

The kNOw school: a post-disciplinary adventure in artist-led public pedagogy

A conversation between members of the Anga Art Collective (Assam, India) and Kelly Hussey-Smith (Naarm/Melbourne, Australia)

Abstract

In January 2023 the Anga Art Collective met with Kelly Hussey-Smith for an online conversation about their practice and collective approach to art making. Anga Art Collective's work explores artist-led public pedagogy through friendship and modes of collectivity, performance, and interventions in public space. Emerging from fifteen years of art, friendship, public interventions, and inter-disciplinary dialogue the fifteen-member collective use creative practice and public pedagogy to explore local contexts and issues in Assam. Their practice shows how collective approaches to knowledge production, learning and creativity can be dynamic forces in generating and sustaining relations.

In 2020 the collective established The kNOw School as a response to monolithic narratives and representations of national identity in contemporary India. Over time, the school has developed into a series of pedagogic and epistemological questions about knowledge production, knowledge hierarchies, and contextual learning. Concerned with local knowledge and regional plurality, their projects and interventions range from workshops with young people to curatorial projects that both strengthen regional bonds and challenge art world hierarchies. Through these site-specific collaborations and interventions, they generate collective questions about how public pedagogy might contribute to practices of equality and solidarity and contribute to a vision of a more egalitarian society. In this conversational interview, edited from an online video conversation between five members of the Anga Art Collective in Assam, and journal co-editor Kelly Hussey-Smith in Naarm, we explore Anga Art Collective's (d)evolving practice as a form of relational, durational and iterative public pedagogy.

Keywords

Collectives, post-disciplinary art, epistemology, publics, education

KHS: *Can you tell us how the Anga Art Collective formed, and how the kNOw school emerged from the collective? I am interested to know more about the values and motivations underpinning the kNOw school. For example, how does the collective approach the idea of contextual or situated knowledge/s, and how does this relate to your interest in 'post-disciplinarity'?*

AAC: The interactions and relationships among the individual members of Anga Art Collective, and the institutional as well as socio-political encounters through which we came to understand our organisational form, have been a long process!

Around 2005, some of the present members of the collective met. We had just joined the government Art College in Guwahati, Assam. For five years, we were coming together outdoors sketching, painting, and having a lot of fun together. It was a time of enjoyment. Working and being together developed as part of the enjoyment. From there, we realised that we needed our own space because the institution was unable to provide the kind of freedom we longed for. It could not provide the time and space to work more continuously and opportunities to engage with practitioners in other fields were limited. Hence, we rented a place—basically a set of three rooms—outside of the institution and started practising painting, sculpture, printmaking and other activities together. This space helped in further strengthening the interaction among us. From the initial group of friends in 2005, the collective of friends swelled which in the present number of members (15) in the Anga Art Collective. In 2010, we started our studio. We also started inviting people from other disciplines to interact with the group. That's how things began. But at the time we didn't necessarily understand ourselves as a collective. We were even unaware of the term 'collective' and the different ways that artists had been working in social, local, and relational ways. Later when we began our masters in other institutions in India, we were exposed to the idea of the 'art collective' and its social, local, and relational contexts. We realised this is what we were already doing. So our practice was already organically there.

The studio that we set up was in a neighbourhood on the periphery of Guwahati City. There was a semi-rural kind of closeness in the area and everyday interactions with the surrounding people were regular affairs. Gradually, we started to take our work to the street and initiate informal engagements such as working with other kinds of discipline experts and forms of making. We displayed our canvases in the streets of the neighbourhood and did a few murals beginning with recreations of famous artworks on the outside wall of makeshift small tea shops or grocery stores. Interestingly, quite a few people showed interest in letting us work on their walls.



Figure 1: A collage mural on the walls of roadside shops in Ganeshnagar in Guwahati. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.



Figure 2: A recreation of Francisco de Goya's *The Third of May* on the walls of the grocery store in Ganeshnagar in Guwahati. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.

By working in public, we used to come across different responses — passing glances, curiosity, an attitude of indifference, and conversation about why we were doing it. For some, a Francis Bacon painting would be ‘jabra’ (meaningless waste). When we drew Francisco Goya’s 1814 anti-war statement “The Third of May, 1808” someone contextualised it in terms of the recent history of Assam. It was through those interactions that we realised the potential of working outside the studio and gallery. From there, things started to grow in an informal way. Around 2016, we took our work to the centre of Guwahati to participate in public meetings addressing issues of communal tensions, majoritarian intolerance etc. It was another moment of learning, as we encountered the curious gazes of passersby in the street as well as navigating the different understandings of art in society. We did some site-specific installations as well during this time addressing issues of flood, erosion, and displacement in the state.



