## The selfie reframed: contemporary visual practices in Mumbai

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# A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of East Anglia

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#### Abstract

Since "selfie" was named the Oxford English Dictionary Word of the Year in 2013, the concept has received varied and robust academic attention. In India, the genre of photography gained popularity after it was successfully deployed in Narendra Modi's national campaigns in 2015 and became synonymous with ideas of national pride and success. In this thesis, I examine selfie cultures in three distinct spaces in Mumbai: locality-specific "selfie points" built throughout the city by political and commercial actors; the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, an annual ten-day public contemporary arts festival; and the Ganapati utsava, the annual eleven-day public Hindu festival celebrating Lord Ganesha. By using the selfie as a lens to examine visual practices in these distinct cultural spaces, I demonstrate overlaps and disjunctures in the fields of politics, artistic exhibition and protest, and Hindu devotion. I also examine selfie objects and images published on digital platforms from these spaces, to address questions of identity and self-presentation in urban India. I adopt arguments that visibilise the influence of social media algorithms on these spaces, while also grounding my discussion of selfie cultures in the Hindu practice of darshan, a mode of worship which privileges the eye and the process of seeing and being seen by the deity, and the widely celebrated practice of jugaad or creative workaround, popular in informal economies in India. Proposing a reframing of the selfie, I demonstrate how the genre of photography is a mode of consistent, affective, embodied engagement in urban India. I use ethnographic field-based research methods, including interviews, video recording and autoethnographic reflection in conjunction with qualitative digital research methods like crowdsourcing on Instagram. This thesis contributes towards an understanding of contemporary Indian culture and offers the field of global digital studies insights into imagined digital affordances in the Indian context.

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### Chapter 6

## Chapter 1 The selfie reframed: contemporary visual practices in Mumbai

### Introduction

To trace when my interest in selfies first began, all I have to do is scroll through my Instagram grid to find the date: 29 September 2017. A photograph I took on my smartphone, of a pair of rubber flip flops, outside the women's locker room at the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Olympic Swimming Pool in Mumbai, during "ladies' timings". On the insole of the left slipper, is printed a digital illustration of a hand holding a smartphone, preparing, as is implied by the orientation of the phone and the hand, for a selfie. In lieu of a face, a pair of heart-shaped spectacles and a smile are reflected on the screen of the illustrated phone. On the right slipper, "#selfie" is printed along the length of the insole. The graphics, in white, stand out against the black and pink pixelated background, and the words, outlined in pink, appear to glow like a neon sign.



Figure 1.1 My first selfie

Reading the caption, five years on, I remember how clever I had felt for spotting and photographing the slippers and reinterpreting the #selfie tag to participate on social networks, while slyly communicating my refusal to contribute to selfie practices by posting one online, and my boycott of what at the time, I thought of as a culture of blatant vanity. Sharing an image from the locker room

of a public swimming pool made me feel like an authentic boots-on-the-ground documenter of the city, with a dry, acerbic take on my generation. The wittiness of the image came from the incongruent depiction of the selfie as a signifier of futurity and aspiration, on the insoles of a humble pair of flip flops.

At the time, the selfie had taken over India, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi leading the trend. In 2015, the Government of India announced the Digital India campaign to improve online infrastructure and increase Internet connectivity ("Digital India" 2015), and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) used social networking platforms and Modi's massive popularity on them, to amplify his persona as a "self-made man" (Baishya 2015). Early in his role as Prime Minister, Modi often used selfies to demonstrate his allegiances on Twitter(X), from sharing selfies with Bollywood celebrities ("Bollywood and power" 2020), to one with the Chinese premier Li Keqiang ("World's most powerful selfie?" 2015), in what the media termed "selfie diplomacy". During the Delhi State elections in 2015, the BJP harnessed Modi's popularity in their election campaigns, constructing one thousand stalls with cardboard cutouts of him in malls and public places. These stalls were reportedly visited by over half a million supporters who took selfies with them ("Narendra Modi takes his selfies seriously" 2015). Even after the election campaign, the idea of taking a selfie with an image of Modi continued to be popular online. On Google Play, I found over thirty applications that allowed users to create a digitally manipulated selfie with Modi. Perhaps seeing the popularity of this genre of interaction in national politics, local politicians in different parts of the country jumped on the selfie bandwagon. In 2017, this political zeal for selfie-themed visibility manifested in Mumbai as a legal battle among the Shiv Sena, the Maharashtra Navanirman Sena and the BJP for a coveted "selfie point" in the prime location of Shivaji Park (Venkatraman 2017).

At the height of its popularity, the selfie trend was also picked up by various services. In 2015, presumably to make itself relevant to younger audiences and generate new income streams, India Post announced a scheme called My Stamp, through which people could buy personalised sheets of postage stamps. A chain of cafes named Selfieccino, that used a 3D printer and food colouring to print customers' selfies and portraits on the froth of cappuccinos, sprung up in various localities in the city in the same year (Dey 2020).

Like in other parts of the world, the selfie is a popular tool in brand "activations" (Carah and Shaul 2015) to encourage people to participate in advertising and promoting brands. In Figure 1.2, taken in

a mall in Mumbai in 2023, the text layout on the mirror is arranged to mimic that of a magazine cover page, inviting passersby to squat to the level of the mirror and "discover" that they "made it to the cover". The "call to action" in advertising terms, "Tell the whole world now!" seemingly invites the passerby to take a selfie and share it on social networking platforms.

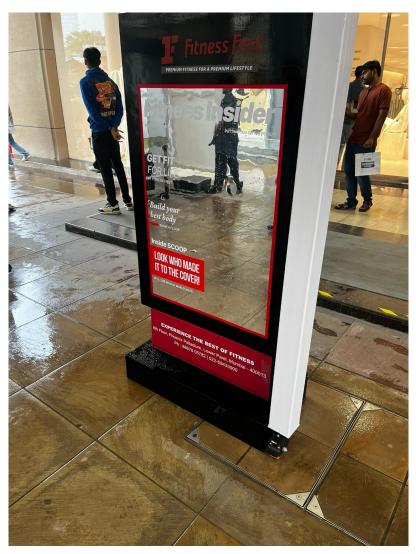


Figure 1.2 A selfie activation at Phoenix Mills

Despite its popularity with advertisers, creators and audiences, the selfie is often framed as an entitled, selfish and perilous act by Indian news media, especially in the way that selfie-related accidents and offences are reported. In the 2023 media reports of a government official who was suspended from work for ordering two million litres from a public water reservoir in Chhattisgarh draining, so that he could retrieve the phone that he had accidentally dropped into it (Sehgal 2023), many news headlines and reports focused on the detail that the government official was in the act of taking a selfie when he dropped his phone, perhaps because the selfie is associated with negative personal traits such as

self-obsession and frivolity, and the use of the word in the headline was simultaneously amusing, and demonstrated a failing of public duty.

In my home city of Mumbai, people seem to be taking selfies everywhere, and although popular with the youth, the phenomenon does not seem to be restricted to them. On a quiet evening at Girgaon beach, I watched a mother-and-daughter pair laugh as they tried to take selfies while their hair whipped in the wind. At a luxury mall, I saw multigenerational families gather to take selfies after lunch. In a public park, I noticed a young boy taking a selfie while balancing on the top of a seesaw. I was told about a woman who insisted that her friends join her at midnight to cut her fiftieth birthday cake at a "selfie point" in the Mumbai suburb of Juhu. The popularity of the selfie is even visible in its absence, with messages from the police dotting sea-facing roads requesting people to not stop for a selfie, and patrolling guards breaking up camera-wielding groups at the sixteen "no selfie zones" in the city, including rocky beaches and dilapidated forts, where selfie-takers have met with tragic accidents (Gayle 2016).

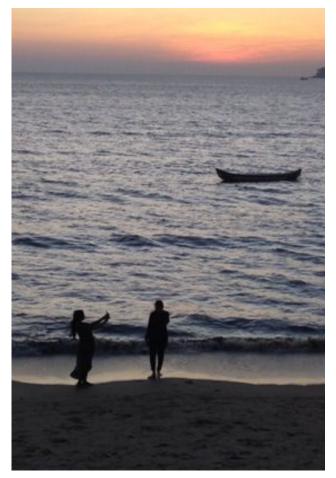


Figure 1.3 Sunset selfies at Girgaon beach

Some of the popularity of the selfie could be attributed to the density of camera phones and the low cost of taking and sharing images on the Internet. Currently, the Indian mobile phone market is the second largest in the world ("India overtakes US" 2017"). Smartphone brands like Honor, Realme and Vivo produce low-priced phones with selfie cameras with up to 32-megapixel resolutions ("best front camera phones" 2020) and advertise flagship models by the megapixels of their cameras. The Oppo F3 Deepika Padukone Limited Edition phone, for example, in addition to the13-megapixel rear camera, has two front-facing cameras: a 16-megapixel selfie camera, and an 8-megapixel for group selfies, and was advertised with massive billboards across Mumbai, with images of the Hindi film actor Deepika Padukone taking selfies using the phone. The arrival of Reliance Jio disrupted the pricing models of data providers, forcing them to drop 3G and 4G costs, and making the Internet even more economically accessible to millions of Indians in both urban and rural India ("For Airtel, Vodafone" 2018). Simultaneously, social networking platforms on which these images circulate, introduced features such as translation and transliteration into Indian languages, to make them them more accessible to Indian users ("Facebook introduces Hindi" 2016).

But apart from technological access, what are some of the other cultural factors that might explain the popularity of the selfie, and how it has been adopted in Indian context? How has the selfie changed the way we think about space, leisure, and self-presentation? What does thinking about the selfie reveal about contemporary experiments with identity? To consider these questions, I look at three distinct areas of academic engagement: photography in postcolonial India and how it has been understood as a visual experiment with modernity; the ways in which the selfie has been studied in other cultural contexts; and new forms of digital interaction on social networking platforms and their influence on cities, leisure and tourism and art spaces. In the following section, I discuss some of the insights drawn from each of these academic discussions, the questions they raise for this project, and my intended contributions to the fields.



Figure 1.4 Seesaw selfie at Cross Maidan

#### **Photography in India**

In sociological and anthropological studies of photography in India, the medium and practices surrounding it have consistently been associated with creative expression and experiments with modernity. In his examination of photography in India, Pinney demonstrates how the medium developed and changed from colonial practices, when it was used to enumerate and classify to scientifically study the Other, to a medium of visual communication and storytelling in postcolonial society. Pinney's examination of photography in Nagda, an industrial town in the state of Madhya Pradesh, reveals that photography is not treated as a medium of indexicality, and not used any differently from other mediums of iconic representation. Instead of valuing backdrops "as a record of the subject's position in actual space", a common practice in "places of high symbolic yield" such as tourist destinations as noted by Bourdieu, people in Nagda reject "real space" in favour of the photography studios with "formulaic backdrops (of the sort to be seen in Hindi films) of flowers and fountains" (2003, 212). With examples of composite printing and montage used at these photography studios, Pinney demonstrates how time and space are dislocated, and how the studio becomes not a place of solemnisation of the social or of Western realism, but instead a space for exploration and creative freedom, where the dreamy backdrops and inventive posing allows for a transcendence and parodying of social roles (Chatterjee 2009). The studios that Pinney documents also devise a complex visual vocabulary that can hold and communicate non-symbolic meanings demanded in the Indian context. For example, Pinney notes that for wedding albums, new couples are photographed in the studio and their faces are superimposed on colour templates such as "courting peacocks, the wings of butterflies [...] and pairs of flowers" (2003, 132) to communicate the predestined, non-symbolic, nonarbitrary union of this couple, as determined by astrological charts as is the "arranged marriage"

tradition in India, rather than a chance encounter or "love marriage". The availability of colour processing in this context, offers "a new repertoire of signs, a different ratio of realism" (132), although Pinney notes that these new technologies do not popularise realism, with people under the age of 35 still preferring "trick" techniques with double exposure and "design mixing" over realistic photographs (135).

