

October 9–24 2021

2020–2022

Jane
Lombard
Prize
for Art
and
Social
Justice
Recipient

AVNI SETHI

Owed to a Certain
Emptiness:

Infra-structuring the
Conflictorium

As for
Protocols

Vera List Center
Forum 2021

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As for
Protocols

Vera List Center
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Explicitly—or not—protocols determine much of what we do. Supplanting traditional notions of “good manners,” protocols are like forms of grammar that regulate how we relate to each other, to our cultural, social, and political environments, and to the technologies that shape them. With advances in artificial intelligence and robotics, the embrace of Indigenous land practices long shunned by extractivist industries, demands to decolonize our institutions, controversies surrounding data mining and privacy, and vast disparities in responses to COVID-19, protocols are emerging as essential instruments of both oppression but also empowerment. As evidence of governmental, organizational, social, or corporate structures, they speak of power—and thus invite subversion, improvement, and action.

At the Vera List Center, artists continuously push us to consider new futures and political imaginaries. For this year’s edition of the VLC Forum, our annual signature event, we introduce five exceptional artists and their projects, all which resonate with the VLC’s two-year focus theme *As for Protocols*. Every day of the Forum is dedicated to a different project, each one proposing alternative and more equitable protocols for engagement. In collaboration with our partner organizations in New York, these artists introduce us to protocols from around the world, collapsing the boundaries of here and elsewhere. We invite you to learn with us by their sides.

Day One of the VLC Forum is dedicated to the Invisible Borders Trans-African Photographers Organization, an artist-led initiative co-founded by Emeka Okereke in 2009 that challenges the notion of borders within the fifty-four countries of Africa. With Brooklyn’s UnionDocs, we host several online workshops, followed by a panel discussion with Invisible Border members, and culminating in a film screening. Day Two highlights the Feminist Memory Project by NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati’s Nepal Picture Library, in collaboration with the Center for Book Arts. Day Three features Cornelius Harris and Underground Resistance with a live concert by DJ Nomadico at Weeksville Heritage Center. This marks the fifth year of our collaboration with Weeksville, and we’re thrilled to present this live performance of techno music from Detroit in their stunning grounds in central Brooklyn. Day Five is anchored by The Clemente Soto Vélaz Cultural and Educational Center, where Jorge González’s Escuela de Oficios sets up a candle-making site as an altar, enacting Escuela’s continuous, embodied work of community regeneration. For these projects, Jorge González, Cornelius Harris, NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati, and Emeka Okereke have been named the

2020–2022 Jane Lombard Fellows at the Vera List Center, and this Forum Guide includes short essays nominating their projects that capture the passion and advocacy of their work.

We have had the honor of working closely with the recipient of the 2020–2022 Jane Lombard Prize for Art and Social Justice, Avni Sethi, for Conflictorium. Twenty international nominators, forty New School faculty members and students, and the distinguished jury chaired by Candice Hopkins, helped us locate and begin to understand Sethi’s groundbreaking project. Labeled a “museum of conflict” and launched in Ahmedabad, the capital of Indian state Gujarat, in 2013, Conflictorium challenges most assumptions we have about both conflicts and museums. Located in the old city of Ahmedabad, with a legacy of brutal religious strife since the start of the current Indian prime minister’s political career in Gujarat, Conflictorium invites conversation, play, research, and co-creative inquiries that thrive on generosity, poetry, courage, and curiosity. Rather than address conflict head-on, Conflictorium has developed alternative protocols of engagement, empowering those who enter the creative space.

We are thrilled to invite you to experience the same. On Day Four of the Forum, join us for an exchange between Avni Sethi and filmmaker Amar Kanwar on Conflictorium. And from October 9 through 24, visit the exhibition *Owed to a Certain Emptiness: Infra-structuring the Conflictorium* at Parsons, The New School of Design, where daily one-on-one conversations between Avni and other artists, scholars, curators, and community activists probe the notion of infrastructures and the protocols necessary to arrive at more engaging, equitable, and vibrant cultural organizations. In these times of the pandemic, this is our contribution to a renewal of our shared global, cultural networks of knowledge building and care.

My profound gratitude goes to the Jane Lombard Fellows as well as Avni Sethi and the amazing Conflictorium team; to my caring and generous colleagues at the Vera List Center; to our colleagues at The New School; to the funders and supporters of the Vera List Center for Art and Politics, to the center’s board, and on this day especially to Jane Lombard.

With you and the artists, scholars, activists, and students assembled for the VLC Forum 2021, we’ll mine together new protocols as the foundations for the performance of living, and begin thinking and working toward new spaces of political empowerment.

— Carin Kuoni, Senior Director/Chief Curator,
Vera List Center

GLOBAL VOICES

2020–2022

Jane
Lombard
Fellows

The Jane Lombard Fellows were finalists for the Jane Lombard Prize for Art and Social Justice. What follows are the essays written by their nominators for the prize jury in the summer of 2020.

Jorge González: Escuela de Oficios

Michelle
Marxuach



Ensayos libertarios (Libertarian Essays), basketry workshop as part of the program Una extranjera peligrosa: Escuela de Oficios, in collaboration with Monica Rodriguez and Julia Bogany, for the exhibition Unraveling Collective Forms, at LACE, April 7, 2019, photo courtesy of Lluvia Higuera.

Emma Goldman often talked about the importance of living the truth, as opposed to just theorizing about it, and about her position toward the forms of organization that can be created by the natural mixture of common interests and voluntary union. According to her: “We could organize the activity of free human beings analogously to the spirit of harmonious solidarity that grows organically producing a variety of colors and shapes as the one that originates in the varied set that we admire in flowers.”¹

Embracing mediation as a methodology to ignite proactive forms that re-narrate and reinstitute the inherent rights of other beings and etnias (ethnicities) in a place that has historically continued to implement forms of eradication is part of Escuela de Oficios. Through practices that convert processes into action, and then into advocacy, Jorge González’s meditation “is not only a methodology but a way to propose new ways of promoting principles of growth and cultivation rooted in our land and its connection to the vibration of the earth.”²

Eight years ago, Jorge González began another story with a community that claimed an *other* form of knowledge building. I was part of it.

Through its ongoing transformative platform of research and practice, Escuela de Oficios taught me to relate with our history again using materials that carry the underlying support structure of learning processes that expose critical issues about our form of production.

Escuela de Oficios has delved into deliberate absences,³ convened to re-learn artisanal skills, and collaborated with artisans and workshops such as Taller Cabachuelas.⁴ It has been an example of training and transformation through experiences of collective learning by nurturing and informing a current generation of artists, artisans, and fellow teachers.

They have also collaborated with the organization Can-Jíbaro Indigenous People’s Organization of Boriken (CAN) to reaffirm their claims and re-narrate a story that can guide new actions toward regional and world alliances, setting forth another way of relating to territories and ethnicities.

From the renegotiations of our cultural objects and their relation to the community, to the reclaiming of ancient approaches to preserving our plant-based species, Escuela de Oficios commits to work hand in hand with CAN and other allied organizations to eradicate oppression by claiming spaces and ways

of existing through reaffirming Indigenoussness as an integral component of our society. It is in these social commitments of denunciation and reaffirmation that Escuela de Oficios and Jorge González's practice merge and become a collective effort in raising the multiple voices that make up our territory. Weaving information and stories, facilitating communal sharing of cultural belongings, learning and doing through de-schooling (like the ones raised by Ivan Illich) or actions (like the ones proposed by initiatives like *Under the Mango Tree*).⁵ Escuela de Oficios takes on a life of its own in the bodies that participate within it.

Escuela de Oficios is a symbolic and practical space for the recuperation of narratives between the Indigenous and the modern, and a fertile terrain for the practices that engage us in actions where we can "walk-together." I could describe Escuela de Oficios and Jorge's practice as a "walk-together"⁷ through applied exercises and investigations in order to learn differently, hear other voices, and take one another's steps to keep our bodies in practice and alert—as Ursula K. Le Guin says: "we've all let ourselves become part of the killer story, and so we may get finished along with it."⁸

The ongoing general perception falters, influenced by perverse narrations that continuously enable forms of colonization through processes that eradicate our diversity. When disappearances occur through narratives that continue this pattern of homogenization, it not only creates a void, but voices cease to exist. By embracing forgotten narratives while we learn to live an *other* way, we might be able to reclaim our rights and reconstitute historic narratives that have been silenced. As Jorge mentions: "The Indigenous population has not disappeared even if the official history narrates another story." I will jointly add that neither have the skills needed to embrace the conscious use of materials while keeping our forest alive.