Figure 3: A public intervention installation work at Dighalipukhuri in Guwahati with YUVA, Uki Research Collective and Guwahati Literary Factory. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.

At this time we also encountered the irony of higher education and art ecologies. Despite growing recognition of public art and the discourses related to community projects, the institutional frames increasingly prepare us for being individual artists in a competitive market. To begin with, through the evaluation systems for students and other measures, academic spaces develop the individual artist as self-aware in their entanglement with institutional spaces. It is a self-absorbed process, which can be alienating in terms of broader public engagements. Even the architecture of division and restriction that academic institutions or galleries uphold is at odds with the idea of an inclusive public arena. The contradiction between our attempt to uphold a collective practice and the way that art ecologies mould individual artists became much more obvious for us when a few of us completed our master’s degrees in 2016-17. During this time we became more embedded in art institutions and

art ecologies in our search of jobs or funding for our projects. Despite this, our individual and collective practices were becoming much more communitarian at this time. Through experiments and interactions, the idea of ‘the public’ became a key component in our collective practice. The surrounding public brought us down from the generic pedestal of the artist. It was enthralling to encounter questions from the public in the street about ‘What’s the meaning, what’s the whole point of all this?’ The community around us brought their interpretations and socio-political concerns to the work and our practices began to draw from their concerns and questions. So, we started to ask the question, what kind of art practice should we do here in Guwahati? What kind of material are we using and why?

It was the peculiar set of circumstances generated by the pandemic that pushed us towards a new phase of our practice. During the first lockdown, many of us moved back to Assam. This experience of being back in Assam, and the conditions of the pandemic, provided us with an opportunity to give our collective work a bit more structure. The kNOw school came out of this thinking as we felt we needed a solid frame to anchor the concerns and ideas we were already dealing with. The pandemic brought different dynamics and issues to our attention — public health, socio-economic disparities, and ecological concerns. It also demanded new ways of communicating and being together. Educational access itself became a matter of concern, as online learning was not a possibility for people living in poverty.

It was becoming clearer to us that we wanted to direct our public engagement towards an exploration of different epistemic networks and frames in society. We were already at odds with the institutional settings that were espoused by our disciplinarian teachings. The questions we were asking ourselves about what type of art to practise in the context of Assam did have a pedagogic dimension. The evolving situation of the pandemic made us realise that our pedagogical concerns were not limited to the field of art. As the lockdown was gradually lifted, we started visiting various localities and conducting workshops where we co-created syllabi based on the issues, questions or cultural values of that locality. From there we started to think about what sort of pedagogical model we were developing.

The various disciplines of knowledge have a tendency to discipline individuals and communities within hierarchies and power structures. In this context, we now consider our practice a post-disciplinary exploration of epistemic frames. It also helps us to explain the socio-pedagogical context of our engagements. We are not denying that disciplines and multidisciplinary are important in framing ways of knowing. However, as our works often build up through interactions with the public or communities, we notice that the idea of the ‘artists’ or ‘art’ as a discipline tends to recreate a hierarchical relationship between us and the other participants. In a social space where the condition of educational infrastructure from the grassroots level is not very ideal, it becomes difficult to assert a democratic notion of ‘disciplines’. In such a context, the term ‘post-disciplinary’ helps us to think, imagine and devise ways of negating the risk of reiterating the top-down approach of knowledge production. The ‘post-disciplinary’ is also inherent in another development—the explosion of information that technology has enabled that has allowed knowledge to be shared beyond the institutional frame. It demands that we rethink the institutional boundaries of disciplines and issues of accessibility. In our view, knowledge should and can be related to values of co-existence, equality, and solidarity and contribute to a vision of an egalitarian society. As we are in the midst of an ecological crisis, nourishing such a society is of planetary importance.