Pinney's research parallels Arjun Appadurai's analysis of backdrops in India. Given Appadurai's interest in modernity and imagination, he looks at the use of props and backdrops to consider how photographic postcolonial Indian subjects style themselves. He argues that although backdrops are commonly understood as locating the photographic subject in a historic or geographic context, they also locate the subject in public discourse, of which the most frequent is that of visual modernity, "expressed in clothes and machines, as well as in bodily comportment and bodily accessories" (1997, 6). Even backgrounds that attempt realism, according to him, are only partial representations, fragmentary and metaphoric, always only a type of location and never an actual location. These locations allude to "either nostalgias of some sort of past (pristine, romantic, historical, heroic) or some sort of future (technological, sartorial, official, moral or relational)" (6). With an example of his own parents' portrait, taken in a studio where his father is dressed in a Savile Row white tropical suit, and his mother in a sari, Appadurai demonstrates how new roles for "social subalterns" are rehearsed and performed through clothing and how domestic and official space are brought into the same visual order. Crucially, this discussion highlights how even those with limited class and state power, in their making, viewing, and circulating of photographs, can conduct experiments and contest meanings of modernity and "interrogate the different realisms (scientific, official, everyday) that the medium appears to arrogate to itself" (8), and mirrors Pinney's observations and the potential of photography as a medium of creative experimentation in India.

David Macdougall, in his investigation of tourist photography in Dehradun, a hill station and tourist city in North India, notes that a "paramount objective" for tourists, is to bring back what Bourdieu calls "monuments of leisure", or photographs of themselves (2006, 164). As a result of the popularity of this activity, photography stations dot tourist sites and visitors spend considerable amounts of time creating these souvenirs. At these photography stations, Magdougall describes how photography, influenced by popular cinema, is used as a medium to try on different identities with props and gestures. For honeymooning couples, influenced by romance films, the activity is a chance to occupy leading roles, "for the only time in their lives" (167). Cinematic visual language is similarly used for

dramatic effect, and Macdougall describes how low camera angles and the positioning of subjects against the sky is used to imitate the "dramatic manner of 'filmi' heroes painted on cinema hoardings" (168).

Turning his attention to the "magical effects and frames within frames" in Indian photography, like Pinney, Macdougall argues that the medium "is not caught up in the search for unitary truths; it need not be afraid of paint or of being self-referential" (169). He explains, "[i]ts purpose is not so much to define, for people already exist as defined beings, but to acknowledge and enlarge. Thus, photography assists in the creation of a reality, not in the discovery (or uncovering) of it" (169). Echoing Appadurai, in another instance, MacDougall describes photographs of a young woman taken for the purpose of matrimonial photography, to demonstrate how objects included in the frame, such as a motorcycle, are not meant to be understood as the subject's possessions, but instead as symbols that convey meaning, often of modernity and aspiration. Both Pinney and Macdougall note that paint is used liberally during photo processing, not just to retouch images like in European photography, but as a creative overlay (Pinney 1997, 79) for instance by painting a halo around a subject, to depict their spirituality (Macdougall 2006,162).

These three key examinations of photography offer this project a starting point in thinking about the medium specifically within the postcolonial Indian context, and are particularly useful for considering selfie cultures, which are associated with individual agency and digital editing. Following Appadurai, Pinney and Macdougall, I approach contemporary photographic practices as a mode of creative engagement with identity and see it as part of a longer, consistent visual experimentation with subjectivity. In the following chapters, I extend this established academic discussion of photography in postcolonial India to digital networked selfie photography and consider the implications and effects of the practice as it contours around personal devices and social networking platforms.

The insights that Appadurai, Pinney and Macdougall offer about the ways in which backdrops, props and gestures are used to communicate different meanings and associations, also offer a framework to think about these objects in the urban spaces that I have chosen. In this sense, I look at how the city of Mumbai is designed to be a backdrop for people's selfies, and how various events at different times of the year evoke different associations and are used to generate and experiment with unique aspects of Mumbai-based identities (Vohra 2006, Phadke, Khan and Ranade 2011, Björkman 2021). By looking at the ways in which selfie cultures are developed and encouraged, I uncover the different meanings associated with backdrops and props and consider how identities that are rooted in modernity or contemporaneity, and tradition and history, are expressed through visual props or backdrops that are designed to encourage networked photography.

Apart from considering the effects of technological updates on photography, I also think about cultural influences on photography and the ways in which other global and local trends have impacted the medium. Smartphones and social networking platforms have not only allowed people to photograph themselves and each other and edit and share these images widely but have also expanded the range of cultural influences that people can access. Drawing from these three texts and their observations about the impact of cinema on both the ways in which these images are imagined, and in the poses, props and camera angles, I pay attention to the ways in which screen cultures impact digital photography and selfie practices.

### Selfie studies

As a mode of contemporary photography, the selfie is unique in the way that the roles of subject, photographer and curator/distributor are merged into one single individual (Senft and Baym 2015). As a form of self-portraiture and self-presentation, it is deemed different from previous forms in its use of technology, casualness, instantaneity and shareability (Senft and Baym 2015). These specific differences from earlier forms and other contemporary styles of visual expression make selfie studies a unique and fertile field of investigation. Although in the 1990s, the practice of "homecamming" or recording oneself using webcams on computers (Senft 2008) was a popular activity, these practices of visually documenting the self with networked cameras were restricted to static spaces because of the weight of equipment and the need for telephone cable networks to connect to the Internet. In 2010, digital self-recording became possible outdoors and in public places when Apple released the iPhone 4 which had a novel front camera of 0.3 megapixels and became a prototype for future smartphones (Molla 2017). As camera phones evolved, this genre of photography quickly became popular and in 2013, the Oxford English Dictionary, which each year chooses a word or phrase that reflects "the ethos, mood, or preoccupations of the past twelve months, one that has potential as a term of lasting cultural significance" announced "selfie" as the "word of the year" defining it as "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, especially one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media" (Oxford Languages).

Since 2013, the body of scholarship on the selfie genre has rapidly expanded. Initially approached as a largely female and youthful form of casual self-expression (Manovich et al 2014), and associated with vanity and self-obsession, the selfie has now come to be understood in different contexts as a networked object that facilitates collective action and multiple perspectives (Senft and Baym 2015), a "technology of the self" in the Foucauldian sense that is a tool in the active construction and continual re-establishing of a chosen identity (O'Regan 2009) and a digital object that exposes the body and the self to commodification and exploitation (Shah 2020).

Large-scale data scraped from 2.5 million posts on Instagram and analysed with a focus on how people use "tags" to slot their selfies into genres, has revealed that most selfies are usually used to convey social status and physical attractiveness (Deeb-Swihart et al. 2017). The authors identify that men tend to take selfies that signal strength and skill, such as while performing fitness activities, while women tend to emphasise their attractiveness and health through hair and make-up selfies (Deeb-Swihart et al. 2017). Both men and women post selfies related to travel and work, which the authors argue signals wealth and status (Deeb-Swihart et al. 2017). This research also significantly takes note of situations in which selfies are not generated, such as at funerals or during divorce proceedings, to demonstrate how there are cultural norms associated with the "appropriateness" of selfies (Deeb-Swihart et al. 2017).

Perhaps the most popular association made with the selfie is the "influencer" selfie, or the mode of photography that has become synonymous with celebrities who share photographs and videos from their everyday lives to fans and followers on social networking platforms. Academics working in the field of celebrity studies have approached this trend from the perspective of labour and gender, to think about digital platforms as workplaces and to consider the role of the selfie in creating and maintaining a public persona and parasocial relationships. Jerslev and Mortensen argue that celebrity selfies are a "phatic gesture to nurture bonds with fans and the public, who are given the opportunity to follow their life as it unfolds", and that this register or tone, often developed by sharing content from everyday life, has narrowed the gap between celebrities and fans (Jerslev and Mortensen 2016, 250). In this context, selfies have been understood as acts of "subversive frivolity", allowing celebrities to construct their public image and engage in ecologies of commerce through what might be considered inconsequential or unproductive acts, and merging notions of intimacy, access and authenticity and reflexivity with branding, commercial promotion and labour (Abidin 2016, 1). This

performed connectivity has been observed to have been imitated by global political candidates and leaders (Ekman and Widholm 2015).

In India, through an analysis of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's highly curated public relations strategy, Baishya finds that the selfies are made to look deliberately amateurish, to convey a political message through a language of the everyday (2015). He writes, "The idea of the self-made man seems to have become fused with the idea of the "selfie-made" man; the question of Modi's own agency as he clicks his own pictures rather than waiting for a photographer to reach out to the masses becomes fused with the rationale of "actions, not acts." (1689). Baishya argues that this use of the selfie and its "seemingly inherent, evidentiary, and immediate nature of their form" (1689), pits Modi against the dynastic Congress and visually complements and reinforces the message that Modi, unlike previous leaders, is not afraid to take initiative against issues he believes plague the nation, such as hygiene and cleanliness and "black money" or undeclared untaxed income. Baishya reminds us that the effectiveness of the selfies is not just in its messaging, presenting the "aura of the everyman" (1692) but also in the low cost of production and how these selfies permeate "intimate interfaces desktops, tablets, and mobile phones" and are therefore far more effective than other "spectacular" uses of technology like the 3D holographic projection of Modi at a public rally, which only people who are present can witness (1687). Turning his attention to selfies that BJP voters were encouraged to post on Twitter, Baishya argues that the popularity of the political campaign to associate Modi with the selfie, turned the act of taking and sharing a selfie at a polling booth or with the black ink stripe on the index finger, which is used to evidence a vote, into "an index of not merely the vote but of voting for Narendra Modi", destabilising the idea of secret ballot and turning the act of taking a selfie into "a kind of informal political labor" (1695). On Modi's website, Baishya considers the image of Modi which is compiled from a photomosaic of supporters' selfies, arguing that "the selfie is not only accorded evidentiary value but is raised to the status of the archival and the narratological [...] The casual form of the selfie is mobilized here as an invitation to participate in a sort of an instant history that is a token participation at best, and a form of historiographic surveillance at worst" (1686). Baishya's analysis offers crucial insights into how the selfie is used in Modi's public image, as well as how it is used to interpellate voters and supporters of the BJP.

Academics studying a range of cultural contexts and historic moments have demonstrated how the selfie, as a form of citizen journalism and as a demonstration of citizenship, has been variously used to communicate patriotism, bear witness and generate awareness. The various contextual

interpretations all start from the point of thinking about the selfie as a form of "witnessing" (Koliska and Roberts 2015, 1681) by documenting an event, and visually commenting on the witnessing of it.

