

## **From Bangladesh to Venice and beyond: art and crisis in the contemporary world**

Joseph Brodsky begins his essay on Venice, *Watermark*, by narrating his first arrival in the city that he would visit many times in the course of the following 17 years. It was an early night in December. It was windy and chill. And the world was “lighter by two billion souls,” comparing to the time in which he’s writing - November 1989. Thirty years later - and after yet another two more billion people - here I am, arriving in Venice in the middle of summer, to cover an artistic residency which purpose is to reflect on our critical times.

Between the last week of July and the first one of August 2019 I worked in Venice at the Majhi International Art Residency Program as a recorder. My task was to interview the eleven participating artists and write about their experience and artworks - the result is the text you are reading now. The eleven international artists included six from Bangladesh, four from Italy and one German with Turkish family backgrounds. They were staying at Combo, a modernised space in the former Jesuit monastery attached to the Church of Santa Maria Assunta, that provided the participating artists with accommodations and working studios. During my stay in Venice I walked everyday through the city’s narrow streets and bridges from Castello, where I was staying, to the eastern part of Cannaregio, where Combo is situated. In the course of these days I became aware of the significant Bangladeshi community living in the city, one of the reasons for the location choice of Majhi’s first edition. The program also overlapped with the 58th Biennale di Venezia and tried to establish a dialogue with its guiding question, “May You Live In Interesting Times,” proposed by the curator Ralph Rugoff. In turn, Majhi’s invited artists were asked to reflect on the question “Does life in these uncertain times of crisis and turmoil, make art more interesting?”

It makes sense to me to present the artists in the chronological order in which I talked to them, thus respecting the natural and gradual process in which the interviews took course. To give the interviews - and consequently, the final text - more coherence, I pursued from the beginning on some guiding questions, some topics that were discussed with every artist. Firstly, the differences and possible connections between the East and the West were perceptibly one of the main experiences during the residency and this is something I tried to explore in each one of the interviews. I also was interested in how the artists think their work through until the final visual result, how they formalised a concept; something that I refer to in many of the interviews as the Form vs. Content dichotomy. Part of this question was to understand how they relate to tradition and, specially in the case of the Bangladeshi artists, to Western influence. Another common question explored whether the artists believe they - artists, or art - can offer a way out to society’s problems and, in that sense, whether they believe in a social function of the artist. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, we spoke about the key word of Majhi’s residency: crisis. The residency’s query

assumes the existence of a crisis (or crises) but it also leaves room for the discussion of this crisis' nature. Therefore I felt the need to ask the artists about which crisis they were relating to, which crisis was, in their opinion, *the* crisis. In many cases this was such a clear concern to them, that this question not only inspired their work, but lay at its very foundation. Every single one of them - and I was quite surprised by that - had a personal and very conscious way of articulating a particular crisis.

I believe I achieved the coherence I sought, for the reader will notice certain connections between some of the artists. Both Cosima and Umut, for instance, believe in the testifying capacity of daily objects of human use. Even if their working methods are different - almost opposite - they create artworks by assembling those objects and share the ambition of their works' ability of giving evidence of our time to future generations. One will also be able to perceive the opposite views on the use of plastic defended by Umut and Shadhin. Among the artists from Bangladesh there is a general concern about dealing with Western influences and colonial past, although every artist has a particular way of dealing with the subject. Western tradition does not affect only Eastern artists, for some of the European participants, such as Andrea and David, recognise very concrete problems affecting our cultural system. One general complaint, common to both European and Bangladeshi artists, reveals the belief that the art world got too commercial, something that poses a new challenge to artistic production and to the construction of meritocratic evaluation parameters.

As it will be clear during the course of the interviews, there is a general feeling of instability and dissatisfaction with our current global situation, but the way each artist concretely formulates this varies. Some perspectives are more local, other rather globalised. Among the most quoted forms of crises is the already mentioned over commercialisation of the artistic market. For the Bangladeshi context migrational movements and discrimination are main preoccupations, while the Europeans tend to mention internal crisis of Western Art History. The current environmental crisis is a unanimous concern.

Climate change is *the* problem of our time. As a coast city, Venice is experiencing it first-hand. For one, the city has been forced to deal with rising sea-levels, just like Bangladesh. Secondly, mass tourism constantly pushes Venice to its limits with overpopulated cruise ships and photograph-compulsive tourists' gatherings, both incompatible to the city's size and its social dynamics. Floods have also become a common phenomenon in Venice; so much so that during Majhi's residency we could once witness San Marco's Square under water. Climate change is one of the factors influencing the occurrence of floods in the city, and it is estimated that Venice sinks 2 millimetres every year. One of the challenges in understanding climate science lays in its units of measurement: either people have trouble understanding how undermost numbers make a difference (2 harmless millimetres!) or the measurement unit is so abstract that it makes the data

incomprehensible (400 parts per million?). Get people to trust scientific research is a need worth fighting for.

But can we also trust art? Since Modernism, art was always able to relate to its context and, perhaps since ever, to indicate alternative realities. What can art do today regarding our current crises? *Does life in these uncertain times of crisis and turmoil, make art more interesting?*

Joseph Brodsky's world was 4 billion souls lighter than ours. Joseph Brodsky's Venice was colder, emptier and sweeter. As a Brazilian, I feel the weight of environmental responsibility and wish my country was more competent in guarding its (the world's) green patrimony, which includes the biggest rainforest in the world. But living abroad gave me some faith: I believe that the contact with people from all over the world - something that was also at the very essence of Majhi's residency - can bring multidisciplinary and multicultural joined efforts together in order to begin to solve our global problems. Therefore, I invite the reader to reflect on whether and how our Majhi artists did engage with the most contemporary issues and challenges.