KHS: *I didn't realise that the pandemic had shifted the collective in this way and that it was the conditions of the lockdowns that prompted a return to Assam. This seems important to explore further considering the considerable impacts of the pandemic on artists and related creative industries. Do you think that the collective has strengthened through this pandemic-enforced closeness? Or were you able to continue your collective work despite living in different cities?*

AAC: The way our collective has been working in the last two years, we can say that the pandemic-enforced closeness has helped in certain ways. The closeness has come through two layers — one is that most of our group members have come back to Guwahati and it helped in recreating the shared space we used to have before moving out to other Indian cities for education and livelihood. The second layer of closeness is that we get to spend more moments in our hometowns. While such closeness makes the social and political tensions intensely personal, we also get the opportunity to observe the intricacies of social life and the recent changes therein. When we were working in the big cities, within the institutional set-ups and within 'arty' networks, we did not get these opportunities. The political economy of the contemporary art scene, of course, has certain predetermined measurements of art and artists based on identity and location. As we engage with this economy based in the metropolitan location, our peripheral situatedness in Assam tends to get a bit exoticised. The northeast of India has been exotically presented in the national imagination. Violence is also fetishised without considering the politics and economy as unfolding in the present time. I think our newfound closeness to the local spaces helps us in thinking beyond premeditated frameworks. Through our interaction and discussions, we can think through what we observe, and return to questions that we have been carrying for a long time.

KHS: *I really appreciate the focus on duration in your work. Considering the first stage of the collective took ten years to formalise or frame, can you share a bit about your experience of sustaining a slow and critical practice? These contextual and socially-negotiated models of art practice don't generally fit into arts ecologies because they are not designed for these audiences and spaces. This raises interesting questions about value and values.*

AAC: Sustaining the collective process becomes quite challenging and in fact almost improbable in terms of the economic rationale. The economy of the national and global art world prioritises an individualistic model, although the informal and precarious labour of others go into the making of the individual artist. The economic logic even tends to turn 'collective' into individualised branding. So, the collective has to negotiate a terrain marked with ideological trappings and financial constraints. When we have to (quite often) depend upon individual projects or odd jobs to sustain ourselves financially, we try to make sure that there remains an interflow between the individual projects and the collective activities. When we started the kNOw school, interested collaborators, individuals, institutions, and communities helped us to develop and carry out the workshops. We are talking here about their enthusiasm, conversations, warmth, as well as certain material things — space, food, or shelter. We are now trying to figure out how to sustain the collective process in the long run.

KHS: *In this edition of the Journal of Public Pedagogies, we are exploring the idea of artist-led approaches to public pedagogy. We are interested in practices that exist outside, beyond, or beside institutional spaces of galleries and museums (although these spaces can also be spaces of informal*

learning and public pedagogy). In our editorial conversations about the concept of publics, we observed a shift away from traditional understandings of the public sphere/s and interventions in public space, and instead a move sideways to community, relationality, and the conditions of knowledge production and learning. We are interested in how artists approach and understand public pedagogy as practice, and what the motivations are for these practices.

I would like to ask you about your views on and experiences with formal education. I am interested to understand more about where your interest in education and pedagogy comes from, and how the kNOw school engages with, or indeed critiques, more mainstream understandings of education and art. Certainly, the title of the school infers resistance to knowledge hierarchies and what might be described as the extractive desire to 'kNOw'.

AAC: One of the major problems in education — from primary to tertiary — is the top-down and hierarchical approach. For instance, we can consider the case of the location of languages in the educational set-up. Standardised versions of the mother tongue/regional languages are usually the medium of instruction in government primary schools across Indian states. In the state of Assam, Assamese is the dominant language in this regard. Political struggles for the rights of the communities and also hegemonic equations have created space for a few other languages such as Bengali, Hindi, Bodo etc. English is also taught as another language in most states and is the medium of instruction in a few government schools. In higher education, English has actually gained prominence as the medium of disciplinary learning. In Assam, Hindi is taught as the third language at the high school level. There is a history of encouraging Hindi in the Non-Hindi speaking regions, and this often slides into coercive rhetoric of forcing it as the 'national language'. The state of Arunachal Pradesh neighbouring Assam presents an example where Hindi has become the dominant language in postcolonial times in spite of the presence of around thirty Indigenous languages. One can say that the language question in the educational set-up reflects political contestations, hegemonic equations, and efforts related to social engineering which benefits dominant classes and castes. How languages operate in a complex multilingual society is hardly ever taken into consideration. As such, there is no impetus to learn from the bottom up — that is, the epistemic networks that navigate this multilingual reality. Many linguistic blocks remain outside the purview of education. On the other hand, reactionary values can sneak into educational institutions, as they remain embedded in the legacy of standardisation of modern vernaculars. This educational setting creates multi-layered exclusionary challenges for students from lower castes and tribal communities and also individuals and communities from geographically peripheral regions.