In the United States of America, Bouko examines how selfies are used to infuse a sense of fun in youth civic mobilisations and to locate performance as a central element of civic action (2015, 50). By looking at various campaigns that encourage young people to take selfies, Bouko illustrates how networked selfie practices, as an alternative to traditional collective action, enable participatory or performative self-expression and connective action, and can be successfully harnessed to encourage young people to share their voices and opinions with policymakers (2015, 50).

This same focus on the connective, networked possibilities of digital communities is brought to Mottadeh's analysis of the Iran election crisis in 2009, the first social revolt to receive global attention through social media. Mottadeh contends that the concept of "the people" during this protest, was constituted "less by a particular socio-economic or ideological category, and more by the mimetic gestures and viral composition [...] comprised of both flesh and data" (2015, 61). The selfie, in this context, is less about individuality and more about the potential of individual contribution to the performance of an embodied collective.

Examining the Pakistani Freedom March selfies shared on Instagram in 2014, Aziz observes how the use of the Instagram hashtag "azadiselfie" (freedom selfie) allowed people to self-identify as part of the protest group and join in support of Imran Khan, then leader of the opposition, as he marched from Lahore to Islamabad (2015). Significantly, Aziz argues that the ability to share their location with family members allows women to feel safe during protests, and that selfies of women, often taken by male family members in "family selfies" where the presence of parents temper potential charges of narcissism, demonstrate how selfies have come to be accepted as a form of citizen journalism (2015).

Considering the sociable spectating practices of the 2015 V-Day military parade in Beijing, de Seta and Proskell argue that the memes, images and *zipai* or selfies that people share on We Chat while watching the media broadcast of the parade, are acts of micro-citizenship (2015, 34). Through these images, which are meant to be decoded by the social circles in which they circulate, people communicate their complex relationship with the State and its pageantry, from national pride to

criticism of the disruption that the event causes in daily life, chronicling the process of engaging with the event as a viewer and offering intimate reflections on citizenship and belonging (2015, 34).

Within LGBTQIA+ communities, selfies have been seen as a practice of freedom that is agentic, sexual, self-affirming and awareness-raising (Tiidenberg and Gomez Cruz 2015, Tiidenberg 2018). In trans communities of colour, Rege uses the selfie to creatively to mark presence and as a mode of critique of whiteness and homonormativity within academic and artistic communities (2017). Steinbock observes that the "cute aesthetics" of selfie practices on Instagram, and video filters that allow people to change the proportions of their face, for example by making their eyes bigger or eyelashes longer and to experiment with adding animal features such as rabbit ears or pig snouts, provide a sentimental shield for trans communities of colour, allowing individuals to enact their presence as a mode of resilience (2017).

Considering the technical aspects of the selfie and meanings generated by the specificities of the genre, Frosh argues that the uniqueness of the selfie lies in its non-representational aspects, "innovations in distribution, storage, and metadata that are not directly concerned with the production or aesthetic design of images" (1607). The act of taking the selfie is at once expressive and disciplinary, as a learnt physical skill that has to be practiced, with the device held in an outstretched hand, body contorted to fit in the frame of the screen, while the technology of the camera and the screen of the device together edit and present a real-time image mirroring the photographer's body. As a result of these specificities of the genre, Frosh argues that the experience of taking a selfie is a performance of the self, presented to itself, even before the image is captured with the click of a button on the screen of the device; and that a selfie signals the body of the photographer and calls attention to its own performance: the "self enacting itself", communicating "not only 'see this, here, now' but also 'see me showing you me'" (2015, 1610).

Koliska and Roberts (2021) draw on Soja's concept of Thirdspace to devise a theory for thinking about selfies that depict place. Making the distinction between "space" and "place" based on Yi-Fu Tuan's understanding of the terms (1977), the authors explain that "whereas the former refers to generally undefined geographic or physical location, the latter refers to meaningful and familiar" (1). Based on this differentiation, the authors argue that people "colonize" points of material "space" with their selfies, to "reproduce, counter, or mix the meanings of places" (1) with their selfies, thereby "marking them as a familiar place" (8). The resulting selfies, according to Koliska and Roberts, could

be understood as "Thirdspace" in how they encompass "all the polysemic meanings of the place and the self that may have been perceived [...] in the interplay of self, objective, conceived, lived, and mediated place (6). Based on this argument, the authors identify six "types" in the spectrum of Thirdspace selfies, based on whether "the self or the place dominates in the process of meaning making" (6). On the end of the self-place spectrum, where weightage is given to place, the authors position the "embellishment of place selfies", "subversion of place selfies" and "documenting of self in place selfies" while towards the other end of the spectrum, where the self is projected as the dominant aspect of the image, they place the "embellishment of self selfies", "subversion of self selfies" and "witnessing place selfies".

By examining constellations created by multiple overlapping elements that constitute what he terms "the selfie assemblage", Hess creates a framework for thinking about the various connections and competing logics "between machines, physical spaces, bodies, and networks" (2015, 1642). According to Hess, several elements alter the reading of material space, both for the photographer in the act of selfie-taking, as well as for the viewer of the selfie: the photographer's own judgement; the stylistic elements of this form of the photography, in which the hand is outstretched and must frame at least a portion of the face; the software technologies on the device which alter and crop the background; and the networked, locative functions of the device which connect the body and physical space to the corporate-controlled spaces of the Web 2.0. These hybrid connections co-exist with those around them in physical space and online. Hess uses examples of selfies taken in private spaces such as bedrooms or bathrooms and images and videos of personal moments from public spaces that are meant for private circulation (1637), to argue that the selfie speaks a language of "publicised privacy" (Sloop and Gunn 2010 quoted in Hess 2015, 1637) and is inherently paradoxical in the way that it complicates binary distinctions of private and public, both in terms of the act of photography and in its circulation.

Referencing Sontag's claim that the photograph is a violent act that restructures the body of the subject, taking away their ability to control the frameworks of image-making and the final image, Shah turns our attention to the Indian State's use of the selfie as a biometric verification tool in the Aadhaar unique identification project, stressing that selfies are "critical digital objects" "under the scrutiny of algorithmic governances, database logistics, and artificial intelligence logics" (2017, 190). Shah's argument challenges the approach to the selfie as a celebration of the self, instead illustrating how the self tends to be exposed to a form of commodification that is in line with the neoliberal logic

of the making of the self. In this way, Shah's approach parallels Moore's study of personal devices and technology in the neoliberal workplace (2017), in how it thinks about the ways in which citizens of a state come to be quantified as the state moves towards digital governance and surveillance.

Some academic engagement with the selfie has proposed an expansion of the way in which the selfie is understood, arguing that it functions as "a multimedia genre of autobiography or memoir that makes the image maker into the protagonist of stories of his or her own composition" (Shipley 2015, 404). This approach to the selfie includes "synecdochic selfies", or anything published to represent "key values of the self" on social networking platforms, including images of other body parts, such as feet, and even items of personal consumption such as clothes and food in their purview (Shipley 2015, 407). For this project, however, with the intention of focusing the field of study, I stay with the idea of the face, while taking into consideration and drawing upon the idea that selfies communicate "key values of the self", but I expand the definition of the selfie slightly to include social specificities related to selfie behaviour and networked photographic practices in India.

To describe the language spoken in the streets of Bombay, novelist Salman Rushdie has used the acronym "Hug-me" which he explains is "a melange of Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, Marathi and English. In addition to those five "official" languages, there's also the city's unique slang, Bambaiyya, which nobody from anywhere else in India understands." (Rushdie 2021). In my experience, there is both this specificity that Rushdie observes, as well as a generality to the language of Mumbai, and words are often supplemented with inflexions, facial expressions, head movements and hand gestures. In this fast-paced multilingual city activated by commerce and transaction, it is generally accepted that the words that a person uses are not as important as the meaning or sentiment they communicate, an idea condensed in phrases like "*bhavnao ko samjho*" [understand the underlying sentiment] that are used to overcome communication gaps.

Given this linguistic and cultural context, I believe there is a need to consider what the term "selfie" means in the Indian context. Although in Mumbai, the word primarily holds the same meaning as the Oxford English Dictionary definition, it is also often used to refer to other forms of smartphone portraiture. For example, a group of friends might be taking selfies together, and then one might say to another "*abhi mera ek* selfie?" [now one selfie for/of me?] asking his friend to take a picture of him. Or a group selfie might be followed with a request to a passer-by for a group portrait, to ensure everybody is included in the frame. Broadening the meaning of the word for the purpose of this

project, allows me to engage with cultures that involve framing the self in a digital image, and the surrounding actions and types of photography that accompany it, especially since selfie photography is often an activity that can last over an extended duration, in groups and individually, involving various experimental poses and framing strategies.

Through this expanded understanding of the term, I engage with the selfie as a form of visual documentation of the face using a smartphone camera, but equally as an embodied act of networked participation and communication. The term "networked" acknowledges the framework within which these images are created and circulated, namely the social networking platforms Whatsapp, Facebook and now most commonly, Instagram, referred to in India as "Insta", which have both thematic and formal influences on selfie cultures. Drawing from the diverse literature on selfies highlighted in this section, I engage with the liberating aspects of the selfie, thinking about how it creates an avenue for people to engage with themselves and each other, as well as with the limiting aspects of the selfie, interrogating why and how selfie cultures are seen as superficial and are criticised for commodifying or commercialising spaces. In other words, I consider how the selfie in urban India functions as a mode of visual interaction that foregrounds the face and cuts across language and literacy differences, but equally a form of brand-building that is used to bring the human body into circuits of algorithmic neoliberal commodification. I also pay attention to the way in which academic contributions have seen the selfie as a political tool both to reinforce the existing status quo and to oppose and resist power and think about the ways in which collective and individual political identities (Anandan 2014, Aziz 2015, Mottadeh 2015, de Seta and Proskell 2015) are generated and performed through selfie cultures in Mumbai. This focus on identity and self-presentation in the Indian context also offers a postcolonial, Global South perspective to the study of selfies and digital cultures. I look what values of the self are communicated by selfies in this specific cultural moment, and how Indian and Western values and identities are negotiated. Drawing from academic insights previously highlighted in this section about decorum, placemaking, privacy and publicness regarding selfie practices, I look at how these are negotiated in the Indian context. I also resurrect the idea of the selfie as "fun" and think about how it is used in various ways to participate, reclaim and question.

#### Social networking platforms

While this thesis is focused on selfie cultures, a discussion of the platforms on which these images circulate offers an understanding of the wider context of shifts in visual culture that have taken place in India and abroad. In the last few years, as this project has developed, this digital environment has

evolved significantly, changing not just the way that people interact online, but also how material environments are conceived, designed and experienced. In this section, I briefly discuss these shifts, introduce some of the vocabulary from social networking platforms that have entered everyday language and are frequently used in the following chapters, and consider global academic debates on the aesthetic impact of trends and formats that are popular online. Through this discussion, I lay the groundwork for ideas that arise in the following chapters about changes in the organisation of space and artistic practices in Mumbai as a result of selfie cultures.

