Artist Statement

Disconnect in October 2009 was a coming together of Zariyein – a community based art intervention that uses images and conversations to explore a diversity of lived experiences. Since 2006, three phases of Zariyein have been carried out in diverse locations – Khirki, an urban village in Delhi; Shillong and villages in the East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya; and in the Tehri Garhwal region of Uttarakhand.

Zariyein seeks an interaction between people and their spaces/experiences, where people record impressions of their everyday using the medium of photography and audio recordings. Circulating these images/recordings and having conversations around them amongst the larger public where Zariyein is located, leads to a collective representation of that particular context. Disconnect was an exhibition/installation of Zariyein II and Zariyein III carried out in Meghalaya and Tehri respectively. Zariyein I in Khirki had culminated with a public installation in Khirki earlier.

Showing a community-based art engagement within a context that was essentially removed from the original context of that engagement, and the challenges inherent to such an exercise prompted the title for the installation- Disconnect. As a title, it also intended to encapsulate the latent disjunction that all the three contexts of Zariyein embodied in one way or the other. For instance, Zariyein II, in exploring the everyday significance of a network of buses connecting rural and urban Meghalaya, also tried to understand the divide and distance that exists in terms of people's imagination and knowing of the other – a manifestation of physical distance and more. Similarly, Zariyein III, in comprehending ways of remembering a town that does not exist anymore, underlined the inability or inadequacy of language to express memories of a place lost in time. Disconnect in this sense was a coming together of Zariyein II & III where the implicit everyday realities of these two varied contexts were presented in the form of two installations using video, sound, still images and materials.

Brief Background of Zariyein II & III

Zariyein II explored the economic, social & cultural significance of a network of bazaar buses that connect villages in rural Meghalaya with the urban market centre of Shillong, also the capital. Bazaar buses are the lifeline of these villages and Zariyein involved people associated with the bus (regular passengers, bus staff, people who work in the bus stand in Shillong and inhabitants of some villages in the East Khasi Hills district) to understand what they thought of and felt for their bus. Ten people at various nodes of the bus took photographs of the ways in which they relate to the bus. Photographs and conversations with them referred to various aspects of the bus – about their villages, the journey, happenings on the bus, the city, the market, the importance of the bus in their lives.

A selection of these photographs was assembled in the form of a photo scrapbook, a narrative of the journey of the bus from the village to the city and back. The same scrapbook in two versions was circulated in some villages in this district and the city of Shillong for four months. People could go through these books, write what they felt or associated with the photographs, draw or add more photographs. Some of these photographs were also taken to six villages on various bus routes in the area. This public viewing led to many things- comments on each photograph, anecdotes and recollections. Significantly, photographs also became a medium to talk about larger concerns of people living in these areas, concerns of health, livelihood, education and access.

Zariyein III was undertaken in Tehri Garhwal in collaboration with Henval Vani, a community radio group based in Chamba, near New Tehri town. It tried to explore the idea of what it means when a place ceases to exist. Tehri Town has been submerged by a dam operational since 2006. People affected by the dam have been relocated to New Tehri and in other resettlement colonies around that area. Today traces of the town remain only in people's personal histories. Zariyein III attempted to document memories and perceptions of people associated with Tehri.

Using photography and sound, members of Henval Vani shared their own experiences and interacted with people from old Tehri town. Members created their individual audio-visual pieces based on a sharing of these experiences and interactions. All the pieces, though distinct, were thematically connected and eventually came together to create Zariyein III – a remembrance of a town through diverse experiences and stories of various people.

Zariyein III was taken around for a larger public viewing and engagement in four places of the Tehri district. While in some places, the work evoked a longing for the past, at others, people felt it was futile to refresh painful memories. Some narrated personal experiences of how they were forcefully moved out of their homes, how little or no compensation had been paid to the poor and uninformed, how they would have protested vehemently against the dam if only they had known the actual truth behind it. Subsequently, Zariyein was also aired on the local cable network, eliciting responses and written letters from audiences. Some even took copies of Zariyein III- a way of remembering their Tehri.

Disconnect

The underlying objective of Disconnect was to communicate the varied realities of the two contexts in Tehri and Meghalaya. The entire studio space at KHOJ was used for the exhibition. The layout of KHOJ Studios informed the setting up of objects and placing of videos, still images and texts for the installation.

Zariyein, as stated above, was a community art project that had its rationale in the context where it was carried out. Sharing images, stimulating conversations through images or a showing of images to other people within the same context led to a simultaneous process of knowing and creating a representation of the context. This was the logic of Zariyein in its execution. The challenge in putting together an installation using video, still images, texts and objects was to, in a sense, re-create the representation as it unfolded in the doing of Zariyein. While this was our framework in trying to re-present Zariyein for an audience far removed from the realities of the two particular contexts, the representation kept evolving and changing in response to the physical space and surroundings. Khoj Studio, as a space, allowed a new kind of representation to evolve, where the theme of disconnect or divide somehow seemed to convey the essence of what we were trying to grapple with. The ground floor of Khoj was used for Zariyein III while the first floor was devoted for the bus installation.