The processes that have silenced and discriminated against the Indigenous and African populations in Puerto Rico in the name of progress are urgent issues. These processes are literally embedded into the country's oppressive education system, from the teaching of Indigenous extinction to the understanding of ourselves as a homogeneous people, rather than a region of great biodiversity and of multiple expressions of its peoples. Through alternative critical pedagogies, we can proceed differently and act with the urgency needed to heal our earth, so that we can heal together.

The verb *narrare* in Latin (to tell) which is derived from the adjective *gnarls* (knowing or skilled) is a good reference for methodologies that

our ancestors have used to guide and express the communal identity and values of our population. Maybe we have forgotten how to listen, or maybe we have misused the practice of the skilled or the narrator: the one who knows that it is not the power of the person who mediates but the harmonious generosity of transmission that gives agency to the narration. Like Mireia Sallares, a voice that contributed to the project, said: "I believe in narration as a possibility to survive death, prohibitions or regulations, or at least a tool to use so that they do not impose the narration on you."

I believe Escuela de Oficios, along with Jorge González's practice at large, is an example of how we should embrace and act toward the present future. These forms extend their relations and commitments beyond their field, to organically add and participate with the layering of the understory. This, in turn, can reinstitute that other narration to implement the changes we need so that the *other* story can be embodied with reassurance and belonging, without faltering in our self-determination to re-negotiate our modernity.

1 Emma Goldman, *Anarquismo y Feminismo*.

2 I would like to share with you a narration by Vince Tao about his experience participating in one of Jorge González's collective weaving/reading gatherings, *Under the Mango Tree*. I hope this can relay the importance of joining new threads with this project.

Jorge taught us how to braid rope from common cattails. We learned the craft in pairs—one wove, one supported—as he read us a text titled "Buscando el bejuco" ("Looking for the Vine"). Told from the point of view of a basket weaver walking the island's thicket, the meditative text guided us through the craftsman's dilated apprehension of place and time... The reading elaborated a contemplative, generous relation to the world embodied in the traditional practice, now nearly disappeared from Puerto Rico by grace of modern life. "When you lose a craft, you lose the vine." We were implored, or perhaps warned: "Cultivate your vines..." Claudia and I admired our rope—I wove, with more than some trepidation; she very charitably supported, holding the other end—for its many imperfections... Claudia observed that the rope's variations recorded our learning of the craft, as well as the beginning of our friendship. Tight, hesitant knots gave way to confident braids, with some loose ends that marked passages when we had momentarily lost our rhythm in conversation.

3 The disappearances of languages, ethnicities, and entire populations is the best tool that authoritative and oppressive groups have used in order to maintain control and silence that which they don't want others to hear.

4 Since 2016, Escuela de Oficios has worked closely with Alice Chéveres, Taino knowledge holder, and her family's pottery studio, Taller Cabachuelas, participating in the principles of a practice based on decolonization and self-organized learning. This long-time pedagogically-based collaboration establishes a practical space that links issues around restitution of cultural belongings and natural resources pertaining to Taino cosmology and territory. Taller Cabachuelas was founded in 1984 by the Chéveres family together with Indigenous archaeologist Roberto Martínez-Torres and Taino knowledge holder Daniel Silva-Pagán.

5 *Under the Mango Tree: Sites of Learning* is a convening of artist-led initiatives, schools, libraries, and project spaces initiated by Sepake Angiama that have been concerned with forms of collective learning/ unlearning, Indigenous knowledges, oral history, and nonhierarchical modes of exchange.

6 Francisco Ramírez Rojas: "Para mí, cuando yo voy a salir, tomo rumbo. Vaya, el día que yo salía pa'ca, voy a los cuatro puntos cardinales, digo, pa'ca es mar, el sol sale aquí y se echa allá, la luna sale aquí y se echa allá. Los miro, les digo: 'Vengan conmigo, vamos, a volar.' Yo soy así, siempre hago mis oraciones."

7 Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, 150–154.

NayanTara
Gurung
Kakshapati:

Nepal Picture
Library

Naeem Mohaiemen

To better appreciate the Asia-wide impact of Nepal Picture Library, it is helpful to zoom out and observe two specificities. The first is the poisoned legacy between South Asian nations soldered by the British Empire, most familiar in the eighty years of border tensions between what Salman Rushdie called “midnight’s children”—India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Separated peoples continue to enact history wars over border lines that some refuse to accept; this is manifested not only in the post-1947 Indian annexation of Kashmir and the decades of conflict that ensued, but also in the rupture of “two-wing” Pakistan into independent Bangladesh and reduced Pakistan. The toxin of disputed geographies spills into both Sri Lanka’s Tamil-Sinhalese civil war and into Myanmar, which has been pushing the Rohingya

people into Bangladesh. The second aspect is the journey of the photographic image in South Asia, where technological limits and the rupture of events have led to collections of images being destroyed through neglect and subterfuge. This twinned context of neighbors as “intimate enemy”¹ and photography as a site of neglect inspired Nepal Picture Library to be a paradigm reset (for image, archive, and memory) that pushed against the vectors of antagonism and erasure.

Nepal has struggled with internal schisms that owe to both colonialism’s toxins and the effluence of postcolonial disappointment. From 1996 to 2006, Nepal was caught in a brutal civil war between the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the government. The Peace Accord signed in 2006 ended a period of death squad

executions, massacres, kidnappings, and other war crimes. This internal war bore similarities to Maoist uprisings in northeast India, earlier uprisings of the Jumma people of Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, and the Mohajir Qaumi movement in Pakistan. In a subcontinent with multiple nations fighting against each other over British-drawn borders, internal minorities are subjugated to a degree matching what they faced under empire. The library project wanted to push back against this shared history of violence—the manifesto was to build a community memory and map of Nepalese peoples, cultures, and lives from collections of everyday snapshots that often recorded “unimportant people.” Through the dissemination of this project across Asia, the intent was also to push against the veil of ignorance about each other that fed border schisms and internal wars.

Photography archives, especially based on family and personal snapshots (the fragments that can make up national history), have often surfaced in environments where the state is actively destroying, or suppressing, official records. One practitioner is the Beirut-based Arab Image Foundation, which was founded in 1997 by a group of Lebanese photographers. Within this archive is an explicit linkage to the region’s upheavals—thus, the collection may be of studio portraits, but there will be within that a *Fedayeen* soldier dressed in fatigues and carrying an unloaded gun. In contrast, Nepal Picture Library focused on collections that were quotidian and comprehensive. It was also a divergence from the first Nepalese project that we encountered in Bangladesh in the early 2000s. Designed by senior journalist Kunda Dixit, the 2009 project *Nepal: A People’s War* premiered with haunting images of Maoist guerrilla fighters in hiding.

Dixit’s *People’s War* came from a journalistic impulse to document “important” events (Sanjay Kak’s *Witness: Kashmir 1986–2016* makes similar use of photographs). Nepal Picture Library proposed a different method—its co-founder NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati, and the supporting organization Photo Circle,² worked in a space of visual arts where photographs were a primary means of communication and exchange, especially in a South Asian context with many competing vernacular languages.³ While Photo Circle and Photo Kathmandu established a reputation for showcasing beautiful photography, Kakshapati and her colleagues on the Library project built a database and living archive of everyday snapshots taken by families. The Library began with this appeal, and has kept its resonance for ordinary Nepalese: “Do you have old family photos sitting in

boxes, dusty and molding, close to destruction?”

While the initial call went out to everyone who may have personal snapshots, studio photographers are well represented, including Amrit Bahadur Chitrakar, Karuna Sthapit, Surendra Lawoti, Aata Husai Sheikh, Purna Bahadur Shrestha, and Ravi Mohan Shrestha. These images remind us of the Arab Image Foundation as well—both the variety and symmetry, in the way people pose for formal portraits with their families and loved ones. Posed portraits in front of staged backgrounds also come from personal home archives—the collections of Karuna Sthapit and Surendra Lawoti have many studio photographs, but they themselves are not studio photographers. Start delving into the Library’s searchable database (still a work in progress and in need of funds to make it truly comprehensive), and its thematic groupings reveal the beauty in the ordinary. “Politics” is one keyword, but far more numerous are the categories that matter to Nepalese across time—“Travel,” “Leisure,” “Fashion,” “Festivals,” and, for the union of the whole, “Weddings.” What does all this mean for a history of intertwined South Asia? This is where the open source, collaborative nature of Nepal Picture Library comes in. Their objective is to digitize and make available their full holdings online, with an invitation to researchers to dig through the collections, and from there write reports, make films, or give lectures based on the material. The library has been keen to not take on the authoritative “last word” on the meanings of these images. Rather they have left that to the viewer as a citizen-researcher.

