# Radical Hospitality and Radical Spaces

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| Louisa Bufardeci0:00:07 - 0:01:13 | Hello and welcome to GAPS, a podcast produced through the Center of Visual Art Graduate Academy, at the University of Melbourne. My name is Louisa Bufardeci. I'm an artist and a PhD candidate at the Victorian College of the Arts. I'm here today with Miriam LaRosa, my colleague from the department of Art History at Melbourne University, and we're sharing our conversation with Indian artist, Mithu Sen and Australian artist Keg de Souza on the possibilities for a radical hospitality in contemporary art practice. We talked specifically about the different ways Keg and Mithu use language and food as a form of radical hospitality. They're both unsettled traditional ideas of hospitality to create other ways of thinking about how we can interact. Among other things, Mithu shares with us the evolution of her poetry practice and discusses her site specific performance. Lunch is canceled from 2019, and Keg tells us about a number of her projects, all of which have community engagement at their core. I hope you enjoy the conversation. |
| Miriam La Rosa0:01:13 - 0:01:19 | Before we dive into our conversation, |
| Miriam La Rosa0:01:20 - 0:01:34 | I would like to acknowledge that we are recording this podcast on the unceded land of the Wurundjeri people and I would like to pay our respects to their Elders. Past, present and emergingWe are guests on this land, and we thank them for their hospitality. |
| Louisa Bufardeci0:01:36 - 0:01:54 | So, Miriam, we were really lucky to have two amazing artists with us tonight. We've got Keg de Souza, who is an Australian artist and Mithu Sen who is an Indian artist and both of them have agreed to chat with us about aspects of radical hospitality in their works. So I'll just start by introducing them. |
| Louisa Bufardeci0:01:54 - 0:03:10 | Keg is an artist with a social practice. She creates dialogical projects with various communities to generate knowledge exchange. These projects often center around the sharing of foodand ideas, in spaces created by temporary structures that she makes and designs herself. Her work is informed by ideas of hospitality, squatting, pedagogy and organizing. She has exhibited nationally and internationally and undertaken many residencies around the world. She is currently completing a PhD at Monash University. And then Mithu Sen is an Indian artist With the conceptual practice, she works across a range of media, including drawing, performance, video, sculpture and more. Her practice produces languages that subvert social norms, including those around our production, exhibition and reception. Mithu's work is underscored by feminist and anti- capitalist thinking, which I'm sure is why I love it so much. And she has exhibited in galleries and museums in many countries around the world and has been the recipient of many prestigious awards as well. So we're really lucky to have these amazing people with us here, and we'll get to it. Miriam, would you like to start off? |
| Miriam La Rosa0:03:11 - 0:04:01 | Of course! I wanted to start with the word 'radical' that is used by both of you in your work to refer to two different concepts. One is a radical space for you Keg and radical hospitality for Mithu. So reading about your work, Keg, you talk about radical space as site-specific project, made with temporary architectural structures, where you host educational activities and often include voices that are marginalised or not part of the mainstream discourse. Whereas radical hospitality for Mithu is a way of deconstructing normative relationship between South and the other? But I'm really interested in trying to expand a little bit on the definition and seeing how they actually manifest practically in your work, through example. |
| Keg de Souza0:04:02 - 0:05:49 | Yeah. A lot of the work I do, looks at how to create relationships and relationality. So through this methodology, I always locate myself. So I want to begin by acknowledging that I live and work on Gadigal Land and I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and I acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. So I'm someone whose own ancestral lands were colonised, and I live on unceded Gadigal land. So, I think for me the way that this idea of radical spaces has really sort of come about through my lived experience. So being a person of color, growing up in a very white suburban part of Perth in western Australia, through this experience of studying architecture, where I was taught predominantly by white men, actually all white men, and how this has really shaped my idea of space is and what place is. And it was really shaped through this Western perspective, and I always felt of it, and I think for me through my work, this idea of carving out space or creating these spaces or delineating these spaces, is because I want to create something that is other than the kind of dominant culture or the dominant space that I am so brought up in and raised in, and experienced that my whole life, and I guess the word radical, in essence, I think it's just, you know, a way that you talk about something that's not the usual, not the norm. And in this respect, I think that's just, you know, a Western discourse or a Western idea of what spaceis. And so how can you create a radical space that looks at other forms of thinking about place and space? |
