



Report from ... South Delhi: *Networks and Neighbourhoods*. Jane Collins in conversation with Sreejata Roy.

Jane Collins

To cite this article: Jane Collins (2025) Report from ... South Delhi: *Networks and Neighbourhoods*. Jane Collins in conversation with Sreejata Roy., *Theatre and Performance Design*, 11:3-4, 282-291, DOI: [10.1080/23322551.2026.2624253](https://doi.org/10.1080/23322551.2026.2624253)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322551.2026.2624253>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 31 Mar 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 5



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)


Report from ... South Delhi: *Networks and Neighbourhoods*. Jane Collins in conversation with Sreejata Roy.

Jane Collins 

The urban villages¹ of Khirki and Hauz Rani in South Delhi consist of a maze of narrow streets with dense housing, bustling markets, small shops, tea stalls and street food vendors plying their trade. These old settlements are now surrounded by and increasingly encroached upon by new developments, shopping malls, apartment blocks, expensive hotels and all the other architectural markers of urban renewal and gentrification. Originally outside the city boundaries, these ‘villages’ were historically places of migration for the rural poor from parts of north, north east, eastern and south India, but more recently they have also become a refuge for migrant communities fleeing violence from places such as Afghanistan and Iraq and from war torn countries in Africa.

Amid this culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged community, visual artist Sreejata Roy and her collaborators have been running workshops and facilitating socially engaged art projects with local women for over ten years. One project, *Networks & Neighbourhood*, is specifically focussed in Khirki. Women are not visible on the streets of Khirki: the culturally conservative community has strict rules governing the behaviour of women in public space, especially young women. As Roy explains, ‘men control public space and daily business in Khirki, and our socially engaged art project aims to explore and document how Khirki’s public spaces are used by local women ...’ (Roy and Chatterjee 2020, 3).

Networks & Neighbourhood commenced in 2015 and is still ongoing in different iterations. In the early stages of the artistic process Roy was embedded in the community over a number of months, running workshops with groups of women of different ages. In the workshops she invited women to tell their stories and encouraged them to share their experiences through mapping their movements around the local area. A group of young women were asked to ‘draw their dreams’; to imagine what it would mean to move around freely in public space. Their dreams were quite modest, being able to drink tea with friends in a café, to ride a bicycle, to ride a bicycle with a boy as a passenger, to play football, to move around freely and be unafraid of being visible. With great determination and tenacity, these young women, supported by Roy, were eventually able to transform their drawings into a series of brightly coloured, highly visible artworks displayed on walls and street corners across Khirki. The murals, depicting young women in public space, engaged in activities traditionally restricted to men and boys, drew attention to their absence, their demonstrable exclusion from the streets. The murals were highly contentious and disturbing for many of the local men and more conservative

CONTACT Jane Collins  j.a.collins@wimbledon.arts.ac.uk

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

older women resident in the area. They provoked discussion, their presence providing a platform from which the young women could argue their case for more freedom of movement and visibility in the public domain.

This socially engaged dialogic art project, along with other examples of Roy's extraordinary work, is well-documented elsewhere.² My interest in this specific project springs from the extent to which it resonates with many of the themes of this special issue. The murals draw attention, through their material presence, to the absence of the living bodily presence of young women in the public spaces of Khirki. In that sense they can be viewed as 'scenographies of absence', staging 'scenes of disappearance' which, for the onlookers, disrupt the quotidian experience of who is visible and who is not on the local streets. They make 'the familiar strange' in the manner of the Russian formalist technique of *defamiliarization* or *ostranenie* famously adopted by Bertolt Brecht in his plays. Art critic and cultural theorist Claire Bishop, in the introduction to her extensive analysis of participatory art in the 20th century *Artificial Hells* (2012), calls for a reassessment of these art practices through the lens of theatre and performance arguing that, '[P]articipatory engagement tends to be expressed most forcefully in the live encounter between embodied actors in particular contexts.'³ Here the 'actors' are the local community, and the site specific context is integral to the works themselves, understood not as artistic products but as an ongoing process both in the manner of their conception and in their reception. The murals are not there to be viewed as aesthetic objects but as active elements that in conjunction with other elements – sound, movement, the passage of time – disrupt the spaces of Khirki and the underlying social, political and economic structures that support them.

