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# An Edgy Art Haven in India Gains Momentum

By AMY YEE

On a chilly winter evening in New Delhi, a crowd of art-goers spilled out from the doorway of a low building. Never mind that the slightly ramshackle villa was on an unpaved, pocked road lined with bicycle rickshaws, a tractor and a lounging cow. Khoj International Artists' Association, an alternative arts forum tucked into a gritty, working-class neighborhood in the south of the city, had drawn an eclectic crowd that mingled in the open-air courtyard and lingered in galleries where original short films flickered across the walls.

Khoj ([www.khojworkshop.org](http://www.khojworkshop.org)), which means “to seek” in Hindi, was established in 1997 by six emerging Indian artists and one curator, all then in their thirties and forties, as a nonprofit visual arts incubator. Since then it has grown into an artists' residency, discussion forum and exhibition space for Indian and international artists that is one of the country's most talked-about art hubs.

Recent events at Khoj, whose two-story building consists of five Spartan studios and exhibition rooms and three rooms next door for artists in residence, include a six-week residency by the Indian artist Samir Parker and the Italian photographer Ottavia Castellina who have been there since mid-December.

During the residency, the two artists explored the concept of “urban journeys” through drawings and photography and the resulting works are on display at Khoj through Jan. 29.

In December, Khoj played host to the “Yellow Line Project,” a screening of short films featuring Indian modern dancers in gritty urban locations. The event was an initiative of the [Gati Dance Forum](#), a Delhi-based organization devoted to nurturing modern dance in India, which brought to Khoj dancers and filmmakers from as far away as Japan and France.

“Khoj provides an intimate space to view and discuss experimental work,” said Rajyashree Ramamurthi, one of the dancers, who

was trained in Britain and now lives in the city of Pune in Maharashtra State. “In Pune there is no such equivalent.”

Indeed, the cutting-edge work at Khoj is a far cry from Delhi’s conservative art scene in the 1990s, when there were few spaces for alternative artists to work or exhibit.

“There was no gallery system or alternative places to make work,” said Bharti Kher, a London-born artist who has lived and worked in India since the early 1990s and was one of the founders of Khoj. “There was nothing. But there was a generation of people who wanted to do something.”

The art curator Pooja Sood, director and a co-founder of Khoj, agreed. “Anything slightly out of the ordinary and galleries would run a mile,” she said. “It seemed important to do something for us.”

Khoj’s first initiative in 1997 was to organize a workshop for 12 Indian and 12 international artists in order to exchange ideas and start up an artistic dialogue. Annual two-week workshops in other Indian cities like Mysore, Bangalore, Mumbai and Kolkata followed and in 2002 Khoj moved into its current building, a former office, which allowed it to host regular residencies.

Since then Khoj has worked with about 500 Indian and international artists, held some 50 residencies, organized dozens of workshops and discussion forums and staged exhibitions, screenings and public art installations.

Of course, Khoj is not alone in attempting to nurture India’s contemporary arts scene. Sarai ([www.sarai.net](http://www.sarai.net)), part of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, a Delhi-based research institute, also offers residencies and fellowships while the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art ([www.ficart.org](http://www.ficart.org)) in Delhi sponsors grants and contests for artists, as well as workshops, discussions and public art projects.

Since Khoj’s early days in the 1990s, Indian art has blossomed. Last year, the annual [India Art Fair](#) in Delhi drew 128,000 visitors over four days with 84 galleries showing work by nearly 500 Indian artists — a sharp contrast from the first gathering in 2008, which drew just 10,000 visitors and 34 galleries. At this year’s art fair, which runs from Jan. 26 to 29, 98 galleries will be present.

And as Indian contemporary artists receive global recognition, prices for their works have skyrocketed. Recent major sales include a diptych by the late artist Tyeb Mehta that sold for \$2.8 million at Christie’s last year while a painting by Syed Haider Raza sold for \$3.5 million in 2010.

“India has opened up economically and Indian and Southeast Asian art has become such a global phenomenon,” said Hugo K. Weihe, Christie’s international director of Asian art. “Indian art will see a tremendously powerful future in the long haul.”

Fashionable art galleries have appeared across New Delhi, especially in the bohemian Hauz Khas neighborhood in the south of the city. The privately owned [Kiran Nadar Museum of Art](#) in Saket and the [Devi Art Foundation](#) in Gurgaon, a satellite city southwest of Delhi, which opened in 2011 and 2008 respectively, also help fill the void of public venues for contemporary arts.

But Khoj’s influence in the Indian contemporary art world is particularly pervasive. While most sleek new Indian galleries tend to focus on lucrative painting or sculpture exhibitions rather than less-sellable experimental art, installations or public art, Khoj maintains an alternative, artist-led ethos.

“Every artist in India who has practiced or is working in India has come through Khoj,” said Ms. Kher, who remains a board member at Khoj. She is married to Subodh Gupta, one of India’s most well-known contemporary artists who is also a founding member of Khoj.

“It’s not just about the end-product or a show,” Ms. Sood, the director of Khoj, added. “We don’t want to cultivate buyers. We do want to cultivate funders.” Recently the center has received funding from sources as diverse as the Royal Norwegian Embassy, the international Arts Collaboratory program, the Ford Foundation, the India Foundation for the Arts and the Dutch nongovernmental organization Hivos.

The center itself, tucked in an enclave of Khirkee Extension, near the cacophonous Hindu temple of Sai Baba and a short walk from a sprawling new shopping mall in the upper middle-class Saket neighborhood, neatly embodies the contrasts of modern India. The liminal, fringe location suits the center. “Khoj is known for being experimental. I hope we can keep that edge,” Ms. Sood said. “No one is going to come down here in their high heels to drink wine. You’re going to find momos and beer — maybe.”

Atul Bhalla, a Delhi-based artist who has exhibited his work at Khoj, said that initially no big Delhi galleries would show his alternative, conceptual work, which includes photographs focusing on the heavily polluted Yamuna River that runs past Delhi. But, in 2005, he showed the images in a solo show at Khoj. Khoj “provides these platforms where you do out of the box stuff,” he said. He added that because Khoj did not have commercial objectives was willing to let artists take risks and experiment, it was “instrumental in redefining the scene.”

Community and public art is also one of Khoj's hallmarks. During a 2005 residency, the Mumbai-based artist Navjot Altaf created a popular project called "Delhi Loves Me?" where she put bumper stickers with poetry on them on autorickshaws across Delhi. She then screened a film of interviews with autorickshaw drivers participating in the project on a wall outside of Khoj where locals could watch. Khoj cultivates "non-art spaces, and viewers other than gallery owners and collectors," Ms. Altaf said.

Projects such as "Delhi Loves Me?" and simpler ones, like a mural on a wall across from Khoj of a soldier against a van Gogh-esque background done by a group of young artists, are aimed at making art available and relevant to the masses. "People loved 'Delhi Loves Me?' because it was theirs," Ms. Sood said.

While artists have flourished at Khoj, it remains one of just a handful of art forums in a country with a population of 1.2 billion. "For a country as large as India, the whole thing is woefully small," Ms. Kher said. Yet, she added, there are the beginnings of a sense of momentum: "There's a lot of energy here. You feel it in a place like Delhi."