Our own journey of education, both in general and specific to our experience as tertiary art students, have made us conscious of this situation. The visual culture in the public arena operates through a layered and multilingual cultural reality. Even at the college level, we noticed that the emphasis was on repeating the standardised narrative of Indian art from colonial academic realism to modernism. This top-down approach to art education is blind to these aesthetic processes and contexts and does not respond to art pedagogy in creative ways.

There is an interesting thing happening in terms of the radical changes in information technology. With the help of mobile data, people can access different knowledge pools and it has broadened the scope of learning. Technology has, in a way, democratised knowledge in our region. We have noticed its reflections in popular culture and social media spaces. Over-saturated with the information flow, these are also spaces of misinformation. But, the bigger challenge is to transform

this commodified democratisation of knowledge and re-articulate an egalitarian notion of education as a right. Interestingly, the welfare state purports these ideals, but the socio-political reality often does not match these ideals.

KHS: *Yes, the national approach to education is often argued as a democratic approach, but as we know, this can be slippery territory. These pedagogies of the state are not only shared through the curriculum but also through the materiality of the environment, and the affective and embodied experience of education (Sriprakash et al., 2022).*

Can you share a little more detail about how the kNOw school operates as a critique of mainstream education and art through community practices? I would love to know a bit more about how you work with and negotiate with different communities, and the kinds of projects you do together as part of the school. I tend to gravitate to the idea of social negotiation (Wong, 2019) rather than social engagement because engagement infers very little about what it is you're actually doing together or trying to achieve, and negotiation suggests dialogue and complexity. I am also interested to know more about how you design your approach to pedagogy and co-creation in contextual and attuned ways where questions of knowing, being and doing are central.

AAC: The questions that you bring up are the questions we are currently working through. By fine-tuning certain exercises and frames, we try to build an interaction with the participants about ways of knowing, the social location of the epistemic conflicts, and the significance of these conflicts vis-a-vis the broader issues of political economy. We also try to build certain forms through the workshop — for instance a booklet, visual chart, oral archive in the installation form etc., which can create an epistemic intervention.



Figure 4: A collective mental mapping made during a kNOw school workshop at Parijat Academy in Kamrup in Assam. Students interact with Geography scholar Abani K. Bhagabati. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.

In recent years, we have noticed that by using the rhetoric of decolonisation, the populist right-wing ideologues in India are speaking about Indigeneity, community, rootedness, and so on. In effect, they are proposing a majoritarian ontology pushed through educational and cultural policies. We think this demands attention beyond the limits of high academia. While engaging with differences in epistemic networks, we strive to understand ways of universalising certain types of egalitarianism.

Initially, we tried to organise the kNOw school by activating what we considered common spaces; but nothing much seemed to materialise from this action. We found that building a temporary space around informal conversations and then moving directly towards a formal structure of a workshop did not turn out to be a successful experiment. This made us think more about how to build a relationship with communities and publics, and about the issue of mediation. We found that it is often the institutions or the organisational framework within the society (such as the monastery or the school) that facilitates this interaction. The other aspect of mediation we had to overcome was the image of the 'artist', which demands a certain presentation of 'art'. The image of the artist also makes the interaction one-sided in that the artist is supposed to be the 'creator' and others are supposed to learn the ways to create in their image. To build space for interaction, we have found that we need to do away with this image of the 'artist'. The aim is to keep the space fluid, where the participants can draw from their everyday surroundings — the epistemic network of the community — and play with their own conceptual frameworks.



Figure 5: "Folktale nest", a bamboo structure made by students for an oral library at Vidya- the living school at Dhemaji in Assam. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.



Figure 6: Students' books made during a kNOw school workshop at Vidya-the living school in Dhemaji in Assam. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.