In 2018, a study by Pew Research Center in Washington DC revealed that India was among the countries with the lowest use of the Internet and social networking platforms in the world, with only 25% of adults reported to use the Internet, 22% to own smartphones and 20% to use social networking platforms ("Only 25% of Indian adults..." 2018). These numbers increased significantly by 2022, when Nielsen reported that Internet use in India had grown at a rate of 37% since 2019 and the country had 646 million active Internet users aged 2 years and older, of which 352 million were located in rural India and 294 million in urban India (Neilsen 2022). Despite these large numbers, the report highlighted that 60% of the rural Indian population did not actively use the Internet, but the growth of Internet users in rural India at 45% outstripped growth in urban India which was at 28%. Growth of women users at a rate of 61%, was observed to exceed the growth of male users, which was at 24%. Especially significant for this project is the insight from the Nielsen report that in both rural and urban populations, the Internet is accessed mostly on mobile phones and that 90% of users reported accessing the Internet daily.

Social media use too is on the rise in India, and social networking platforms appear to be capitalising on the business opportunity that the growing young population of the country presents to them. According to data that Meta provided for advertisers in 2023, the largest number of Facebook accounts and the second largest number Instagram accounts are located in India (Kemp 2023). Currently, most selfies shared online in India are circulated on Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube, as still or video images. Apart from these USA-based platforms, the short-form video hosting site TikTok was extremely popular until it was banned along with several other Chinese mobile applications in 2020 by the Indian government because of national security concerns ("Why has India..." 2020). In 2017, Facebook acquired Instagram and then WhatsApp, which were until then its direct competitors. This move was considered so significant to the global economy and the fields of media and communication, that the acquisition is currently being investigated by the American

Federal Trade Commission for breaching antitrust laws in the United States of America (Federal Trade Commission 2021). In 2022, in the wake of evidence from whistleblower Frances Haugen of Facebook's knowledge about its negative impact on long-term global public health, Facebook changed its parent company name to Meta (Paul 2021). Within this new multinational technology conglomerate, Facebook, Instagram and Whatsapp have been rebranded as "products" which offer slightly different interfaces to share images, videos and text-based messages to individual users and groups. Apart from Meta, other social networking platforms that are widely popular in India are YouTube, owned by Google, and Twitter, recently taken over and rebranded to "X" by Elon Musk (McCallum 2023). YouTube is the primary platform for "vloggers" or video bloggers because of its unique revenue sharing model by which a portion of profits made from in-video advertising are sent to individual content creators (Shrivastav and Juned 2023). Twitter, or X, first conceived as a microblogging site and used for short text-based broadcast messaging, is a popular platform for the discussion of current events and was effectively harnessed by the BJP during Modi's election campaign (Baishya 2015). Snapchat is an image-sharing mobile application, popular with younger generations for its disappearing messages feature, by which the sender can control the duration of time for which an image remains available to the recipient, and augmented reality (AR) filters, which allow users to change the proportions of their face or add elements like animal ears or snouts to their selfies ("Four out of five digital users" 2023). Other platforms and sites popular with young Internetsavvy Indians and video gamers include Reddit, Discord and Twitch. All these platforms are available both as websites, which can be accessed on most networked devices, and as applications or "apps" that can be used on Android and iOS mobile operating systems.

In this thesis, along with instances from my fieldwork, I consider examples from Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Google Images and blog sites. This range of examples is an attempt to maintain focus on the selfie as a digital object and present the diversity of formats and methods of image circulation on the Internet. When required, a description of the context or the workings of the social networking site, or a discussion with the people involved in the sharing and receiving of the image, supplement the analysis of an image. Another reason for choosing examples from various sources is because any attempt to make distinctions between the various websites, social networking platforms or mobile applications is complicated by how "content" or user-submitted data (in the form of text, images, audio and video) moves across the Internet. After acquiring Facebook rivals Instagram and Whatsapp, Meta attempted to consolidate power by encouraging cross-platform sharing, or prompting users to share images uploaded on one platform on the other social networking platforms it owns,

updates which have been termed "messy" by technology commentators (Shankland 2022). As a result of these changes, however, when a user posts a selfie on Instagram, they are prompted to also share the image Facebook and Whatsapp. The Meta, iOS and Android smartphone operating systems, which are constantly updated to stay "user friendly" or simplify the handling experience, also encourage users to "forward" content across mobile different applications in a one-step process.

A third issue that complicates the effort to distinguish one digital space from the other is the evolving architecture of these spaces. Meta Founder and Chief Operating Officer Mark Zuckerberg's motto "move fast and break things", which summarises the company's core principle of constant reinvention to stay relevant, keep pace with changing trends and by doing so, retain Internet users (Taplin 2017, 8). This is often achieved by routinely imitating successful features from competitors, which also reduces differences between each platform. For example, the geotagging function from Instagram, which allows users to add geographic coordinates to images based on the location of the user's mobile device and present this as a "tag" which can be clicked on by other users to reveal other images sharing the same metadata, has now been applied to Facebook as well. The "Stories" feature on Instagram, Facebook and Whatsapp is borrowed from the popular timed disappearing posts from Snapchat, and the "Reels" feature on Instagram imitates the 15 second video from TikTok, which often involves "trending" music, dance steps or video formats to which individuals put their own spin. The "Live" video on Facebook and Instagram is taken from the live streaming feature offered by Twitch and YouTube, which allows video to be shared in real time as it is recorded directly from a device, without needing to be first recorded and stored. In 2023, Meta introduced a new mobile application called Threads, which is linked to users' Instagram accounts, but has a user interface that mixes the text-based micro-blogging format of Twitter with images and photo albums from Instagram.

Apart from acknowledging this complicated imbrication of the various platforms, any study of the circulation of data on the Internet must also be attuned to the role of algorithms, the data processes or set of instructions based on which information is arranged and presented. As people compete for attention on social networking platforms, and the platforms compete for the largest share of users, the most crucial innovations are perhaps made in these algorithms (Terranova 2014). While competing for the largest share of users, platforms use sophisticated algorithms and machine learning to organise and present content, which most users do not understand (Smith 2018). These algorithms are considered highly proprietary and are strictly guarded by the developers of the social networking

platforms, posing a significant challenge for users and researchers. In the absence of this information, researchers use modelling techniques, examine large-scale trends and collect anecdotal evidence. Although a longer discussion of the issues created by network-based people recommendation algorithms is outside of the purview of this thesis, researchers have found that they tend to increase social cohesion and exacerbate social biases (Ferrara et al 2022), polarise opinion (de Arruda et al 2022) and favour negative opinions, news headlines or content (Pomeroy 2022).

Another significant influence of social media platforms which is relevant to the study of selfies, is the ways in which shopping, advertising and marketing have changed. As part of the services that they offer to users, Meta has experimented with creating avenues for online shopping on their various platforms. On Facebook, this takes the form of Marketplace, a page on which Facebook users can advertise everything from rental properties to small household items. Until recently, a Shopping tab on Instagram allowed users to make in-app purchases, although the functionality has been discontinued in 2023. Whatsapp offers business accounts with which businesses can QR (quick response) codes for customers and create catalogues of products and display information and prices. This emphasis on shopping has not only changed the way that people interact on the Internet, but also made a significant impact on the way that products, businesses and spaces are marketed. In India, Instagram was found to have become the first choice for retail advertising in the Delhi NCR (National Capital Region) in 2016 (Bohra and Bishnoi 2016). For advertisers, the researchers found that the appeal lay in the ease and low cost of creating a shopping page and the ability to tag products to make them more accessible for online shoppers, while customers stated that they appreciated the scrolling and browsing functions on the mobile application, and the ability to discuss items with sellers and request customised products (Bohra and Bishnoi 2016).

This culture of online shopping has encouraged the growth of a new professional class of people called "content creators" or "influencers": people with a high follower count and the ability to "influence" or drive their followers to spend time online or make purchases. While this profession was restricted to the economic and cultural elite in the early days of social networking platforms in India, it has evolved into a more diverse space as the avenues to monetise content online expand. Now, many social media users document their hobbies or everyday lives online, hoping that what starts as a "side hustle" or "passion project" can evolve into a fulltime career. A common trope across the various genres of content, is the foregrounding of the individual and the crafting of stories around daily life, often using techniques of "calibrated amateurism" which is understood as "less of a static

quality and more of a performative ecology and parasocial strategy with its own bona fide genre and self-presentation elements" including behind-the-scenes or making-of photos and videos (Abidin 2018), as well as posting regularly or even daily, and using an informal, friendly or "authentic" tone of voice (Marwick 2015, Abidin 2018, Manovich 2017). In the Indian context, Rukmini Pande observes how these strategies of authenticity have been used by the comedy collective All India Bakchod (AIB) by leveraging their position as "ordinary guys", or upper caste, upper class, urban men, and by using humour and satire to challenge celebrity culture and politics (Pande 2019, 146).

To describe this set of behaviours, Theresa Senft uses the term "microcelebrity", arguing that most people on social media mimic celebrity behaviour by curating their online persona, sharing certain images of themselves or sharing their geolocations (Senft 2008). Reframing celebrityhood in this way allows the concept to be understood as a performance or behaviour (Senft 2008, Marwick 2015, Abidin 2018), or a set of strategies that have now been adopted by most social media users in their self-presentation online (Mavroudis 2019). In the upcoming chapters, I pay attention to this idea, thinking about how the ordinary Mumbaikar uses these "microcelebrity" strategies while presenting themselves on social networking platforms. Locating the discussion of selfie cultures in Mumbai, allows not only a certain proximity to the nerve centre of cinematic action, and a chance to engage with questions of modernity and self-fashioning as understood through screen cultures, but crucially also presents an opportunity to consider contemporary influences of transnational flows of commerce, around which cities grow and thrive (Appadurai 1996). As a performative city, and a city activated by transaction and commerce, Mumbai is a fertile backdrop for the photographic performance of new subjectivities, in the way that it has been understood by Appadurai, MacDougall and Pinney, as well as in terms of new, commercially charged digital cultures.

Globally, the popularity of social networking platforms, and specifically Instagram, seems to have predominantly impacted aesthetic trends in the hospitality industry. Frier observes that décor elements such as bare bulbs, bright lights, plants, and mirrors, which look attractive in digital photographs and often feature in popular Instagram posts, have become staples in restaurants, shopping malls and hotels (Frier 2020). Architectural firms and interior designers offer special packages to hospitality and retail spaces to turn them into "Instagram bait" by using "triggers" like novelty wallpaper and special lighting to attract customers who visit with the primary intention of creating Instagram content (Newton 2017 in Leaver, Highfield and Abidin 2020, 300). Much like these retail spaces and restaurants, urban areas too are seeing a homogenisation, both in the way they are designed, and in

the way that they are represented on social media (Stodola 2017 in Leaver, Highfield and Abidin 2020). The location tagging and search functions on social networking platforms, which allow users to "tag" a location and search for posts based on these location tags, have also physically shifted global tourist behaviours, bringing attention to quiet photogenic neighbourhoods (Hui 2018 in Leaver, Highfield and Abidin 2020) and creating interest in previously "undiscovered" places. At the Trolltunga cliff in Norway where tourist numbers increased from 500 in 2009 to 40,000 in 2014, it has been observed that tourists who photograph views from the top rarely record the long, tedious queues that form along the mountain (Frier 2020, 269). Changing notions of travel, representation and authenticity have similarly observed with the rise of businesses that cater to people who are unable to travel, but still want to appear that they do, such as cafes in Shenzhen, which re-create high-rise hotel rooms with several backdrop options, and rent out half-hour slots to visitors, providing them with beds, pillows, and bathrobes as props for photographs (Kohnhorst 2018 in Leaver, Highfield and Abidin 2020).

