project, or any kind of an event. That's why the term scenography, because it's setting a scene of sorts.

Anuraag: So, were you always attracted to scenography, or was it something that you came across later in life and adapted to?

Swarup: So, you know, I've had varied interests and this seemed to be an interesting way of integrating a lot of my varied interests – from photography, to crafts, to architectural practises – you know the scape is fairly wide, and this practise helped me integrate a lot of my diverse interests. So, yeah, that's how scenography basically started.

Anuraag: That's very interesting. Now, I'd like to come back to Calcutta Bungalow once again because I really want to find an answer to this question, it's a sort of question that I've been going over personally. When you look at Calcutta as a city – I personally define it as a city with one of its legs in the modern era, and one of it in the past – and it's clearly visible because, at the same time like you said, Ifteqar's Calcutta Walks, then you also have Heritage Trails, you have Fun Trails, you have a lot of these people working to conserve the heritage of this city. At the same time you have what Bhooter Bhoishyot very funnily named 'Promoter Raj'. What exactly would you consider is Calcutta's future – do you envision Writer's Building being broken down and turned into a shopping mall?



Swarup: (laughs) Actually, you know a scape of a city and its future lies in what the citizens would like to see their city as. Unfortunately, we don't realise what we have, and there are many problems in and around it. Let's say if you want to buy an old house and make it into a home instead of a new flat, you will not get a loan because anything which is beyond 30 years, is difficult to get a loan on. So, which means you need to have that much amount of money to invest into sort of repairing or restoring the house. So, there are impediments at different levels, if you want to buy an old house, and if you buy it for a relatively cheaper price than what it is, then it could be a distress sale because it's not like a new flat. You buy it and then you have to invest a lot of money into restoring it, into repairing it. Legally now, you have to pay 20% tax if the value is less than the stamp duty price. So, there are many impediments legally, which makes proposition of restoring old houses difficult if not impossible. So, you need to really have the will. The question is how are we looking at ourselves. Whoever comes to this city, what do you want to tell them about you? It could vary, it could vary between you showcasing a modern you – which is what the future of any city is – but it could also be a city which can coexist with its past, where we take pride in it and we tell our own stories and our histories. So, yeah I mean it would define – it would actually, eventually be defined by the people of the city how they want to see the city as. Unfortunately, as of now it seems like we're not really valuing what we have, we're rushing towards something which is an easy solution. But I don't know if people are coming into the city to see that, to experience that. There is not much that we've built in this city in the last 50 years which catches your attention as opposed to things that were built a hundred years back-

Anuraag: Even the art-deco structures



Swarup: Sure, art-deco and even before that, which are neo-classical, neo-gothic, all these very interesting sorts of architectural structures that had come up and the conversations that have happened before have been quite exciting. So, I don't think we have come to the very vibrant architectural legacy that we possess from the recent past. So, yes we do beckon back to an era which is beyond 80-100 years and rightly so, because those buildings are still around and they awe-inspire us and we experience it and we would like people who come to this city to also experience that. So yeah, at least have this question open to all of us, to see how do we want our city to be.

Anuraag: Now coming back to your careers as a multi-disciplinary artist, I was absolutely taken aback by the photos that you took, I absolutely love them. In fact, I was showing them to Aryaman who was also quite taken aback. What sort of style would you say you follow, or is it more free-form and what's your inspiration behind it?

Swarup: See, my personal photography projects and art projects are based on certain personal quests and journeys that I am going through, gender being one of the areas that I seem to be addressing through my work. But its also to do with identities a lot, and gender being a part of that. I've had a scape of life where I have travelled into different places so the contexts have changed in my life. And that eventually leads you to the question of 'who are you?' and 'what is your identity?' blah blah blah. And so a lot of my work looks at these issues of transience, of identity, of who you are and of course, the city plays a big role in that too. So, a lot of my personal work moves through that. So, stylistically it varies depending on projects and the language it requires in terms of communication. A lot of it arrives through the process, rather than the stylistic signature I'm trying to develop. It's about the project.

Anuraag: So, my next question for you, is there anything you would consider the highlight of your career, till date?