I have mentioned the eroding condition of the archives in South Asia, accelerated by local climatic conditions, and also hostile state organs and officials. Writing about the destruction of the Bangladesh image archives, I wrote in 2012: “I asked the custodian where the originals were. The documents he had shown me were pristine yet distant, copies of copies. The originals are long gone, he explained. Every time there is a change in government, an official inevitably comes down to the storeroom and asks to see what is inside. With a tradition of abrupt and forced *pala bodol*, every state functionary assumes that nothing that came before his time will help his cause. Therefore, the safest path is to destroy all documents, which the official does with mechanical and unemotional efficiency.”⁴ It is not only meddling bureaucrats that make records vanish, weather and related life-forms also eat away (figuratively and literally) at the archive. An anthropologist researching the roots of the idea of “Islamic banking” recently posted a heart-breaking photograph from the National



Nepal Picture Library, Patan Durbar Square, 2018. Photo by Chenni Dorje Lama. Local women visiting *The Feminist Memory Project* exhibition at Patan Durbar Square as part of Photo Kathmandu 2018.

Archives of Bangladesh. The ledgers of the British Colonial administration were too far in the past to be sensitive or censored. But when she opened up bound volumes that had not been touched in a decade, a small rivulet of paper-eating worms spilled out—the ledgers were scarred by dozens of worm food channels across each page.

Such archives face rapid decay in South Asia, and Nepal Picture Library's drive is to build a digital archive before materials are lost. There is an intensely urgent feel to the Library's communications: "If you want to contribute your photographs to Nepal Picture Library, digitization and archiving facilities WILL NOT COST YOU a single rupee." followed by "Please send us an email with your information and we will schedule a meeting as soon as possible. There is not a day to lose!" With this sense of urgency, Nepal Picture Library has become the repository for one of the largest image collections in Nepal within five years. Scanning from every vintage format, including glass plates, negatives, and printed photos, the current count is 120,000 images and growing. This spans 380 named collections (either after a photographer or a family), of which the largest are Sridhar Lal Manandhar Collection (9,000), Betty Woodsend Collection (6,000), Bikas Rauniar Collection (2,400), and the Amod Dev Bhattarai Collection (2,500).

Working with citizen-researchers, the Library has begun to produce curated exhibitions, books, and standalone websites as visitors find new ways to think through what arrives as a "raw dump" of images. Gleaning a sprawling catalogue, Nepal Picture Library has published the books *Facing the Camera—A History of Nepali Studio Photography* and *Juju Bhai Dhakhwa—Keeper of Memories*. A key publication that aligns with the Library's mission of fighting casteism, racism, and nationalism in South Asia is *Dalit—A Quest for Dignity*. This book collates photographs on Dalit (subaltern peoples within Hinduism's caste system) resistance over six decades using archival photographs to "demand an accounting of obscured histories" and the "processes of inclusion and exclusion." The commitment shown in *Dalit* expands further into a new project begun in 2019, which looks at the idea of "Indigenous Pasts, Sustainable Futures." Through archive building and storytelling, the Library reimagines conversations around traditional knowledge systems, and Indigenous ideas of futurity. Expanding from the book form, the online project *The Skin of Chitwan* looks at terrestrial change through images and sounds of personal memories of the past.

One of the Library's significant new projects,

The Public Life of Women: A Feminist Memory Project,⁵ came to Bangladesh in the form of a traveling exhibition, and I saw it again in Delhi at India Art Fair. Building from a public call put out in 2018, the project collected photographs, letters, diary entries, pamphlets, and other formal and informal records documenting the role women have played in Nepal's contemporary history since the 1930s. It announced the challenge of a "past [that] needed to be freed from the grips of economically and culturally dominant groups." Standing at 8,000 photographs two years later, it has brought a feminist history of Asia outside the familiar stories of work in domestic spaces to take in the full possibility of participation in public life. In a fast-evolving economic scenario, South Asian women are now in factories, offices, and organizations in unprecedented numbers. This dramatic increase in women's public visibility, and men's fears of losing space and power, has faced backlash across India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The propaganda arm of that backlash has proposed that these jobs, and the necessity for women in those spaces, are "new," "imported," and in spite of a long history of local feminist organizing, "foreign." The response to these intrigues is the Feminist Memory Project, which insists, *we have always been here, and we won't go back inside*.

Nepal is a vital nerve center in the fight to reclaim a common memory, against the dark centrifugal forces that drive peoples further apart. The future takes shape because of this sharp look back at *where we came from*—to understand *where we go next*.

Nomination statement by Naeem Mohaiemen, August 2020

1 Nandy, Ashis. *Intimate enemy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

2 <https://www.photocircle.com.np/>

3 Mitchell, Lisa. *Language, Emotion, and Politics in South India. The Making of a Mother Tongue*. Indiana University Press, 2009.

4 Mohaiemen, Naeem. "Prisoners of Shothik Itihash," *New Age*, March 31, 2012.

5 Video: <https://vimeo.com/359396369>.

Emeka Okereke: Invisible Borders Trans-African Photographers Organization

Naeem Mohaiemen



Lugards Rest House I, Lokoja, Nigeria, 2016.
© Emeka Okereke. Courtesy of Invisible Borders Trans-African Project, 2016.

The last time I remember smiling at a newspaper was three weeks before global headlines were swallowed up by a living organism, when 2020 became *annus horribilis* (“terrible year”). I was in Dhaka in February working on a new film, and Emeka Okereke and the Invisible Borders team were installing their project at the national Shilpakala Academy. Emeka handed me a copy of *The Trans-Bangladeshi*,¹ a newspaper published jointly by Invisible Borders Trans-African Photographers Organization and Bangladesh’s Pathshala photography school. The immediate sign that something was pleasantly awry was the price—“Taka 0,” a gentle way of announcing a barter or gift exchange. The haunting cover photograph had both the Bangladeshi photographers I knew well (Sayed Asif Ahmed, Sadia Marium, and others) and a team of African writers and photographers who were on their first trip to Bangladesh. Captured by Emeka, the black-and-white image had a sepia sheen that rendered the team members copacetic beyond their passports, differences marked only by small glimmers of local fashion.

But what is *local* anyway? In Invisible Borders’ imagination, a shawl was equally likely to be a roadside find in Lagos or a gift from a Dhaka friend. In its staging, it also reminded me of Okereke’s images for an African road-trip (*Dilemma of a New Age II*, 2012)—the gas station attendant holding a petrol pump nozzle to his head, as if to say to a rapacious world: *you’re trying to kill me*. The lead news story in this Africa-Asia joint newspaper was

Kay Ugede’s “Let’s Try On New Clothes.” The rest of the newspaper alternated between English articles and Bangla texts from the local artists. Again, if to say: *those who know will read, we don’t always translate to make it easy*. Three weeks later, much of the world would go into the long lockdown—Invisible Borders’ beautiful project to break down checkpoints between African nations, and between Africa and Asia, suddenly faced a new opponent. Since March 2020, a hygiene regime has been attached to surveillance and border controls, the global movement of humans is seemingly at a hard stop. This is a necessary time to insist that the idea of a Trans-African Organization must not be allowed to perish in this pandemic. A dream of open borders—through journeys, stories, and images, between African and Asian nations—stands in contrast to the nightmares that have gripped our lives, accelerated by autocratic dictators, North and South.

For a decade, Invisible Borders has been committed to a journey that surpasses the incentive-reward system of contemporary art circulation. The making of work can be as heterogeneous and universal as we wish and will it. However, the majority of capital flowing around art distribution remains concentrated in Europe and North America. Because money always shouts, its selections and favorites try to stand in for all of contemporary art. A familiar journey is for the artist from the Global South to gain legibility and accelerated circulation through recognition by Northern

gatekeepers. Even the performance of authentic forms is striated with this wondering: *which audience matters?* From the beginning, Invisible Borders and its expanding team have insisted that the dialogue is between the many Souths, and not for a Western audience. In particular, the collective has taken on the format of the long-form road trip as a building block, focused on pulling together African nations through their peoples, rather than an obstinate state machinery.

Lagos, Nigeria has been the nerve center of the project since 2009, but from there the road trips radiate outward across the continent as part of a trans-African exchange. Starting as a project where artists took photographs as they crossed into each country, the project expanded to encompass literature, film, and performance art. Individual projects, such as a celebrated Lagos to Maputo 2018 road trip, stretched into fifty days with equal numbers of entries, from exuberant music videos to a sober assessment of Rwanda's post-genocide futurity. While real-time sharing and video diaries are a visible aspect of how the project makes itself known during and after a journey, this project is not concerned with the *over-production* of material and archives. Look closely at the mission statement and the emphasis is unmistakable: "*collective journey* of the participating artists who, during their *momentary* stops in capital cities"—the long travels are the point, not the arrival or destination.