Building on theories that the tourist gaze and tourist photography shape each other, Anja Dinhopl and Ulrike Gretzel look at how the popularity of the selfie and increased integration of camera phones into everyday life affect touristic looking (Dinhopl and Gretzel 2016). They argue that while tourist photographs traditionally function as proof of having been to a place, the geotagging practices of social networking platforms allow this evidence of place to be offered in passive ways, removing the need for tourists to present locations in their photographs. As a result, destinations are only important for the environment that they provide tourists with to create stories of themselves, and the researchers predict that future popular destinations will be less relevant as tourist attractions, than for the ambiance that they serve in tourists photographs and videos. As a result of the centrality of the tourist over the tourist attraction, Dinhopl and Gretzel observe that "selfie-spots" (2016, 134) or locations that are further away from the monument or tourist attraction, in nondescript locations, become the new sites of attraction because they offer the best composition for a front camera phone. They also identify the reasons why the selfie has become more stylised and creative, in a bid to be unique: with the disappearance of the backdrop from the photo, the "self becomes elevated as a touristic productit is what tourists are there to consume" (2016, 134). Dinhopl and Gretzel note that since these selfies also exist and compete with other selfies and the own person's previous selfies, tourists feel the need to create new, interesting ways to perform themselves.

This privileging of the self in tourism can also be seen in the rise of "Insta factory" galleries, pop-up spaces and museums that cater to visitors who want to take photographs for Instagram (Leaver, Highfield and Abidin 2020) and in the way that traditional museums and art spaces have responded to the Instagram attention that they have either intentionally or unwillingly received from visitors (Fei 2016). Museums, acknowledging the desire of visitors to share their perspective and experience through photographs on Instagram, use stickers on the floor to indicate placements for the best photograph and ask their visitors to use specific tags in image captions posted on social networking platforms to aid in marketing campaigns (Budge and Burness 2017). Some museums have shifted marketing strategies to focus on the "Instagrammability" of their collections and pay for sponsored content on blogs that make tutorials on how to take good Instagram photographs of special ticketed exhibitions (Leaver, Highfield and Abidin 2020). Pre-social media artists like Yayoi Kusama and James Turrell, whose art is now considered compatible with social media aesthetics because of their use of light and colour, have re-emerged as favourites and pop culture icons (Leaver, Highfield and Abidin 2020). At the Tate Modern, where Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Mirror Rooms exhibition, which was first put on display as a special exhibition in 2021 and has now been extended until 2024, visitors are allowed paid entry in fifteen-minute slots and allowed only two minutes to experience each exhibit or "room".

In the USA, the most well-known example of an "Insta factory" is the Museum of Ice Cream (MoIC), with locations in New York and San Francisco. At the MoIC, much like in a traditional museum, people buy tickets, queue in long lines to enter, and then walk through exhibits or rooms, waiting to take their turn at capturing photographs. Journalists have described the museums as "detail-oriented ... [although] none of these details was small enough to be noisy or list in a frame, ensuring that all would translate nicely to a small-screen format" (Wiener 2017 in Leaver, Highfield and Abidin 2020). The MoIC and others similar spaces like 29Rooms, tie up with companies including Tinder, Fox and American Express and include special rooms or props to promote them (Wiener 2017 in Leaver, Highfield and Abidin 2020). In London, the Selfie Factory at the O2 which describes itself as "The UK's first Instagram inspired funhouse", encourages "self-love photo taking" at exhibits or rooms include the "The Pink London Tube Train", "The Flower Phone Box" and "The Neon Love Island Room".

In the following chapters, I bring these observations from other cultural contexts to Mumbai, to consider the impact of social networking platforms and photography on ideas of tourism, art and

leisure in the urban India. I base my research in Mumbai not only because it is my home, and it is where my interest in the topic first began, but because it is the most densely populated city in the country and the trend-setter in terms of the "new middle class" the English speaking, economic elite of Mumbai, whose lifestyles, which include studying and holidaying abroad, bring Western trends to the rest of the country (Dwyer 2000, 58). Conceptualised by the British colonial government as the "urbs prima in indis" (Kidambi 2007, 5) the city continues to occupy the Indian (and global) imagination as the romantic, glamourous home of the Bollywood film industry (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994). As both the financial and entertainment capital, Mumbai has been described as India's New York and Hollywood rolled into one (Conlon 1995, 90). Gyan Prakash writes that the allure of Bombay/Mumbai, the mythic proportions of the city and the desire by non-residents for the city, was created jointly by Bombay cinema, tabloids, and magazines, that created the idea of "a freespirited city, a palace of pleasures" (2008, 8). Today, even as cities like Bengaluru, Pune and Hyderabad have become hubs for technological innovation and start-ups, Mumbai retains its status as the nerve centre of the film industry, and by extension, as the nucleus of popular creativity and self-imagining. I document how the visual landscape of the city is altered both by the specific cultural and political moment, as well as by the impact of the popularity of social networking platforms and aesthetic trends that have arisen from these digital cultures. I consider questions of social roles, dialogues with modernity, visual experiments, cinematic performances and engagements with past and future moments and locations, specifically through the lens of selfie practices in the city of Mumbai. What does it mean when physical space becomes the backdrop for our selfies, and when a smartphone and linked digital networks, become extensions of our human ontological experience? What new relationships and ways of seeing and occupying space are developed around these selfie cultures? What might a study of selfies offer in terms of an understanding of how people understand and construct their partial, fragmentary, contesting, complementary and evolving identities and roles in local and global societies?

Drawing on these key observations about how global viewing practices are impacted by the popularity of digital photography and social networking platforms, I examine how visual and aesthetic trends and spatial organisation have changed in Mumbai. In the following chapters, I look for parallels with global trends observed in the previous examples as a result of the importance given to visual aesthetics and image production and examine the influence on the visual landscape of spaces and changed patterns of use and experience (Appadurai 2000, Jain 2017) in Mumbai. Specifically, I think about tourism, branding, art exhibition and viewership, and changing understandings of recreation and

public space. Simultaneously, I consider previous modes of engagement that are specific to the Indian context and assess how these have altered as a result of the popularity of visual practices on the Internet. I ask what new behaviours and cultures have developed around social networking platforms and selfie photography and think about how spaces in the city are designed and re-designed to invite networked photography and the objectives of the people involved.

Basing the research in India, and specifically in Mumbai, also opens the discussion to the organisation of physical space and physical movement through it, from a perspective that acknowledges discrimination based on gender and caste-based identities. In India, access to space is often controlled by caste, gender, education and other markers of privilege, and equally impacted by the sheer population and the density of bodies. When considering the impact of tourism and gentrification as a result of networked media cultures, I ask what differences emerge from Western urban spaces and how access is regulated and negotiated by digital maps and devices. I also look at how social networking platforms, which are often associated with ideas of connectivity, are used in this context and what narratives are constructed about space and locality. I use the literature about the "framing" of spaces by front-facing cameras on personal devices and the impact of the location awareness and the "tagging" functionality of platforms to think about the reinvention of space and neighbourhoods in relation to selfie cultures. I think specifically about identities rooted in place and space, and the effect of population density and issues of exclusion and inclusion on the use of networked devices and representation on social networking platforms. I also complicate questions of authenticity and image production, or the value of a place based on its photographability, by examining Instagram cultures at a Hindu religious festival, asking how these spaces are experienced in a time of digital mediation and how they are later represented on social networking platforms.

### Thesis outline

To address these questions, I identified three discursive spaces which have the common feature of installation art and are used by people as the backdrops for their selfies. By choosing specific sites which have defined temporal or spatial limits, I was able to define the boundaries of my field of research far more clearly, and the differences in the spaces gave me room to explore the different types of selfies in the city. Each of these three spaces was created at different historical moments to strategically construct public space and identities that responded to different needs of nation-construction at those points in time, and have distinct political and social textures, so my investigation

of social and visual questions, while specific to selfie cultures, includes larger discussions of political patronage and identity in the city.

The three spaces are:

- The city during a public art festival: the Fort area or the art district of Mumbai, during the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival (KGAF), when modern installations are displayed on the streets and in public parks for nine days in February each year.
- The city during a religious festival: the *sarvajanik* (public) Ganpati *utsava* (festival) where public space is transformed into a festive space, for a ten-day period.
- The city in its everyday state, as it evolves: permanent "selfie points" or installations spread across public spaces in Mumbai.

Temporally, the focus on the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival sits between the other two case studies, as it grew out of the 1990s and India's economic liberalisation. Selfie points are a more recent phenomenon and indicate the growing importance of the digital in the making and remaking of the physical city and city-based identities. The construction and management of public identities during the Ganapati *utsava* has a longer history and is brought into focus here to help understand the convergence of popular and digital Hinduism, as well as how Hindu visual culture is used to generate other social and political identities. I examine the selfie cultures that have developed in each of these spaces, to comment on evolving relationships in the fields of politics, public art and Hinduism, the foregrounded body of the citizen/participant/devotee, the instrumentalisation of art for the purpose of camera phone photography, selfie photography as a mode of dialogue between various stakeholders of the city, and the complex relationships that have evolved between these fields and the physical and digital city.

The Kala Ghoda Arts Festival was started in the year 1999, in the decade of economic reforms that opened India to global markets (Zitzewitz 2014). The festival, organised over ten days in the art district of the city, was started by the elite art world to invite the public into the site, and designed to ideologically resist the violent, communal actions of the Shiv Sena, a political party that was trying to erase the multicultural, secular nature of the migrant port city. Public events include workshops, talks and exhibitions in fields including dance, music, theatre, film, architecture, food, literature, and visual art.

In Chapter 2, I identify thematic and structural choices made by artists to make installations camerafriendly, and ways in which they are re-interpreted by visitors. I see KGAF as a physical-digital assemblage, in which artists, visitors, curators, installations, physical space, camera technologies and networks interact and exert influence on each other. In my investigation of meanings generated by selfie practices at KGAF, I look at the role that art played during the early nation-building years, and how the popularity of social networking platforms and algorithms have changed the way in which public art is understood today. I argue that networked camera phone technologies have turned KGAF from an exhibition site into a democratic space of co-creation, and that the original intent of the festival organisers, to open the elite art district to the public, is aided by the commercial selfie logic of the festive space.

