

more of an avalanche: Raju Rage and Trishna

Shah transcript

Leah Clements 00:00

We will now be moving through to the gallery where we'll hear from Raju and Trishna. I'm going to give a slightly longer introduction to Raju and Trishna before we move through. So, Raju Rage is an interdisciplinary, interdisciplinary artist who is proactive about using art, education, education and activism to forge creative survival. They primarily use their non conforming body as a vehicle of embodied knowledge to bridge the gap between disconnected bodies between theory and practice to text in the body, and aesthetics and political substance. They work in performance, sculpture, soundscapes, and moving image, focusing on techniques of resistance and utilizing everyday objects, and everyday life experiences in communicating narratives around gender, race and culture. they investigate history, memory and trauma with an emphasis on colonial legacy, its continuation and impact on the body. So Raju will be joined by Trishna Shah contributor to the interview portion of the work. Trishna has been a roots reggae, DJ, and singer for over 15 years, building connections in the UK roots reggae sound system scene. She co-founded Uprising, a Cambridge based promotions company who have organized events throughout the UK. She's a she's a writer and contributor to Gal-dem magazine, and is part of Off Road Circus, an organization that combines circus and social activism. So we'll maybe return to some of these questions later, but for now, we can move through to the gallery for Raju and Trishna.

Raju Rage 01:44

Trishna hear was also a participant in this work, which is titled 'The Undervalued Energetic Economy' and, yeah, it's a work in progress. It's work that I started to develop while I was here at Wysing on residency last year in March to May. So over that six to eight week period, I was at a point in my artistic career where I was doing a lot of performance based work and wanting to not do that anymore and thinking a lot about the conditions of making work that I was under, my peers were under, mostly as, I guess, artists of colour within the UK context. And trying to so...I used this periods of residency to kind of really try and untangle this, but realizing there was a huge entanglement with with everything I was experiencing, in my kind of artistic career. And so, yeah, my background, I guess, was, yeah, more kind of in self organizing and DIY culture in the early 2000s, in London, and I was involved, I guess, not by choice, necessarily. But yeah, just kind of dealing with everyday struggle and what that meant getting involved with various activism. So actually I know NC?? from back in those times as well and that's how we met actually. So yeah, and then I'd also got involved, I've been in art school, and I studied in art school, and with all the frustrations that you mentioned around Rasheed Areen and speaking about, Nick was speaking about ??, and we just turned to each other and we were like, nothing changed. You know, so kind of the same concerns. So I'm not going to go over those again. But just to say, those are kind of reiterated of having that same experience of frustrations of, you know, why are we not being taught about this at school? Where are these histories? Where are the other artists like me, or in my specific case, finding artists that were either artists of colour, but not necessarily trans or queer. So yeah, just kind of that that struggle. I also get involved in education work, because I did at some point become quite politicized about these issues, and speaking about them, and that kind of attracted institutions. So

institutions were interested in kind of me doing the diversity and inclusion work and that's something that a lot of us fall into. So yeah, so I was just trying to kind of make sense of it all. So I kind of was at a point where I was like, let me kind of just kind of get to grips with this. In the in the meantime at Arts Collective with...well it was just me and Evan Ifekoya and then Rudy Loewe and Raisa Kabir joined and it was kind of an open group and people came in and dropped out again those who participated as well. And many different people who were creative practitioners and artists and activists came to those spaces. So we created an Arts Collective to kind of to have space to carve space, where we could actually come together and discuss some of these issues whether it was about ranting about, whether it's about sharing resources, sharing each other's work, having the space to crit each other. And so yeah, so collective creativity, we're kind of provided the space. We're having a lot of roundtable conversation. And, yeah, it was a really important moment because and this started in like 2014. It was a period where we started to then look at the Black Arts Movement and do a lot of, I would say, anarchiving of those archives. So part of that involves having cross generational intergenerational conversation with some of those artists directly. So we were lucky Sonia Boyce, Keith Piper, Lubaina Humid was was really influential, it was...we had conversations with her we went to the archive, the making visibles archive in Preston. So we we started to begin these conversations. So we were kind of unpacking, yeah, what happened in history, what, you know, what's happening now how these things connect. I was trying to connect all these different areas of my life, which felt quite separated as well with within activism, education, and artistic practice. And so I developed this, this this map while I was here to just kind of really try and untangle it, and then realizing that it's a huge entanglement, actually. So this is a work in progress. Some of these links, you know, there's other links to be made. There's other things to be