### **Kamruzzaman Shadhin (b. 1974, Thakurgaon)**

Kamruzzaman Shadhin was born in Thakurgaon, Bangladesh, and works mainly with installations and performances. When one confronts Shadhin's body of work for the first time it becomes immediately perceptible that his art is 'engaged.' His most common subjects include the environment, migration phenomena and social and cultural life of rural/indigenous communities in Bangladesh. When I asked him about this he told me he works spontaneously and couldn't really imagine doing art in a different way: "Being an artist is the only thing I can do. I've been doing this for 20 years."

I noticed throughout our conversation that for Shadhin being an artist is something almost indissociable from working within local communities of his country, including the one of his hometown. On one hand these communities – its daily life and the challenges it faces – are a subject to his work. On the other hand, the local community often actively participates either in the production of Shadhin's work or in its reception. Some of his installations highly depend on the interaction with local people to exist. He also relies on community's support in order to handle specific materials, since he is not a craftsman: "I am not a technician, and they have the skills which I don't have."

Seeing that Shadhin sees himself as an artist that explores the traditions and local culture of Bangladeshi people, I confronted him with my perception, that the aesthetic result of his works fits the European art scene surprisingly well. I could easily imagine his *Greed* (2016), made in occasion of the Asian Art Biennale, installed in an art gallery in Berlin, where I live. He acknowledges this

aspect of his work and explains that it communicates in different ways to each culture. The idea of making the clay rats we see in two different versions of *Greed*, both from 2016, and in *Rooted in Soil* (2016), came from a particular reality in the Bangladeshi indigenous village of Santal. Due to excessive use of pesticides and insecticides in the agricultural fields, which drives away vultures, eagles, snakes, birds and other animals that kept the rats in check, the community faced a rat infestation that threatened the community's houses, made of clay. Therefore, in these works the clay rats "are a symbol to human greed that is leading to environmental degradation." This close reference to national and popular realities is an important aspect of Shadhin's work. Nevertheless, as it happens in *Greed*, Shadhin's installations are also easily engaging in their final aesthetic result. At one point we came to talk about the residency's question and I asked him what was, in his opinion, the main crisis we are now facing. I could notice that one of his primary concerns is the impact of human action in the environment. He stated, for instance, that he never uses plastic in his works and questioned his very being in the residency, having come by plane and played his role in the respective CO2 emissions, just in order to be there talking about the environment and other crises. He believes that unfortunately we can't do much against the critical situation we're living in since the majority of the problems are of political order. "Is art powerful enough to fight politics?" I asked him. "Yes, sometimes. Art is a tool," he answers, "like a writer who writes or a soldier who fights, the artist has his specific medium."

He believes that his work *Elephant in the Room* (2018) translates well the current context: "The problem is beyond our measure and too threatening for us to bravely face it. But we know it's there" – thus, the elephant in the room. For this project, Shadhin worked in the world's biggest refugees settlement, which is located in Kutupalong-Balukhali (Bangladesh) and shelters more than 600,000 Rohingya people who fled from the violence in Myanmar. Shadhin's intelligent view on the issue is able to reveal another aspect to this phenomenon: "Thousands of acres of forest land were transformed into red, barren earth within a few months to make way for numerous makeshift shelters which became home to hundreds of thousands of people." The Kutupalong-Balukhali settlement lies along one of the main migratory routes of critically endangered Asian elephants that travel between Myanmar and Bangladesh. During several months Shadhin worked closely to the community building artificial life-size elephants out of bamboo and used clothes. Through participatory art Shadhin believes he could promote co-existence with nature and raise awareness about elephant conservation among the community. In this project the artist works with the stateless, be it human or animal.

For the Majhi International Art Residency, Shadhin is returning to a working process present in his former *Heaven is Elsewhere* (2017), a large cloth panel made with old clothes he collected in Bangladesh from migrants and Rohingya refugees. For his *Maze* (2019), created and produced

during the Majhi program, he sewed used garments gathered from Bangladeshi migrants living in Venice into the shape of roses. The roses allude to the first economical activity Bangladeshi migrants find when they first arrive in Venice. Around 20 rose-shaped patchworks resulted from this process and were then temporarily hung on clotheslines in the neighbourhood of Castello, to which the artist and his helpers only could get access after asking locals to enter their houses. The very presence of the clothes in the local houses could have been the only association to the Western culture, but Shadhin also chose to have Venetians writing over the roses. The installation process was documented by photographs and videos, which were exhibit in the show alongside the actual cloth roses.

To have migrants clothes hanging from typical Venetian clotheslines in a traditional neighbourhood works as a powerful metaphor for this aspired better-life that brings many people to Europe. But while their very clothes hang securely from the traditional Venetian houses, immigrants continue to suffer the consequences of not getting access to these clotheslines: true integration in society.

### **Umut Yasat (b. 1988, Germany)**

Umut Yasat is a German artist with a Turkish background who developed a personal concept for his body of art, something he calls *Der Stapel* (German for “the stack”). By disposing of daily objects from his personal use and piling them into the so-called stacks, he creates a materialised storyline – a narrative – of his own life.

In a very conscious and rational way, the artist formulates explanations about his own work process (which alone could be perhaps the result of a Western education). He describes how he started to work with the stacks during his early years as an artist in Karlsruhe, when he was interested in creating objects that could materialise and visualise time. With a classical art education, he started working on paper and passed to the tridimensional format after a few experimentations on piling the paper leaves. The stack is not a sculpture, but a different way of arranging a story, something that could also be delivered by a painting or by a drawing, more or less like a book could comprehend the same content in codex or in scroll. “I am not a sculptor,” Umut states, “I don’t think tridimensionally.”

I was already familiar with his work before I met him at the residency and it was good to have the chance to deconstruct some of my first impressions about *Der Stapel*. At first I thought his work was connected, in some way, to the idea of recycling – that seemed natural to think when looking at a pile of used objects. However, it always felt strange to me that the stacks were so clean, that the objects that formed them were clean. Talking to Umut I notice that he doesn’t necessarily connects his work to the reutilisation of materials that otherwise would go to a dumpster – at least not as a

primary aspect of his work –, but that he is more preoccupied in creating layers of meaning, a narrative, not only of his life, but of his own time. “I see myself as a chronicler,” he says. The stacks are a chronological tower of meaning: like tree rings, they tell a chronological story, his chronological story. They are a further development of the artist’s previous experimentations with self-portraits. Umut would wish them to be endless, as tall as possible, but has consciously limited himself to his own height, to the size it was imposed to him by nature.