Theatre historian Arnold Aronson, in his foreword to *Scenography Expanded* (2017), describes site specific scenography as '... foreground[ing] the spectators' interaction with the surrounding environment and their increased awareness of the emblematic signs inherent within the space' (xvi). Here, the murals reveal the inherent normalisation of the absence of women on the streets and their emblematic presence facilitates encounters in which 'there is no monolithic, dominant or specific way of speaking, listening or responding. Our processes run parallel to each other and often continuously overlap, braiding together dynamic trajectories of sound, visibility, mobility and time.' (Roy & Chatterjee 2020, 5) This relationality, the ability to facilitate 'spaces of encounter' is one of the defining characteristics of scenography in the expanded field (McKinney and Palmer 2017, 8).

Roy describes herself as a visual artist from a fine art background, but her work has many synergies with notions of expanded scenography. I was interested in what we might learn from her long, slow and sustained process of working with the women of Khirki and Haus Rani where scenography, following Sigrid Merx, 'can be understood as a practice that determines, organises and refigures who and what is there to be seen and heard' (2013, 54).

The following conversation with Roy took place over a series of email exchanges and zoom meetings during the autumn /winter of 2025.

Jane Collins: Thank you very much, Sreejata, for giving up your time to talk to me. Can we go back to the beginning. Where did you first encounter these young women. How did the project start?

Sreejata Roy: I was walking in the lanes of Khirki and Hauz Rani, and a staff member at the Khoj International Artists Association introduced me to a small tuition bureau run in a garage by a middle-aged woman named Rani, herself a migrant from a neighboring state. Rani offered after-school tuition for girls and boys and she became interested in my artistic research, which sought to engage young girls with the idea of women in public space. She paused her class and asked who was interested in joining the project. Three girls (ages 18-19, from conservative backgrounds) volunteered; they became the first participants whose initial thoughts on public space influenced the wall paintings. Later, we met three more girls (aged 16-17) from Khirki's streets, who were more independent, came from Manipur, Nepal, and Punjab, and wore shorts and skirts. The blend of backgrounds and levels of freedom made the group very vibrant. Eventually, one Nepali girl brought her Afghan friend, and gradually, more international migrant girls and boys joined. Subsequently, we discovered another tuition bureau, where three local boys showed interest and joined the group. After about a year and a half, the group members decided to call themselves the Khirkee Collective.

J.C: How were the sites chosen? How did asking the young women to 'draw their dreams' determine the positioning of the murals. I know it wasn't a straightforward process.

S.R: Actually, they wrote them first, their "wild ideas" about using the public space as men do, and then they drew them in pencil on paper. Then the question was how to make them public. What was the form? We discussed posters or paintings that could be hung somewhere. Then as an artist I suggested wall painting as one of the options and they liked that; they liked it very much. They said they would stand in the public space and paint their dreams. So, we went back to their texts as they had already written about the places they wanted to be seen, the tea stall, the barbers, the street corners, (that's where all the men gather to chat), the lanes and the bike store.

J.C: So, the sites were chosen not for what was there, but what was absent, because the girls imagined themselves into those spaces. Where did you start?