| Miriam La Rosa0:05:49 - 0:05:55 | Yes, which connects very well with your understanding of radical hospitality, Mithu, right? |
| Mithu Sen0:05:56 - 0:06:50 | My own radical hospitality, I would say, like after this basic notion of hospitality, even radical hospitality, what I practice more is like I put myself in both the places, as a guest on as a host to get, you know the same time in the same situation and that I create situations. So that is my role of using it, and I do it very playful. You know, I try to draw a line between these two within myself. So for me, me and the other within myself. And then I play and perform in that role, I don't know, like if it is like, I can, you know, with that example, maybe I can explain that it's a lot. So basically traveling that whole and unsettling the whole welcoming aspect of individual institutions. |
| Louisa Bufardeci0:06:51 - 0:07:12 | I have a question for you, Mithu. Keg told us about how her upbringing in Perth has kind of framed her practice and the radical side of her practice, and I'm wondering if you had a similar experience growing up. Were there examples of radical hospitality practice around you when you were growing up? Or how did you come to this as a practice? |
| Mithu Sen0:07:13 - 0:09:10 | Well, it was more organic because, you know,because during my upbringing, I mean, everything was there, but there were not theoretically or politically named, that you are learning some interdisciplinary acts, or you are a feminist. Nothing was taught, nothing. So everything was very earned from life and experience. But then when I moved to a big city, like Delhi, from my small little town, a very regional cultural hub. I'm coming from Bengal. But it was always considered as very romantic, you know the Bengali culture,writers and poets and musicians, you know, and my mother is a poet. So I also started writing poetry at a very early age, in my own language, Bengali. When I was starting out also, I was, I think writing more than I was doing anything else.I quickly started publishing. I got my book published, and so everything happened quite at an early age, and I got a kind of recognition or confidence about my own language. I was very convinced that, you know, what I want to do is I want to be a poet. But then, you know, my destiny brought me to this big city in Delhi for personal or whatever professional reasons, and I started living here, but before that, I did not really encounter these kind of the differences. But India as a whole, has a colonial hangover as a post-colonial country. You can see that the hundreds of languages we have, and the hegemony and the hierarchy and the politics. The whole lingual politics is something that we almost all suffer, except the privileged elite who can send their kids to private schools. The whole how we adopt a different culture. |
| Mithu Sen0:09:12 - 0:11:01 | I mean, I have no problem with that, because I love languages, different kinds off culture, everything. But when you are overlooked on your side and you can see, you can feel it on your skin, it's like, you know. And I just suddenly lost all my confidence, everything. I just felt like that all I was dreaming to be. I wanted to be a Bengali poet and suddenlyI realized that there was a huge communication gap. People are not really interested to know or understand, or there is a sympathetic kind of things, like"she is good" but then there is the humiliation of not speaking or performing a very sophisticated English or Hindi, or other languages. So there was always and it was not, you know, over your face, but in your skin, you know, so you you feel it. And sometimes you understand that how you are being marginalised without even being kind of said that you are in some categories, you know, and, you know, like I'm dyslexic. I was a dislike since when I was in school, so I just could not keep up with adopting something and so language was a huge thing. So I went into silence. I stopped writing and I stopped. I Did not stop writing out of revenge. It just organically started happening. At first it become very, very minimal, you know, like a Haiku. And then it became words and then became, you know, like one letter. And then eventually it became the blank pages. So my last book was published with all those because I consider and acknowledge them as poetry, even if it is a blank page. So my poetry became on poetry through that and then my other book after 10 years, when I was prepared, that was all the glitches, unreadable glitches. |
| Mithu Sen0:11:02 - 0:11:55 | And then I started reading, you know, like reciting my poetry even without me, you know, understanding what is written. So that kind of subconscious came out as a resistance so that became a part of the lingual anarchy of site and that is what also my idea of radical hospitality is about. Because, simply, I don't let others control my language, but I make my own one time, ephemeral non-language by un-languaging the very notion of what you call language. I still I'm not, but I'm very confident, I feel empowered when I speak my non-language and I don't care if it is understandable, rather playing with this labour. Yeah, it's almost like the same kind of confidence when I write poetry and I feel like this is poetry. So I judge for myself, and I don't put myself in a position to be judged. |