added. There was, it was a series where, I don't know, were you there when we did a little conversation? Okay, so there was another part of the process where, we where I kind of opened up to people to kind of, well in a kind of kitchen table setting where they had these placemats and they could add to it or change it or, you know, but I realized that it's very much kind of a self portrait in the sense of my, my world, and me, and my peers and what's around. But part of that was, yeah, this kind of need to like, yeah, to question why we weren't coming up on this information in the archives, why it took so, so much to find that information and the accessibility to get to institutional archives even. So, what I was thinking about in this project was to create a map, but also kind of a resource, that will be a kind of on a digital platform. That, you know, so for example, if you click on one of these, these links, it kind of leads you to somewhere else, or to somebody's work or to, to theory or to, you know, so it kind of becomes kind of an alternative archive. So I kind of started collecting and interviewing people who I thought were kind of, yeah, when I, when I kind of made these things. I was like, oh, who can I speak to about 696 legislation? Who can I speak to about different aspects of this? So I started to do these interviews and I've compiled four of them and one of them was Trishna, who maybe you want to introduce yourself, but you are an artist based here in Cambridge, and I was here at the time. So I was in Cambridge, so it made sense to connect with you and find out what you were doing and how you were connecting art and activism. So maybe at this point, because otherwise you'll forget to say anything *laughs*.

Trishna Shah 08:09

laughs Yeah, sure. So I guess the way we started the conversation was we were talking about music and I grew up in a Gujarati family. My mom always used to force us

to go to Pujans on a Friday night, which I absolutely hated. Because all my mates were able to go to normal stuff we used to have to Pujans, but but that was sort of started my journey into music. I went to art school as well, but then I got pregnant and, you know, sort of, I don't find that much time now to do my art. But I guess I put more of my time into music and being a mom, I think I have to focus on making money and stuff like that to buy things for the kids. Like, like trainers. Like proper nice, like you've seen the video. *audience laughs* But yeah, it was nice to get getting to know Raju, I think in our community art isn't something that's valued. So you go and you say to your mom and dad, I want to go to art school. You know, I think that's a nice hobby, but actually you should, you should go and do maths or something. So seeing Raju and what they were doing, and how they were making all these links was really important actually, I met you about, what, five years ago. So I guess that sort of re-inspired me to get in touch with my art a little bit. And I know I dug out lots of my old paintings and started WhatsApp-ing you photos and stuff like that, because I think that there's something about capitalism that takes me away from what I really want to be doing. So in a way I understand this need to make money and have all the material stuff, but at the same time, my heart isn't happy unless I'm doing stuff that makes me happy which is why these is a really beautiful. I don't know if you guys have read these lists, but it's just, it's doing that stuff that is good for me and it's sort of good for humanity too because if I'm happy, I'm a good person, and I do better things and also my activism, that whole capitalism thing, job, all that that takes me away from my activism too. It's like it's this fine line and I'm quite happy with trying to dance it at the moment.

Raju Rage 10:26

So can you speak to like, Yeah, what what you've been doing Cambridge, you've been kind of building this, like music, sound system, group together and things like that.

Trishna Shah 10:39

Yeah.

Raju Rage 10:39

Like what you've had to experience in Cambridge as well.

Trishna Shah 10:43

Yeah. Okay. So there was this collective called Cambridge Revelation, it was mainly sort of a lot of Jamaican guys and a few other white people and they were sort of very inclusive as like sound system collective, they had a sound system and we were all DJs. So it was quite there was about 12/15 DJs. That was when I was...now I'm 34, so that was when I was 16/17 and we had a pub we do regular nights, there's a sound system in there. We used to take the sound system out to Strawberry Fair and that's how I got into I think I first started listening to roots through that. I mean, obviously, I knew like Bob Marley and Peter Tosh and things like that. And so what was nice about that was just a community of people of colour, really a community of I told you how some of the elders were really encouraging, like my friend Brody, who you met, he was like go on, you know, buy tunes go on, go and get on the mic and stuff when I was shy. So so that was beautiful to have that because growing up in Cambridge, it's not like growing up in London, where you're surrounded by lots of people of colour you are the odd one out at school, you're the one with the oil in your hair, or you're the one who's, who's family is speaking weird language to you in the playground and it's embarrassing. So actually, to

have that, that connection was important, and from that Uprising came, which was just jungle and reggae collective. Tonight, we've got an event. So I'm not part of Uprising, I just get paid to go and play there. Now I don't really want to do any of the organizing. But if any of you know Demolition Man, a jungle artist, is coming down tonight. So I'm playing there. So yeah, that's, that's the progression. And now I guess, the time that I get away from the kids, when I'm not at work, I'm focusing more on writing lyrics and making music I was building my sound system. I was like, it's too much money I can't put money into that. I'm trying focus on the music as a way of expressing what I wanted to the youth.