This is not a project focused on grand outcomes or tangible milestones, as those favored by NGO-modeled arts funding today. A great volume of work is produced, but communications underscore the transformations and friendships among the artists on the long-distance bus. This is present especially in the focus on the after-life of the journey, when artists return to their own countries and cities. The focus on borders as lines to break and overcome gives Invisible Borders a possibility to create something new outside the nation-state form, and it is best expressed in the psyche and artworks made by the alumni of this project many months after the road trip has ended, when they are back in their own homes. Except the idea of a "home" in Africa has permanently changed, because of what the artists learnt from each other, in ways that are both symbiotic and friction-laden. The Congolese artist finds herself unable to stereotype Nigeria's oil-riches, and the Cameroonian photographer is haunted by the energy of a Kigali that defies Hollywood's *Hotel Rwanda*. Invisible Borders meticulously documents all works produced with different do-it-yourself (DIY), scrappy website hosting platforms (blogspot being the earliest) that also stand as testament to a

decade of technology shifts. Follow projects since 2009 and you can trace a repeated, looping, and accumulative line of movement, and a focus on what happens to the travelers afterward.

I started with a memory from Bangladesh, and this was not a random itinerary for the Invisible Borders Trans-African concept—rather, it universalized their idea of Africa. In 1972 Walter Rodney published the iconic *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Fifty years later, Invisible Borders audaciously proposes the contrapuntal arc: How Africa might show a path for building warm neighbors instead of hostile walls. After traversing the African continent, the project expanded to post-war Sarajevo for a road trip between Africa and Europe's former Socialist Bloc periphery. In a similar spirit, the team traveled in 2020 from various African countries to a central airport, and from there to Bangladesh. Finally, with a group of Bangladeshi artists, they set out to one of Asia's most heavily militarized map lines—the Bangladesh-India border, a site of shootings and killings by Indian soldiers of desperate Bangladeshi migrants. As anthropologist Delwar Hussain outlined in *Boundaries Undermined* (2013), this border is the site of lethal military surveillance, and at the same time it is a bustling microscopic scale city on a border line, where sexuality, commerce, bureaucracy, and leisure collide and overlap. It is this perpetual push-pull between danger and promise that is captured in Invisible Borders' joint project produced as a newspaper and exhibition this spring.¹

The spirit of *more roads / less walls* is captured decisively in the images and prose that Invisible Borders has left for Bangladeshi artists to savor and build on in the coming years. The Islamic preacher who tries to pronounce Nigeria as "Nai-je-ria," the young villagers who ask with naivete about dreadlocks, and finally Innocence, a member of the road trip, patiently obliging requests for selfies from villagers who are meeting African artists for the first time.

Finally, I treasure a quiet image of three young Indians at the Hili border checkpoint between India and Bangladesh, eagerly snapping mobile phone images of the artists. Their easy smiles and enthusiasm stand in sharp rebuke to the heavily armed border guards of their own nation.

Nomination statement by Naeem Mohaiemen, August 2020

1 *The Trans-Bangladeshi*, Invisible Borders Trans-African Organization and Drik Network/Pathshala/Chobi Mela. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ma9_wFzNdWu0P8JsNeqwmHRq79wZ3nl/view

Underground Resistance: Submerge Project

Salome Asega

Let's make sure we're on the same page about one thing: Techno is Black cultural production. Techno is Detroit's motor city sound. When you ask early pioneers of this art form how the sound came to be, they'll start by telling you how sequencers, samplers, and electronic audio gear became affordable by way of the American Federation of Musicians' tax against electronic music in the mid-'80s. This tax ensured bands and analog musicians were prioritized when booking shows and concerts. Musicians who could afford this equipment at original cost were finding it difficult to get gigs, and would consequently sell their gear at discounted rates or pledge them to pawn shops. This opened the door for a younger, more Black audience to scoop up these toys and start playing.

Meanwhile in a Detroit suburb in the mid-'80s, Juan Atkins, Kevin Saunderson, and Derrick May were pioneering a new sound that would birth a subculture. The three musicians were informed by Japanese synthpop (Ryuichi Sakamoto), European synthesizer music (Kraftwerk), The B-52's, Prince, Parliament-Funkadelic, Donna Summer, among so many more. Known as the Belleville Three, these musicians were determined to experiment with emerging electronic tools to create a sound all their own and representative of a city undergoing dramatic change.

Following this development, Underground Resistance (UR) formed as a record label and collective of musicians who were interested in

merging the sonic aesthetics of Techno with the social, political, and economic conditions of inner-city Detroit in a Reagan-era landscape. Formed in 1989 by musicians "Mad" Mike Banks, Jeff Mills, and Robert Hood, UR made Techno a sound for radical imagination by and for Black people—music for a movement.¹ UR rose in opposition to a more commercial music industry. With Motown down the way, UR wanted a label without rules; they performed with masks so audiences could focus more on the music instead of the artists as a package.

As music journalist David McNamee wrote in *The Guardian* in 2008, sampling "was the working-class Black answer to punk."² Techno developed by way of people experimenting with equipment that was not meant for them to afford or own. And without the restrictions of an established electronic music industry, these artists found freedom of expression. No one was going to tell them what they could or could not do with their samplers and sequencers. There was no manual, no protocols.

Anyone who visits Detroit knows you don't just show up and take up space. It's a city that asks you to listen first and listen deeply. And when you do, you hear how the sonic culture is informed by Black labor. The auto production industry provides a historical backdrop for the invention of this sound. Juan Atkins mentions being the grandchild of a Ford auto worker who moved to Detroit during the Great Migration and how the plant's equitable



UR live in The Hague. Courtesy of Photophunk.com.

pay policies created generational opportunities for his family. Mike Banks himself worked as an auto worker and used to drag race cars as a way to finance his music projects. In writer Mike Rubin's "Cosmic Cars" piece in *Victory Journal*, UR co-founder Banks tells Rubin, "Motown is affiliated with cruising; UR is associated with horsepower."

Speculative fiction and world-building are just as much a part of the music as the technical production. Many of the early techno groups affiliated with UR were couched in mythology, making future visioning a central tenet to the genre. UR label affiliate Drexciya, a duo made up of James Stinson and Gerald Donald, reckons with a dark history by creating nautical Afrofuturist sounds inspired by their vision of an underwater country made up of those women and children lost during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. For Stinson and Donald, these people have not passed, but have instead adapted to life underwater, creating utopian kingdoms far greater than anything we've seen on land. The music and mythology serve to envision a world with protocols that are more equitable, celebratory, and just.

In recent years, UR has grown to be much more than a Detroit label. They are a global stakeholder in how the sound continues to grow and be studied. In Detroit, they have the Submerge, a space that is part Techno history museum and part record store. In the basement there are signatures from thousands of music fans around

the world who know that visiting this site is an act of honoring the sound and the people who built it. In addition, UR is often sought out by audio gear manufacturers to consult on the direction of new music tools. For UR, digital equity and access are key to these consultations. Culture is shaped by the voices of those who have been pushed to the margins, so it's important to them that young Black people are centered in the design and cost analysis of new technology. And to this point, they are now in the process of building a music residency and school for Detroit musicians that includes dedicated workshops with established artists and professional development opportunities.

UR is so committed to place and to making sure the talents of their city are acclaimed at home and abroad because they carry with them stories of how the world could be. My favorite bit from the *Underground Resistance Manifesto* reads, "Techno is a music based in experimentation. It is music for the future of the human race. Without this music there will be no peace, no love, no vision."

- 1 See *Underground Resistance* featured on Electronic Beats TV, *Slices* issue 3-06. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGmO9qdu4g0>. See also DeForrest Brown Jr. on *Underground Resistance* and Kevin Beasley, "Your Groove," *ArtForum*, December 14, 2018. <https://www.artforum.com/performance/deforrest-brown-jr-on-kevin-beasley-and-underground-resistance-77993>.
- 2 David McNamee, "From pillage to homage," *The Guardian*, Feb 15, 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/feb/16/popandrock.features16>.



Conflictorium

AVNI SETHI

Owed to a Certain Emptiness: Infra-structuring the Conflictorium is presented at The New School as part of the Vera List Center Forum 2021: As for Protocols. It celebrates Avni Sethi, recipient of the 2020–2022 Jane Lombard Prize for Art and Social Justice.

Jury Citation

Avni Sethi
for
Conflictorium

Recipient of 2020–2022
Jane Lombard Prize
for Art and Social Justice

Candice Hopkins, Jury Chair
Ivet Curlin
Natasha Ginwala
Carin Kuoni
Tamara Oyola-Santiago
Shuddhabrata Sengupta



Installation shot. *Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression*. Photo by Shristi Sharma. Courtesy of Conflictorium.

