



In conversation with Kasha Vande

Description

After the successful completion of Pondy Photo 2014, a mega photo festival on the tribes of the Indian sub-continent, The Inquirer team interviewed Kasha Vande, the initiator of PondyART and the organizer of the festival. She shared with us about her experiences in curating the many photo exhibitions that she had organised over the last ten months or so and about Pondy Photo 2014.

An excerpt from the interview....

Can you tell us about the inception of PondyART. How did it all began?

PondyART was initiated as an idea in December 2012 and we brought out our first exhibition in February 2013 in Pondicherry along the Canal using the work of Srikanth Kolari. The idea was to take a documentary photographer subject and the message he was carrying out to a broader audience, that could be reached through magazines, [or] a gallery. [But] This could go straight to the people and those people are the ones that probably could make a change from the ground level up. We held two shows, one is test run with very small prints and one with a large format print done on the paper on the canal, and then the owner asked for the property back. We had a show scheduled with Yannick Cormier, and I searched for a new wall that had a broader audience. And [I] was lucky enough with the help of Lalit Verma to get a wall on the Beach Road, where 100,000 people generally pass a month. They are people from the city, they are also tourists because this is a great place to be in and the wall was directly in that space. So there was no entry, no gates and anybody could access it.

How did the public react to these exhibitions?

We held shows for about six months [at the beach road] and I felt that the local reaction was very positive because none of the images were touched, they weren't vandalized and they weren't stolen. They were only pasted to the wall and with that number of people passing I found it really amazing that nobody has stopped to take anything.

What was the feedback you got from your audience?

It's a little difficult for me to give you direct feedback because I don't unfortunately speak Tamil. But I watched young boys dash across the streets and stand in front of the photographs moving from image to image and just staring at them and reading the captions. And for me that was the biggest success to watch people stop in their tracks and look and walk away thinking about something.

Was there any kind of negative reaction to any kind of the works that were exhibited?

There were some negative reactions. At one point we did a show by Senthil Kumaran on the environment and he showed some pictures that were ugly of what is happening in India. I was there fixing and repairing and repasting one image and a scooter stopped behind me and the man on the scooter said rather loudly that *'these people only take pictures of the ugly of the India, why don't they notice what is beautiful'*. I came down because I heard him and I said "Sir, I don't think you realize [that] this was a Tamil photographer who took this picture" and he said ' Yes, but why are they taking.. why are they taking the ugly of India?' and I said "Because he loves India and he doesn't want it to continue like this. And he said he was not pleased. And I said, "Well the point is that you stopped to look at it and may be when you go home you will make a change in your own personal life that will keep India beautiful. So I felt that the result and the success was there with this project.

Some of your shows were on controversial topics. Were there any repercussions for it?

We did a show on October by Amirtharaj Stephen, who has been focusing on the protesting going on against the Kudankulam Nuclear Power plant. The images are extremely strong and I was very concerned about the reaction of the government in showing those kind[s] of pictures. In fact nobody did anything to those pictures either. And Amirtharaj during the opening evening managed to catch images of the police looking at the police in the images. So even there, a subject that so strong and controversial, got attention and was not negatively received for bringing out into the open.

How did the shift from the wall to the Old Distillery came about?

In the end of November [2013], the owner asked for the wall back. He was concerned that the new tenants will not approve of having an art show on their walls. I started research with the help of The Hindu to find new space and very surprisingly and wonderfully the Government stepped forward and the Government of Pondicherry offered the Old Distillery at the end of the Beach Road. The Old Distillery has been vacant for about 35 years. Many many projects have been presented in terms of redeveloping that site, whether as a shopping mall, as a hotel as a cultural centre but nothing has ever come through. I have been here for 13 years and always wondered about that space but it never occurred to me to ask for it because nobody had gotten in there before. When they offered this place I felt it to be impossible to refuse and we moved in there. Now this was not exactly the kind of space I have been looking for because it does have a gate and we are obliged to have a watchman. The public do not feel quite as comfortable walking in. we have put up three shows, so far, and the feedback has been enormous. However considering we were getting 100,000 pedestrians passing our work for the last six months, in there we were getting close to 600-800, perhaps a little more. So visibility went down.

When you do shows, do you approach the photographers or do they come to you?

Initially the idea started with the photographers, though the first show came like that. Yannick was the second photographer and I initiated contact with him. From that point on, he has not worked and I have not worked and as people saw the shows mostly people contacted me. On occasions when are looking for a specific topic I have approached the photographer. When that happens, our answers are now positive within five minutes by email.

Tell us about Pandy Photo 2014.

We had a wonderful opportunity arrive in December this year where we had a chance to consider doing a festival in Pondicherry. A photography festival. We had been working with the Delhi Photo Fest which created 65 shows out of 3500 applicants screened. They created 18 shows that were for presenting in the outdoors. And I requested if it would be possible, if Pondicherry could have the honour of hosting 18 of those exhibitions. The request was granted. In addition to that we had opportunity through Yannick Cormier to create a very big show following our general theme on *Building Awareness on Issues Challenging India Today*, focusing on the tribal of the Sub-continent – the Indian Sub-continent.

How is Pondy Photo different from your other shows?

Yannick approached eight other photographers and we created a huge curated show and expanded our use of the distillery which is an enormous site and we had only been using about 20% of it. At this point we approached the Government to help for funding and they agreed to give the space and also to consider funding the project.

Who else were involved in this venture?

Working with Andreas Deffner who created the concept design and Yannick [Cormier] who worked with all the photographers collecting their images, doing layouts, measuring the site. We moved into the distillery and in two weeks created this incredible show that you have been seeing all over the internet and in the newspapers.

What would you call your greatest success in terms of Pondy Photo 2014?

I feel that our greatest success with the festival has been in the variety of people who have come to look at India, at photography and at the building as well. We had rickshawwallas, we had ashramite, we had French residents, we had diplomats, we had Government officials, so many people have come and wandered together through a single space looking at the photography. I was concerned that the distillery was not a public space but I believe by the musical and performances added to the programme, by the workshops we initiated with the help of the photographers, by the panel discussions, all of those things got the public interested and brought them into the distillery and made the distillery a public space for art for everybody to gather and enjoy it.

Tell us about the team that worked behind Pondy Photo 2014.

The main team is composed of myself, Andreas Deffner who did all the graphics and concept design, Yannick Cormier who is the art consultant, did the curation, collected the images. We all worked together measuring the site, we all gave back up to each other whenever it needed. And one of the most important figures for us was Muthu Stickers. Mr. Muthu, who did the installation and printing, he worked with us 24x7, I don't think he slept for more than two hours a night in the last two week [during the preparation for the event]. He is a tamil, from a very small shop, but he was absolutely dedicated to the project and he was working with almost no advance because he supports it. We had other contractors that worked with us and in all these cases these people showed up for our preview with their families, with their friends, dressed and super proud to contribute to the city and also to be part of such an event. So for me part of the greatest thing is that the team that worked together was proud of it together and we want to continue doing this. Its an amazing thing to be a part of.

What is lined up for PondyART in the coming months?

We are booked through October of 2014 and even yesterday we had three requests to show with us. The most important thing we are trying to do now is ensure that the standard of what we are showing remains the same. We can show emerging photographers such as Olya Morvan who has only held a camera for only one year, she is now on the cover of Le Monde, in Paris. We were her first show. But the standard stayed the same. So that is the most important thing right now. So we are doing some screening, but in many ways most of the photographers are chasing us.

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Category

1. Face to Face

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