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Inside the 13th Berlin Biennale: Foxing, Fugitivity, And Resistance

The 13th Berlin Biennale explores themes of fugitivity, subversion and art's endurance

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**Summary of this article**

- The 13th Berlin Biennale, curated by Zasha Colah and Valentina Vivo, builds on the twin ideas of “fugitivity” and “foxing” to critique power, identity politics, and cultural commodification.
- Works range from exposing military and capitalist complicity to reimagining humour and sorrow as tools of resistance and reflection, questioning the ethics of art and activism.
- With performances and installations referencing Myanmar’s dissidents, Ambedkarite art, and new-age “slacktivism,” the Biennale positions art as a fugitive space that confronts violence through irony, dialogue, and endurance.

Fugitivity and foxing are positioned as non-compliant themes of the 13th Berlin Biennale. They function as introverted traps set by artists who are escaping military regimes, capitalist democracies, military-industrial complexes, caste constitutionalism, fashionable identities of recent modernities, or cultural commodities of accusatory politics.

The Urban Fox

Foxing aims at appearance and evasive distance; we cannot confidently determine whether the city fox has the capacity to take on the city’s hellscape. Foxes, unlike the ruderal elements of **vegetation** native to the city, have a focused history of reclaiming what is theirs. The city has also preserved larger floral tracts from bygone eras where the public attends to its regimental habits of jogging, smoking, cycling, drinking, lounging, playing, creating and mating.

Foxing has become a form of banditry in the coolness of the pre-dawn city. Urban foxes share the underworld with rodents and other crawling and flying creatures who prefer to exist alongside us but on their own terms. The fox thus becomes the curator of furtive cliques. Curator Zasha Colah, working with Valentina Vivo, speaks through the doublespeak of Joker’s euphemistic ‘Address’ by Sawangwongse Yawngkhwe, whose dinner menu reveals the military-industrial complex’s role in warfare and social tension. The arms trade serves as a bridge to the **slave trade**.

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Investment in insurance companies fuels **war** games, and financial control becomes a mousetrap for those hoping to succeed. But this system extends beyond external forces—it shapes what we are offered to consume. The cultivation of a sweet tooth becomes a scandal taught to children. Even the **fruits** sold are replicas of sugar bodies, serving as sombre reminders of today's deterioration.

The Joker and Death in Dialogue

This curatorial approach makes defiance intentional. The joke, joker, joked and jokey function as themes loaded with tense verbs.

The joke operates as terror. The joker becomes a transmogrified interior space with the sideways glance of planting saplings for artistic delicacy. If a joke doesn't land, does this mean the surface it was meant to land on was barren? Does an infertile base fail to receive it and produce offspring of **laughter**? Does a joke need to be delivered by a loner? Must it be formal? Should we consider jokes as forms of diabolical **dialogue**? Jokes can produce violence in the hearts of the fearful. However, the artist was heavily burdened by citations that are remarkably in vogue and celebrated in unsurprising thickets. The artist falls short in projecting his native, vernacular and distinguished episteme and honouring them at an event such as this.

There is no space for "**Identity Politics**," but rather a possible "fellowship of hunger and dusk". We are told that, like the emblematic city fox (of Berlin?), the exhibition also moves—snatching, stealing, dragging, sniffing, drugging, waiting, and appearing to be only an incomplete half. There is no promise of a complete package. We are sure to be disappointed, and in this periodic sampling of time, we discover the subjectivity of the artefacts.

The curators refuse to let their creative festivity be arrested by the anodyne clamour of hostile politics that hijacks the urgency of the moment. Ideas of conventional politics are exported to other countries, while accepted **German** history is engaged with flirtatiously, as if gesturing toward the mandates of bipolar politics.

