

Art outside comfort zones

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Challenging status quo: "The Urur Olcott Kuppam Festival is challenging us to break free of the scaffoldings that limit our perception of art, ourselves and all those we encounter." The festival in 2015. file Photo : Bijoy Ghosh

To stir and shake the classical environment, the Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha this year brings the non-classical and marginalised art traditions into classically tagged spaces

For long we have believed that the arts bring people together; that those belonging to different sides of the fence, with opposite world views, merge in the presence of beauty. On the face of it this seems like a reasonable proposition. And in continuance of this line of thought, we have had umpteen performances that brought diverse artists together on a shared stage. These have been, at times, evenings of great art and pleasure, but rarely have they nudged us to find a new window through which we could see the world afresh. We are not looking for earth-shattering, radical shifts, but cumulative subtle movements that allow for a discourse. The problem probably lies with the presumption that the art world and artists come together in wonderment of aesthetic beauty, irrespective of its originating social and cultural address. We also ignore the fact that audiences are deeply divided, conditioned to receive only with tinted lenses. It is as true that environments where most of these initiatives take place are kosher to the more dominant and culturally legitimised art form. This makes the experiment intrinsically a feel-good event and at times an exercise in sympathetic condescension. In the case that both art forms belong to the same level in social hierarchy, the conversation is a tussle for common ground supremacy.

[The soul of art forms](#)

Is it truly possible to use art as a door which, when opened, enables people to see and listen to each other? Art is a generic term encompassing every one of its created manifestations. But every art form is a distinctly individual, with a specific intention that drives its aesthetics, interpretations and evolution. Beyond superficial identification signs, every art form has an interior that is uniquely precious. The soul of each art form lies in that purpose and cultural construct. But there is one thing that binds all art: the chance that a genuine art experience can reconfigure human beings and change the way we receive ourselves and life around.

The life breath of art is the challenge it poses to the status quo. Art must make us question our strongest beliefs and redraft our coordinates. Serious discomfort is beautiful; it unshackles our minds from predisposed mindsets. Great pieces of art play with the way we are wired, and when that happens we receive with an openness that is rare. But this does not happen easily since every art, its artists, and the community that constitute its environment collapse on to each other, establishing an inseparable dependency, becoming a socio-cultural flagship. Those within its contours hold on to its reins tightly, making sure that it does not transgress comfort zones and artistic expression is limited to superficial movements. Therefore, if art is to play a role in social transformation, it needs to unstrap itself from this bind, rediscover its essence from within and in relation to the outside. This can only happen if in the curation of art there is a conscious intention to break pattern-determined norms.

The Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha is one such idea. It is challenging us to break free of the scaffoldings that limit our perception of art, ourselves and all those we encounter. Everyone becomes vulnerable and that is where change begins, be it cultural, social or political. The festival is situated in an unusual space, within a fishing village, on the rim of Chennai. This shift obligates a certain class to step out of its sense of 'normal'. Using a common public place like a park would have been one step, but to curate art in a space that the traditional middle-upper middle class is unfamiliar with, even alien to, unsettles the mind. After initial moments of discomfort, something magical happens. The unfamiliarity of the space and the lack of known external support structures dissolve socially imbibed judgments and allows for an unhindered reception. The known art form overwhelms in a way that it never did before and the unknown art traditions are imbibed with new respect and love, and are not seen as exotica. For those who live in the kuppam, this has been an opportunity to experience art forms that they thought were exclusive to 'certain kinds of people'. Their own suspicions of people like 'us' is addressed without verbal articulation. Learning and unlearning happens through and from the art experience.

New reorientations

Organically built into this framework is the possibility of rejection. When an art form remains within its own fiefdom, it is permanently secure. If we strip art of this safety bracket, it is in free fall. And real art happens in free will, when rejection is also a distinct possibility. When art and receivers are completely open, there is an aesthetic tension that exists. It is from this place that empathy and understanding evolve. Classical artists are not used to this kind of rejection; at the Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha, this is entirely possible. And for the marginalised art forms, this space has given cultural strength and has forced the privileged to feel beyond sympathy; it has forced them to recognise, respect and embrace. But we realised that inversions cannot stop here. The classical environment also needs to be stirred and shaken. Hence, this year, the non-classical and marginalised art traditions are being presented for the first time in a classically tagged space.

And in the process, sociocultural positions occupied by people and art forms are once again inversed. There are new reorientations for both worlds.

This journey is a slow walk and we are all still pausing, looking around, learning and figuring our way forward. But this art experience has allowed for the rubbing of shoulders between diverse people and changed the way we listen to each other's lives. At times, in patches, we have begun to speak in one shared voice. The self-centred home, my family, I and my needs do not vanish but become pale shadows of their original domineering character. The emergence of this sensitivity keeps us alive to life itself. The Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha has enabled this: a non-identity-specific openness that enriches every part of one's being and revitalises art itself.

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