| Miriam La Rosa0:11:56 - 0:12:22 | While you were speaking Mithu, it came up to my mind, this very famous quote by Emmanuel Levinas. The philosopher used to say that a languageis hospitality or that hospitality is language. And language is something that is very much at the core of both of your practices in different ways. So maybe we can unpack that a little bit. The idea of lingual anarchy that you've already started to to mention Mithu and making in your work, Keg. |
| Keg de Souza0:12:23 - 0:14:22 | So a lot of my work is with people. So it's about creating these relationships and these conversations with people. So naturally, that sort of filters into thinking about how you can disseminate some of these ideas and continue these conversations in another way. An alternative way to documenting conversations than a recording, or like an audio or video recording. So I often use these mindmaps or other forms of mapping through, you know, mapping the language and mapping these conversations, or sometimes even removing my voice from those, but pulling out important things that I think are really poignant about a place and mapping these together. And often they become a cacophony of different voices onto onekind of map, and I guess coming back to that word 'radical'. There's a long history of radical cartography. So, you know, Cartesian maps have these, obviously, these really strong ties, to colonialism and the way thatland was mapped for forms of ownership, really ought to navigate and find more Atlantic conquer or more possess. So using other forms of mapping is always something that really appeals to me. So, through language, I often tie together different themes, that seem to come up in my work a lot from, you know, labour, class, economics, displacement, dispossession. And often through these conversations, they interrelate,overlap. And forming these mind maps really shows away how the separate conversations from people with very different experiences and different knowledges overlap so intensely. And I find it a really lovely way to read quotes or read narratives or read stories, but through a very organic thread. So your eye goes from one part of the picture to another part of the picture, in not a linear format, really. |
| Keg de Souza0:14:22 - 0:14:32 | But it's just how you kind of choose your own adventure. How you take in these stories. think that's a nice way to sort of play with language and play with people's voices through that. |
| Louisa Bufardeci0:14:34 - 0:14:46 | I'm thinking, particularly of the one that you did for"Edible Stories from the Food Bowl" in Shepperton. I was wondering if maybe you could just describe that for us and tell us a little bit about the stories that you included in that map. |
| Speaker 20:14:47 - 0:16:21 | I did a project in Shepperton, which is the food bowl of Australian food. And so there's a lot of large scale farming and a lot of agriculture, it's where most of our produce comes from in Australia. So what I did there was, as that region in that area really integrated into the river, and the river is a really important part of life there from the long indigenous history there, pre colonisation. But in more recent years there was the Cummeragunja 'Walk Off' and so thinking about these histories of displacement through that and then also their thriving food culture that existed there. So Uncle Neville was one of the people who I spoke to and he took me on a tour down near the river. And through this area where the Walk Offs dhappened. He had so much knowledge about food and place and pointed out that in his lifetime some of the animals that were there when he was a boy would no longer be around becausethere wasn't that flow down the river. I think those those kind of stories are really important. But I spoke to such a diverse range of people from an orchardist to uncle Neville to restauranteurs and these really different voices of a place really came through. So what I did was for the actual map, there is an outline of the river and how it flows through that area. And then these stories are placed in amongst it to kind of pull in the land or uniform.Or form how the land was divided up in that way. |
| Louisa Bufardeci0:16:23 - 0:16:56 | Yes, it's a terrific work. Thank you, Keg. I really love that one. You've addressed the idea of food culture as a metaphor for displacement in three different works. So there's"Appetite for Construction" from 2016."Preservation" from 2015 and"Temporary Spaces, Edible Places in Vancouver" 2015. Can you tell us about the way food works as a metaphor in these pieces? What are these works about and how have you developed them in collaboration and exchange with different communities? |