“Museums are not normally formed around conflicts, yet Conflictorium is not a normal museum. Initiated and directed by Avni Sethi, a cultural organizer and trained Kathak dancer, it reflects Sethi’s interdisciplinary, boundary-crossing practice and ethos. Deeply embedded in the surrounding communities of Ahmedabad, Conflictorium is opening up histories of individual and collective trauma and holding space for challenging and difficult conversations. The museum operates within a complicated political context and is an intellectual and ethical sanctuary in the region—particularly at a time when democracy and basic human rights, including religious freedoms, are under attack, in Gujarat, and elsewhere in the world.

Conflictorium is rooted in the political dimensions of its immediate surroundings. Sethi’s commitment to intimacy of scale and sincerity of intent has made it a place of gathering for everyone in the community, from schoolchildren, to elders, to neighbors. Indeed, by working across

generations, the museum navigates polarized spaces and challenges historical amnesia. Under Sethi’s guidance, Conflictorium uses lyricism to recalibrate what has been frozen into silence, and it is through this sense of the political dimension of poetics, that it addresses the often unspeakable nature of trauma.

We are honored to bestow the 2020–2022 Jane Lombard Prize for Art and Social Justice on Avni Sethi for Conflictorium, and delighted to appoint the 2020–2022 Jane Lombard Fellows. All are recognized for collaborative projects, and we hope that in placing them in conversation, a sense of solidarity will be fostered. The conversations that Conflictorium is engaging with have global resonances, and the projects of the Jane Lombard Fellows affirm this. Hosting Conflictorium in New York in the fall of 2021 will shed light on the current political relationship between India and the United States, one based on mutual complicity, without criticism or reproach.”

Owed to a Certain
Emptiness:

Infra-structuring
the Conflictorium

Avni Sethi



Conflictorium, *Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression*, installation view.
Photo by Shristi Sharma. Courtesy of the Conflictorium Archives.

It is difficult to describe in language the scale, intensity, nature, and repetition of the kinds of violence taking place in India. I am not going to attempt a contextualization of the trauma that is unfolding every day. It is grave and unforgivable. The descent of violence into our everyday lives is systematic and designed. This violence has been reproducing and mutating itself from city to town to village to homes. It has engulfed the most vulnerable in the harshest ways.

We have seen the worst manifestation of power and its blinding visions. We have seen the dismantling of every welfare infrastructure, the rotting of judicial infrastructures, a ruin of education and learning spaces, a degeneration of societal imagination, heightened inequalities, persecuted lovers.

What does one do with this magnitude of pain and grief? Pain that is heightened everyday, making us a people living in crisis, numbed by grief.

Since 2013, Conflictorium has attempted to hold space for this very continuous grief. To build infrastructures that acknowledge and remember this violence, to be able to speak, listen, laugh, and cry through the onslaught of this bitterness. To build some space within cultures that allow for expression without privileged prejudice. In building this infrastructure, we have done well sometimes, and also made mistakes, either way, we have learnt from our journey.

Excerpt taken from the exhibition text that accompanies *Owed to a Certain Emptiness: Infra-structuring the Conflictorium*.

Cautious Optimism: A Curatorial Walkthrough

Eriola Pira



Conflictorium, *Empathy Alley*, Permanent Exhibition.
Photo by Nipun Prabhakar. Courtesy of Conflictorium Archives.

At the time of my writing, Avni Sethi has just arrived in Mexico for a two-week stay, which will allow her to enter the US, bypassing COVID travel restrictions on those arriving from India, which are expected to be lifted by the time *Owed to a Certain Emptiness: Infra-structuring the Conflictorium* closes. Despite this leap of faith and extraordinary efforts, there is no assurance the artist will be present for an exhibition that hinges on presence. We proceed with cautious optimism but it is not without other kinds of uncertainties and even existential questions that we present this exhibition. Among the more mundane are the current COVID-protocols at The New School: if you're reading this text you're likely to not have experienced the exhibition, which is not open to the general public, so consider this writing exercise a curatorial walkthrough, an attempt to bring the exhibition and Conflictorium to you.

Sethi would tell you that Conflictorium is a universal and urgent idea that could very well be transplanted or replicated in other cities and contexts. She founded the museum in 2013 as a testimony and response to the socioeconomic divide and violence in Ahmedabad, or the larger state of Gujarat since its founding in 1960, but especially the Muslim pogroms of 2002. The stated aim of Conflictorium is to support others in building their own space dedicated to engaging with conflict or other social issues. A few are underway, such as *Mehnat Manzil: Museum of Work*, a "sister museum" of Conflictorium also based in Ahmedabad. This exhibition, however, is not a traveling or temporary Conflictorium in New York. Instead, it has been conceived with and for the artist and her team to be a space for pause, presence, and emptiness, the kinds necessary to think through Conflictorium as a practice, a methodology of instituting. A moment to recalibrate and design

new protocols and structures for transformative processes at and beyond the museum.

Thus the question of how to take Conflictorium and move it in and out of its hyperlocal context becomes a key consideration for the artist and us, the presenting institution, and not just in the way that such a concern is endemic to contemporary art and the demands of the circuit of international art institutions, prizes, and biennials, the Vera List Center for Art and Politics included, not to mention the global art market. What are the possibilities and pitfalls of bringing a Conflictorium, its approach to conflict, and to museums to other places? To institutions outside of India? How do the lens and infrastructures of the hosting institution affect the visibility and reception of a museum of conflict, and how is Conflictorium itself potentially affected by them? What does Conflictorium bring with it to New York, and what from this exhibition does it take back home, to Ahmedabad, and elsewhere? What is there to learn from one another? How do we conceive of this work as infrastructures of care?

Far beyond the curatorial concerns and challenges this project poses to us, this exhibition, and especially working with the nimble and resourceful team at Conflictorium, has been one of embracing or at least acknowledging conflict at the heart of cultural work and transformative processes. It's too soon to tell how successful we've been, and this is not the space to speculate on the posed questions. Still, it might be helpful to walkthrough our exhibition, conjure up Conflictorium's ephemeral presence in it and let you experience it in absentia.

This exhibition is empty, much like at Conflictorium, where emptiness makes and holds space for untold stories, unheard voices, and unseen bodies. That is not to say that there is nothing in it but that it contains no artifacts or singular artworks. The immediate context of Conflictorium, the street in Mirzapur where it is located, in the old part of Ahmedabad, is a constant presence. A 24/7 livestream projects the streetview outside Conflictorium inside the Aronson Galleries at The New School. The visible time zone difference of nine hours and 30 minutes simultaneously highlights and collapses geographic distance, the space between the two contexts, the order of day after night, and provides the artist a break from it, room to think and breathe, often in silence and sometimes in conversation with select guests.

Conflictorium's interior has also been extracted, almost surgically, and photographs of its walls cover the gallery, creating a shell, a container for emptiness. Doors and windows invite entries and exits from this space to suggest additional

rooms and floors of a house to explore, which is what you would do as a visitor to Conflictorium. There, you'd start with the Conflict Timeline, which defuses conflict away from any one event, and make your way through the Gallery of Disputes, Moral Compass, Empathy Alley, Memory Lab, and Sorry Tree. All are rooms or permanent installations at Conflictorium that lie empty, waiting for the evidence of conflict, suppressed histories, and encounters with the Other that visitors bring to Conflictorium.

Let us stop for a moment in Conflictorium's Memory Lab, a room of empty glass jars labeled with tags. There you're invited to leave behind objects you associate with personal conflict, because when you're at the museum, you're not only taken through historical, social, and political conflict, but you're also put right in the middle of it. Conflict isn't just out there and removed from you—you stand in the center of it. This conception and experience of conflict, as located in the realm of the personal, as well as the empty space the museum holds for multivocal and competing narratives of discord, provide for an alternative approach to both conflict and museums. The collectively produced installation of objects, stories, experiences, and conversations slowly materializes emptiness.

In this exhibition too, there are empty jars on shelves, with contents based on conversations between Sethi and her invited guests. The jars will be filled—over the course of the exhibition, the jars will be filled by small objects that each guest was invited to bring in as a personal testament to infrastructure. Each jar will have a QR code directing visitors to their recorded exchange on infrastructures and infrastructuring. The accumulation of these artifacts and conversations extend the idea of art practice as evidence for transformative processes. They archive reflections and expanded notions of infrastructures for such work, both personal and structural in nature, by noted artists, academics, thinkers, and journalists.