Believing that art is “a mirror of its time”, Umut hopes to crystallise in his stacks the moment he lives in, and he aims high: he wishes the stacks could be in 200, 300 years time a testimonial of this epoch – and that’s why he doesn’t regret using plastic in them, a way to show future generations what a bad idea we once had. We started talking a little about the environmental crisis we are facing and I noticed that, although Umut acknowledges it as the main problem of our time, he remains positive. “Statistically there was never a better time to be alive,” he said, echoing, to me, incurable optimists like Steven Pinker or Barack Obama, for instance. We then agreed that there are some very important aspects of life – especially of life connected to culture – that simply can’t be measured by hard sciences and facts. I must say, I could share his vision of a utopian future: “to live in the forest with internet.”

Talking about one crisis led to talking about another. We determined the existence of what we called “a lack of limits,” something that artists face nowadays and can be extremely overwhelming. We reflected on the historical development of art history and how it has always been a succession of clearly set of formal objectives combined with a series of gradually broken rules that has pushed us “forward” (to use a questionable term). After all limits were pushed by the vanguards of the 20th century, a vast palette of possibilities regarding the mental concept and the material formalisation of an artwork now imposes itself to artists as a major new challenge. The logic is simple: when everything is allowed, how can the public recognise the exception? And how can the artist produce something meaningful? According to Umut, when artists are faced with this ocean of options they tend to establish their own personal set of rules, thus creating private “safe havens.” *Der Stapel* works for him in this way. The stacks are supposed to be a life-long project, a self-imposed limit. Within this limit the artist can create and develop infinitely.

For his residency the artist created *Der Stapel 37* (2019) with objects he brought to be used in Venice – already knowing he would leave them behind and return to Germany only with his body clothes. Comparing this 37th edition of *Der Stapel* with earlier versions it is possible to see some new developments in Umut’s working process. The trolley, which in the stacks serves a practical function of supporting the standing object, was replaced by a typically Venetian salesman’s trolley. In earlier editions the trolley fit perfectly the width of the stack. But working with this broader trolley generated the new challenge of holding the stack together somehow. For that Umut included



a purchased object in this stack edition, namely some plastic wires that not only hold the stack firmly inside the trolley, but create a milky space around it – a metaphor perhaps for the third parties we need in life among society; a metaphor for the external validation an artist (or anyone) must achieve for recognition.

### **Rajaul Islam Lovelu (b. 1971, Bangladesh)**

Rajaul Islam Lovelu is a wood carver from Bangladesh and Majhi is his first residency. He explains to me that ever since he started working he felt comfortable with wood. For him the organic matter is connected to the beginnings of artistic practice in ancient civilisations, which consists of a primary inspiration for his work. Rajaul regards wood “as a natural material with individual expression,” shown in the wood’s natural qualities, such as the tree trunk’s texture, the shape of the branches or the tree rings (a testimonial of the passing of time).

Rajaul also tells me that he likes to, “experiment with the material in different ways – high relief, low relief carving, chiseling, burning, pasting other materials to it”, in order to get an accurate impression of him in his work. In other words, he is interested about, “leaving his mark in an object that is useless.” Safeguarding, naturally, the respective backgrounds, Rajaul’s aspirations reminded me of Joseph Beuys and so I asked him if he was familiar with the German artist. “No,” he said, he doesn’t feel influenced by Western tradition and shows the conviction of expressing himself artistically in the regional language of his land and under its local traditions.

His actions’ marks onto the wooden surface include scratches, perforations and strokes. Suddenly going in a new direction, there’s also the very addition of whole external pieces, a kind of incorporation of the ready-made into Rajaul’s composition. For the work he presented for the Majhi residency he incorporated entirely figurative objects. In his previous works, Rajaul also often applies colour to its wood boards. I tried to understand why he does that, what is the importance of colour in his conception. We spent some time on this subject and Rajaul’s explanations went from colour having the ability of giving, “additional extraordinary feelings” to the artwork to, “colour highlights the carved shapes and makes the work more beautiful.” “So beauty is important to you?” I asked him, “Yes.”

For Majhi’s residency he prepared two compositions in wood panels that try to reflect on the consequences of human action on natural environments, an issue he defines as a “global uncertainty.” In both boards, natural pieces of wood are processed, marked, drawn on, and attached to the surface. Then they are complemented with a tridimensional figurative object each, which stands out in the composition. In *Lost civilization* (2019) we see a Mesopotamian mask, and in *Revival song* (2019), a European Putti. The two figures should elude to the “lost civilisations” of

Mesopotamia and the Roman Empire. One could question how really lost these civilisations are, since they've shaped – at least in the West – the beginnings of our entire understanding of artistic process and development.

Differently from his previous woodcarvings, which he showed me through a booklet, he doesn't apply any colour to these two wood panels created during Majhi's program. Seeing his previous works, made in Bangladesh, I immediately notice the difference between that language and the one of the works he produced during the residency's. Rajaul's previous works present a much stronger popular and folkloric look. This is less obvious in the two pieces he showed me in Venice. When I confronted him with that opinion he didn't seem surprised at all. He shows a preoccupation regarding the specific spectators: "My work is popular in Bangladesh, there they can understand it." In Europe, however, he deliberately tried a new language. The Western maxima of a coherent connection between form and content become here a connection between form and audience.

Rajaul expresses a view on artistic practice that is common among the Bangladeshi artists participating in the residency. It is one significantly based on a spiritual notion of art being "pure and strong" and able "to connect and motivate people." Such a mystical perception is so strongly inbuilt, that even when Rajaul tried to be more European for the artworks presented at Majhi's residency he couldn't totally break free from it. Interestingly, he – whether if conscious or unconsciously – identified in his previous works the elements that are commonly associated with popular expression, hence the colour, the figurative composition and the style of the figures, and eliminated them. Anyway, what was left still contained traces of authenticity and therefore contributes to this residency's very idea of cultural exchange.