| Keg de Souza0:16:58 - 0:18:52 | This series of works were all produced for the CAV. The Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, over a period of three years. So they have this really lovely program which invited these slow growing, unfolding works that happen with people, which was like a really incredible, lovely experience to be able to do a series of residencies over such a long time and actually get to know different parts of Vancouver but also build certain relationships with people over that time, because essentially, every summer, I would go back and unfold a project. So the first one I did there was the"Temporary Spaces, Edible Places Vancouver" and this was the fourth in a series of picnics that I'd host inside an inflatable made out of Gingham tablecloths. So the first one I did was actually in London, And that was a way-I was doing a residency at a place called Delfina Foundation, which is based in Victoria, which is a very commercial central part of London. So trying to think about place, like often, I do very, very localised projects.And these this seemed not really like an easy way to have a conversation with people in this space. But the residency space was so generative. So what I did was host this picnic inside this inflatable, and we'd cook traditional English food in this very classic sense of things like the Eton mess and cucumber sandwiches and Cornish pasties, as a way to open up these dialogues about place, because they all have these really rich, dense narrative behind them. So the cucumber sandwiches were used as a medium to be able to unfold a dialogue about class, because the English aristocracy used to eat them because they basically had hardly any sustenance, and they had other people to do their labour fore them. |
| Keg de Souza0:18:53 - 0:20:37 | So it was a way to just, you know, have something that had no nutritional value or calories, to be able to feed them. It was really interesting how each food could open up these different conversations in different ways. So in Vancouver, I did a similar thing, cooking, you know, what what we consider"Canadian food" but also invited other people to add things to it. And that to me, was when I sort of first arrived there, and in a way it was more of an open discussion. Well, I could actually start to learn about food culture there. And so those kind of dialogues opened up and in that project, the conversation as it unfolds. I do a live mapping onto the ground of the inflatable. So at the end of it, it becomes this very large-scale mind map of the conversation and how that came about.So moving through bodies, and it's quite performative and less like it. And then at the end it becomes the document. This idea of food culture as a metaphor for displacement. For example, Bannock, whichthereis often associated with being a popular First Nations food. But it was actually obviously introduced into local diets when Vancouver was first colonised and flower was traded. So there are these elements of displacement throughout that obviously do come up, especially in a colonised place like Canada. But in the next work I did, it was called Preservation and I worked with an Indigenous herbalist called Lori Schneider, and she led a tour off the foreshore around the marina where the gallery had the residency space that I was staying in, in the old coastguards office. And the area around the foreshore was just completely covered in invasive Blackberry plant. |
| Keg de Souza0:20:38 - 0:22:11 | It was really interesting, it was like overtaking a lot of the embankments, and I was particularly interested in how this invasive Blackberry was described in some literature. Like from, and it was described as a weed, that wouldoften overshadow and uproot, native flora and fauna. I started thinking about weeds as this metaphor for colonisation and thinking about this place in that way. So on this tour, Lori did a tour of a lot of the native plants that exist around there. We collected a huge amounts of blackberries. And on the second day, we had a jam-making workshop and we'd turn those berries into jam and over making the jam we sort of mapped out some conversations and some dialogues about place there. That's kind of interesting because her husband actually led the jam making workshopandthat came about very organically. When I was developing the project and talking to Lori, she was like, so how good are you at making jam? And I was like, Oh, I've never jam before And she was like, Oh, really? I don't actually really like jam,I find it too sweet. And she thought that was really funny. And then she's like, How you gonna learn how to make jam? And I said, Oh, the Internet. I mean, I built a canoe or yeah,surely I can learn how to make jam, and she's like, you know, my husband's a master jam-maker. Do you want him to come and teach the workshop? And so it was this really beautiful exchange, where he came and led the workshop, which was really great. But it was a really nice way to |
| Keg de Souza0:22:11 - 0:24:02 | think about the abundance and the sustenance and this other side. There was this really beautiful dialogues that came out of this weed or this invasive blackberry, that it was actually such a food source for a lot of people, because they don't spray them. I think a lot of blackberries in Australia get sprayed by council. You'd see people picking them all the time. They were just everywhere. It was kind of amazing. And a lot of those conversations came up on that second day. In a similar way they were sort of mapped out, and they also formed the labels of the jams. So there were different themes that do often do come up in my work. So thinking about something like labour and they would be on the back of the jam label, uh like we'd sort of map them on a tablecloth. And then people choose ones that related to the theme and their jams. They would take these jars of jam home with them, and I kind of like the idea that they would be in their cupboard and someone will be like, What's this strange jam that's just says"economics" on it? And then they'd turn it around and on the back of the label it would have all these dialogues that we've had about it. And then during the final visit, I made the"Appetite for Construction Project", where I was based in a shop front in Chinatown, in the in the downtown East Side area of Vancouver, which is a pretty low socioeconomic area that's being rapidly gentrified. Many of the old Chinese businesses have been replaced with kind of niche eating places, for example, like a hipster fried chicken place or vegan pizzeria, these kind of very trendy food establishments. Obviously the demographic that used to be there, like a lot of the Chinese community, has actually moved out to different suburbs of Richmond. |