Sethi's theoretical and practical conception of emptiness and exhibition-making as an infrastructure of care is most present in two other elements in the exhibition that also evoke and refer to ways in which Conflictorium turns visitors into participants and each encounter into a dialogue about conflict at the heart of society: a large, circular table that invites you to pull up a floor cushion and have a cup of tea (which due to COVID protocols is limited to a very small number of companions) and ten, clear acrylic sheets that line the walls with Sethi's meditations on ten years of doing the work of instituting and infrastructuring the Conflictorium laser cut in them. You'll have to hold out your hand, touch them, to read.

Citizenship and the Amnesia of Violence

Adil Hossain

In conversation with historian Howard Spodek, author of *Ahmedabad: Shock City of Twentieth Century India* (2010) on his first visit to Conflictorium with me on January 14, 2017, one employee told us that the project of Conflictorium, “started with the idea of citizenship and what democracy means.” To answer the question, why Ahmedabad needed a Museum of Conflict when there are sixty-two other Museums in the city, she replied beautifully with the following words:

Maybe we will have to turn the idea of the Museum on its head. We will have to take away the yellow lines, we will have to take away the glass boxes, we will have to start touching, feeling, being part of the exhibit, being part of history writing. So, lots of the exhibits [in Conflictorium] have this kind of interaction with whoever comes in, who adds something, and that becomes part of the museum.

The participatory nature of the Museum provides the space with a special meaning in a city like Ahmedabad, often cited in media and academic literature as a “bleeding city” or a wounded city with its history of communal violence. As a researcher of “life as such,” as French anthropologist Didier Fassin terms it, especially life after conflict, I am most interested in how the issues of citizenship and democracy are shaped in the politics of everyday

life. And ideas of citizenship and democracy can be debated, challenged, and enriched only when we make people “part of history writing” through such participatory spaces.

In Ahmedabad, I argue that mourning a violent past and remembering what happened is part of this process with the aim to offer an inclusive citizenship to everyone affected by violence (directly or indirectly). 1969, 1985, or 2002 are not just years, but a certain marker on the city and its tryst with Hindu-Muslim violence. Acclaimed feminist scholar Butler stresses that “mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation.” And this transformation involves both reflection and reconciliation with the past. My emphasis on mourning and remembering against a certain amnesia of violence in a city is essentially linked with civic memory. Dagger argues, “Civic memory is nothing more than the recollection of the events, characters, and developments which make up the history of one’s city or town.” This civic memory nurtures a civic identity, offering a form of belonging to the city which is indispensable for the question of citizenship.

Here we may ask, what kind of civic memory on violence exists in Ahmedabad in the presence of a top-down narrative of moving on? And there is no common and unifying answer to this question, but

rather various shades of opinion, something dependent upon the identity of individual responders.

One senior bureaucrat while speaking on the vision behind Sabarmati Riverfront development and other schemes operating in Ahmedabad city said, “The poor will obviously thrive if the city thrives. Why do outsiders keep talking about 2002? Where is the violence? People live in peace: outsiders cannot quite grasp the social fabric of Ahmedabad. There was no violence.” On the one hand, this is a classic case of “official amnesia” present around the city to promote a different kind of civic memory. On the other hand, for people living in Citizennagar, a small resettlement colony of 130 families that was set up in the aftermath of the 2002 pogroms against Muslims in the outskirts of the Ahmedabad near garbage dump, civic memory essentially consists of violence and displacement.

So, what role can a museum like Conflictorium play in the middle of such contesting narratives around violence, and thus belonging to the city then? One way is to acknowledge its engagement with the issues of citizenship and democracy. Before I write my impression of this place and analyze its role in the citizenship building process, let me throw light on the idea of citizenship itself and why it needs to be debated from a new perspective in the Indian context.

As an academic, we usually credit British sociologist T. H. Marshall for first theorizing the concept of “social citizenship” in his lectures delivered at Cambridge University in 1949. He sought to define citizenship as, “a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community.” He believed that all those who possess this status are equal with regard to their rights and duties. Marshall’s account of citizenship analyzed the political history of Britain in the last three centuries and developed a typology based on three categories—civil, political, and social. He examined the emergence of *civil* rights such as the right to free speech and association in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; *political* rights, including the right to free and fair exercise of suffrage in the nineteenth century; and *social* rights such as the right “to live a life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society” in the welfare policies adopted in twentieth century.

Marshall’s idea of citizenship helped us to understand its various dimensions over a historical period. But his emphasis on the concept purely from the perspective of claiming rights on the state and equating community with nation was critiqued by scholars later. Academics and activists who work with marginalized groups like women and members of queer communities argue that their

struggle to become “full members of the community” is not reflected in traditional conceptions of citizenship. Actually, if we see the scholarship on citizenship, from Aristotle’s *Politics* to Marshall’s analysis of the idea, it has always been treated from the point of view of a white male. However, it is also true that the contours of citizenship have never been static. It is as much a status as a process in itself. If the American Revolution produced the concept of property rights for all citizens, then by the 1848 revolutions that rocked the continent of Europe with the aim to replace old monarchical regimes, the idea of citizen became inclusive of working-class men.

One question is pertinent at this stage, and that is whether citizenship is fundamentally a western concept rooted in western texts and practices. Scholars like Dominique Schnapper based at École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) in Paris starts his European debate on citizenship by saying, “EUROPE INVENTED THE IDEA OF CITIZENSHIP, and Europe is the birth-place of nation-state.” The task to come up with a coherent theory of citizenship rooted in South Asian history becomes harder when we recognize that our society was stratified along complex layers of social identifications, caste being prominent among them. There is no denying that this very land has witnessed the birth of Sufi traditions and Bhakti movements, where the idea of humanity beyond any social markers was put on a high pedestal. Possibly much before Thomas Paine or John Stuart Mill, it is Vaishnavite poet Chandidas who declared in the fourteenth century, “sabar upare manus satya tahar upare nai “ (The supreme truth is man, there is nothing more important than he is).

If citizenship is about being “full members of a community,” then how should we read Kabir’s *doha* or Lalon Fakhir’s *baul* songs, where love for another human being is the only criterion to celebrate togetherness? Whether Kabir or Lalon Fakhir, the early proponents of citizenship in South Asian life are a matter of debate and further scholarly analysis (sadly little or no work is available on this), but we have to acknowledge that in the present-day, the concept of citizenship represents the political expression to the idea of wanting to live together. It is not just “community” but the idea of “political community” as Hannah Arendt explained in her work *The Human Condition* (1958), which is fundamental to the principles of citizenship today.

One of the main issues in postcolonial societies like those in India is that there are multiple sites of authority and an individual’s relationship with these authorities at various levels constitutes his or her political subjectivity. This political



Conflictorium. Permanent exhibit, Sorry Tree.
Courtesy of the Conflictorium Archives.

subjectivity can take the shape of both “citizen” and “subject,” depending upon the context, as Ugandan academic Mahmood Mamdani explains in his eponymous book (1996). And that is why membership in the political community involves a process of continuous negotiation and struggle. It is in this process of claiming and reclaiming rights that institutions get made and remade through their claims to authority.

Most of the academic scholarship today accepts the fact that citizenship mainly talks about encounters between society and the state. Canadian-Turkish academic Engin Isin, in his book *Acts of Citizenship*, says that our position and experiences within a “social” sphere define our “citizenship.” Therefore, for Isin citizenship is “the art of being with others, negotiating different situations and identities, and articulating ourselves as distinct yet familiar to others in our everyday lives.” To think of citizenship from the social perspective, especially how we live and interact with others as elaborated by Isin, enlightens us on the limits of the state to deliver rights. And this is why in India citizenship is not simply defined by one’s voter I-card or Aadhar number, which may facilitate certain rights in some specific scenarios, but is not enough to provide the gamut of experiences that comes with being a citizen.

And here the idea of a museum becomes important in order to enhance the social experience

of a person and effectively help in securing the ideas of citizenship. When members of Conflictorium talk about “touching, feeling, being part of the exhibit, being part of history writing” at the museum, and through that about exploring questions of democracy and citizenship, I believe they argue for felt aspects of social membership, which is beyond democratic self-governance or deliberative democracy that the Indian constitution offers.

Usually, any museum with its photographs, letters, signs, and different artifacts is understood to be participative because every item evokes some kind of relationship with its audience. And therefore, a museum has no independent meaning in itself. The objective of any museum is to find resonance with people at large with chosen themes and objects, something which evokes a sense of belonging among the visitors. And here the idea of citizenship and museum falls on the same plane, as both aim for a universal ideal with a particularistic approach. The design of Conflictorium, from the room with “Conflict timeline,” which is Gujarat-specific to the “Sorry Tree” upstairs, symbolizing the universal idea of apology, reflects the same approach. To me, this journey from conflict to apology in the space of a Museum encourages everyone to participate with the cause of a universal citizenship.