Last year (2022) the kNOw school collaborated with a school called the Parijat Academy which is situated at the periphery of Guwahati city in a village called Pamohi. Close to the village is the Deepor Beel — a wetland and the only Ramsar site in Assam¹. While the school has a residential complex, many students come from a nearby locality. The wetland and the nearby village are very fragile ecosystems threatened by the encroachment of property development. The dumping ground of the city also pollutes the area. In the workshop, our concerns were to embrace the quality of the place and to map the area with the students through questions about environmental policy, and our relations with our surroundings. We participated in different learning exercises where participants were asked to relate with their surroundings through their senses; for instance, how could they sense the place through sound and smell with eyes shut? The students were asked to narrate orally and write about how they experienced the area as they navigate the space of the school, home and the nearby wetland. As the dumping site is part of the everyday experience in the locality, we also made it part of the outdoor exercise. They were encouraged to collect materials, and a drawing and mapping exercise was carried out using their collected materials. Through this process, the workshop took the shape of a critique of the relationship of the city to its periphery and its dual impact on the subaltern classes and local ecology.

¹ A Ramsar site is a wetland site designated to be of international importance under the Ramsar Convention, also known as "The Convention on Wetlands", an intergovernmental environmental treaty established on 2nd February 1971 in Ramsar, Iran by UNESCO, which came into force from 21st December, 1975. Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramsar_site



Figure 7: Sound exercise during the kNOw school workshop at Parijat Academy. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.



Figure 8: Students listen to the morning silence at Deepor Beel. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.



Figure 9: Students look for objects and materials, and take photographs with their smartphones. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.



Figure 10: Details from a mapping workshop led by the kNOw school at Parijat Academy in April 2022. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.

In another instance, we organised a workshop in collaboration with the Tai Phake Language Study and Research Center in the Namphake village in Upper Assam. The village is home to around 150 families belonging to the Tai Phake community. The Tai Phake is an ethnic minority, who supposedly migrated to Assam in the 18th century and settled mostly near the Burhi Dihing river in small villages. We planned our visit by communicating and consulting with Paim Thee Gohain who is an independent researcher and social activist from the community who writes about the social, cultural and historical aspects of the Tai Phakes.



Figure 11: Woodcut printmaking exercise as part of kNOw school at Namphake village in Dibrugarh in Assam. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.

The monastery actively supported us, which is an essential part of everyday life in the community. In the workshop, which ran for four days, we studied the visual aspects of the old manuscripts in the monastery library. Simultaneously, we tried to share our skills of print-making with local youth to understand how manuscript pictures can be recreated in other mediums. We focused on developing a pictorial alphabet chart of the Tai Phake language. The paintings were drawn by the children, which brings together different imaginative representations often juxtaposed as modern versus traditional. The idea of the alphabet chart came up through informal discussions at the side of the workshop about linguistic challenges for a small community.