| Keg de Souza0:24:03 - 0:25:13 | The gentrification became very evident through the food establishments, and they became this clear signal for that changing urban fabric, and it was very much through food, driving that. Through that project, I made a temporary architecture but invited people who are coming to the space so locals, to bring an object that sort of represented food and the area to them. And these objects were vacuum sealed into these vacuum bag tiles that formed the structure. So the structure in itself became a sort of map of the area, andwedid have pieces of old fence in it. And some packaging from, you know, one of these new food establishments. And it became this strange map of the area. And I also had another map that was more of a street map on the ground, but very blown up, very large scale and quite faint. And people could write stories of food onto that matter, both historic and contemporary stories. And it became this really dense map of stories, but through people's own words. And that formed the tablecloth for the final event, which was a Yum Cha event, because that shop front that I was in was an old Yum Charestaurant. |
| Miriam La Rosa0:25:15 - 0:25:43 | That's amazing! Thank you. I find it very interesting that there are so many fascinating connections between your work, your practices because this work that you were describing to us really leads us very well into a performance by Mithu, that is called"Lunch is cancelled". Which you did in 2019, and you were also addressing ideas of food as a vehicle to highlight inequalities, but also as a tool to the colonised relationships. So can you tell us a bit about this work? |
| Mithu Sen0:25:45 - 0:27:33 | It was kind of an absurd proposal, I placed when I was invited for one of the art patrons in Delhi. So I always create my projects according to that space, the venue, so that I can just directly address that. The big banquet by Devi Art Foundation in Delhi, which was organised during the art fair on the first day before that, which is a big thing, you know, like the whole world comes, like from all these mainstream big museums, MOMA, Tate Modern, all the directors and their associates and everybody, and it's a very exclusive space with 100 guests. You know. So I know that of course everywhere in this world, we have all these kind of systems of exclusivity, to create that, you know, that other side. So this project was not much about-I use food as a vehicle, but not much about culinary food. You know, it's about, the space, taking over the space, because this whole highly prestigious, exclusive art world banquet was a great opportunity for me to subvert. I always play that sabotaging game where I am privileged to be invited as an artist and I never repeat anything, you know, people never know what will be my next project. So none of my performances ever repeat. So every time it's a new one, and then if you invite me, it will always be the inviting organisation or the host side taking risks. I wanted to, you know, use that site as to reveal that method of control and discipline. |
| Mithu Sen0:27:35 - 0:29:40 | How the habit oftheguest-host hospitality equation still continues a pattern of very controlled colonial, hierarchy systems, you know, that kind of habit to turn into. The hierarchy turning into performance by deconstructing the whole inequalities or reveal rather, expose that thing. And the possibility to decolonise that relationship, you know in a very humorous are absurd manner, was my play. So it created a certain dark humor. You know, that to highlight the persisting forms of inequality, say like how we're caring for, you know, and the whole post-colonial hierarchy that continuous shape of social institutions. How we privilege how we feel honored. So this whole satire or this absurdism was injected into that performance, when you are invited to a lunch or dinner, for a meal, it's always the host who will serve you the food first. So it was something like that. A biggatheringhouse was placed there in the lawn and guests were about to start, and some of them already started having the lunch. At that time, the big banner came on, announcing the lunch is canceled. Almost like a shock. Everything, the food serving, was stopped and then I came out. I mean, I personally was performing. It's not always that I perform. It was very strategic, orchestrated. You know and also choreographed, a kind of performance, I used that very colonial - The marching band, and I used all the members from the kitchen, the caterers who serve food, with their black costumes on, what I exerted was, I just put a dog's collar, a very beautifully designed dog collar around everyone there. |
| Louisa Bufardeci0:29:41 - 0:29:52 | Andso this is like one of those Elizabethan collars, the cone shaped collar that a dog might wear if they've had an operation or something like that, right? |
