

Layered Cities: How Technology and Art Can Mediate Space

An interview with Dhanya Pilo

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Dhanya Pilo is a pioneer in the realms of technology and spatial engagement through the arts. Before most people knew what or how to understand codes and layers or the ways in which virtual worlds interact with real ones, she was engaging with the city's walls as a community project, later making films—breaking all of the boundaries that ordinarily confine female artists. In terms of a public art practice specific to south asia, her experience and legacy of work remain unique for the ways in which she engages audiences and communities. Whether using infrastructure like walls, to paint on or screen her films, or film-making across languages, or creating site specific immersive experiences that combine music and visuals. In this interview, she reflects on her trajectory, changing interests and on being an Indian artist.

1 What is it like being a woman (if that is the gender you identify with) working and creating in mostly male dominated spaces (film / public art)?

It's been really fantastic to have a woman's point of view in this day and age when there is no city that is planned by a woman. You realise that urban spaces are largely designed keeping in mind the male user and everyone else has to just adapt. It's funny. Earth is made up of Nature, Humans, Animals, etc and somehow we are increasingly moving away from that ecosystem by taking it for granted and irreversibly destroying it. So as a woman we may not be on top of the foodchain but we are high enough to influence and call out the game. Now, how do we bring in all the other ladies up to the mark?

Mumbai's wayfinding is based on an imagined "neutral" user of public facilities and infrastructure that is invariably male. Not just gender, but all manner of politics – class, caste, religious and sexual orientation, physical ability – are part of imagining this. In Mumbai, the prototype user then is not just male but also middle or upper class, Hindu, upper caste, able-bodied and heterosexual.

Since most loud narratives in India are male, we seem to be discussing and experiencing that daily patriarchy, yes in this day and age too. Women need to get louder and so do LGBTQ folks. Well so do men, who understand this gap - that is so negligible and few, and we got to support them too. As a women creator you do get credit for bringing in fresh view points but somehow the larger number of projects seem to fall back on safer cliques. On larger projects, I have experienced jealousy from junior male team mates just because they cant deal with a female boss, with the sole problem being my gender and class - and not as a fellow artist or co-conspirator. The amount of bitching that goes on during an Indian film set is amazing, if you are not playing the game then you are the game!

Opportunities are limited and the only option is to grab all of them and give it your 100%. Unfortunately the economy is down, so are jobs, and the men who are really feeling the pinch - are really taking it out on easier pawns. Of course if you are muslim woman, you are also changing your name on your uber ride as you fear for your life, the cab is no longer your safety net. In this climate art reflects that fear. Nobody talks about any of this and they tend to brush it under the carpet.

2 What if women were given the scope to design a city, would it be a more circular yet balanced approach to life?

Aren't we all artists on this planet? All the world's our stage? Why are we not playing our parts? Fire the writer?

We still behave as a solely "human 'male' society," and completely disregard the non-human entities we share this planet with. These are the questions that some of the more sensitive artists are asking. At the same time, I see a lot more women bringing their art to the forefront and that work has so much power! So the momentum is good and rolling! Watch out for us.



Source: <https://www.mediamatic.net/en/page/47768/dhanya-pilo>

I have been supremely grateful for the opportunities I have and for the outlook that I have gained, as well as the situations I have put myself in. I do understand it is a privilege, and I do feel a responsibility to not just nurture my skills but also to share the learnings, the possibilities, and ofcourse the unending drive.

3 How and why did you decide to become an artist and work in these realms?

I didn't really decide to become an artist and some days I do wonder if I am really an artist or just someone who tries to live their life to the fullest with all the opportunities that I encounter. Showing up is the most important step to represent to yourself, your planet.

Coming from a family that was pretty hung up on design and art I never thought of it as a career option. Those days I was studying economics as somehow that seemed more cutting edge in the business capital, Mumbai. Invariably I was unconsciously leaning towards a more creative space as witnessed by my college economics report on the "welfare of labour in tea estates in south india " it had a cover page smeared with spilt tea. My abstract visualisation art piece and comment on the state of Tea Estates in India. The bankers would never have given me a job, I would have been too renegade in that wannabe straightjacket space. I say that as so many of my corporate friends after 10 years in the industry have quit and moved to more creative pastures.