Swarup: Well, I think there've been many, depending on what scape of work I'm doing. In terms of my personal work, I feel my last exhibition was quite a highlight in my, sort of artistic journey, which was called Ko. It was interesting, just to tell you about the name itself we called it Ko because again it was about questioning identities, and in Bengali most of the words, which is about – what do I say? – the interrogatory words are all with ko. So, that's how the name arrived at. But we looked at a fairly wider scape of issues related to identity, not specifically gender, but identity being a transient entity. So, that was quite well received. In terms of my restoration project, I think I could argue it's been quite a highlight because we could express ourselves the way we wanted to. Also we wanted it to be a private project for others to sort of take references from. We have an open resource where you could go and you could ask us where we sourced material people from and we are happy to share it with everyone. So, that's been an interesting one in terms of you know, events that I have conceptualised in Calcutta, I mean India Story has been one interesting key-point.

Anuraag: You were a part of India Story?

Swarup: I was the one who conceptualised India Story

Anuraag: Oh, did not know that (laughingly)





Swarup: So, it's been a six-chapter, last year and it was also a city centric scape. We felt that, you know in terms of city's exposure to good design, there was not enough adequate, interactive points that were there. So, we conceptualised this product where we would have a space where people would come and interact with different design practitioners, have a conversation with them, endorse them, buy if they want to. If not, have a hearty conversation – be exposed to it. And in terms of production, we wanted it to be something that spans out pan-India. That's why, while it was a scape where we had designers coming in, be it a very young or a veteran. But its also a scape where you have culinary experiences, you have sort of musical experiences. So, it was a very interesting, well thought of scape where we wanted the city to be exposed to good design. So, that I think has been a good highlight

Anuraag: A couple of questions back you mentioned how the city of Calcutta has played a really important role in your artistic process. Would you care to elaborate on that?

Swarup: So, it's been multi-pronged. So, I was born here but I was raised in the North-East. My early life was me coming back for my summer holidays and spending time with my, sort of big joint family in our old ancestral house. That's a memory of a space that I've always taken back with me, and the old bari, extended family, fun, things that have been with me. And of course, you know, I lived in the North-East where you didn't have good cinema halls, even if you did, a lot of the movies wouldn't come. So, English movies in Calcutta have been an interesting part. It's always been that we'll come back and my father would take me to a new lighthouse or a globe to watch some movies.



(.contd) So, many things you know, museum of a scale, that was the first time I was exposed to in Calcutta. Then of course, at a much later stage when I was in the city and I studied design here and then I went out to study design in U.K. and I came back, I saw there are so many latent possibilities that, when you're in the context, you don't see it, but when you go out of the context and analyse it, you see the merits of it. One of it is, let's say a city of – we never look at Calcutta as a city of crafts but if you just walk Chitpur, maybe in a stretch of two kilometres, you'll find more than 11 crafts. Be it bamboo, be it jewellery makers, be it block-makers, musical instrument makers. So, there are different kinds of inspirations that I've sort of drawn from the city and the idea is to reimagine this city in a scape of what it's used to. But also not a city which is sort of beckoning its past but also looking forwards, and striking a balance, a harmony between the two.