| Mithu Sen0:29:52 - 0:31:52 | Yes. Then we marched first, the whole lawn. There was a beautiful lunch table set up in the middle of the lawn. Then I came to the table with 10 kitchen staff with the dog collars, and sat on the table, to have the lunch by ourselves. So before the guest, the host, or the host behind the real host, they started eating with the difficulty of having the dog collars and then the struggle off and make the audience all the invited guests. Toe watch that, of course it was very, very unnerving and discomforting and humiliating for the guests to see the struggle, but it was beautifully and a visually and aurally orchestrated: the dark colours, the marching band, the black costumes and these errands, you know, like the rhythm and the motion. So I was in the leading role, so my non-language was commanding, so I was using almost, like a commanding instruction. It doesn't make any sense, like all this meaningless nonsense language, but it gives you a command to follow what you're supposed to actually do or perform. So, like, even to eat food with the dog collar, you know, So involving this whole in-house staff and capturing and and including the dog of the house who was actually a precious part of this whole house. You know who has his own trainer or he has a perambulator. And unsurprisingly, the dog has a gold necklace, so well, my sabotaging is not to put the host in an awkward position, but to make him or her contemplate, because I am in between a position, guest and host. So I am the host and again, I am the guest, and then it is always a dialogic relationship between these two. I just leave it there, you know. I mean, I'm not to prove something or, you know, subverting that unsettling. |
| Mithu Sen0:31:53 - 0:32:47 | You know,thisunsettlement of this power structure between the guest and host and the patron and the artist, that employer or the employee, you know, these kind of the roles that constantly are being made. So it is really to create a very complex, kind of situation where both sides can be questioned. And also eventually contemplated. It becomes an experience for everyone. It was quite intense, and I never feel sorry, though it became quite controversial. So my radical hospitality or my lingual anarchy or whatever I am using which is a huge thing in my practice, is never a very articulated, defined space. But I never also aim for that. |
| Miriam La Rosa0:32:48 - 0:33:28 | But in relation to this particular work, I think another interesting layer of complexity is the fact that the guest is not only one, but it's a community of guests, which I thought that really makes the work much more layered. Because when you say that the lunch is cancelled, youarealready implying that there is an event happening because you cannot cancel a lunch with yourself, right? I mean, you can decide not to have lunch. But the moment you are hosting an event, it implies that there are people attending who have received an invitation. And in this particular case, the people attending is not like one individual, but it's a group. It's a community.So this I think it is another very interesting aspect of this work. |
| Mithu Sen0:33:29 - 0:34:20 | Yes, absolutely. And that is the fun of playing that role and taking over the control and twisting the power dynamics, like, who is that - the host? So the generousity of the host. I just take the control little more than I am supposed to. But then, as a host, you offer so much of generousity saying that of course you can do anything and everything without assuming that it can really be like a boomerang back. And you know, it can really give you something, and I think that playing that role is like my way of - or I think it really works with a little bit off humour and wait - so that immediately it does not sounds too harsh, But eventually it goes into our now and here. I can only do that. I cannot do more or less. |
| Keg de Souza0:34:26 - 0:34:50 | I think projects like this are such an interesting way to critique these hierarchies. And also I feel like how you're looking for that word instead of sabotage. And it's like, I feel like it is, you know, an artist role. to critique distances and to critique society and reflect society back on itself. And I think that's just such a powerful projecttomake people think about these structures in this way. |
| Louisa Bufardeci0:34:51 - 0:35:20 | I was thinking, Keg, about your piece, 'The only rock we eat' because it's kind of on the other end of the spectrum with food, Mithu was talking about a project where food really divides people, whereas in your case, 'The only rock we eat' is unifying people, it's finding a common food that everybody uses. So looking at the other side of human relationships, and of course, it's got that aspect of environmentalism as well. So maybe would you be able to talk to us a little bit about that project? |