Raju Rage 12:36

So yeah, Trisha has interview I mean, it goes into more background, herstory of organizing and creating, creating this, this space for yourself, and how that also connects to the activism because I know you also write and you're part of activism. Do you want to speak a little bit about that?

Trishna Shah 12:54

Yeah sure.

Raju Rage 12:54

Why you came to that?

Trishna Shah 12:56

Yeah, I guess I've always sort of written poetry and stuff like that and sometimes issues just get to you, you know, you see stuff in society, and it just gets to you. And that's how

I started writing for Gal-dem and contributing. It's a magazine, it's an online magazine that's written by women of colour, but it's for anyone, stuff that's relevant to everyone. And I just get annoyed about things sometimes and writing is a way to, you know, whether it's lyrics or an article is a way to express that and hopefully, that's going to be useful to someone.

Raju Rage 13:31

Great, thanks. So yeah, so my interest in kind of interviewing you and interviewing some of the other people, there's writers, poets, musicians, artists, and some most, most of them connect with politics or activism in some way. But I am going to then move to kind of interviewing more activist, strict activist participants as well, I guess was to kind of, to kind of give this some contextualization, and and some, some, yeah, embodied experience of like, what what these these narratives are, but also to kind of bring bring more nuance to them, because it can be really simplified, like, you know, diversity, inclusion, decolonizing, intersectionality, but actually, what does that mean, and kind of everyday living kind of practice? And so, you know, yeah, there are some issues around cultural appropriation, what that means, like, just different nuances to what some of these are about and how they connect to each other. And my hope is to kind of build on that, and I think, yeah, I kind of set it up like a kitchen table, because I come from, I guess, this legacy of like, not having space like this kind of closing the few centres that we talked about, and you know, the squats, squatting becoming illegal, that kind of got rid of a lot of spaces that I was involved in, in the early 2000s, in London, Hackney. And rising rents and gentrification and so on has meant that a lot of us meet at kitchen table conversations and have done and I've been involved in activism in Berlin as well where that kind of happens there because it's also like this overt racism still exists in Germany,

which maybe doesn't exist in the same way here. But there's, you know, things we talked about things not shifting, but actually. Yeah, context, things have not shift the context of shift policy his shift shifted. And there's still institutional racism, right? So a lot of us kind of, yeah, come together outside of, or find safer spaces like kitchen table conversations. And, yeah, this is a space where we can kind of have these conversations, debate, discuss, critique, and where knowledge is produced, but isn't really recognized, in the same way that this, you know, knowledge is recognized within institutions, and how they're spoken about in conferences in academia. And I guess it's also to kind of counteract how I see a lot of that becoming this discourse within kind of academia to kind of bring it back to the kitchen table. And I'm also, I was trained as a chef, and I also cook and so that's part of my kind of everyday life as well. So but yeah, a lot of kind of current activist groups like Black Lives Matters and so on meet at kitchen table conversations in the kitchen tables, and we don't have spaces, we just actually a group of us have put together an application for Raven Row that's...don't know if everyone's heard about Raven Row, they're offering office space for a year. So you know, so yeah, kind of thinking about how we, how we organize, share resources, produce knowledge, and really unpack these, these kind of this conversation these links. Yeah, I don't think there's any more to say.

John Bloomfield 16:39

I think that brings us up to the break. We'll come back to some of these questions at the open discussion at the end.

Raju Rage 16:49

Yeah, feel free to like come up to me and ask questions. And also, there's the the interviews and the work here. There's other people's materials that I've also found inspiring that I've included, but it's an exhaustive list. There's just so much there's so much that isn't here, that I'm aware of. But again, it's this, this will probably take me a lifetime to kind of make it to a kind of a digital resource that I'm hoping to do. Thank you very much.

Audience Member 1 17:12

Can the Soundcloud be accessed?

Raju Rage 17:14

Yes.

Audience Member 1 17:14

Okay.

Raju Rage 17:18

And that's the idea that it will be able to be accessible. And also the ideas also that I wanted. I want to make kind of an open source project so that other people can contribute because there's always going to be things that are missing and lacking and other perspectives as well.