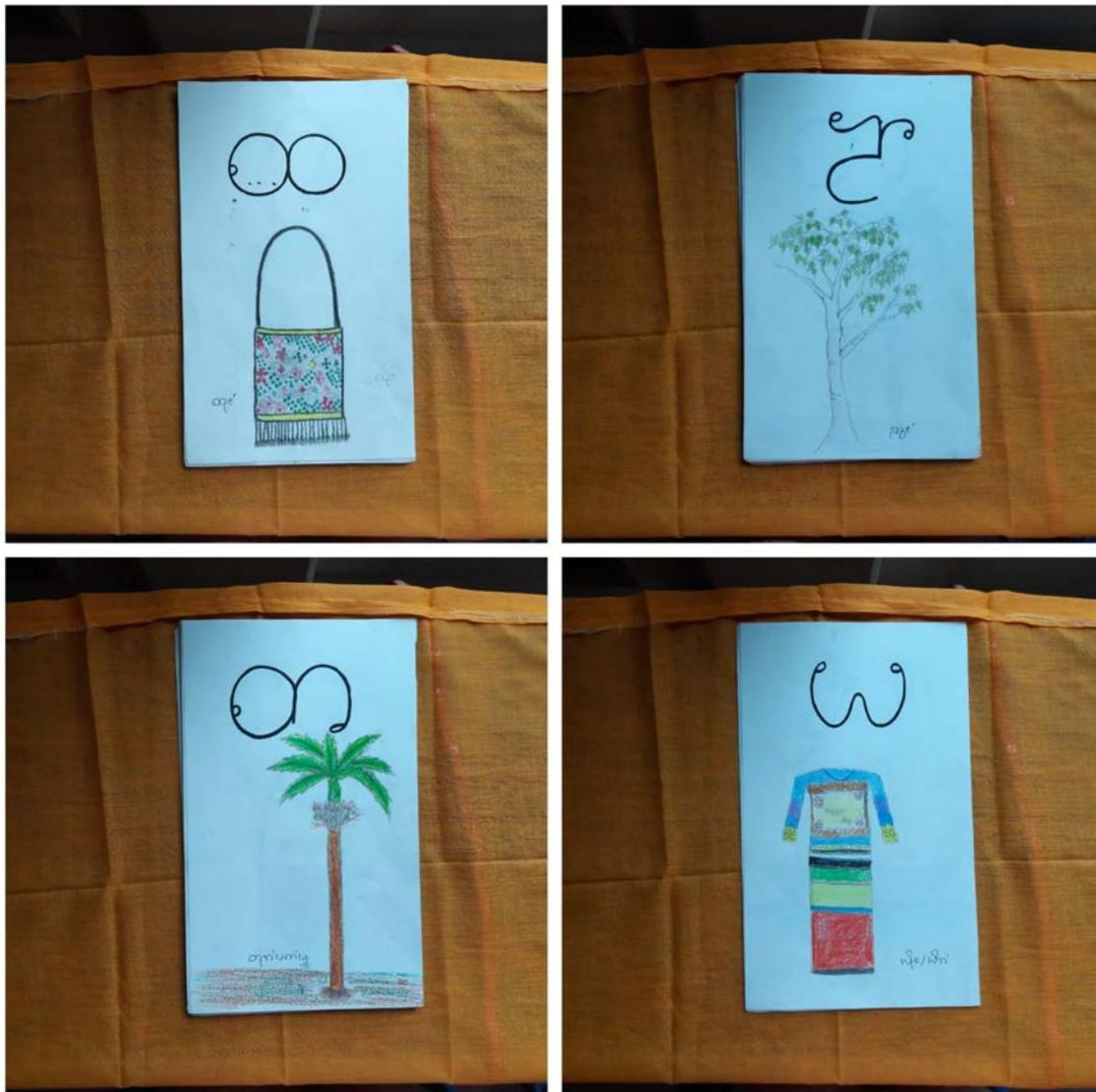


Figure 12: Tai Phake alphabet drawings made by children during kNOw school at Namphake village. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.

When we did the first kNOw school at ‘Vidya: the Living School’, we did not begin with a particular concept in mind. The residential school is situated in a picturesque location surrounded by hills and streams at the border of Assam and Arunachal. For the initial session, we tried to do away with any temptation of using pen, pencil and paper — the conventional method of drawing. Rather, we explored the locale with the children and let them play around, play with the objects, and build anything collaboratively. We proceeded from there to a storytelling session, where they narrated mostly folktales. We asked them to write or imaginatively draw the characters from the stories. At the end of the workshop, we installed a structure made of bamboo to store the images and written stories in an archival form.



Figure 13, 14, 15: Students made site-specific drawings and sculptures with soil, charcoal and other locally available materials during kNOw school at Vidya-the living school at Dhemaji in 2020. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.

KHS: *So, it seems that your work as the kNOw school is striving to work with plurality in co-created and exploratory ways. This returns to your earlier points about the problems of monolithic national narratives that deny plurality and arguably destroy knowledge/s.*

AAC: Yes, we have been thinking about different models of mutual sharing and about how to interact with participants in co-creating the workshops. In one workshop in Vidya Living School in Dhemaji district, we proposed to the students to prepare small books. They came up with concepts reflecting their encounter with everyday objects and experiences. One student made a rotating book where the pages unfold one after another through rotation (see Figure 16).



Figure 16: A rotating book made by Mriganka Gogoi during kNOw school at Dhemaji in January 2022. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.

When we asked him how he got the idea, he said that the idea came to him from a rotating spoon stand. Another student designed a foldable book in the shape of a pig (see Figure 17) - an animal ubiquitous in the rural economy of the region. One small boy wrote a poem focusing on the

labouring body and hardship of his father in the paddy field (see Figure 18). These small observations were very interesting to us.



Figure 17: Moni Prasad Mili made a foldable book in the shape of a pig. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.