| Keg de Souza0:35:20 - 0:37:15 | So"The only rock we eat" was made for a ASE Open in the Adelaide Hills. So in this part of Australia. It's South Australia. The state is the driest state in the driest inhabited continent, which is Australia, in the world. So we have a lot of problems with drought. But we also have a lot of problems with salinity in the soil. So this show that this work was part of, was commissioned for, was all about food. So I started thinking a lot about salt and how it crosses every culture. You know, we actually need salt to survive. So it just seemed like this Very interesting thing, as far as food goes, it just is this one little element that is on every table, and it can open up a lot of discussions. And so for this project, it was actually more about carying stories. It was quite different to a lot of worksI do around food, in the way that food often servesto open up narratives. So ingredients on the plate often invite people to have a conversation about histories and dialogues about about food in certain ways, and particular themes. So in this work, the food was all related to different themes. But we'd tell a story, so I performed it with a scientist friend of mine, and we'd tell a story related to a different theme to open up that dialogue and it was an informal conversation. But it was really about listening to these narratives how salt crosses through all these diets of every culture and around the world and then sort of bring it back to Adelaide. Like for example, through the theme of resistance, it was told through telling the story of Gandhi's Salt March, and his illegally making salt by crushing it between his fingers, at the beach to protest the British salt tax. |
| Keg de Souza0:37:16 - 0:39:08 | So Indians were forced to buy expensive British salt, and they closed the salt works. This march is so important in the history of what led to eventually revolution, because through that there was a lot of peaceful protests. And then there were a lot of people beaten and jailed, and that brought international attention to the occupation of India. And so this story was told, and then the element on the plate that we ate was a native salt to a desert line, that Indian people eat with their Papadums. So it was a way to relate the food that we're talking about to the story. So these native desert line is the salt plant. And then the thing of economics was actually discussed through a kind of like a Pepsi Challenge of salt. So we asked the guests. We passed around two things of pink salt and one was locally produced. Murray River Salt and the other one was Himalyan pink salt, and they had to guess which one was which. And we sort of talked about how it's cheaper to buy pink salt from the Himalayas. That's across the other side of the you know, that many ks away, then the local pinksalt and how actually farming the local pink salt would help the salinity issues, which is also something that's quite interesting. So therewere all these ties back tolocal food production and consumption and these issues of salinity, which is such a big issue in Australia with when we're talking about food and growing food and how that's all changing. And a lot of the salinity issues are caused by land clearing for agriculture. So it's this constant cycle and for grazing lands. And that leads, you know, to soil that is less fertile, erosion, salt seeping into rivers. So it's all quite linked to salt. |
| Keg de Souza0:39:08 - 0:39:13 | So there were these different ways that just a simple element of food could open |
| Keg de Souza0:39:13 - 0:39:44 | up further dialogues about food, culture and food consumption through those stories. And I think it was quite interesting how all these themes that do come up in my work. You could tell stories about these through so many- Like salt just has this incredible history, from being used as currency and ancient tax and how it was first written about in Marco Polo's journals when he went to China. And these kind of histories. It is just so widespread and interesting. |
| Miriam La Rosa0:39:46 - 0:40:49 | I'm wondering whether we should now make a move towards the idea of exchange, which is another very interesting element at the core of the politics of hospitality and in particular, the idea of the gift exchange. That is something that you, Mithu, to have tackled in your work. And I'm thinking specifically about this work called"Return Gift for Sale" that you made in 2016, where you put for sale, some gifts, which I think is a very interesting take on the whole idea of reciprocity and the gift, which is an offering, so in theory it doesn't have an economic value, but by putting it for sale, you commodified the gift. Although, of course, if we look at different theories on the notion of gifts from philosophy to anthropology, we will definitely discover that the gift demands for a coming back. So even though it's not necessarily an economic sort of bond, there is always this idea of a mandatory response. So, yeah, I'm interested in this work, andifyou could describe it to us. |
| Mithu Sen0:40:50 - 0:42:51 | It's interesting that you you chose"Return gifts for sale", which is a much later project. Then, when I started thinking around the politics of the gift so that started around 2006 on then early 2007, it was more like critiquing the art market and the consumerism around the art product and all these things, and then how the market tries to control and create the art and the artist as a consumable item using that exoticism. Or using the narrative or, you know, like there's always that talking around, creating an identityand this myth of this art world, you know? So I personally started one of my websites in early 2007. On it was with this project called"free Mithu". So when I saw that within a couple of month to two years how my art work, like a tangible form, or like a product and art piece