Being at Conflictorium, when someone enters the room with “Conflict timeline” and looks at

posters and information on various conflicts that happened in the last century, it forces us to think of conflict in Gujarat from multiple perspectives. The timeline educates the audience that, it is not just the 2002 carnage against the minority Muslim community or the 1985 caste violence that define Gujarat's experience with conflict in the eyes of media and people elsewhere, but also on conflicts with state on account of land acquisition or nature in the form of earthquakes and floods. Here the idea of conflict is not reductionist but rather holistic in its conception, and essentially puts humans at the center. We know from Edward Simpson's work on the 2001 Kutch earthquake, that life after such a natural disaster can be designed around political ideology as well. And this is why Conflictorium's attempt to enlighten the visitors on Gujarat's conflict in this way deserves applause.

In the other room, when someone hears the historic speeches delivered by the makers of Modern India like Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Jinnah, and Ambedkar, it presents us with the ideals of a political community where everyone would find their place and worth. These are the very ideals that get violated in the aftermath of a conflict, as the other rooms of this museum show. We understand from these speeches that though these great figures talk about particular moments and movements in history, their vision presents a future for all.

However, it is the room called "Moral Compass," where the replica of the original Indian Constitution adopted by the constituent assembly takes center stage, and long banners displaying major Acts and Bills enacted by Parliament since independence, which fundamentally connects with Conflictorium's project of citizenship. Here the ideals of political community are shown through the notions of legal citizenship and as a national enterprise. Here citizenship is a status enshrined in legal documents and institutions, which promises equality for all.

By the time the visitor reaches the Sorry Tree (a hanging bougainvillea) upstairs, this museum offers another kind of opportunity to engage with conflict. So, what happens when someone says sorry, especially in the context of past violence? Sometimes, an apology from the accused persons may bring true reconciliation between warring parties. But here in Conflictorium, visitors irrespective of their background are encouraged to apologize to their intended audience and leave a note on the Sorry Tree. Here, one may invoke Socratic or philosophical citizenship where he or she is encouraged to realize their own powers of reason and independent judgement. It is on the line of Hannah Arendt's explanation that Socratic

"thinking" may help us to diminish the evil in our political life, which is a widespread phenomenon today. The Sorry Tree essentially asks us to be human again, in the face of conflict.

To draw an example from home, I wish to quote here from the Bengali play *Mewar Patan*, written by nineteenth-century playwright Dwijendralal Roy. In the last act of this play, after the fall of Mewar at the hand of Mughal forces, when Rajput brothers who fought from opposite sides bitterly argue about who betrayed the motherland and why fulfilling duty out of allegiance is important, a mystic singer appears and chants, "Swajan desh dubia jak, abar tora manush ho" (Forget your nation and community, let us become human again). The venerated, decorated, and glorified idea of nation and community should be kept aside when humanity is at stake.

The idea of Conflictorium is an important intervention in the political landscape of Gujarat. The civil society in Gujarat operates in a highly volatile political climate and there were allegations that it did little to challenge the status quo present in Gujarati society, especially segregation based on religious lines. There is a great need that non-governmental organizations engage in constant acts of omphaloskepsis, given that in the aftermath of 2002 violence, some academics claimed that civil society does not exist in Gujarat.

Conflictorium does not take any side, be it political or social. It neither stands for the victims of conflict, nor for the perpetrators of it. It can be accused of being an apolitical project because of the way it is curated. But we have to keep in mind that the very act of thinking about conflict, in Gujarat, is the most political act in itself.

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2020–2022

Jane Lombard Fellow and Prize Recipient Biographies

JORGE GONZÁLEZ maintains a practice that serves as a platform to restore symbols and concepts of Boricua (Puerto Rican) material culture, for the purpose of creating more inclusive narratives between the Indigenous and the modern. González founded the Escuela de Oficios to create a space dedicated to documenting and producing quotidian and academic knowledge of Boricua practices and history. The pedagogical approach is one of self-management with a focus on convivial and communal forms of production. The school's programming includes conversations, workshops, and exhibitions in which participants engage in mapping, documenting, and practicing artisan techniques. The school aims to recover practices and techniques that were lost to colonization by putting them to practical use.

NAYANTARA GURUNG KAKSHAPATI lives in Kathmandu, Nepal and works at the intersections of visual storytelling, research, pedagogy, and collective action. In 2007, she co-founded photo.circle; an independent artist-led platform that facilitates learning, exhibition making, publishing and a variety of other trans-disciplinary collaborative projects for Nepali visual practitioners. In 2011, she co-founded Nepal Picture Library; a digital archiving initiative that works towards diversifying Nepali socio-cultural and political history. NayanTara is also the co-founder and Festival Director of Photo Kathmandu, an international festival that takes place in Kathmandu every two years.

EMEKA OKEREKE is a Nigerian visual artist, writer, filmmaker and DJ who lives and works between Lagos and Berlin, moving from one to the other on a frequent basis. A past member of the renowned Nigerian photography collective Depth of Field (DOF), he holds a bachelor's/master's degree from the Ecole Nationale supérieure des Beaux Arts de Paris and has exhibited in biennales and art festivals in cities across the world, notably Lagos, Bamako, Cape Town, London, Berlin, Bayreuth, Frankfurt, Nuremberg, Brussels, Johannesburg, New York, Washington, Barcelona, Seville, Madrid and Paris. In 2015, his work was exhibited at the 56th Venice Biennale, in the context of an installation titled A Trans-African Worldspace. Okereke is the founder and artistic director of Invisible Borders Trans-African Project. He is also the founder and host of the Nkata Podcast Station. Okereke has served as guest/visiting lecturer in several art platforms and learning institutions – notably Hartford University's MFA program in photography and Summer Academy of Fine Arts, Salzburg Austria and Sandberg Institut Amsterdam. In 2018, Emeka Okereke was conferred France's prestigious insignia of Chevalier dans l'ordre des Arts et Lettres (Knight in the Order of Arts and Letters) by the Ministry of Culture of France as recognition of his contribution to the discourse on art in Africa, France, and the world at large.

UNDERGROUND RESISTANCE, a techno music collective and label, was co-founded by Jeff Mills and "Mad" Mike Banks in the late 1980s. Currently led by Cornelius Harris, UR's work has always had a socially conscious message and "a militant, mysterious aesthetic" defined by the bandanas members wear while performing. Their project Submerge is a subterranean brick and mortar space that is part techno music history museum, part record store, and part site for workshops and classes. It pays homage to the rich history of Detroit techno, a specific genre of electronic dance music produced in the Motor City in the 1980s and 1990s. The space showcases musical equipment on which iconic sets were recorded and an extensive collection of electronic music. Collectors travel from around the world to visit the record store for rare cuts from Detroit's most well-known and obscure techno artists. Submerge and Underground Resistance are considered among the most significant electronic music institutions worldwide.

AVNI SETHI is an interdisciplinary practitioner with her primary concerns lying between cultures of violence, memory, space, and the body. She conceptualized and designed the Conflictorium, a Museum of Conflict (www.conflictorium.org) situated in Ahmedabad, Gujarat in 2013. The museum has since been home to diverse critical explorations on conflict transformation and art practice. She currently serves as its Artistic Director. She has been writing and speaking about the potential of small museums as a holding space for social justice processes and the necessity of building care based ecosystems. She co-curated Mehnat Manzil, a Museum of Work in Ahmedabad focusing on informal labor and migration in collaboration with Saath Charitable Trust in 2019 (www.mehnatmanzil.org). Trained in multiple dance idioms, her performances are largely inspired by syncretic faith traditions and sites of contested narratives. She has been continually interested in exploring the relationship between intimate audiences and the performing body. She is currently nurturing "Ordo Performance Collaboratory" (www.ordocollaboratory.com), a studio space that focuses on performance based experimentations in 2021 in Ahmedabad. She lives and works between Ahmedabad and Raipur in India.

The Vera List Center for Art and Politics is a research center and public forum for art, culture, and politics. A pioneer in the field founded at The New School in 1992, the center serves a critical mission: to examine, teach, and learn from the intersection of art and politics; to advocate for art as a practice that responds to as it shapes political contexts; and to foster and support vibrant, diverse, and international networks of artists, scholars, students, and policymakers who take creative, intellectual, and political risks to advance social justice in their communities.

Named in honor of philanthropist Vera G. List (1908–2002), the center is the only institution committed exclusively to leading public debates on the intersection of art and politics. Along biennial thematic investigations, the center initiates interdisciplinary events and classes, prizes and fellowships, publications, exhibitions, and the annual Vera List Center Forum that probe pressing issues of our time. The center is committed to dismantling hierarchies of teaching and learning, nurturing emerging voices, and supporting artists in their crucial work of imagining better worlds.