### **Dilara Begum Jolly (b. 1960, Chittagong) and Dhali Al-Mamoon (b. 1958, Chandpur)**

It was an interesting conversation the one I had with the couple Dhali and Dilara. Both of them are established artists in Bangladesh with a significant repertory in the canonical names we are familiar with here, in the West. Our conversation dealt with many Western art historians while when occasional Bangladeshi or Indian names were mentioned, I was shamelessly ignorant. In spite of that, they were happy to fill me in and explained to me their colonial past as part of the Common Wealth and the national efforts towards the finding of a authentic cultural expression that could overcome the British influence.

Dilara has since long worked intensively on the gender debate. Due to some language limitations from her side (and perhaps a little bit of shyness?), Dhali was more participative in our talk, but Dilara and I managed to get along through some looks and gestures between one cup of black tea and another. Dilara tells me, it was difficult to find a topic that connected at the same time to Venice



and to gender. Her work usually regards the national perspective on the subject. More importantly, she was concerned with the residency's concept and with joining East and West through her usual gender perspective.

For Majhi's art residency she is, not for the first time, working with photographs of important women of Bangladesh and India, such as the Bangladeshi poet and political activist Begum Kamal, the British-Indian educator and social activist Begum Rokeya, the Bangladeshi sculptor Novera Ahmed and the freedom fighter Kakon Bibi, who played an important role in the liberation war that led to the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. The four pictures are collected from the Internet, amplified and printed, and finally Dilara glues typical Bangladeshi decorative elements onto it.

The solution to the initial lack of connection to Venice, a reasonable concern having in mind the residency's context, came with a second series of four images, which depict European torture instruments used specifically to prevent the speech – a metaphor for the situation many women still face in Bangladesh. In this case Dilara also worked on the pictures afterwards by perforating them and setting them against a window that provided the light that comes through these minor holes, underlining their appearance of a photographic negative.

With her work, entitled *Portraits but not Portrait...!* (2019) Dilara aims to, “represent the victims as well as the victors of the monstrosity of patriarchy.” All the women depicted in Dilara's series are already deceased. I asked her (them) if that meant that there aren't current female personalities one could look up to in present Bangladesh. “No,” Dilara said, “but these women I depict are personal inspirations for me.” The eight pictures were then decorated with typical-South-Asia-looking cloth elements and glitter. With this Dilara hopes to add a “spiritual meaning” to her pieces.

Pause for biscuits.

Dhali, by its turn, besides being a well-established artist, works also as a professor of the Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Chittagong. As all participating artists, Dhali only had the idea for his work when he was already in Venice for the program. He started wandering through the narrow streets of Venice, at first simply letting the city impress him. (He mentions at this point that he is aware of the fact that his perception is conditioned by his socially constructed views.) On these walks Dhali encountered some reoccurring posters, one announcing an exhibition on the human body and using a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci for publicity's sake, other with the sayings “The Future Is Now.” Later on he found a tree branch lying on what we would call sidewalk, if Venice had sidewalks. The lying branches were photographed. Then Dhali picked the little tree up and took pictures of it – staged it – alongside the previously founded posters. The little tree was then taken to Dhali's studio at Combo.

Dhali then worked on the tree, adding artificial foliage to it and rapping up a large part of its body with cotton and surgical gauze, thus conceptually “making it more alive, giving it a new life.” In his

words, this process represents a certain utopian desire, inevitable to the human condition: “We are utopians living in the dystopian times and we need a dream; we are dreaming creatures.” His work *Ten days with dead tree branch in Venice!* (2019) enables an environmental analysis. For him this issue is, in Bangladesh, closely connected to the damages that resulted from the country’s colonial past, which he regards as a contradiction of the Western idea of progress. Thus, industrial progress leads (or lead in the past) to the destruction of one of our most common good. However, he also states a more optimistic point of view: “Sapiens show the ability to negotiate with the environment.”

Apart from the ecological crisis we are facing, Dilara states that, “one of the main problems nowadays is still discrimination and deprivation.” In this respect, artists are able to raise social sensibility to critical subjects, but this also depends on the people’s ability to reception this awakening call. Regarding this colonial past, that seems to hunt all Bangladeshi artists I interviewed, I was curious to know how both Dhali and Dilara deal with the formalisation of their artistic ideas. Do they struggle to find a Bangladeshi language? Is this a concern for them? The term “Bangladeshi language” sounds a bit too nationalistic, he tells me, they are always searching for a “contextual language.” Dhali explains that “finding a language is a problem when you don’t have a tradition.” This question came to the country around the 50’s and 60’s and consists of a major concern for them. Dhali says he is “not capable of breaking free of Western tradition,” which I think must be especially difficult for him, since he shows a significant repertory in this very tradition. “Yes, if I could eliminate my past, I would be able to do something new.”

Through pictures, Dhali documented the process of finding, and staging the tree, which was exhibited in a mounted bed. This bed was flanked by two tables, in which the photos and some drawings were also displayed. These drawings, roughly figurative, present a sketchy look and therefore are freed from compositional thinking. Some identifiable objects (birds, trees, branches and a sitting man) are scattered all over the paper surface with ink that will disappear within little time.

### **Cosima Montavoci (b. 1988, Venice)**

From all participants in Majhi’s residency Cosima was the first Venetian artist I interviewed. After being born in Venice and having had a long experience in the Netherlands, where she studied at the Rietveld Art Academy in Amsterdam, she returned to her hometown, where she now lives and works.

Ironic humour is one of the key elements in Cosima’s work. The artist constantly plays within the border between the cute and the grotesque. In previous works she has dealt with the deceiving

capacity of first appearances: in *Tomb Sculpture* (2015) she made beautiful-looking objects with casts of her own teeth crowns, while her *Untitled* (2013) presents cheerful 1950-ish pop-looking prints of food made of pubic hair or dust – and that was even before the age of Instagram’s food-porn.