was becoming so exclusive with the play of a couple of galleries and, suddenly making me feel so exclusive and so talented and powerful as an artist and who doesn't even understand her own talent and all these things, was quite flattering. But then emotionally and sentimentally also, I was overwhelmed because for me art was still in a very romantic way a form of something that you know, a lifestyle, I am still in the search of what art means to me. But at that time, when I was making drawings or sculptures and all these things and I used to give them as ah, I always since childhood, I always thought that when you buy a gift for someone, it always judges you by the price of it. So it's easy. Okay, She has invited me and what she gave me on my birthday last time. So I should give him a book or a flower bouquet. |
| Mithu Sen0:42:51 - 0:44:54 | We never, you know, give a gold ring if someone came up with some candies to my house, that again, that exchange is always extremely calculated. But the very gift is always a debt. I played that vicious circle of constantly giving and return gifts. So it's a gift, and then always there is a return gift on. It always creates a tension between the giver and the receiver. And when you really think about that equation which was controlled, maybe in a personal way, you and someone, and then suddenly there is another overpowering factor that comes in whether it's a market or something that creates value on your gifts, which I always try to avoid. If I give someone my artwork it will not be considered as how much it is of value. But the moment it becomes of value. You know, we count square feet or you know, some kind of a strange measurement about our evaluation. So this whole politics of value creation and value consumption becomes an issues. So I started using it also as a tool in my own way. I launched that website, announcing that this is like a big summer surprise. It's called"Free Mithu Project". Anybody can write me a letter with some love and I'll given artwork as a gift, you know, a free gift or something like that. It really became quite a sensational project.And I said it will never end, it has an ongoing life. Because no gallery, no museum, no curator can control me saying that this is the deadline and these are the norms. No, it will change with its own organic and spontaneous situational way, but it will never stop, so it's still on. So I always try to play that someone is sending me a later with the expectation, because the rule is that you can send me a letter whenever you want, but you cannot demand on artwork immediately. It's not that kind of transaction. |
| Mithu Sen0:44:55 - 0:47:02 | You know the transaction I created was never built on any given norm that already we all have. It's rather to explore constantly. You know, you mightsend me a letter today morning and you can receive something today afternoon. You never know, and some of still like to send me emails. It's 11 years, 12 years now, 2007. It's 13 years. And still they say, I haven't received it. I say I am still alive. So if my lifetime is the deadline, then nobody can. So just try to make those kinds of critiques on creating value on something. So at one point, the gallery said to me, you are really wonderful and generous, but you just keep giving your artworks. They almost took a class through me about that world, about the marketing, about the demand and supply. If someone gets already a work of mine he or she may not feel hungry about it. Oh, I understood. I expect that because I like to subvert and sabotage the system by being part of this system, not sabotage or whatever I used, because it's all I think. Like in a visit, a very positive way. I would rather say I like to manipulate. It is a strategy. Definitely. It is a very intentional strategy. The way I try to manipulate that system is already happening and Iunsettle that a little bit. Not too much, you know. I mean, I don't kill any guest.So then when they said like, this is like that, and I alreadywas trapped, I was placed in the gallery-artist-gallery thing. I had to create another way of me being who I am, who likes to give friends a gift of an artwork. And I kept doing that, and I launched that websiteand when it became an articulated manifested art project, then you have to one critique it and put it in a discourse. |
| Mithu Sen0:47:03 - 0:48:01 | So it's an artist project. So I kept giving, sometimes, sadly, I see that you know, all those drawings and, you know, which were so personally made as a gift to a friend - sometimes they appear in auctions. So yeah, not many things right now, because I give a authentication certificate. You can do anything with it. you can burn it, you can rework it. You can sell it. You can, you know, love it, frame it, whatever. So so that whole gift and the return gift, which creates that kind of strange bonding between two. But over time, over many things, you know ups and downs and the relationship often changes. It can beout of personal, emotional political or economical reasons. How talking about this, you know, it is interesting that the relationship over time changes. |
| Speaker 30:48:01 - 0:48:22 | Thank you for listening. We hope you enjoyed this conversation with Mithu Sen and and Keg de Souza For GAPS. The Center of Visual Arts, Graduate Academy Podcast series. Please head to theCOVA website at sites.research.unimelb.edu.au/COVA for more episodes. |