In 1895, the festival celebrating Lord Ganapati was reinvented from a largely private observance into a public street festival, as a tool to revive nationalism during the Independence movement, because of the colonial government policy of non-interference with religious events (Prakash 2010, 208, Kaur 1998, 94, Pinney 2004, 47, Chandavarkar 2009, 136). As a result of its political genesis, the Ganapati *utsava* in contemporary praxis continues to be a site for political mobilisation and to generate collective identities rooted in locality. The festival also allows for creative liberty in the conceptualisation of tableaux art or *pandal* (temporary structure that houses the deity) decor and in the iconography and design of the *murti*. As a result, the decor and the *murti* are important mediators in the festival, which at once functions as a site for entertainment, religion, and politics (Kaur 1998, 132). Another unique element is the *sarvajanik* or public nature of the festival, and the imbrication of media networks and commercial actors in the celebration of the festival.

In Chapter 3, I consider how the Hindu devotional practice of *darshan*, or flow of sight between the deity and the devotee, and the resulting iconographic design of the frontal address generate specific situations conducive for selfie practices in Ganapati *pandals* in Mumbai, and the resulting meanings of this new ritual. I argue that the selfie is as much an act of constituting the self as a devotee, as it is a form of documentation of an experience. The image of the selfie, similarly, is not just evidence, but also carries with it the powers of the deity and offers protection and good luck. I also look at how selfie practices might be understood differently in a society that privileges collective identities, as an act of proxy, offering prayers or seeking blessings on behalf of family members, and through integration as a feature in *pandal* design, as a community-building exercise.

The "selfie point" trend started in 2016, when the Shiv Sena, the same political party that the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival was designed to ideologically oppose, adopted an installation from the festival

that had become popular on Instagram, and placed it in a permanent location in Mumbai, calling it a "selfie point". Since then, selfie points continue to be built across the country by various political players and private builders. In January 2020, I mapped over thirty selfie points in Mumbai. Most of them are located not near tourist attractions but in residential neighbourhoods and have replaced the word "Mumbai" with the locality that they are situated in. Some of them have changed the red and white colour scheme, which seems to be influenced by the enduring "I Love New York" logo and the "I Amsterdam" letters, or added other iconographic elements that reflect the religion, caste, or political inclination of the commissioning authority.

In Chapter 4, I look at how the selfie cultures which activate KGAF, have been expanded to the realm of citizenship and the spatial production of the physical and digital city. In the analysis of the placement and iconography of "selfie point" installations, I discuss the embodied performance of citizenship and politics and how the citizen has been urged to become an active producer of the "spirit" of Mumbai; the production of place for political and commercial gain; and the "saffronisation" of space (Anderson and Jaffrelot 2018, Hansen 1999), or re-inscription of space as upper-caste Hindu space. I consider questions about the commercial, religious, and political implications of place names; political ambitions, urban planning and beautification; and the different meanings of and attitudes towards recreation and permission to use space across social classes.

These three chapters have been arranged to allow for the progressive introduction of three central elements of the discussion of selfie cultures in Mumbai, and while they remain rooted in their individual contexts, the ideas developed in each chapter lead into the next, from questions of the popularity of Instagram and the influence of algorithms on art in Chapter 2, to Hindu visual culture in Chapter 3, and finally Mumbai politics and spatiality in Chapter 4. With each chapter, the scope of the discussion becomes geographically narrower, from the global to the national and the local. In Chapter 5, I consolidate my arguments about selfie cultures, considering the influence of cinema and the media on the way that people imagine their roles in society, and the ways in which smartphone is strategically used in various circumstances to overcome infrastructural limitations in Mumbai. I discuss criticisms of selfie cultures and the various ways in which the face is recorded and surveilled in Mumbai and consider the implications of editing software on the values that we assign to selfies.

In Chapter 6, by way a conclusion, I reflect on the effect of the coronavirus pandemic on this project as well as the way space is experienced in Mumbai. I reflect on my journey conducting fieldwork remotely and in Mumbai, and I consider the ways in which the experience of the city might evolve, with the Web 3.0 and the increasing imbrication of digital agents and networks in everyday life.

#### Method

I approach the word methodology both as a conceptual approach to the subject at hand, as well as to indicate techniques of data collection. In terms of a conceptual approach, I seek my lineage from debates about visual public culture and national identity in India. In the 1990s and early 2000s, following Benjamin, de Certeau, Levin and WJT Mitchell, Indian scholarship began to attend to the agency of the visual image, and its habitation and transformation of the public world in which it circulated, to study and theorise postcolonial modernity (Ramaswamy 2003, xiv). This shift began to accord visual production and performance the same importance as print literature (Chatterjee, Guha Thakurta and Kar 2014), and engage with the idea that the visual is not just representative of, but an essential element in fields of culture, history, and politics (Ramaswamy 2003). The writing about photography, film and other visual practices in this context, focused on situating it in opposition to Western realism and colonial modes of documentation, drawing attention to the creativity of the genre within Indian contexts and its continuity with other contemporary postcolonial practices.

In the last decade, however, there has been a shift in the way in which the visual realm is studied. In the preface to *New Cultural Histories of India: Materiality and Practices* (2014) the latest of the 'Public Culture' volumes, the editors Partha Chatterjee, Tapati Guha Thakurta and Bodhisattva Kar, seeking inspiration from theories that focus on questions of embodiment and materiality rather than just the eye as the viewing apparatus of the subject that consumes the visual image, to divest from a focus on the "visual" by grouping the essays published in the volume into five categories: "the textual" "the visual" "the aural" "the ritual" and "the spatial".

Discussing shifts in the focus of the *Public Culture* series over four decades, the editors write: "If the first of these 'public culture' volumes set out, in the early 1990s, to grapple with a distinctly post-Nehruvian, post-secular incarnation of Hindu nationhood, by the end of the 2000s, we had arrived at a juncture where we needed to conceive of a post-Hindutva moment (well past its Ratha-Yatras, videos or posters of the proposed Ram temple) and confront a new vocabulary of competing imagery in the electronic and cyber media—in whose refracting mirror, we would see an increasingly dissolving iconography of the nation." Now, as mobile networked devices become increasingly imbricated in daily life, creating a "meshwork" (Pink and Hjorth 2012, 152) of online and offline

spaces, "materialities and digital environments of place, embodied experience and sociological phenomena" converge (152). I position my contribution to Indian cultural studies at this juncture, when the physical landscape of the nation is impacted by and becomes the creative background for digital images of the nation and national identity.

This approach to visual studies provides the overarching conceptual framework for the thesis. In each chapter, I focus on distinct theoretical debates that I have listed in the table below:

Chapter focus	Theoretical debates
Kala Ghoda Arts Festival	Algorithms, public art, the Indian modernist art movement and contemporary practices
Ganapati <i>utsava</i>	Hindu <i>darshan,</i> festival photography and Hindu visual culture, Ganapati and Maharashtra/Mumbai
Selfie points	Mumbai history and politics, city and national promotional campaigns, links to Hindu <i>darshan</i> , gentrification
Summative chapter	Smartphone affordances, cinematic influences and "microcelebrity" practices, out-of-place selfies, editing technologies and surveillance

Table 1: chapters and theoretical debates

In terms of methods of data collection, I similarly draw from various traditions, in order to attend more closely to the spaces in question. Since the development of the field of ethnography, set ideas about the ethnographic researcher, the field, the interlocuter and the idea of a unitary truth and authority have vastly changed (Geertz 1983, Minh-Ha 1989, Rosaldo 1989, Said 2002). Reflexivity and cultural "translation" have emerged as strategies for researchers to consider their own biases and the "experimental moment" (Marcus and Fischer 1986) of anthropology has prompted a questioning

of the way in which narrative ethnographic texts are constructed and presented. Coming to higher education in India in the 2010s, many of these ideas were central to the curriculum in humanities education, with its focus on gender and postcolonial theory, and informed my approach to the fields of literary analysis (Said 1978, Bhabha 1994, Spivak 1988), film studies (Naficy 200, Marks 2002) and film production (Wolf 2007, Rajagopal and Vohra 2012) that I had trained in.

I started to think about the "selfie phenomenon" while working as an assistant to an independent feminist documentary filmmaker and saw it first as a potential idea for a documentary or an installation. For several months, I read about selfies in the news and watched people take selfies at various events and celebrations. I have also been visiting the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival and attending the Ganapati *utsava* celebrations for as long as I can remember, as a visitor and resident of the city. I had watched as selfie points sprouted in different localities, wondering what it meant. During this time, I began to recognise that even if the selfie was a passing trend, it was markedly different and important to consider because of how it has altered the way we occupy and interact with physical space, both physically in the city, and symbolically as consumers/citizens/devotees on the Internet. Given my long engagement with these spaces, even though I now write from within the formal academic system, I see myself "less an academic gone native than a native gone academic" (Campbell quoted in Shahani 2008, 36).

Since I am studying power structures within my own culture, I am also acutely aware of my shifting location in the field. My gender, class, education, age, location, and institutional backing tussle with each other, changing my position from insider to outsider and back. Lila Abu-Lughod attends to these issues, identifying feminists and "halfies" or people "whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education or parentage" (1996, 137) as the two groups excluded from the collection *Writing Culture* (1986) edited by Clifford and Marcus, which otherwise marked a turn in cultural anthropology. The exclusion of these groups, according to Abu-Lughod, reveals anthropology's fundamental distinction between the self and the other. As a reconsideration of this duality, and to write against the "talismanic qualities" (Said quoted in Abu-Lughod 147) or the "coherence, timelessness and discreteness" of culture (147) she offers three textual strategies: discourse and practice, connections and "ethnographies of the particular". By using the terms practice and discourse, Abu-Lughod invokes Bourdieu and Foucault and the traditions that they established to challenge assumptions of boundless and idealism (148). Her focus on connections, historical as well as in terms of international politics and global flows of capital, works to oppose thinking in terms

of people as isolated units (149). Ethnographies of the particular, which have been compellingly used by "untrained" wives of anthropologists in popular ethnographies (152), but were seen as a lesser form of writing, are adopted for their focus on the author's positionality and their refusal to use jargon and scientific classification and generalisation of groups.

Having been trained in a postcolonial academic tradition, the first two modes of engagement already informed my approach to the topic. Exploring visual traditions within a historical framework and establishing and demonstrating global connections are central to the way this project has been conceived. By including thick descriptions, snippets of conversations and anecdotes from the field that reveal specificities of experience, I attempt to engage with the particular. I also adopt a style of writing which enacts a hybridity (Narayan 1993, 679) between narrative ethnography and analysis in "the language of everyday life" (Abu-Lughod 1991, 151) with the hope of making this research available to a wider readership.

At other times, my familiarity with the field has been a hurdle, and I have had to challenge my own assumptions and closely examine ideas or opinions that I had taken for granted. To address issues that arise from the assumption that the "native" anthropologist can represent "an unproblematic and authentic insider's perspective" (Narayan 1993, 672), I include a reflection on my data collection methods in each chapter. My own understanding of the festivals and spaces has shifted while conducting fieldwork, and by foregrounding and reflecting on my personal history and cultural understanding of the city and my experience of conducting fieldwork, I am able to acknowledge my subjectivity and position in the field.

When I began this project, I quickly realised that the difficulty of studying something so familiar is finding ways to define its boundaries. When working out research methods and the scope of this research project, I had to account for three issues. Two of these came with the nature of the subject and the field, and I was able to account for them as I devised a strategy at the start of the project. These were the twin realms of physical and digital space and thinking about how to delineate boundaries for the purpose of the project within each. The third issue developed suddenly, six months into my project, just as I was beginning to plan my fieldwork. This was the coronavirus pandemic, which fundamentally altered the way in which public space was occupied, as well as the concerns, interests, and mood of country.