A further output of her work consists of experimentations with trash. Cosima presents the wish to create an “honest fossil that represents our time,” by collecting random rubbish found on the streets. She believes that the trash humans leave behind tells an “authentic story” and have the capacity of representing our time in the future – sadly also testifying to our wrong consumption habits and decisions such as the use of plastic, for instance. Working with leftovers of human action is not a new subject for Cosima. Her body of work includes the *Trash Project* (2019), where she investigates not only what trash can tell about us but also how it is specific to each particular city. In Venice, for instance, the artist has found leftovers of tourism or water-related activities.

Interestingly, and possibly opposite to one’s first impressions, Cosima doesn’t see the environmental crisis as a primary motivation for her working with trash. The first impulse to work with trash came from the observation of trash’s testimonial capability. “I don’t want to ignore the elephant in the room,” she says, “the environment became obviously a part of my work, mostly in the specific project to Majhi’s residency, but I still think it is a layer of my production.” Cosima doesn’t want to engage directly with specific subjects, because she believes that would make her work simpler in a way, and less accessible.

For this residency Cosima created *Achrome/Art Waste* (2019). For this specific project Cosima decided to isolate single-use plastic products that are often used in the art process and that are in the end never visible; hence part of the title - *Art Waste*. The title’s other part, *Achrome*, is an acknowledgement of the aesthetics of 60’s, she explains. It also specifically alludes to Piero Manzoni and his homonym series of works. In both cases, achromatic does not stand for colourless, but for unmediated materiality, raw reality.

In *Achrome/Art Waste* Cosima partially concealed the single-use plastic artistic residues in light transparent resin squares, still leaving some parts of the objects escaping through the resin-boxes’ boarders. These translucent-resin structures, containing white and clear plastic objects, are fixed on a white-painted wood board, which was lined against the wall of a staircase at the Combo’s reception, a space decorated with frescoes that pose a nice contrast to Cosima’s contemporary piece. Both materials used by Cosima also generate an ironic contrast, since resin is quite expensive (250 Euros every 15 liters) and is used here to encapsulate low-value discardable objects. Next to Cosima’s panel there are single-use plates also made of white plastic, like the ones used in garden parties or children birthdays. They were carefully arranged on the floor against one of the south walls under a window. Another evident concern of Cosima is to create beauty and to do that by

playing with the everyday beauty of randomness, or better yet, of the conscious arrangement of random plastic objects. With this title the artist also distances herself from the expected environmental interpretation her work could encourage at the first sight.

Regarding the crisis' issue, promoted by the residency, Cosima believes artists alone cannot offer a way out. There must be a joined effort that will, one small step after another, lead us to improvement. Cosima strongly believes in humour as a powerful tool in art. "The first reaction people get from my work is maybe thinking it is poetic, and then they come closer and see it's trash [or body parts]." Exactly in this interval between the first impression and the insight lays the irony and the strength of Cosima's work.

### **Andrea Morucchio (b. 1967, Venice)**

Andrea Morucchio is a well-established Venetian artist, who works mainly with installations and video. He has worked previously with documentary photography and started his artistic practice with sculpture. He himself, who has a PhD in Political Sciences, says he is "extremely political," and this is very noticeable in his work.

Our talk started with him telling me about his work *The Rape of Venice* (2015), exhibited at the Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia at the same time as that year's international art biennial and closely related to its title, *All the World's Futures*. In this multimedia installation, which included an overlaid printed floor, an audio track, video projections and the diffusion of a fragrance, Andrea dealt with what he called "the decay of Venice." The Venetian artist, indignant about the situation Venice found itself in, was then concerned with the challenges unfairly posed to the city's residents by mass tourism: "The Rape of Venice encourages the public to reflect on the present conditions confronting Venice today, its decline, and its relentless transformation into a theme-park for millions of tourists," Andrea wrote in the entry to the artwork on his website. This still remains a problem for this wonderful and wrongly celebrated city of only 53,000 insular Venetians and 20 million yearly tourists.

The viewers entered this installation walking over an artificial floor, made of pictures' fragments Andrea took from the mosaic floor of the Basilica di San Marco, Venice's most famous sight. Through this iconoclastic presentation of Venice's postal card, Andrea is alluding not only to its byzantine past but also to its possible destruction. In one of the many signs presented in the installation one reads the question "Is Venice being loved to death?" Andrea explains to me how the installation aims to direct the viewer towards "a desired climax: the Scent of Venice." How surprised I was to know that this presented scent was an attempt to reproduce the smell of "freezing seaweed" Joseph Brodsky describes in the beginning of his essay on Venice (*Watermark*), the one I

was reading during my stay there. This scent is the most essential feature of Venice and in this work it represents the hope of saving the city from its environmental and social threats derived from unthoughtful human action.

Andrea's artistic process has been socially and politically charged from the beginning on, he tells me. However, for him it is essential to convey his message enclosed by an aesthetic format, "otherwise it's just propaganda." Andrea's general body of work shows that the artist works as aware of the tradition which precedes him as (in)formed by global contemporary events. He has made references to Renaissance paintings (*Puzzling Project*, 2017) and neoclassical sculptors such as Antonio Canova, while regarding contexts of terrorism and war for instance (*Le Nostre Idee Vinceranno*, 2002). Andrea's inspirations lay in many traditional and contemporary sources, from literature to music, in religion and the visual arts. Our talk included names like Brodsky, Luigi Nono, Toni Negri and Walter de Maria. The artist explains to me that although he gives a lot of attention to the technical aspect of each work, the concept is also very important to him.