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The New School's Jane Lombard Prize for Art and Social Justice is awarded by the Vera List Center for Art and Politics to an artist or group of artists in recognition of a particular project's long-term impact, boldness, and artistic excellence. International in scope, it constitutes a unique meeting of scholars and students, the general public, and globally significant artists. The prize initiative unfolds over a two-year period and provides a multi-layered platform for artists as agents of social and political change. Key features of the prize initiative include:

The Jane Lombard Prize

This honor is conferred upon the prize winner and includes a cash award as well as an academic residency at The New School. The Vera List Center and The New School act as a portal to New York City, introducing the artist to organizations and individuals relevant to their field. A major international conference, an exhibition of the winning project, a publication, and multimedia resources are made available to artists, scholars, and the public around the world, helping to lift up and extend the impact of the prize worldwide.

The prize has been awarded three times. Its inaugural winner was Theaster Gates, who was recognized for *Dorchester Projects*, an examination of racism, belief, and objecthood in Chicago's South Side, during the 2012–2014 cycle. Abounaddara, an anonymous film collective documenting the crisis in Syria, was awarded the prize during the 2014–2016 cycle. Berlin-based Brazilian artist Maria Thereza Alves was awarded the prize during the 2016–2018 cycle, in recognition of her long-term project *Seeds of Change*, which explores the myriad ways in which colonialism, commerce, and migration have shaped our modern world through the entry point of ballast flora. The 2018–2020 prize was awarded to the collective Chimurenga for their *Pan-African Space Station*, a virtual and material space that reflects on the collective political histories and memories in the Pan-African community.

The Jane Lombard Artist Fellowship Cohort

This honor is conferred upon a group of prize finalists from around the world, whose disparate projects are celebrated, critiqued, and evaluated in relation to one another and to the field at large. The cohort receives opportunities to engage with one another, the prize winner, and the faculty and students of The New School, where their projects will become the focus of interdisciplinary scholarship and curricula.

The 2020–2022 Jane Lombard Fellows are Jorge González for Escuela de Oficios (Puerto Rico), NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati for Nepal Picture Library (Lalitpur, Nepal), Emeka Okereke for Invisible Borders (Lagos, Nigeria, and elsewhere), and Underground Resistance for Submerge Project (Detroit, US).

2020–2022 Jury Members

IVET CURLIN is a member of the Zagreb-based curatorial collective WHW (What, How & for Whom). WHW runs Zagreb's Galeria Nova, where it collaborates with cultural organizations to promote intergenerational discourse around the politics of art. Along with WHW members Nataša Ilić and Sabina Sabolović, she currently serves as one of the joint directors of The Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna.

NATASHA GINWALA is an independent curator, researcher, and writer. She is Associate Curator of Berliner Festspiele at Gropius Bau, Berlin; Artistic Director of the 13th Gwangju Biennale 2021 (with Defne Ayas); and Artistic Director of Colomboscope. A 2019 recipient of the Graham Foundation Grant, she nominated Chimurenga, recipient of The New School's 2018–2020 Jane Lombard Prize for Art and Politics.

CARIN KUONI is Senior Director/Chief Curator of the Vera List Center. She has curated numerous exhibitions, and is editor/co-editor of several books, among them *Energy Plan for the Western Man: Joseph Beuys in America*; *Entry Points: The Vera List Center Field Guide on Art and Social Justice*; *Assuming Boycott: Resistance, Agency, and Cultural Production*; and, most recently, *Forces of Art. Perspectives from a Changing World*.

CANDICE HOPKINS (Carcross/Tagish First Nation) is a curator and writer, originally from Whitehorse, Yukon. She was recently appointed Executive Director of the Forge Project, a new initiative in upstate New York to support leaders in culture, education, food security, and land justice. Among her numerous recent international exhibitions are the Toronto Biennial of Art (postponed to 2022); the Canadian Pavilion for the 2019 Venice Biennial; and SITE Santa Fe's 2018 Sitelines Biennial. She was a participant in the Vera List Center's *Indigenous New York!* seminar series.

TAMARA OYOLA SANTIAGO is a public health educator and activist who specializes in harm reduction. After earning graduate degrees in Public Health and Latin American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, Oyola-Santiago joined the National Institutes of Health as a Presidential Management Fellow. Since 2009, she has been part of The New School, working with students to mobilize for social justice, equity and liberatory practices of education, including with the Vera List Center's *Vogu'ology* program.

SHUDDHABRATA SENGUPTA is an artist, writer, curator, and member of Raqs Media Collective, a group whose work sits at the crossroads of historical research, philosophical inquiry, and contemporary art. Raqs has exhibited widely, including at Documenta, the Venice, Istanbul, Taipei, Liverpool, Shanghai, Sydney and the São Paulo Biennales, and is the curator of the Yokohama Triennial 2020. Sengupta was the 2015–2016 Keith Haring Fellow in Art and Activism Bard College, and has lectured at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at The New School.

2020–2022 Prize Council Members

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 Hannah Black, London/New York
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 Paulina E. Varas, Valparaíso and Santiago, Chile

The New School

In 1919, a few great minds imagined a school that would never settle for the status quo, one that would rethink the purpose of higher learning. The New School was the result. Today it is a progressive university housing five extraordinary schools and colleges. It is a place where scholars, artists, and designers find the support they need to unleash their intellect and creativity so that they can courageously challenge conventions. We dissolve walls between disciplines to create communities in which journalists collaborate with designers, architects with social researchers, artists with activists. Our academic centers in New York City, Paris, Shanghai, and Mumbai offer over 10,000 students more than 135 undergraduate and graduate degree programs uniquely designed to prepare them to make a more just, beautiful and better-designed world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to our friends near and far, especially in these pandemic times, who are enabling us to come together in hybrid modes, around different platforms and along hybrid trajectories.

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Exhibition Support
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Petrit Pula, People Time
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Zif Tech Systems

Conflictorium
Manjushree Abhinav, Mustaq
Ali Shaikh, Amba, Varun
Andhare, Rocky Balsara,
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Shristi Sharma, Shefali Singh,
Dhananjai Sinha, Pravin Soya,
Avani Tanya, Mansi Thakkar,
Hozefa Ujjaini, Amit Vaghela,
Anuja Vohra, Nihal Vora, and
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The members of the board of
the Vera List Center for Art and
Politics, especially Jane Lombard.

COLOPHON

This program guide
accompanies the Vera List
Center Forum 2021
As for Protocols

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"Citizenship and the Amnesia
of Violence" by Adil Hossain
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permission of the author and
originally appeared in Art
Affect Archive: Participations
at the Conflictorium, edited by
Shamini Kothari.

CREDITS

The Vera List Center Forum
2021 is presented as part of the
center's 2020–2022 focus theme,
As for Protocols. It is curated
by Carin Kuoni and Eriola Pira
and convened with the support
of Re'al Christian, Camila
Palomino, Adrienne Umeh, Nelly
Kobanenko, Ash Moniz, and Molly
Ragan. Partner organizations
are Bluestockings Cooperative,
The Clemente, Center for Book
Arts, UnionDocs, and Weeksville
Heritage Center.

The exhibition, *Owed to a Certain
Emptiness: Infra-structuring the
Conflictorium* at The New School
is presented as part of the Vera
List Center Forum 2021: As for
Protocols. It celebrates Avni Sethi
of Conflictorium, recipient of the
Vera List Center's 2020–2022
Jane Lombard Prize for Art and
Social Justice, and the 2020–
2022 Jane Lombard Fellows.
The exhibition is curated by
Carin Kuoni and Eriola Pira with
Avni Sethi and the support of V.
Divakar, Jignesh Gajjar, Ken, YSK
Prerana, Nayan Rathod, Kinjal
Shah, Shristi Sharma, Dhananjai
Sinha.

The Vera List Center Forum 2021
and free admission to all events
are made possible by major
support from Jane Lombard and
the Kettering Fund, as well as The
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation,
The Andy Warhol Foundation for
the Visual Arts, the Boris Lurie Art
Foundation, Dayton Foundation,
Ford Foundation, Kettering Fund,
the Native Arts and Cultures
Foundation, Pryor Cashman
LLP, The New School as well as
members of the Vera List Center's
board and other individuals.

October 12–16 2021

2020–2022

Jane Lombard Fellows

JORGE GONZÁLEZ

for Escuela de Oficios

NAYANTARA GURUNG

KAKSHAPATI

for Nepal Picture Library

EMEKA OKEREKE

for Invisible Borders Trans-African

Photographers Organization

UNDERGROUND RESISTANCE

for Submerge Project

As for
Protocols

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