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Artreach–KNMA Teaching Fellowship 2021-22

Report:

DRAWING BEINGS: Reflections on a Series of Ten Workshops

It is with a great sense of happiness that I am writing this report on my recently concluded ten-part workshop series for Artreach-KNMA Teaching Fellowship where I had the good fortune to engage with and guide an ever enthusiastic and energetic bunch of children at the Karm Marg (henceforth KM) care home. Though the series was envisioned and proposed as in-person events, the circumstances pertaining to waves of the pandemic had made us pivot sessions oscillate back to online-only engagements. This had further posed challenges on the planned activities which needed offline methods.

The proposed teaching plan was designed to expose the participating children to various meanings, methods and modes of drawing as an artistic activity. Since the proposal was made before meeting the children it had elements which were abstract (for example, a session of playing with ink and water), which needed tweaking of plans to accommodate things children wanted to do more of, from their previous experiences. The pivot to online also meant that plans required changes to function within the possibilities on offer, from a single web camera and screen overlooking a classroom of about twenty children, to challenges of networks on my end when I was away from Delhi.

Online sessions: Plans, Challenges and Possibilities

The challenges posed by the medium and infrastructure were dealt with through the familiarity the children had with the space of the computer room at KM. One of the elder children would sit next to the computer, often away from my sight, but ever ready to respond to my suggestions and directions for the group. They would understand what I have to say by listening closely and repeat it for the group when technical glitches made my voice crack through the speakers.

I had to quickly find ways to engage the group through a single web cam and that is where the first session I had with them really helped. The first meeting happened offline at KM where I got a sense of the space they live in as well as the space of the computer room where online sessions would happen. I also got a list of names of the children I met there on the first session and familiarising myself with the names of the children became important to conduct the online sessions. I always kept the list of names handy while conducting online sessions and would call each of the children towards the webcam and screen one by one to show the stages of work they are doing in a particular session. I would ask them to hold their artworks against the cam at a particular distance, often with the help of elder children who understood the webcam better, and I could suggest ideas particularly making sense to each child's choice of stages of work. This method helped in making the sessions engaging and I could also keep a tab of each child's interest areas.

Since webcam became the tool, I also found ways to change camera angles on my end by

using a wired webcam. After initial introductions of each sessions, I would often put the camera in a position looking down on to my table from above, so that the children could watch my hands, tools and materials whenever I was working on paper along with them.

I also had short films or presentations relating to sessions and that would give ideas and directions for children to pursue the session. For example, there was a session of drawing self-portraits, inspired from the processes of German artist [Carlotta](#), who suffers from a condition often known as face blindness which has prompted her to “make self-portraits of the face she cannot picture in her mind”. She uses touch as a method to understand the terrains of her own face and makes marks on paper accordingly. A short animation film called [Carlotta’s Face](#) (2020), captures the challenges she had to face as a child and the ways in which she overcame a world which did not understand her, through art.

Another session on drawing and cutting out silhouettes was inspired from American artist Kara Walker, whose ways of building up on narratives through paper cut-outs was introduced to the children via a small presentation on her works. It was followed by viewing some of the works by the late Indian artist Jangarh Singh Shyam to seek parallels in artistic concerns and subject matters.