As a spontaneous and inexpensive mode of everyday photography, with instantaneous results and limitless potential for distribution, one does not need to consider the processes and implications of selfie photography to participate in the production of the images. How does one understand or frame relationships between physical public place, digital space and networks, the individual, their image, and viewers; changing perceptions of public art and participation, while doing it through the lens of a form of photography usually dismissed as "time-pass"? Since it was this unconsidered, casual mode of visual engagement that I wanted to capture and analyse, I identifed physical fields designed for selfie photography, and then examined the architecture of the spaces, the actors involved in the design, the participants who arrived in the space and engaged with it and engagement with the spaces on social networking platforms.

At the beginning of the project, with a focus on physical fieldwork, I operationalised my training as a documentary filmmaker in India. Following Sarah Pink (2012), I planned to use visual ethnography as a method to create knowledge based in my own experience and to adopt a reflexive approach that would recognise my subjectivity as the researcher. I did this by recording observational video, as well as autoethnographic video at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival in February 2020. Initially, in order to mark a difference between video observation and autoethnographic video filmmaking, I devised a set of formal rules for cinematography, to switch between these two registers: the observational documentary filmmaking, which was recorded in conjunction with, and not as a replacement for field notes, would follow the rules of observational filmmaking: long shots, normal lens, "shot in an unprivileged style from the point of view of a normal human observer" (Henley 2004, 109) and with no interference as the filmmaker and no interaction with the subject being filmed. This observational material would generate an understanding of regular use of space (with and without the presence of the camera and other recording devices), interaction (with the self and the city) and function as a tool to focus my attention as a researcher, and allowed me to repeatedly revisit the sites, while I later worked on analysis (Grasseni 2004).

For the autoethnographic recording, I planned to use my smartphone to capture and post casual images and videos on social networking platforms. This would allow me to consider the life of the image after its creation, and to participate equally in the physical-digital assemblage. I planned to monitor social media trending tags, to capture "content" and post it on Instagram and comment on images posted by other attendees of the festival. This would be my attempt to engage in the same

fragmentary and spontaneous mode as selfie production or Instagram photography, as well as to participate as a visitor as much as a researcher.

However, when I was recording the space on my DSLR camera, it was difficult to have a clear frame because of the crowded nature of the spaces under investigation, the pace with which people moved through these spaces, and my own instinct at times to zoom in or focus on something that caught my attention. People often engaged with me even when I was clearly busy recording, sometimes purposely trying to ruin my recording my walking past or blocking my camera set up. Instead of seeing this as a disturbance, I decided to treat it as an opportunity to interact with people, and this led to several serendipitous interactions and insightful interviews. Often, I was drawn into conversations by people in the crowd, who would ask me to take photographs of them. While I was recording, I was recorded by others as well, and people I interviewed took selfies with me afterwards, or asked me to give them "content" for their Instagram accounts.



Figure 1.5 An artist's Instagram post featuring a selfie with me (top right)

When I realised that the two distinctly distinct modes of video would not work as planned, I shifted towards a blended approach. I turned to strategies used by Young and Lachlan (2017) in the documentation of the 'hybrid spaces'. While documenting streets and museums where networked imaging technologies such as CCTV cameras and mobile phone cameras are widely prevalent, Young and Lachlan ask questions about the ethics of their recording of these spaces as outsiders and researchers, which was especially helpful when I was thinking about recording people's faces and interactions in the festive space. Explaining their approach, they write:

We did not visit the site at regular intervals. We did not stand in the same place when we photographed the walls. We were regular visitors to the area but with no temporal pattern to the visits. Instead, we took photographs from slightly different spots on the streets, according to our preferences on each occasion. We didn't try to control for alterations in the light according to different times of the year or as a result of variations in the weather. We allowed the resulting images to look different from each other. Some are framed as landscape images, some in portrait format, and still others are square—after we became users of Instagram, our phone cameras were sometimes set to its square format when we encountered and photographed changes in the walls [...] We allowed this randomness in order to do justice to the experience of the passerby in urban space, who does not move through the streets in a strictly ordered manner and who encounters walls at different times of the day, and who may or may not notice changes in the urban environment. Our digital visual techniques thus incorporate a sense of auto-ethnography into the project's methodology; once embarked upon the process of documenting the site, we have not forced ourselves to notice changes in it but when we do, we record them. We have approached the process of documentation less as conventional researchers and more as members of the public—or at least as a combination of the two. The resulting archive is a device that activates a history of our being in the space as much as providing a record of the history of these walls. (86).

Like Young and Lachlan, I began to see that allowing the natural patterns of the day and space to seep into my visual engagement would enrich the visual material I could collect. Once I abandoned the concern of keeping the two modes of filmmaking separate, I was also able to focus on collecting observations and experiences, engaging in conversation, and allowing my camera to wander and pick up interesting details. The short film that I made from the footage collected during this leg of the fieldwork (Appendix 2) reflects my position as a participant-researcher, and provides both a record of the festival, and a glimpse of my experience of the space.

In addition to this visual engagement, I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with curators, artists and visitors. I followed Saskia Sassen's recommendation to construct the using subject as a critical dimension in the study of the interaction between the digital and the nondigital (Sassen 2006). The most popular way to analyse the matter of use, according to Sassen, has been to conceptualise it as an unmediated event, conditioned only by access, technical competence, and interface design, which leads to blindness about of the individual or the human. Noting this as cautionary advice, in the following chapters, I foreground my discussions with the people involved in designing and participating in these selfie cultures, to position humans as equally integral actors in physical-digital assemblages.

During the same field trip in 2020, I documented 25 selfie points in Mumbai, over a period of a week. I had already seen or read about many of them, and I referred to online newspaper archives to make a list of the larger selfie points that had been inaugurated with some amount of fanfare or had been in the news for being controversial. To ensure I had an exhaustive list, I posted an "ask me a question" sticker on Instagram, asking my friends and followers on the networking site to tell me where they had seen an installation. In this way, I was not only able to collect information on the location of the selfie points, but also to understand how they had been perceived by the people who see them on a regular basis, and to get a sense of opinions and attitudes towards them. Along with this digital crowdsourcing, I used Google Maps to find the locations that people had "pinned" and to read the reviews that people had left of some of the larger selfie points that had been classified as "recreational spaces" on the application.

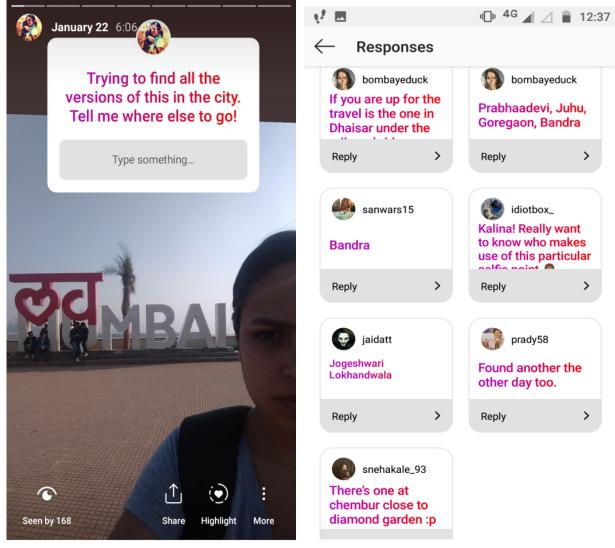


Figure 1.6 (left) Screenshot of crowdsourcing information on Instagram Figure 1.7 (right) Screenshot of responses on Instagram

Once I had a list of the selfie points that I wanted to visit, I used Google Maps to devise a route and draw up an efficient schedule to document the selfie points. This was my attempt to participate in the assemblage as a resident of the city, as much as it was an instinct to rely on the digital tools at my

disposal. On the field, as I took photographs of the selfie points on my DSLR camera, I continued to document the experience on my smartphone and to share it on social networking platforms. While looking for the selfie points, I would often get lost in the streets, and this would lead to serendipitous conversations with shopkeepers, taxi drivers and residents, sometimes with many of us peering at the digital map on my phone, other times, with them dismissing my phone and relying instead on their memories of the terrain of the city. In this way, my ontological experience of the city and the selfie points was imbricated in the digital maps on my device and the Internet. I include descriptions of some of these events in the chapter, as auto-ethnographic reflections and ethnographies of the particular to consider physical-digital assemblages. In Appendix 4, I share visuals from the viewing gallery opposite the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus railway station. The video documents how people interacted with one another and activated the space with their presence, as well as how they responded to my presence and my camera set up in different ways: by ignoring me, posing for me and trying to get my attention, trying to avoid entering the frame of my camera set up, or by approaching me and talking to me.

While working out the methodology for this project, the second consideration was the Internet, and an attempt to delineate a digital field. Markham and Baym write, "The internet is directly implicated in at least four major transformations of our epoch: (1) media convergence, (2) mediated identities, (3) redefinitions of social boundaries, and (4) the transcendence of geographical boundaries. Each of these intertwined cultural contexts inevitably affects the identification of research objects, engagement with research fields, and design and conduct of qualitative inquiry of contemporary social life." (2009, x).

When it came to researching a phenomenon that is informed by and circulates on the Internet, I was faced with two issues. The first was isolating or identifying one phenomenon, when relationships between phenomena are so interlinked (Markham and Baym 2009), and the second was working on the Internet which is both an "imagined space and architected space", where the fundamental architecture is constantly changing (boyd 2009, 26). In the initial leg of my fieldwork, I relied on boyd's observations while researching the use of MySpace by American teenagers, that the phone is "no more than a glorified camera plus coordination device" (2014, 3) and that social media gives teenagers "new opportunities to participate in public life" (10). Evident in these findings is that social media and mobile phones have altered physical, real interactions. In the field, which is constituted both online and offline, struggling to define the boundaries of my research: "when to start and stop"

and "when to go in between" (Hine 2009, 7), I decided to conduct mostly in-person fieldwork and to not collect large quantities of online data for quantitative research, because of the following reasons: accounts on social media are often private (so I cannot expect unrestricted access to "all" selfies); the Instagram and Facebook algorithms are closely guarded (so there is no guarantee that a regular search for certain hashtags will reveal any accurate data); other ways of sharing these images (such as Whatsapp) are private and are impossible to monitor; noting the number of hashtags on Facebook and Instagram (example - #KGAFselfie, #selfiewithganpati) – will not necessarily reveal only locationspecific data; and spellings of Devanagari words in the Roman alphabet are inconsistent and there is no limit to the number of tags that can be generated with synonyms (for example - #selfieganapati, #selfiewithganapati, #selfiewithganpati, #selfiewithganesh, #selfiewithganesha,).

I was aware of the data that I might miss, and not be able to collect at a later date because of the ephemeral nature of the Internet: users deleting or changing the privacy settings on their social media; social media companies changing algorithms and user experience and privileging some content over others; and Internet shutdowns by the State or deliberate slowdowns of social media channels. I recognise this as a limitation of the study, but simultaneously, my focus on embodiment, understood as "contextual, enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture, which together compose enactment" could only be understood by a framework that insists on the particular, on "the specific instantiation generated from the noise of difference" (Hayles 1999, 394-395). Therefore, I used material from the Internet as and when I encountered it, while regularly looking for selfie-related information and images and during festive periods, when the publication of online content related to my study would intensify.

