

# An Experimental Public Art Project

Deciphering artists perceptions through personal lenses  
within the social cultural narratives of Kerala

Curated and conceptualized by  
**Tanya Abraham**



**taos** the art  
outreach  
society

**seed**

**PEPPER  
HOUSE.**

**KOCHI  
ART  
WEEK**

  
**KOCHI  
BIENNALE  
FOUNDATION**

  
**COIRCRAFT**  
KERALA STATE  
COIR CORPORATION LTD.





Titled an *Experimental Public Art Project*, it was conceived by curator Tanya Abraham to experiment with the intersection of art and the public realm. As part of The Kochi Art Week 2021, the two-day project was produced in collaboration with *Lokhamae Tharavadu*, a 250-plus artists exhibition by the Kochi Biennale Foundation and curated by Bose Krishnamachari. To examine how curatorial interventions can intervene and impact the public in reference to exhibitions, Abraham invited three artists exhibiting at *Lokhamae Tharavadu* to share their works with a community of women coir workers of the Kerala Coir Cooperation in Alappuzha (who worked at the premises of one of the gallery-warehouses). The second invite was extended to a batch of young architectural students at SEED, APJ Abdul Kalam Institute of Environmental Design, in Kochi. The two-day event began with artists and Krishnamachari sharing their works with the women and the students. The first study was the work of Blodsow, a fabric installation the artist had created using blouse materials of every possible colour, which he had purchased from a store in Allapuzha. Blodsow's expression centred around what blouses mean to women, how men may perceive them, and their position in a patriarchal society.



The next work discussed was by Meera George, the video screening of a theatrical performance she had earlier staged in New Delhi, enacting the story of Nangeli, a low caste woman, and the famed breast tax, which once was prevalent in ancient Kerala society in the early 19th century. Nangeli's story is a popular one and reveals the evils of caste and gender suppression in Kerala. Unable to pay the breast tax for covering her breasts, Nangeli, in a fit of rage and desperation, cut off one of her breasts and offered it as tax. It is said that the incident and her death created a riot in society, and the breast tax law was eventually removed. This story provides a perception of the socio-cultural framework on which ancient Kerala operated, laws created by upper-caste men, which demeaned women of lower castes as lowly (thus breasts were to remain bare, while upper-caste women were granted permission to cover their breasts). The story also throws light on the status of upper and lower caste women, and the various caste-based morality rules. Once the breast tax was abolished, lower-caste women were free to cover their breasts. And with subsequent colonial influence, morality popularised the sari blouse, today an apparel of fashion.

The last artist whose work I chose was Murali Cheerth. Cheerth's three-panel video work depicted a female Ayurvedic practitioner who dared to challenge community expectations that only upper-caste males were traditionally permitted to practice the science. As a (upper-caste) woman, she further disrupted the ancient practice by opening her ancestral home to all castes and communities to propagate true communal harmony.[1]



Cheerth's work was then used to thread the works by Blodsow and George, debating and discussing Kerala's caste system and gender identities. It urged the two groups of participants to question the significance of the art works and how they may be viewed in relation to one and another : the ancient breast tax issue where women of lower castes were not permitted to cover their breasts, the array of multi coloured blouse materials - fabric now used to cover the upper body, and an upper caste woman who chose to break tradition and challenge customs by embracing all communities with the belief that the universe is one.

The students of SEED and the women worked on reproducing perceptions of the works in discussion, using various everyday materials such as paper, fabric, discarded clothes, wires, and so on. The works of the women - the expressions of their views on existing social structures pertaining to gender (created with the support of the students) were later used for an installation at Pepper House (Day 2), one of the biennale venues in Kochi. In addition, my desire to see how the responses of the women could be taken to a larger audience (outside these two groups) lured me to invite a public personality who is known as " RJ Neena", in Kerala.





Neena works for a local radio station called Radio Mango, and the idea of experimenting with radio as a format of the public art exhibition is in view of my research regarding taking the exhibition outside gallery spaces. In addition, it also helped me tackle the issue of poor public participation at exhibitions by engaging a medium popularly enjoyed by the public, and in understanding the route upon which my project during the 2022 biennale may be curated. RJ Nina took part in the project (along with the women and the students) on both days and transcribed the process and its outcome with her audience the following day (FM channel which has an audience in lakhs, women and men across strata in the state of Kerala).

#### Understanding the Responses

The coir workers with no previous exposure to an art exhibition explained that they had felt lost and understood little from their casual visits a month earlier. It was also noted that in spite of the gallery's entrance being next door to where they worked, some had chosen not to visit the exhibition from a lack of interest/a sense of intimidation. Interacting with the artists, and through the discussions, a whole new understanding was thrown open: The women were elated in being able to understand what specific art works meant and narrated their disappointment as less privileged women who had no access to any form of art nor the understanding of it.







The women who had previously expressed intimidation explained that understanding the art works made them realise that contemporary art is not an alien subject.

Interpretation 1: It made me query if such exhibition formats further divided society intellectually and how art requires to provide a platform to be embraced, to seem familiar and to be accepted freely.

The women also shared their opinions on patriarchy, their positions in society and at home. 30% felt that it was a struggle while the remaining 70% said they did not face the severity of patriarchy (which meant there was no severe abuse within families). However, the 70% also believed that performing household chores was a woman's duty. 100% in the group expressed their fear of travelling alone after nightfall and living alone (without a man for protection). 90% of them felt they were trapped in a system that gave them no freedom of free expression. 90% said they would never smoke or drink for it would impact their morality. All 100% also felt that men are the heads of the family and their decisions in family matters are very important.

Interpretation 2: Patriarchy continues to exist in Kerala in various forms. Although the impact of caste was not openly discussed for its sensitive subject, the division between them was clear as women hailing from a family belonging to a low caste had more social struggles. No open distinctions were seen due to the similar economic backgrounds, however, women from the lower castes expressed a sense of less self-worth.

The students on the other hand, although with very little exposure to the arts from their families and environments, had an exposure of it through their academics. They formed a thread between the women participants and the final installation on day 2, being able to understand perspectives and aid in the putting together of a social sculpture .

Interpretation 3: The installation represented the participants and their views, secondly it proved how one could expand the existing exhibition format to include the common man (the public), and eventually propel social change.

The radio in Kerala's vernacular language, Malayalam, which has access to numerous people from all walks of life across the state, is a neutral platform in society. With Neena drawing audiences into the experience of the project, Lokhamae Tharavadu was, thus, "extended" to many more a number. There also was a sense of familiarity regarding art exhibitions offered to listeners as Neena used her calibre as an RJ and her power as a public figure, to lure them. Callers found radio a platform to express their challenges regarding gender positioning, especially concerning sexuality and morality. This included male callers and their opinion on futile social structures.