Offline Plans, and Materials

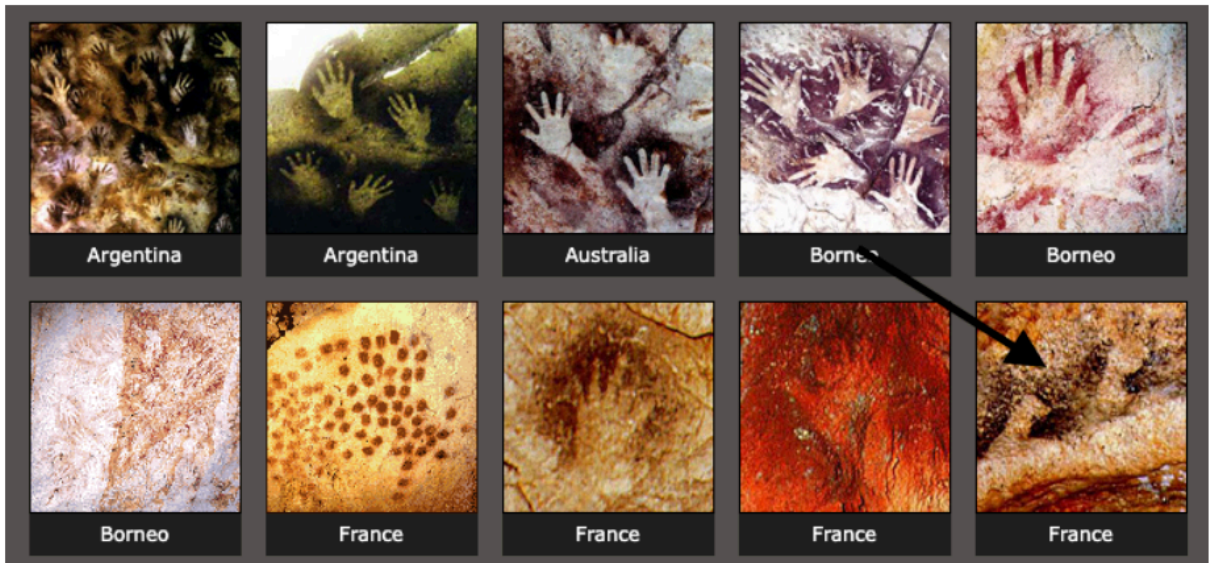
Offline Sessions offered instant potential of in-depth engagement and since the opportunity to conduct such sessions were scarce, extra efforts were made to introduce the children to a variety of materials. My first session was an introduction to the vast history of mark-making humans have engaged in, the recent of which we call the act of drawing. I had carried printed material of visuals of cave drawings, impressions of hands found in various pre-historic caves, and some modern interpretations of such textures and lines (figures below). Along with Ita from Artreach, we played a warming up game where a sheet of paper was circulated among the children, each responding to the marks made by the person before them, with a mark, a line, a smudge, or a scribble. Then we moved to making layers of outlines of one’s own palms and responding to the layers by carefully choosing to highlight some forms made by crossing lines of the outlines. By going step by step forward, a sense of anticipation and response made the session more of a dialogue rather than a one-way prompting of directions.



Image from the walls of Bhim Bhetka caves.



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Somnath Hore
Peace; Figure, Etching, 1967

Sometimes offline session was the demand of the medium itself, where we had to postpone or juggle session plans to wait for the airs to clear. One of the most engaging sessions we had was linocut printmaking, where children enjoyed the variety of materials that were there to play with. As some of the elder children were familiar with the methods, it became apparent very early that the directions would travel much easily to each child as they often thrive through helping each other. Since we were asking the children to use sharp tools, extra care was taken in communicating the methods of cutting the lino safely. This medium also demanded a whole day of activities, as printing would be a separate session, the workshop was divided into two session on a sunny Sunday. Each child was given papers, and spoons to print on their own and as soon as they got a hang of the medium, they helped each other in taking out prints. As some of the designs needed careful pressing, we also helped some in printing.

Conclusion:

This was a much rewarding experience for me than what all of the above described snippets would suggest. The planning and implementation came with its own challenges, but the joy at the end of most of the sessions made up for whatever niggles we had to overcome. Most of the children were very gifted in their skills and imaginations and the variety of materials and methods in the series offered opportunity to various children to execute plans of the sessions better, resulting in a more democratic learning process.

Artreach team was always ready with their help and the presence of their members in the sessions helped immensely in communicating ideas and plans for sessions. I would like to take this opportunity to put my heartfelt gratitude to the Artreach team on record.