For this residency Andrea presented a video entitled *Engagement Acts* (2019), that shows him in a sandy landscape engaging in a series of bodily explorations of his surrounding – throwing and escalating rocks and bush branches, experimenting with the ability of his body of passing through the natural obstacles he encounters. In a natural way, he experiments with nature's force and power and explores to what extent it is possible to achieve a graceful result. He is the sole explorer of this empty scenery, which is meant to be "everywhere and nowhere," since it is not possible to identify from the landscape only where the action actually takes place. Andrea tells me that the film was made in the Venetian beach area of Lido, but he consciously aimed to a more universal approach. "Don't call me a local artist," he warns playfully. The artist is also the sole explorer in this film because there was no cameraman and production team on site. In some rather funny moments, nature unexpectedly revenged the artist by throwing back at him some object he had thrown first. A metaphor of human action on the environment?

Eventually I asked him one of my guiding questions of all interviews, namely what crisis are we living in. "It is a general cultural crisis," he says. This one creates many others: lower levels of empathy, populism, lack of critical instrument. I couldn't agree more. "Do you venture to guess an origin to all this cultural crisis?" I asked. Andrea was, as it is expected of someone who understands the complexity of the situation, reticent to find a unique responsible but eventually he traced the origins of our current crisis to the popularisation of television, something that culminated in digital social media. Since then, he believes, we have seen a general decline in literature, pop music and cinema, not to forget the visual arts, which have been hijacked by a "circus of money and interests." I ask him whether art and artists still can do something to change this situation. "Of course, otherwise I wouldn't be one," he answers.

**Noor Ahmed Gelal (b. 1977, Dhaka)**

Noor was born in Dhaka, where he lives and works. He is a professional documentary photographer since 2003 and documents mainly travels, cultural and social topics and nature. His photographs were published in national and international newspapers, such as the Bangladeshi Daily Star and the British The Guardian. Majhi is his first artistic residency.

At the beginning of our talk he stated his interest in documenting his home country of Bangladesh, “the land of smiles,” in his words. He tells me he has found in photography the ability to “say something,” to convey a message, something he couldn’t do through other means, like writing for example. In photography he has found the perfect language to show his country. “In Bangladesh people work in general so hard,” he tells me, “and despite of that people are happy.” From what I understood, Noor’s interest in this contrast was always present in his work, so I ask him whether I can call him “an investigator of happiness” and he seems to like the expression. His major interest, he tells me, is “documenting Bangladesh.”

Noor was very reticent to call himself an artist. “I am a photographer,” he said, when I asked him how it was to be an artist in Bangladesh. He told me he could only talk about the reality of documentary photographers, a field that in his opinion “is doing very fine” in the country. Like other Bangladeshi artists I interviewed, he understands his work as a photographer to be part of something greater, a greater mission. “I am first a good man, and then a good photographer.” Furthermore, Noor strongly believes his art has a moral function.

For the Majhi residency he presented a set of three photographs he took while in Venice. Each of them was printed in a piece of cloth and then hung together in the smaller cloister at Combo’s common social area. In every one of the pictures there’s a man whose face we cannot see. The three men are anonymous immigrants from Bangladesh and Libya who were at the time of our interview living in Venice. One of them was the only survivor of an entire boat that was rescued by the Red Cross, Noor tells me. The other one was earning 1,300 dollars fusing metals in Libya: “This is more than enough for him,” Noor says, “but he still wanted to leave.” The man is now established in Venice and making even more money, Noor tells me.

Noor’s clear message, he tells me, is “to warn people not to come to Europe.” He worries about the amount of people who die trying to make it to Europe, especially through the sea: “They don’t understand how dangerous this trip is.” As a convinced defender of the country of Bangladesh, Noor also does not understand why people choose to leave it. He questions this decision and tells me that, “some people are guided by an abstract dream of better life.” I try to consider the current migration movements: among war refugees and climate refugees, there are people like his fellow



countrymen or me, as a matter of fact, someone who leaves a functioning country such as Bangladesh or Brazil, in search of better conditions. I tried to understand why he is resistant to this kind of choice: “Are we only allowed to leave when there’s war?”

In the end, Noor is trying to portray a positive image of Bangladesh and dissuading people to flee in a “dangerous way.” “But by taking these pictures, you are actually showing the victorious ones, aren’t you?” I ask him, “Wouldn’t it be better for your objectives if you actually portrayed the victims?” He then explains me he is speaking from the perspective of the people who were left behind and suffer either by the loss or by the distance of their leaving relatives. He defends that people come through what he calls “the good and safe way,” meaning through an official governmental application, with the security of a good job and by plane. “Everyone should have the dignity to do it right,” he tells me. The problem is that in reality few do.

Noor obviously believes the artist has a social function - I would even say he believes in the artist’s moral function. I ask him whether he thinks it is up to him to decide the future of these immigrants or to attempt to influence their decision: “of course individuals decide in the end what they’re going to do,” he says, “I am just trying to warn them.”

The title of Noor’s work, *Merchant of Venice* (2019), is an obvious reference to Shakespeare’s play. I was interested in exploring the meaning of one of the most powerful names in the Western canon to Noor and to the Bangladeshi context in general. He tells me Shakespeare is part of the school program in Bangladesh, perhaps still a vestige of their former British rule. But Noor’s real inspiration for the reference in this work is a specific sentence: “All that glitters [glisters] is not gold.” However, while the golden box in Shakespeare’s play does not concede the Prince of Morocco his wish, immigration is less determined and remains still an option - and a worthy risk - to many people.

### **David Dalla Venezia (b. 1965, Cannes)**

David was born in Cannes and grew up between the French city and Venice, his parent’s hometown. He told me of his childhood in France and how his father’s profession introduced him to the world of painting. Being the son of a framer (among whose clients was the English collector and art critic Douglas Cooper, for whom some of Picasso’s works were framed) allowed David the constant contact with modern art during the 60’s and 70’s. At age eight he returned to Venice, where he later graduated in Art History and Philosophy at the local university. In this new environment, David got most significantly in touch with Renaissance painters who helped to shape the Venetian school - he specifically mentions Titian’s *Assumption of Mary* in the church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari - and developed a certain preference for this historical and artistic context. The early development of

his personal artistic language as a painter, he tells me, came at first through the combination of these Renaissance influences with the popular culture of comic books. From the Renaissance he got the appreciation of a particular style of painting; from the comics, a more contemporary sense of narrative. The figurative was an early certainty: “I was never tempted to make abstract paintings.”