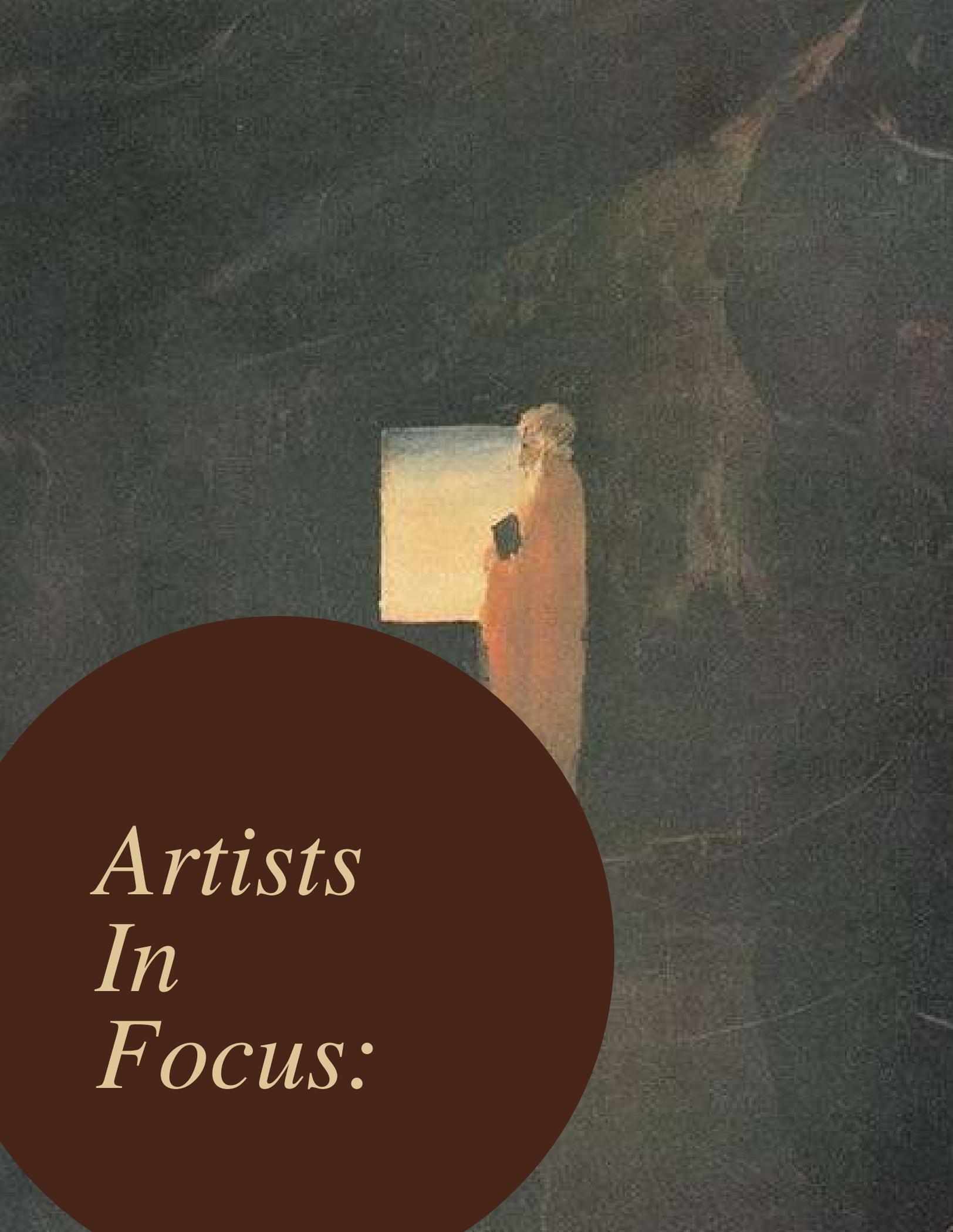
Anuraag: What is next for Swarup Dutta, multi-disciplinary artist?

Swarup: (laughingly) I think, looking at the city and sort of raising the bar – aesthetic, experiential, see if we could restore much more. Keep the city, sort of work towards the city where we could restore much more. I would really like to do more restoration projects in the city and see where it takes us. And I really hope that, you know taking queue from projects like Calcutta Bungalow and hopefully there'll be many more, that more of us come and sort of "save the old" and recontextualise it. So, that's one vision I have for this city, that I'll be really working on effectively.

Anuraag: That's a wonderful way to go forward. And a concluding question, last one: would you have anything to say to everyone at home, readers to Monograph, anything?

Swarup: First is that, please go on and express yourselves, and there could be so many ways of re-imagining our scapes and art is a wonderful medium through which we are expressing ourselves. Be it the follies of the society, be it the good things that are happening. Art can really soothe where its required to and question where its required to so, keep at it. I think we all have questions within us and I think that can lead and egg you towards your sort of artistic practise. So, it'll be interesting to ask yourself questions, maybe questions which you're not comfortable with and see what answers come up. Find a way of way of telling it and communicating it to people and keep doing it, you know, keep questioning it.





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Special Thanks To:

Swarup Dutta

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