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'Maps of Disquiet': Chennai Photo Biennale addresses the exigencies of our time

"Maps of Disquiet reflects on the exigencies of our times. resisting majoritarian impositions, ecological collapse, and technological dystopias by reclaiming pluralities of thought, voices, and art; building new networks of solidarity and care"

Written by [Shreya Agrawal](#) | Itarsi |

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Gauri Gill, Sikhs protesting against the Nanavati Commission Report in New Delhi, 2005, Excerpted

from the 1984 notebooks, 2013-ongoing. (Source: CPB/PR Handout)

Our society, at present, is gripped by several social, economic and ecological emergencies that need to be addressed immediately. Reflecting on some such exigencies is the third edition of [Chennai Photo Biennale](#) (CPB), being presented in hybrid physical-digital forms this year.

Curated by Arko Datto, Boaz Levin, Kerstin Meincke and Bhooma Padmanabhan, the [exhibition](#) explores the theme ‘*Maps of Disquiet*’ through the sub-theme of labour, urban imaginaries, the commons, economic and migratory flows, archaeology and mining.

Delving deeper into the theme, the curators told [indianexpress.com](#), “*Maps of Disquiet* reflects on the exigencies of our times. Resisting majoritarian impositions, ecological collapse, and technological dystopias by reclaiming pluralities of thought, voices, and art; building new networks of solidarity and care.”

“In today’s world of highly specialised fields of operation, rigid chains of command and niche disciplinary focus, a space such as a biennale offers the possibility of rethinking our futures through broader parameters that address the complexity of the disquiet that we are experiencing,” they added.

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The biennale highlights all that has shaped our present and navigates through the contested visions of our future. It pushes the viewers to ask, “Whose resources? Whose [rivers](#)? Whose interests? Whose voices? Whose images?”



Soumya Sankar Bose, Where the Birds never sing, 2017-2020 (Source: CPB/PR handout)

Elaborating on its focus, Padmanabhan said, “CPB had already set itself upon the national stage with edition 2 of the Biennale in 2019, and so for us, it was about taking forward this important space for dialogue on contemporary [photography](#) in the region, and make it more meaningful to local artists, students, and art community, other than the general public.”

This has been done by initiating specially commissioned projects this year, as well as collaborating with local institutions like the School of Architecture and Planning, Anna University to develop meaningful and [sustainable](#) partnerships.

The exhibition explores the role of photography in re-imagining the world over the last two centuries of colonialism and global capitalism. Photography and mapping were methods of knowledge production and representation that were promoted by colonial powers to exert their authority.



Gauri Gill, Taranjeet Kaur's grandfather Jeevan Singh was killed on Nov 1, 1984, Excerpted from the 1984 notebooks, 2013-ongoing (Source: CPB/PR handout)

Maps of Disquiet goes back to this “twinned history of photography and mapping”, the curatorial note read. “It confronts the paradigms of postcolonial nation-building and identity formation, and subsequent fissures that emerge, especially in India, with economic liberalization and the rise of communal politics, while also looking at current uses of photography, both at the service of power, surveillance, and extraction and as a tool in countering these forces.”

Adding, the curator said that *Maps of Disquiet* offers a platform to “critical mapping practices—a mapping from below, in flux; mapping as an insoluble question, as an unlearning—as well as to photographic grammars that reflect on this history, providing counter-maps and charting alternative futures.”

Several [artists](#) from distinct backgrounds have come together to display their work in the Biennale. Talking about the artists, co-curator Levin told *indianexpress.com*, “As is often the case when curating, I think there was a mix between artists we had in mind immediately and whose work inspired the themes at the heart of *Maps of Disquiet* and others whose choice was inspired by these themes. There’s also always the process when the work of one artist reminds you of the work of another; in other words, it evolved quite organically. And it was great working as a team, with each of us introducing each other to new artists.”



Senthil Kumaran Rajendran, Tamed Tuskers, 2016-2021 (Source: CPB/PR handout)

Agreed Padmanabhan and added, “we would introduce to each other the practice and works of artists/photographers that each of us were interested in. Sometimes it was artists whose works we knew, and sometimes it was new works/artists we found as we were doing our research. This would then be discussed in detail during our curatorial meetings before making our final list.”

The curators, who had met in 2019 to plan for this edition, revealed that the central idea of the Biennale underwent several changes due to ever-evolving cultural and political situations. Despite the [pandemic](#) being the biggest disruptor in the global scenario in the last couple of years, the curators didn’t want the exhibition to be a response to the pandemic that has wreaked havoc on the global order.

However, the journey to the successful execution of the Biennale amidst the pandemic was far from being easy. From depleting funds to uncertainties like timing, space and [Covid-19](#) restrictions — it was met with several restrictions. “We had to be extremely flexible and were lucky to have artists respond graciously and generously to an unstable and uncertain situation. CPB foundation too was incredibly resourceful, and the Goethe Institute provided a level of security with much-needed support,” Levin said.



Lisa Rave, *Europium*, 2014. (Source: CPB/PR handout)

“It was certainly challenging to go ahead with the biennale after changing plans multiple times during the last two years,” Padmanabhan told *indianexpress.com*.

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Levin added that the successful execution of the show “is a testament of the strength and vitality of CBP.”

The show is being presented in a hybrid format — physical and digital — owing to the uncertainties presented by the [Covid-19 pandemic](#). “Since usually biennales are so closely interwoven into the fabric of the city and its spaces, it was initially hard to move away from the physical possibilities of developing site-specific projects and installations. However, considering the uncertainty regarding travel and public

gatherings, which we are seeing even today, we decided on a hybrid format,” Padmanabhan highlighted.

The hybrid manner of the exhibition includes a web-showcase of artists’ works with projects re-worked to specifically suit the online framework, a 2-part journal with images, textual contributions and new podcasts, workshops and urban walks (some online, some physical), and a special MOD (Maps of Disquiet) publication in the form of a newspaper (which will be out in Jan).



Jane Jin Kaisen, Sweeping the Forest Floor, 2020+Community of Parting, 2019. (Source: CPB/PR handout)

“In addition to these, we were also delighted to be able to collaborate with fantastic local institutions like Roja Muthiah Research Library, Forum Art Gallery and Ashvita’s to bring a small set of physical installations across Chennai. Finally, we have an exciting lineup of artists’ video works that we have curated into the Screening Room, which happens every Wednesday and Saturday at Goethe-Institut Chennai and online,” she concluded.

The Chennai Photo Biennale is on till February 6, 2022, and is the only biennale to launch in India this year.

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