When he first consciously decided to be a painter his parents suggested him to pursue a classical education in arts, something that was decisive in his career and he is therefore grateful for this advice. To him it is important that an artist has not only a technical specialisation but is also able to reflect historically on art and to develop a personal method. Later on, David’s readings on Psychoanalysis also influenced his paintings, especially his self-portraits, throughout his production. In some series he explores also the genre of still life, for instance by depicting a series of toy dinosaurs (*n°576*, 2008) and other animals taken from the childish universe (*n°579*, 2008) - it is still life in the form, but the subject is different. Another facet of David’s work consists in copying, revising, great paintings from the past, such as Antoine Watteau’s *Pierrot*, at the Louvre (*Sua Cuique Persona*, 2011-2018). Self-portraits, still-life, copies: these are the main ways David formally relates to his field’s tradition.

When we started to generally talk about “crisis,” the key-word of Majhi’s residency, it led to reflections towards the present art market’s situation and the function of the artist and of figurative painting. “We’re going through a total change of paradigm, the art system got very commercially based,” David says. Because of the lack of current well established judgment parameters (something that also came up in some other Majhi interviews) the art world has fallen hostage of the market: “today there is no secure way to value an artist’s merit and commercial worth,” he says, “The essential value today is money, how much an artist costs.” In David’s opinion this logic led also to the conditioning of critics, journalists, museums, fairs and other legitimacy institutions. Everyone is committing to the system.

In a way, this new context took the public away from the artist. David compares that in the past, an artist used to express a certain community, religious or other, while “now we are a community of individuals so you just express yourself.” In this sense, despite having been an artist for the past 30 years, David sees that painting has become something quite “useless, something less interesting than in the past, because you don’t have a collective need of the painter’s knowledge.” Regarding this I asked him whether he thought we’re experiencing a problem of reception. “Reception is also a question of general education,” he says, “it’s a matter of a general ability to recognise quality.” I agree with him that “we live in a world of quantity and not quality.” David is not a reactionary though. I was curious to ask him, in a humorous way, whether he would prefer to have lived in Renaissance times, to which he answered me that he knows we are living in the best times ever, even if we’re not always aware of it. “I don’t like mystifications of the past,” he says.

An etymology-enthusiast, David often begins to sketch the idea to a new work from this point of view. For this residency he started searching the etymology of the word “crisis.” It comes from the Greek verb *krínnō*, he explains, and it means to distinguish or discern, to order, to decide. Therefore, there is a positive dimension to every crisis, something that leads to acting after some judgment. David believes that “crisis is essential to life.” He also told me that being in the residency has pushed him out of his comfortable working rhythm. Seizing the moment, he tried to detach himself of the usual creational authorship and freedom and made ten canvases where he depicted the other participant artists. In his work, entitled, as the exhibition itself, *Scent of Time* (2019), he “put his skills and knowledge as painter at the other artists’ disposal” and tried to eliminate as much as possible his own subjectivity. He did not simply depict his fellow artists but related specifically to the works they presented in the residency. This posed to David a challenge in understanding several different working processes and in surpassing personal preferences. The ten canvases are attentive to each artist’s individuality but also work well as a set. They carry David’s personal style and present generally the same colour tones - comparing them to David’s previous works and among each other. In some of them the artist returned again to etymology, while in others it is visible how he engaged critically with his fellow artists.

### **Uttam Kumar Karmaker (b. 1962, Munshigonj)**

Uttam initiated his artistic education in his home country before moving to Italy, where he studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts of Rome and of Macerata. At the time of our interview he was living in Rome. During Majhi’s residency program Uttam was showing a triptych painting at the 58th Biennale’s Bangladeshi Pavilion, held in the Palazzo Zenobio in Venice.

At the beginning of our talk he tells me that he found himself in the residency among many artists who worked in a “more conceptual way.” He, on the other hand, always identified more significantly with figurative painting. Once, while studying in Rome, Uttam took classes in abstractionism as a way of challenging himself to do something different, but he couldn’t “break free from the figurative” and kept worrying about a “final formal result.” To him this formal solution is much easily understandable in figurative painting, while it is harder to say “what makes a good or a bad abstract painting.”

For the Majhi Residency, Uttam chose to engage with the other participants. From what he tells me, he was guided by two main sentiments: on one hand, the meaning of the word “majhi,” and on the other, his personal experience in the residency. Majhi means boatman or sailor and is a mystical metaphor in Bangladesh for a guiding figure. Some artists to whom I talked during the residency regard majhi as a type of destiny, but for Uttam the spiritual boatman becomes a symbol of his

power in guiding his own life. He then tells me how going through the residency's experience made him feel as part of a "Majhi family" and this is something that, combined to majhi's mysticism, he wanted to depict.

Uttam portrayed, literally, a random selection of some of his fellow participant artists on six canvases, while on paper he drew other residency members on a boat against a Venetian cityscape. Among all depicted people, not only the artists were present in his work, but also the curator, professionals from the press office, the sponsor, and me, the recorder. Caterina Corni, the curator of the program, is centrally represented in Uttam's paper work: she holds a paddle, that, Uttam tells me, is not meant to be a gondola paddle but one common to the traditional Bangladeshi boats. He explains to me that combining the Venetian scenery with a Bangladeshi popular boat was a way of symbolically combining these two places, resuming the whole transcultural residency's experience.

There is a certain strangeness to Uttam's final presentation: the vertical paper piece glued on the wall, the wood board with the diagonally installed canvases, a second boat drawn on a paper piece below the wood board, the disparity between a perfectly drawn Venetian cityscape and the formalisation of the oil portraits... I was curious to know why Uttam had made those decisions and I tried to explore in his work some of my favourite dichotomies: form versus content. He tells me that he deliberately applied this particular language to his oil portraits in order to achieve a connection to Bangladesh and to drift apart from a more traditional European representational model. But when I asked him whether I would find such a painting style in Bangladesh if I went there or, in other words, if this visual language was common or traditional in his country, the conversation drifted to another direction.

