

Unexpected Encounters: Being a Women Painter in Public Spaces

Interview with Anpu Varkey

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Muralist Anpu Varkey's work was a chance to inquire about questions regarding women and their visibility in the public realm. She has worked with assorted festivals and initiatives across the country, including St.Art. Her monumental works are layered with nostalgia. She trained from the Baroda School of Art and rose to fame after assisting a German artist paint an XL portrait of Mahatma Gandhi onto a wall of the Delhi Police Station. She has also won acclaim for a harvest moon she painted on an abandoned building in Bengaluru. I asked her to write and respond to the following:

- 1) What has it been like as a woman working on art in the public realm?
- 2) Do you have any stories that illustrate your experiences working in the street?
- 3) Were you trying to or able to challenge or dispel stereotypes through the practice and process of art?
- 4) Pls. share how you began (aka your story and trajectory as an artist)?
- 5) Is it important for south asian women to work on art in public space projects?

What began as an experiment became a livelihood for me, I got into working in public spaces serendipitously. I began as an introverted studio painter, working only in oils; my outlook towards life started and ended on a canvas. Spending copious amounts of time in a shut room and expressing through color dabs was life as I knew it.

Around 2009, I lived in Bremen, Germany and shared a studio with a conglomeration of artists—DJs, clowns, musicians and a few graffiti writers.

We once drove by a graffiti writer, me and a group of other writers and that was the first time I witnessed their act of criticism. They were looking under bridges and commenting. I frowned, realizing that I knew next to nothing about these spaces or even street art in general. I had never even glanced upon it, but then I started looking at signs and writings and the marks that were being made in the city.

It soon became a game for me to spot my friends' works as I cycled by them. I remember feeling extremely exhilarated, with an almost childlike fascination. Although graffiti was illegal, these artists thrived on vandalizing city spaces. Illegible writings, tags, color spurts, are very

unconventional compared to what one studies in art school. It didn't matter if they were being judged or criticized -- on this scale it was all based on how quickly a work was done, how many cans were used, and the scale of its audience or reach. It was like stumbling upon a whole new ideology — I began to question what it meant to make art in this day and age when we're living in cities witnessing exponential growth. I wondered about the reflection of cities being based in inequality and of graffiti, then, as altruism.

I moved to Delhi and started experimenting on the streets, first with small stencils. I would walk around a neighborhood and ask if I could paint a spot on the wall. Out of 10 people, two would usually agree, and one such winter afternoon, a friend and I walked around a South Delhi neighborhood when an auto rickshaw driver offered that I paint his auto.

Then, three more autos lined up— this was the most amazing day for me, all I had to do was be out on the street and unimaginable stuff was happening. It was like letting the universe take care of me, and these chance encounters with people have been the most gratifying experience over the decades that I've been working on the streets.

You never know whom you might meet on the streets,

and that anticipation of not knowing what I will paint or whom I might meet along the way has been the most compelling factor to pursue it as a further art form.

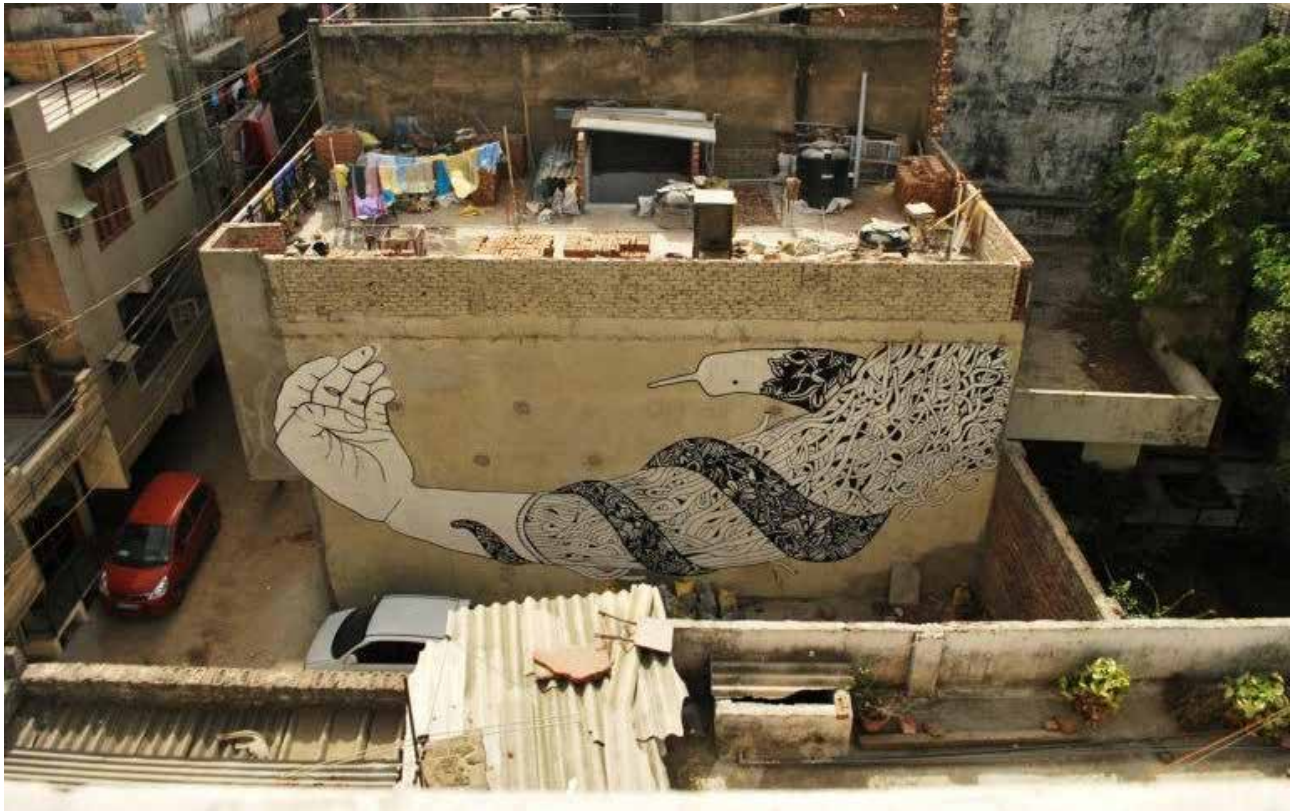
I had never planned to make a career out of it, but here I am —having worked in many cities across India and still feeling like I don't know what I'm doing. That's the beauty of street art. I don't enter it with a philosophy of understanding, I experience it anew every time, and never dictate how things should shape up. The work process is more important to me than the outcome, and I'm always learning and growing when I work on the streets — it's only in the vicinity of these spaces that I feel so alert, and confident. Confident enough to try anew, to make mistakes, because everything goes on the streets and nothing is important or valuable.