3 things that changed my life then was - AIESEC (Association Internationale des étudiants en sciences économiques et commerciales), college theatre and an art exhibition. AIESEC was an international student organisation which suddenly got me to interact with peers across the country as well as the world, taught us about Entrepreneurship and encouraged us to believe we were changing the world. Theater is such a complex medium, but it gave me the know how to create with a team of people and forge our own make believe space.

The art exhibition was a turning point as we created life size 3D paintings of great artists such as Van Gogh, Dali, Escher, Munch, Picasso, etc that you could walk into (circa 2001). A museum in Paris has now finally (in 2021) created a digital 3D version of that in a public museum and I just heard they

will be showing that in India in 2023. All these experiences led me to take a leap of faith to understand design and pursue it at the National Institute of Design (NID) - which is really a hidden gem in the heart of India.

It gave me skills to read India like a delicious tiramisu layer by layer, and that exposure has grounded me and activated me to mix up a whole bunch of skills in a mixed bag of tools to play with further. One of the documentaries I made was about a nomadic shepherd family who lived in the desert and I was fascinated by how few belongings they had, the land was their living room, no walls. That simple thing made me realise we don't need much to live with, and got me to try learning in a city environment when I returned to my home town - Bombay now known as Mumbai. I lived with only the bare essentials as I wanted to remove all possible distractions that were not adding to my daily life and that just gave me a blank canvas to attempt various things. Two of them were the Wall Project and my avatar as VJ DECOY.

I now tread the line of being a filmmaker, designer and electronic artist. And then, there are days when I need a digital detox and immerse myself entirely in nature - in forests or in the sea. As time passes, I'm changing the way I look and react to technology itself, and am reasoning about why that has changed for me.

Experiencing the shift between the analog to digital world, and now losing that to artificial intelligence (AI) is bringing me back to definite hands-on living on planet earth, because that's what matters in the end: how well you live and how well you help others live.

4 Do you see a role or possibility moving from flat 2D art to more interactive and 3D art?

Yes, I have been in and out of it for many many years now. Art with hands on horizontal surfaces became design with analog to digital to vertical surfaces and spaces. I was very motivated to move film out of the rectangle box and was playing with a lot of crt tube feedback which was a lot of fun, but disturbing for many. I was exploring the vertical TV screen way before mobile phones made it a way to interact and that's also when I moved to the projection screen. VJing was super interactive and a lot of live editing and gigs are fun! VJing also touched so many dimensions

from projection mapping to projecting off a moving train, on caves and trees, remote VJing over the internet before zoom 3x3 screens was a thing, hacking into open CCTVs around the world and using that for live show. Pre-covid we managed to project on the Kala Ghoda statue and that was literally mapping on a black 3D horse.

Nowadays I'm trying to do projects that mix all of these artistic trajectories – from analog to digital and space design - set/space design is one that comes close and also redefines my narrative with VR. Restaurants and public spaces that are designed with interactive digital vibe.

My biggest learning from the Wall Project was meeting so many talented artists who were comfortable with small 2D canvases, but found it difficult to translate that to vertical walls. Motivating them was a lot of work, and they would come through beautifully. I literally live my life like a video game of sorts, with a limited lifeline - I love cities and love finding new ways of navigating them, cycling, sailing, trains, metros, driving and now unicycling.

5 Share a brief short history of your trajectory:

NID definitely opened up my eyes to how vastly different villages and cities ecosystems are and how they are formed. Then there is the no mans land with people who are not really part of the grid. The shepherds, along with them the tribals they really go about their life interacting with the environment - adapting and co-existing. While we are all getting bombarded by tonnes of strategic algorithms and adverts leaving us more confused/deranged.