S.R: We started in the lanes where we were working. Near our art space was a tea stall owned by a man called *Jha-ji* who is from Bihar. It was a very popular tea stall and behind it, up above was a wall. Then we chose the street corner where Raju the cobbler sits, and opposite him was a place where the vegetable vendors stand and the men gather. Also, temporality, KT, a barber, had set up a chair. So that's where we started but over the years, gradually, as they got more confident the girls found bigger spaces. We chose a huge wall by a car park and that's where they painted women playing football. Then we went inside Haus Rani and in front of the bike stands they painted the women cycling. Haus Rani is a very crowded space, narrow lanes with many permanent and temporary shops. There was a set of shutters that hadn't been opened for a long time and so they painted three girls on it, just standing there chatting. Another site was a small café, actually they invited us, where the girls were shown sitting alone eating kebabs etc ...

J.C. These are clearly all dynamic spaces with a lot of traffic and male footfall I imagine. Was the intention to provoke?

S.R. The intention was to bring the men into dialogue. Choosing the spaces was very straightforward but negotiating permission for what we wanted to do was very difficult.

J.C. So in a way the dialogic nature of artwork began even before the girls had picked up a paintbrush. Can you tell us about some the negotiations that went on?

S.R. Well, for instance, right at the beginning *Jha-ji* the tea stall owner was very helpful and polite, but when we wanted to start painting he told us the wall wasn't his wall and we'd have to ask the owner. It was the side of a small warehouse and upstairs there were some young men working in the office and they got very angry saying, "Why do you want to do this?" And the girls tried to explain, and they argued with them and it got quite heated. So, before the painting had started there was a lot of opposition and conflict. We eventually tracked the owner, who worked in a government office, and through one of my family contacts I was able to make an appointment. I still had to wait two days outside his office to see him, but it was worth it because he said if we wanted to we could do a painting.

J.C. Were you surprised? Do you think he understood what you were doing?

S.R. He was quite old and nearing retirement. I told him we wanted to do a painting, and it wouldn't harm his building. I was very excited and I rushed back to tell the group. The men in the office were not happy when they found out we had permission, but they did back off for a while. Then they became quite obstructive and found ways to distract and disturb us. The painting was half finished, and a truck would arrive and park in such a way that the girls couldn't continue. They couldn't get up on their ladders, and they would have to stop and wait until the truck left. Often it would be there for hours. We asked them to tell us when the truck would be arriving so we could plan round this and they would tell us the wrong time. It always seemed to arrive shortly after the girls started painting. Once again the girls tried to negotiate with them, but the truck kept arriving, interrupting the process and blocking the painting from public view. But the girls were very determined, and they decided to just sit there and wait with their brushes and pots of paint to see how long the men could keep this up. And over time, when the men realised they were not going away the truck stopped arriving at unscheduled times and the mural was finished. But it was very tough.

J.C: There's the seeds of a drama there, the seeds of a play, the dramaturgy emerging from a conflict over the production of space.³ The way even images of the presence of girls in those places was seen as threatening, appropriating and changing perceptions of public space.

S.R: Exactly! "Why women? they said. "Why do we have to see women sitting there?" And one young man said, " Why don't you paint flowers or trees?" And the girls laughed at him.

These are sixteen and seventeen year old girls but they are very feisty and gradually as a group they were getting more and more confident. These were not only Indian Muslim girls from the locality but Nepali, Manipuri and even Afghani girls who were living there seeking asylum.



Figure 1. The Cobbler's Place 2015. Photo: courtesy of Khirkee Collective.



Figure 2. Street Corner, Cycling, 2016. Photo: courtesy Khirkee Collective.

J.C: How were the murals received in some of the other places?

S.R: Over time the girls got bolder. In the painting behind the cobbler's place for instance there is a young woman seated on a chair with a book, and she is looking out at the viewer. Now, whether by accident or design, when the cobbler was working the chair appeared to be resting on his head. It was funny but also quite challenging. And next to her in the painting another young women was depicted working as a cobbler. This is on a corner and opposite there was an electrician's shop and as the girls were painting the man who owned it protested, "I will be sitting here all day, and I cannot tolerate a woman looking at me." I didn't intervene and the girls said, "Excuse me. Don't you sit here all day and gaze at girls? We've just drawn girls looking at you. Now you see how upsetting it is." But the cobbler was very helpful, and we built up a good relationship with him. And over time the painting became a way of identifying his shop which was good for business. We also made him a sign advertising his shop.

