

## Tamil Art Practice in Diasporic Existence

This paper presents a research project that has explored contemporary art practice among the Tamil diaspora in the UK. It demonstrates a plural notion of community, embedded in continuous processes of changing values and hierarchies, and it argues that artists need to acquire in depth knowledge of any community they aim to cooperate with. The investigation has followed various routes between Western Europe and South Asia, where movements of people, practices and materials have been linked to power relations formulated by colonialism, nationalism, civil war and migration politics. It shows how local Tamil communities in Sri Lanka have transformed into global networks where one single family often is dispersed across Canada, Norway, Australia and the UK. Thirty years of brutal war altered voluntary migration towards better lives into outright flight motivated by the will to survive. The classification of the Tamil liberation struggle as terrorism articulated by global communities such as the UN and the EU has had a large impact on where and how expatriate communities could establish themselves locally. Among the Tamil artists, conceptions of ethnic on the London art scene and the global network of biennales continuously affect possibilities and terms for participation. This uncertain context increases the already marginalised position of artists in the Tamil communities, motivated by cultural notions of a prosperous life achieved through upward mobility. However, the participants of this study are examples of possibilities to challenge and/or negotiate the dominating norms.

The project is positioned between artistic and anthropological research, and has combined art practice as method and presentation with the inside perspective and long term engagement central to anthropology. Collaboration with the artists and other representatives of the Tamil diaspora emerged as the methodological focus, including actions for increased Tamil visibility in an environment defined by British aesthetics. In order to avoid the risk of reproducing asymmetrical hierarchies through socially engaged art practice, articulated in art criticism (Bishop 2012; Kester 2011; Kwon 2002) as well as anthropological theory (Sansi 2015; Schneider and Wright 2013), Tamil ethics and morality has been thoroughly investigated (Laine 2009, 2015a, 2015b). The paper presents three artists who participated in the project. Their varied backgrounds and ways of working elucidate that community cannot be reified into a singularity, but at the same time they embody certain norms and values particular to Tamil perspectives on the world.

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