Disconnect > Zariyein III & Zariyein II

Zariyein III
Tehri is a place that does not exist anymore. Facilitating Zariyein in collaboration with the community radio group led to the collection of many archival photographs and interviews of people who had memories of being in Tehri before it was submerged. Besides such material, many other photographs and video recordings of spaces and objects in the present which have become symbolic of a town lost

in time were also recorded. What emerged was an assortment of associations and attachments that ranged from the private to objective comparisons between the old and the new to comments on the politics of displacement and so on. All material collected during Zariyein III was finally assembled into an audio-visual piece which was then played back to people at different public places of the area. The engagement of probing memories and recollections of an old town reached a certain measure of conclusion with the production and showing of this piece – a work that was done with people who belonged to that particular context. This was done in 2007, two years before Disconnect in 2009. An exhibition of Zariyein III, two years later for an audience one step removed, posed the question of how we would use the material to recreate an experiential representation of the extinction of a place.

The entire ground floor of KHOJ with the courtyard and the large room behind the courtyard was used to set up the Tehri installation. As one entered the exhibition space, the first thing one saw was an image of a half submerged clock tower of Old Tehri mounted on a transparent acrylic sheet. A mythological story of the origin of Old Tehri was superimposed on this image, a teasing introduction to people to come and witness loss. Large horn speakers were hung from a tree in the courtyard to symbolise a "talking tree." The intention was to arouse the curiosity of the audience, to invite them to go and "hear" voices from the speakers, which ironically were silent, voiceless – a symbol to convey the inability of language in capturing memories of a place that no longer existed.

A live video image of the tree was projected in a room inside. This projection was played onto a heap of industrial waste, along with voices of various people talking about their personal memories of Tehri. Industrial waste became a metaphor for us to talk about the futility of such projects and the idea was to have people's voices emerging, literally, from a pile of rubble. This was the representational register that we as artists at this stage had consciously devised to re-present or recreate an experience of losing a place in time – a fact that Zariyein III had initially done in collaboration with the community radio group in that area.

Zariyein II

The first floor of KHOJ Studios was used to convey the materiality, sense of people's love and attachment for their buses, and the process of doing Zariyein II in Meghalaya. The staircase leading up to the first floor was painted with graffiti as one finds inside these wooden buses – graffiti which is local and contextual to these buses. One space was devoted to recreating the process of working with still images. Photographs taken by people who belonged to the bus became a point of departure for us to see and understand the entire system of these buses. Hanging a few of these images was a way of inviting people to walk around a maze of images – an embodiment of the multiplicity of perspectives in trying to look at what the bus means for people. Placing the two scrapbooks in the same room represented the journey that these images had taken in the course of doing Zariyein II.

Another space on this floor was used to express what the network of buses means for people who use them. In this space, two video projections of the bus in its journey, work around the bus like loading of goods, physical landscape of the area and other images of general life around the bus were projected onto two adjoining walls. Extracts of people's conversations printed on transparent acrylic sheet hanging from the ceiling was meant to mediate the viewing of these two video projections. This experience of viewing moving images through physical texts on transparent material was intended to create an experiential reliving of the bus and its significance for people who belong to that context. We were conscious of this form as being an attempt to represent the essence of the bus. The last

space had a video projection, in slow motion, of a wooden bus being constructed. This was, in a way, our ode to the work and functionality that these wooden buses signify for people in Meghalaya.

Disconnect was a coming together of the process and representation achieved in the doing of Zariyein II & III. The main question that confronted us while conceptualising Disconnect was that of representation or recreation of process-based work, which was what Zariyein really was at one level. What artistic license could we, as facilitators of a community based art project, take to work out a representation of what was, in essence, a collaborative project? What were the dynamics of presenting such work outside the context where it had been carried out? What relevance do such forms of representation have?

Answers to some of these questions emerged while executing Disconnect. People who viewed the show expressed varied opinions. Some felt that they could experience the loss and the inability of comprehending loss, as was manifest in the Tehri work. The materiality and significance of wooden buses came alive for another audience. Others felt that representing the process of Zariyein in a particular way was not true to the life and relevance that the process had in its original context. Another audience was curious for more information on the bus and the process of carrying out Zariyein in general, as they felt that the representation in the form of an installation did not manage to encapsulate the entire two year long process. Interestingly some people also felt that it was interesting to see that a space as large and as spread out as Khoj was held together through a presentation of one project.

Working through images and conversations implicit in the making and sharing of images was a way for us to arrive at a representation of contexts and phenomena, while one is still trying to know and understand the context – the idea of Zariyein in a nutshell. Working on Disconnect as an exhibition of collaborative process based work enabled us to extend the same principle, where what one sees is not meant to be a definite representation of the context or phenomena. The meaning of what one is trying to represent through the mounting of objects, images, video and sound is open to a multiplicity of meanings and constant reinterpretation. The purpose and achievement of Disconnect as an exhibition/installation of a community based art project has been to raise the dilemma of this binary – the dilemma of carrying out a community based art project that is heavily process-based and of trying to work out a representation of the same in a particular form (in this case, an installation).