J.C: Were these self-portraits?

S.R: No, they were drawn free hand and they were quite rudimentary. The girls had no formal training in fine art, but what they showed was clearly young women active in public space. The formal issues were secondary to getting people talking.

J.C: Did you discuss what they are wearing in the murals?

S.R: Not much, they made the decisions. There's a wide range of styles of dress and sartorial customs depicted, from the hijab to female footballers in shorts.

J.C: Are these kind of pictorial interventions common in Delhi?

S.R: We have street art by professional artists who go into communities and paint murals but to my mind you cannot do public art like that. You cannot just parachute into a place and make an artwork about it. Works like this are made with the community and by the community and that is very rare.

J.C: And it takes time.

S.R: Yes a long time. And it's processual. You start and you have no sense of where things are going to go. It's not authored in the way that scenography is, certainly in the theatre. I went in with a question, that was the context. Where I live in Delhi, it's a middle class area, you see women and girls walking around in public space. In Khirki and Hauz Rani, you didn't. I was interested to know what the girls in those areas felt about that. So, you enter into a careful dialogic process with them. Yes, initially I'm guiding it but gradually the girls develop their own critical thinking and then it takes off in ways I hadn't imagined. I try and be responsive, spontaneous.

J.C: It seems to me you start as a guide and then you become a facilitator, in the sense of someone who makes a process easier and more likely to happen. You employ your skills as an artist, your knowledge of paints and pigments and brushes, to facilitate the murals as envisaged by the group. Not to mention your patience and negotiating skills in securing the wall space in the first place. You're doing a lot of work in that regard, but in the background.

S.R: Yes, initially, but the goal was for the girls to eventually build the skills and the confidence to do all those things themselves.

J.C: So, the murals gradually became incorporated into the architecture of the area?

S.R: I wouldn't say incorporated, they became a talking point, a disruption to the everyday, a destabilising presence that triggered lots of informal discussions with individuals and small groups. The girls managed these, but they didn't try and direct them, they weren't set up as didactic engagements, they were very open discussions although we all learnt a lot through the process. We learnt a lot about the history of the area from local people, the migratory patterns, the different religions and cultures co-existing in a such a densely populated locale. Not to mention the changes and modernisation programmes they'd witness which added to sense of precarity and alarm about the future. This helped to explain some of the entrenched attitudes towards women and girls -although it doesn't excuse them of course. Eventually this led us to set up a 'Living Archive' of their stories. People like the cobbler, the café owner and the bread maker who embody a living history of the area.



Figure 3. Playing Football 2016. Photo: courtesy Khirkee Collective.

J.C: Tell me about the performances. How did they start?

S.R: We wanted to access more women in the locality and so we went inside the buildings and shops, and we found a lot of middle-aged women, some of the girls mothers or friends of their mothers who were running small businesses for example, hair salons, designer boutiques, tailoring shops and small eateries, also food delivery services from their homes. Sometimes with their husbands but often on their own. At this point in the research, we invited two social geographers to join us (Nian Paul and Chetana Naskar), from Jawaharlal Nehru University, because we wanted them to work with the young girls, I should say young women now, to explore ideas of public space and social space in more formal ways. So, this whole group used to go and talk to these women about how they were struggling in public space and they wrote down what they said. These conversations resulted in a series of zines⁴ which were shared amongst the women. The next challenge was how to make them public and so we used the places that had already been activated by the paintings as performance platforms to read out the stories assembled in the zines. The girls were very nervous at first about standing up in public and reading out loud, but as with other things, gradually they got more confidence and some of them even tried learning the stories like a script.

J.C: Who was your audience?