As someone who doesn't know much about the Bangladeshi art scene I was eager to understand more about it. Uttam explains to me that most of the artistic tradition in the country was imported from Europe and brought there by Rabindranath Tagore, the famous Bengali poet and "humanist" who was culturally important for the region that is now Bangladesh. Through him, Bengali people knew modern art and abstractionism. Unlike other Bangladeshi artists I interviewed, Uttam doesn't seem radically resistant to the idea of European influence in his country. He believes "it is a positive encounter to get in contact with the different" and that this cultural exchange can foster Bangladeshi to find their own authentic way of expression.

When asked about whether he thought artists have a specific function in society, Western or Eastern, Uttam showed his belief in the artist's "special sensibility" because "they are freer." In this sense he is closer to what his fellow countrymen told me: to Uttam, art has the power to set an example and its profession is "a mission, something that comes from the heart." He also mentions, using the very same word as many other Bangladeshi artists I interviewed, that this special "sensibility is something very *pure*." For him art is connected to "love," not to "money," even if there are artists

that are corrupted by the market logic. And in this, his critic resembles the European artists' one: "the commercialisation of the art world is a global problem, it happens in the West as well as in the East." Uttam tells me that the "evaluation levels" may be different in these two civilisation traditions but that the art system - that is, the market - is the same everywhere.

### **Chiara Tubia (b. 1982, Venice)**

Chiara was born in Venice. She started drawing already from a young age and later studied Art Sciences at the university in Bologna, before acquiring a master degree in Fashion. During her life she was increasingly interested in religious and spiritual expressions and philosophies, as well as in other cultures. This, combined with her passion for travelling, influenced her work immensely, she tells me.

Chiara's exploration of different thinking systems includes references to religion, folklore, anthropology, spirituality and science. Her main aim is to question individual and collective convictions "in order to unveil the different facets of 'reality' and to suggest the awakening of consciousness." In three different times in her life Chiara has lived in India, where she "learned to connect all her interests," and especially after this experience her work developed towards the attempt of merging Eastern and Western philosophies.

Formally, all this universe translates to her work in multiple solutions, combining different expressive languages ranging from installation, performance, multimedia, painting and sculpture. Some of her most interesting works include public installations and land-art interventions like in *Breath* (Brescia, 2017), in *La parte visibile* (Venice, 2015) or *Marigold* (Assam, India, 2017). In my opinion, Chiara's strength lays in achieving a beautiful and clean aesthetic result while working with multidisciplinary and transcultural references that could easily foster the opposite.

Chiara had a religious education, during which confessions made her question religion's power mechanisms. The fact that her father was a doctor brought her to understand the physicality of life, while in contact with different religion systems she understood how "truth" is, on one hand, relative, since every spiritual expression has its version of it, and on the other, universal, since the need of having it is common to all. Not only this need is common, but there's often also a concrete overlapping of theories, a certain "common point" which Chiara perceived in all cultures. When she explained me how this dichotomy of physicality and spirituality is present in her life she mentioned Bernini's famous *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, a deliciously ambiguous work of Art History's Western canon. To Chiara, the "concrete-physical and the invisible-spiritual worlds" were never separate things; both of them are parts from the same whole, "regardless of our beliefs."

She believes art is not only a way of self-expression, but that it can be more, it can “help to change things.” However, Chiara doesn’t speak to serious subjects, such as religion, in a very serious way; she doesn’t want to reproduce the dogmatic posture of churchmen. She believes “a subtle irony often permeates her work, even if this is not evident at a first reading.” It is not about showing her point of view, she explains, but uniting all possible ones and their multiple connections: “There is no judgment, accusation or denounce in my work.” Chiara was the only European artist in the residency that had a significant experience and more concrete interest in the East, so I asked her if she felt more connected to her fellow participants artists from Bangladesh: “since I am intrigued about differences in cultural behaviour, the residency was an amazing experience from this point of view,” she answers. Chiara’s utopian idea of future consists of a combination of the achieved technological advances with our more spiritual origins and contemplation capacities, by means of a true encounter between Eastern and Western traditions.

At Combo Chiara’s *My Place is Placeless My Trace is Traceless* (2019) included a sound installation at the main courtyard and a further room with a multimedia installation. The soundtrack was the simultaneously playing of three sound editions made of several religious chants from three religions: Christianity, Islamism and Buddhism. From Christianity Chiara took bells, liturgies and Gregorian chants; from Islamism, different versions from muezzin calls to prayer (*adhān*), some chanted recitations of the Koran and some prayers (*salah*); from Buddhism, some mantras, the cosmic sound (Om), Tibetan bells and gongs. The one-hour track was played everyday by three loudspeakers positioned in Combo’s main courtyard reproducing each one of the tracks. As part of this work, Chiara previously navigated through the waters of Venice - echoing the very meaning of Majhi - with the same three loudspeakers attached to her belly. This process was recorded and the 18-minutes-long video that resulted from it was presented in Chiara’s second exhibition room, where the soundtrack was also being played. Because of the film’s and sound recording’s different time durations, in each time the video was played it gained a different soundtrack. The installation was completed with the printing of 49 sentences taken from various spiritual traditions on book shelves that filled the room - a metaphor for the “immense spiritual library of the world.”

I am attracted to Chiara’s investigation of melody’s significance in religion: “since ancient times, sounds and words are directly connected to religion and serve as an instrument of connection between man and divinity,” she says. The world was never soundless - neither could it ever be imageless, as testified even by religions that strictly follow the third commandment - and this rhythmic human impulse was from early on somehow connected to the existential hypotheses humankind created to give meaning to life on earth. Chiara’s work underlines this *common* fact, and diminishes the hierarchical value of religious systems.