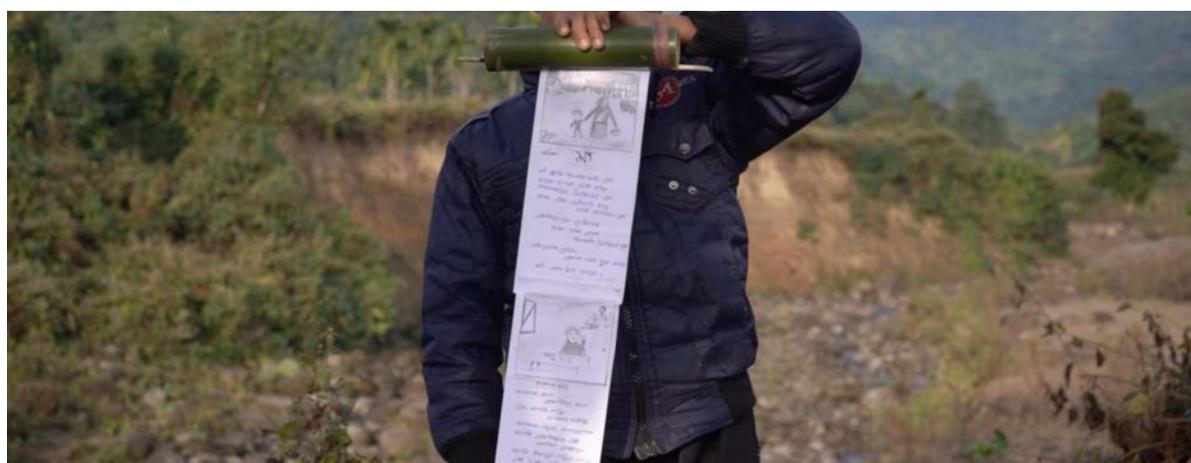


Figure 18: Jayanta Mili with his scrolling book made during kNOw school at Dhemaji. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.

It was our second workshop in the Vidya School. We would love to further our interactions in all the places we have visited so far. Although we are interacting more with students and children now, we look forward to developing our interactions with different formations of communities in terms of identities and spatial differences. We are also thinking about the format of the workshop. We do not wish to limit ourselves to one type of short-term workshop. As we engage with the same space and the community again and again, our wish is to develop frames to sustain more elaborate projects. Simultaneously, instead of limiting everything to the teleological framework of kNOw school, we intend to keep going back to some of our earlier activities – sudden outdoor field trips, interactions with people, an odd sudden workshop here and there and so on. We wish to make different frames, forms and spaces, which can fluidly flow into one another so that an interactive archive too can grow.

KHS: *More recently the kNOw school has broadened its focus from workshops with children and young people to a focus on working with other artists in the Northeast of India. In this way, the school becomes a way of working or a whole practice and ethos moving between art, pedagogy and curation. Can you share a bit more about how this is evolving?*

AAC: Recently we were invited as curators for the student biennale at the Kochi Biennale. Curators were selected from different regions around the country to curate students from specific regions for the student biennale. We were commissioned to curate students from the northeastern part of India. The region is made up of eight states, so it was a big undertaking. Instead of just selecting works that were submitted to us, we visited a few art schools in the region; but our emphasis was really on visiting areas, where there are no art schools. Because we have fewer art schools in the northeast, we wanted to open the opportunity up to artists who may not have easy access to art education. So we also needed to navigate the terrain of the conceptualisation of art and artists. To find these artists we conducted workshops in different states and eventually developed projects together with the artists that were exhibited at the Biennale.



Figure 19: kNOW school workshop at Government College of Art and Craft in Agartala in Tripura for Kochi Students' Biennale. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.



Figure 20: kNOW school workshop at Aizawl in Mizoram for Kochi Students' Biennale. Photo courtesy of Anga Art Collective.

So while this was a curatorial project, we extended our approach to the kNOw school workshop in order to develop contextually relevant art ecologies and pedagogies that focus on co-creation. We did not limit ourselves to the goal to find art projects and exhibit them in Kochi. But, we looked forward to finding people and practices in our region who we could connect with for our future friendships and collaborations. So yes, the school is not limited to children. It's open to everyone because we see these relational approaches and ways of working that are contextually specific, as interesting and relevant to everyone.

Biography

Anga Art Collective (founded in 2010, based in Assam) was initiated by a group of friends who sought to create a space that engaged in critical thinking about visibility and materiality based on the geographic and social landscape of Assam. They think and work through regional and cultural specificities, exploring the possibilities of how artistic responses can meditate them. They explore through their practice what it means for a studio space to break out of itself to become a process, imagining the idea of a collective as a growing process rather than a closed ensemble. The collective maintains a fluid structure where individual and collaborative practices go hand in hand. They believe in sharing knowledge across disciplines and collaborating with village communities, academics and activists on different events and situations.

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