S.R: Mostly local people, men and women, young and old, some from outside, it all spread by word of mouth. We were less keen to encourage people from outside, it was more important for us that it stayed within the community, we didn't want a spectacle. We weren't looking for any kind of consensus just a forum for discussion. It was out of my hands now, the group would rehearse and gather at a prearranged time and people would turn up. Once we got established some local Afghan and Somali women set up a small community kitchen and made tea and served samosas and cakes. I should say that by now the group had expanded and some more boys had joined us, some of whom are still with the project. And there are members of that early group who are in their twenties now and they stay in touch.

J.C: You say you weren't looking for consensus, but do you think the project has made any difference?

S.R: Small steps, locally, yes. Their presence in public space has changed the girls and changed the space and the men have had to accept that. They walk with more confidence, with their heads up rather than their eyes fixed on the ground. Those girls have also got some of the young boys in the area on their side, from all faiths. Previously a local Muslim boy would not talk to a Somali girl – that's a shift. But beyond that I don't think so, it will take a long of time.

J.C: It seems to me that although your performances weren't staged in the traditional sense, they were framed scenographically by the architecture, the sounds, the smells, the changing light of the local streets ... perhaps embedded is a better word than framed. The murals activate the space but beyond that there's no manipulation of

the environment just a kind of active dwelling in it. And I know how noisy Delhi is – the bikes, the horns, the shouting of the vendors – so people have to come in close to listen and to talk.

S.R: It's interesting you say that because as I said the original group is now dispersed with members all over the world, some are in Canada, some in Europe but we still keep in touch. One of the things they're all missing is the noise of Delhi, "It's so quiet here," they say. So, they want to do a project on silence: What does silence mean to you?

J.C: Will they do that online – the group is very scattered now.

S.R: The girls who have left for resettlement are in different time zones now. However, they do meet online when they can to share photos and upload text around the sound project on the blog which is only accessible to the Khirkee Collective.

J.C: One of the strongest lessons I take from the project and listening to you talking about it, is the extended time frame and the open ended nature of what you do. The project clearly has a beginning, but it takes its own time. Things can't be pushed or rushed in the process. And it's still ongoing?

S.R: Currently, only two girls and one boy remain on site to manage the project, as most participants have departed. Discussions with other members continue via the virtual platform. Two young sonic artists, Anurag Singrou and Ashish Chauhan, from Ambedkar University, have been invited to collaborate with members of the Khirkee Collective. The collective is also seeking additional participants for the ongoing sound project. So yes, it's still ongoing. The wall paintings at the sites persist but are gradually decaying. However, if the collective organizes a sound performance at the site, the walls may be repainted, as has happened during previous street performances and zine launches.

J.C: I wish you all luck with that and I look forward to hearing about it. Thank you very much for your time, Sreejata. It has been fascinating talking to you.

Notes

1. Urban village is something of a misnomer suggesting a small settlement outside or on the edge of the city boundaries, in fact these areas are completely subsumed in the urban sprawl of Delhi. (see endnote ii).
2. See Roy, Sreejata & Chatterjee, Mrityunjay, 'Re-imagining the everyday: Street art in an 'urban village', Delhi, September 2020 *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* 7(2-3):281-293; Roy, Sreejata & Chatterjee, Mrityunjay, 'The Art of Uneventful Everyday: On Socially Engaged Art Project in Delhi', *Revue Ensemble*, Chittaranjan Park, New Delhi, India <https://revue.network>
3. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991.
4. mulaqat.wordpress.com

ORCID

Jane Collins  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0950-5382>

References

- Bishop, Claire. 2012. *Artificial Hells Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London. Verso.
- Mckinney Joslin & Palmer Scott, eds., 2017, *Scenography Expanded*, London, Bloomsbury, Methuen Drama.
- Merx, Sigrid. 2013. 'The Politics of Scenography: Disrupting the stage', *Performance Research*, 18:3, 54-58, DOI: [10.1080/13528165.2013.818314](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2013.818314)