Exposing and Foxing

While foxes engage in foxing, the artists curated in the Biennale engage in doxxing. They expose the actors of tragic causes who bequeath pain and suffering to our living lives. This constitutes an exposé of **weapons manufacturers**, anti-civil rights regimes, the arrests of dissidents from Myanmar by the military regime, Serbian student insurgency, and Ambedkarite assertion through art of subversion and protest, among a host of innovative cries showing direction.

Humour, dialogue — not revenge — emerges as a theme one consciously adheres to in the installations. There are oddities one confronts without adequate attention being paid to calamitous episodes rooted elsewhere, even outside the galleries and **museum** venues. Major Nom's participation in the Beggar's National Convention, a slapstick comedy made in 1987 by popular Burmese comic Zarganar, was refashioned to tell the tale of today's apathy in the age of cellphone stardom and social media celebrity activism ungrounded from the dust flying in the weightless world of charity-driven popularity. **Influencers**, social media activists, and digital revolutionaries who have access to keyboards on their phones claim singular leadership of slacktivism.

This performance speaks particularly to our times. It critiques the genre of new-age activism, where trending on apps makes spatial indifference a form of dominance that transcends national charters. The **NGO** industry employs copious strategies for fundraising — or “fund raiding.”

Sorrow as a Theme

The art world has extensively discussed nostalgia and suffering, but there is not much focus on sorrow — a longing in everyone's heart triggered by **lost memories** in the chambers of the heart upon which we build new foundations of memory. We don't slowly meditate on sorrow. Instead, we reminisce about ideas of sorrow or borrow someone's pain

to identify with it. **Sorrow** as both state and past constitutes essential intelligence for realising the realm of death. Death becomes a stage we aim to reach.

Taj Mahals and civilisational crafts have been built to prolong the desire to belong and be held by the softer one. **Deep cracks of pain** plowed through motions of broken promises remain alive like suppressed lava. Once that lid is slightly opened, it floods into a night sky of possibility. The canvases build loyalty through shared, identical failings—where the only option left is to remain alive, collecting memories like droplets of morning dew. We rejoice in clubs of crimson monochromes.

Thin vibrations, so fragile, competing against gentle air, emerge from the desired untrodden path taken by the courageous artist. A God is born.

We take breaks, diversions and halts, but carry them while juggling safety like carrying hot iron with a wooden stick. The iron may burn the wood and, essentially, you, but there's no guarantee this won't happen if you handle it well. Like the joker in a circus whose balancing act involves surviving episodic mayhem, we capture the essence of awe, tension, relief and memorable entertainment.

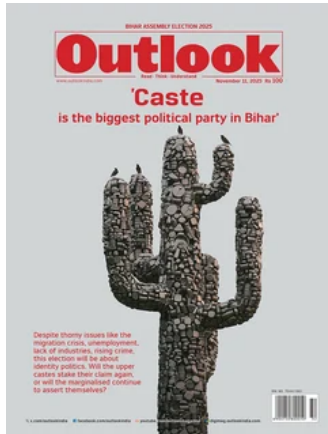
Political Passions at the Biennale

Simon Wachsmuth's film on Dada stayed with me. The presentation of the act, interspersed with history and the radical topic of **protest** and politics, told between the lines, left the intelligent viewer to guess its realpolitik. The dialogue between a pig-faced subaltern and a robotic judge at the courthouse was intentionally placed at the Courthouse Lehrter Straße venue. The dialogical impasse and the transformation of a soldier into a courageous ideological warrior are posed against a judge whose robotic intonation reveals the manipulated judicial system. The actors, **cinematography**, dialogue, music, visual effects, script and direction demonstrated impressive advantages of cultural work.

(Views expressed are personal)

Suraj Yengde is a contributing editor at Outlook. He curates 'Artality' about travel, art & culture. He is the author of the most recent, Caste A Global story

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This story appeared as *Fugitive Frames* in Outlook's November 11 issue, titled "**Caste is the Biggest Political Party in Bihar**," which explores how caste plays multiple interconnected roles in seat-sharing and coalition-building in the land of the setting sun



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