When I paint, I'm present and well integrated with the

process; I feel like a worker more than anything else. I'm usually paint stained from head to toe, and most people who are on the streets are working class. There is a sense of admiration with which I'm looked upon, sometimes in smaller towns, where they have likely never seen a woman paint on the streets before and can't comprehend it. Most often, father's bring their daughters to watch me paint, as if to show them that nothing is impossible to achieve. It's a powerful reality, a woman happily painting on the streets, drinking tea by the roadside; I belong in these spaces, I enjoy communicating with people within these spaces, with sight, gesture, or sound. I never leave a space too soon, I love to linger on, to take in the sights and sounds so different from where I live and be omniscient within it. The people that I've met have shared so many different experiences with me, and I feel fortunate to do what I do.



Source: Anpu Varkey



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In India, very few people go to museums or galleries, and so the streets become the most accomplished space to communicate and express oneself. Most often it's political commentary or social reform ideas, but to make something that doesn't fit within this bracket is mighty hard. I've strayed away from the social messaging or beautification canvassing that has superseded most of street art in India. What I've aspired for is an emotional connection with the people either through colour or form, using a very painterly approach. I'm a messy painter, I drip, use watered down paint, if you look close enough it's just a mesh of colors woven to create an illusion. I've never wanted to tackle the streets like I do on canvas, I wanted to feel anew with the immediacy of the space, the time constraints of working in harsh conditions and cultivate the endurance to enjoy this hardship. It's all the non-discerning factor that adds to the happiness: the heat, the people, local gossip, becoming one among the many, enjoying a day in the open. It's really a luxury for me as a woman, that I'm able to stand out and paint all day.

Getting a real-life audience that connects with your way of life and with what you do and not feeling isolated within the journey is important. People help me improvise, and think about how I should approach public space. The universe has all kinds in it and it's mindful to be cognizant of that and to not let everything revolve around you. I see life in continuity. Painting is only the beginning of a journey and not the end—each work emboldens me to enquire and try new things. I've spent the last decade feeling excited about not pursuing a specific style— I'm anti-style, and I believe that everything is permissible on the streets, and nothing is important.

I've made friends on street corners, I probably never would have, had I not painted on the side of the streets; these relationships are special to me, and when I revisit a space, it deepens. I know that it is a patriarchal space, but I'm determined to find my footing within it.

I once encountered a deaf and mute man cycling by the site where I was painting. He would come by everyday and watch me paint. Through hand gestures he would communicate how much he liked the work. These are moments I cherish. I once got a discounted auto-rickshaw ride, where the driver said that since I was a worker he wouldn't take more money from me than was necessary.

An elderly gentleman who lived in the vicinity once offered me sweets and thanked me for the painting I had made of a girl hanging upside down. He told me that it reminded him of his childhood, and of how he would often hang upside down when he was a child. He then wrote a poem about the painting. One forgets the power of the image, and the kind of sentiments it holds for onlookers, but by having those conversations what I do aligns beautifully for me.

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