+ "After design school I moved back to the city and moved out of my parents house to the new cultural capital Bandra, which was a melting pot of India's

creative energy. In 2005, I felt a new cultural shift happening and was actively part of that new dynamism. In 2010, the municipality of Mumbai had actually shown us many prime plots in the city to build a vision of a public art center.

After 7 years of immersion in big city life, I was invited to be part of Strelka's studio residency in 2012, which was a golden period in Moscow; I got to interact with many cutting-edge architects, urbanists and creative technologists. I focussed my research and time there on the Houses of Culture, a mass

cultural infrastructure concept built in the USSR, in order to fine tune my concept for a public art center I wanted to build."

6 How does your identity shape or become reflected in the work you make ?

My identity simply allows me to understand myself better.

7 What do you see as the relationship between the city and art?

The linear city of Mumbai has an amazing flow of people from north to south and vice versa. So many rhythms, so many pulses all matching the metronome. A city that outgrew itself and its systems is now feeling the pressure on the walls like a cooker, exploding at any moment - so if an accident happens - the number affected tend to be larger like in a bowling alley. The city is packed with billboards, vehicles and matchbox houses that allow its residents only a small window view to the world art then tends to be the only relief. But art here is not based in galleries, art here comes out in the form of festivals, and now somehow art is encroaching on festivals as the most popular medium. Unfortunately, this mutation will take a long while to get finessed but nevertheless definitely adds humour to the daily routine.

Art allows you to relook at the city in many different ways and to highlight moments that might be misplaced otherwise.

8 Have any other women influenced your work or ideas ?

Asha Puthli is the only legendary Mumbai girl who really pursued her passion to sing a version of operatic jazz, travelled the world and make a name for herself when getting a passport in itself was a very complicated affair (this was the 1960's). Her history, her herstory is particularly inspiring because she had no role models to look up to and invariably - Donna Summers and Madonna literally copied her sense of style. She could have been a top artist, but missed that chance as she wanted to keep her artist name as her Indian name against the wishes of her then promoters who wanted to Americanise her branding. Usha Uthup, Ila Arun— all singers for some reason. Rebecca Gomperts - the

founder of Women on Waves - is amazing. She has been working for safe pro-abortion rights all over the world. In 2015, she purchased a yacht and had a sailing crew use the concept of international waters protocol to access women in need of abortion counselling in South America; I was to be part of the sailing crew, but at the last minute I couldn't make it. Yet, she remains deeply inspiring to me. "

https://www.ted.com/talks/dhanya_pilo_the_art_of_video_jockey

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www.dhanyapilo.com

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9 How does public art counter or promot propaganda in India?

People are still trying to understand the importance of art in public spaces. Every once in a while you will see a piece commissioned, but totally misplaced in narrative. The most common are of course renaming everything from streets to museums as a way of temporary colonialism, for example when the British wanted to put their rule in all the kingdoms they had usurped to quickly unify them - they collected coins from the locals and impressed the Queen's face on it. Quick, effective and tacky. It's been over 15 years since the Wall Project started, and now you will see the name used in projects all over the world the idea all over India. It's been fun watching events unravel and observe the culture boom! Now governments all over the country are commissioning cheap public art in the guise of beautification and social messaging. India is a country of walls, covering emotions, traditions, hiding their body, fear etc. Prime example is Navi Mumbai which is now retagged as flamingo city as the flamingos migrate here in the lakhs for half the year.

All over Navi Mumbai you will be greeted with flamingos painted all over the walls and many flamingo installations - the only problem is that none of the installations represent the flamingo that we have locally, but the American ones - essentially validating the curation to be suspect. Huge statues bigger than the Statue of Liberty only add to the wrath of people who get displaced and whose money could have better been used to lift them out of generations of debt. Painting graffiti that is out of context is also quite pointless and tends to alienate those who are exposed to it daily. An overdose of Bollywood murals also just regurgitates the filmdom of the city—nothing new, nothing inspiring, simply nostalgia. And only one aspect of a diverse and multilayered space.