I had planned to return to the selfie points and conduct fieldwork much like I had at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, but in March 2020, soon after my return to the UK, the spread of the Covid-19 virus dirupted the world. This was the third factor that I had not accounted for, which fundamentally changed the way that the city was occupied and experienced, and deeply influenced the mood of the nation. The Central Government and State governments in India imposed severe lockdowns and restrictions on public gatherings, and people were mourning the large-scale loss of life. For the first time since the festival had been organised in 1895, public gatherings and events at the Ganapati *utsava* were cancelled in 2020, and again in 2021. Apart from government directives, the solemn mood in the city, the financial and economic effect of the lockdowns, the mass exodus of migrant workers

from the city, and the caution exercised by organisers contributed to muted celebrations in the two years.

As people moved online during the festival to express solidarity and collectivise, generate financial and moral support for pandemic relief efforts, engage with politics and changing government guidance and rules, conduct business and look for entertainment, I anticipated that the Ganapati *utsava* (as well as the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival) would be observed online. Thus, in the second stage of fieldwork, I decided to move online to the embedded, embodied, and everyday Internet (Hine 2015).

The Ganapati *utsava*, given its scale and popularity, was already televised, and steadily live streamed on social networking platforms. Most organisers ran social media pages for the *murtis*, on which they would announce count downs to the festival and behind-the-scenes footage, to generate interest. Since there was already a digital infrastructure in place for organisers to broadcast footage to platforms, I was able to predict the ways in which the festival might evolve, but also had to keep up with new activity on the Internet on a daily basis during the festival.

In the first instance, a few months before the festival, I identified people involved in the festival, from organisers, to *murti* designers and devotees, and conducted in-depth interviews on Zoom, focusing as much on the current situation as I did on questions about previous years, and the integration of digital technologies into the festival. In addition, I collated people's selfies on Instagram, popular songs about taking selfies with Ganapati on YouTube, and images of *murtis* of Ganapati taking selfies and other similar selfie-themed material from the Internet, to think about ways in which the selfie had been incorporated into worship and celebrations in previous years. This was also my way of circumventing the issue that selfie activity had slowed down in the city, and that during the worst waves of the pandemic, it felt insensitive to have discussions about an activity usually associated with joy, celebration, and physical proximity.

The most exciting material I was able to access during the duration of the festival was the live streams from various *pandals* in the city. Many organisers set up daily live streams, and during the Ganapati *utsava* 2022, when locals were permitted to visit the *pandals* that had social distancing measures in place, I observed people enter and leave the *pandal*, interact with the *murti* and each other from my laptop screen. Although this was quite a change from the original fieldwork plan and my view of the

festive space was limited by the framing of the live streaming camera, watching live streams activated other forms of interaction such as the comments section. The camera, in most cases, was also shooting from a distance and a height, and I was able to observe people and movement from a perspective that I would not have had access to if I were physically present.

I was able to visit the Ganapati *utsava* in September 2022, the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival in 2023 and the selfie points in each of these field trips after the coronavirus pandemic had subsided. During the Ganapati *utsava*, I visited pandals with my recording equipment and participated in the festival as a visitor, experiencing it in the way that I had been able to at the other two spaces in 2020. At the busier pandals and during the *aagaman* (arrival procession of the *murtis*) and *visarjan* (ceremonial procession to immerse the *murtis* in the sea) ceremonies, the crushing crowds and the pace of movement prevented me from engaging in the same impromptu conversations as the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival at the busier *pandals*, but at the quieter pandals I was able to talk to organisers about the design of the pandal and the murti, the role of social networking platforms and the way in which devotion was mediated or aided by technology. Some of my observations from this leg of fieldwork are recorded in Appendix 3. In this short visual observation, I offer a glimpse of how screens and devices become involved in the devotional festive space in various ways.

Although ideally, when conducting such a research project across different contexts one would have preferred to adopt a standardised research methodology, the various approaches I adopted to ensure that I was in the middle of the action during the pandemic, gave rise to unique observations and insights that I have attempted to preserve by maintaining my fieldwork timeline in the writing. As this project is about imbrication of digital technologies in everyday life, it also seems only fitting that the context of the everyday seeps into the project. For this reason, I have attempted to include observations and provide examples of the ways in which these spaces evolved during the pandemic, although my focus remains on selfie photography.

To account for these differences in approaches to fieldwork and to offer some structural continuity to the thesis, I begin each chapter with a short excerpt from field notes that I kept during the time, situating the reader with me in the middle of the field and introducing some of the ideas that I proceed to discuss in the chapter. I also start each chapter with images which seek to ground the following discussion in the realm of visuality, calling attention both to the rich visual detail of the field, and conversing in a language which might at times escape or exceed the written word and generate alternate connections or meanings. The anecdote about my first Instagram selfie post, with which I opened this chapter, follows this format, establishing my initial approach to the topic, demonstrating my position in the field and my use of reflective methods, and opening the discussion to questions of the imbrication of memory and experience in digital devices and networks, a concept that activates the following chapter.

# Chapter 2 "It looks better on Instagram": Algorithmic logic at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival

## An excerpt from my field notes, February 2020:

I find a spot on the concrete steps, from where I can look down at the festival street. The sun is setting, and the street is getting more crowded. It is time to stop recording video for the day. Today a young woman mistook me for a festival videographer and asked if there was a service that she could hire to take photos of her with the installations. Although I did not offer to help her, I did volunteer to take some photos for couples and groups. I realise that I am more sympathetic towards people wanting selfies when they are documenting their togetherness. I ran into a friend I had worked with a few years ago. She told me that access to the installations was blocked by people taking selfies and it has been getting worse every year. She said she got so tired of it that she started to deliberately photobomb people to sabotage their photographs. Walking from one end of the street to the other, she reckoned she had ruined over fifty selfie photoshoots. I chatted with some festival volunteers who joked, "it's not Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, it's Kala Ghoda Selfie Festival."



Figure 2.1 Visitor selfie at KGAF2020

The Kala Ghoda Arts Festival is an annual nine-day public cultural festival, held from the first Saturday to the second Sunday of February, in the heritage art district of Kala Ghoda in Mumbai. An important cultural event in the city, the festival caters to a wide range of audiences, from the cultural elite to people working in the neighbouring business district who might stop by to see an exhibition or event on their way to the railway station after work. Events include fine art exhibitions, craft workshops for adults and children, dance and music performances, film screenings, book launches and poetry recitals, food demonstrations and street plays. The biggest draw of the festival is the visual arts section, on K Dubash Marg (formerly Rampart Row), the adjacent Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj

Vastu Sangrahalaya (formerly Price of Wales Museum) gardens and Oval Maidan, a large open ground nearby, where over forty installations are exhibited in open air. Over the years, the exhibition has attracted a growing number of young visitors, armed with smartphones and DSLR cameras, who jostle for the perfect Instagram photograph, and bestow only a customary glance at the concept notes and artist biographies.

In February 2020, I visited the festival with a DSLR camera and a small audio recorder, to participate in and record the visual art exhibition on the festival street. In the excerpt from my field notes, with which I begin the chapter, I noted how I was approached several times by people wanting photographs of themselves in the space. I was happy to indulge the people visiting with friends and family who wanted an image to memorialise their visit, but amazed by the visitor who assumed that the festival would organise a service to provide Instagram photography for visitors. Later, I wondered why these two modes of photography were so different for me. Why did I, and other festival regulars, think it was inappropriate for someone to use the exhibition space for a photoshoot? Is it because we see selfie photography as a symptom of consumerism? Could it be a generational difference? Class difference?

In this chapter, I consider the popularity of the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival as a backdrop for selfpresentation online, and what meanings are associated with the practice of selfie photography. How can we understand new approaches to art exhibition and viewership that are channelled by social networking platforms? Can a closer look at this practice offer new ways of thinking about the role of public art? What do artists and curators think of selfie cultures? In my search for answers, I begin with situating the festival in its historical context, discussing its ideological background and how the festival has evolved with shifts in politics and the art industry.

#### Background

Kala Ghoda is situated within the old Fort district, surrounded by colonial buildings including the Bombay High Court and University buildings. The area is characterised by large green *maidans* or grounds, created by the British to mark a physical boundary between the colonial rulers and subjects (Kaviraj 1997). The buildings continue to be used for their original purposes, and the area is extremely busy on weekdays, with people carrying out official work. On weekends, activity shifts to the *maidans*. The *maidans*, which were once divisionary spaces, are now enjoyed by a wide spectrum of people. Informal cricket pitches take over the grassy areas, students revise by the light of the

streetlights, and young couples occupy the unlit corners. In the way in which space in this part of the city is always in use for different official, educational and recreational activities, the area of Kala Ghoda and the nearby Marine Drive, are quintessential public spaces.

In her examination of contemporary art, Karin Zitzewitz (2014) notes the importance of the Kala Ghoda district in the germination of the art movement in Mumbai. Zitzewitz describes how the Fort area began to develop into the art district soon after Independence, when two new art galleries were built: the Jehangir Art Gallery in 1952 and the National Gallery for Modern Art in 1954. From its nascency, the independent Indian avant-garde was galvanised by Jewish artists from post-war Europe and enthusiastic patrons such as the Parsi gallerist Kekoo Gandhy, founder of Gallery Chemould in the Jehangir Art Gallery. One of the most prominent groups to emerge from this time was the Progressive Artists Group, founded in 1947 by Francis Newton Souza. The PAG was not united by style, as much as they were by the historical moment, and the artistic freedom they felt from Independence. The artists, like the patrons, came from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds and experimented with uniting traditional Indian art with European and American developments. Although the PAG was short-lived with artists migrating to other countries, according to Zitzewitz, their legacy inspired future generations of Indian artists, who began to be recognised by global art markets after the liberalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s. The institutions built during this time continue to be important centres for the exhibition of contemporary art.

The diversity of the founding artists is important because of the role that it has played in the way that the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival was first devised, in response to the way in which language and religion have been politicised in Mumbai. After Independence in 1947, when India began to be divided into administrative states on the basis of language, the two neighbouring states of Gujarat and Maharashtra both staked a claim to Bombay, which was a strategic port and industrial city. The city had equal numbers of speakers of both tongues, and a bitter battle ensued between the two communities. Finally in 1960, Bombay was included in the state of Maharashtra, and the Shiv Sena, a nativist, Marathi political party, rose to power from the movement (Prakash 2010, Fernandes 2013). In 1992-93, the divide between the various communities in Bombay came to a head in the Hindu-Muslim riots, which permanently segregated the city based on religion. In 1995, the Shiv Sena, which has traditionally used brute strength to extort and maintain unofficial control over the city, consolidated and announced their power by renaming the city to Mumbai – the Marathi name for the city (Prakash 2010). As part of their anti-Muslim rhetoric, the Shiv Sena began to attack Maqbool Fida Husain, a prominent

member of the Progressive Artists Group born to Muslim parents. Husain had become famous in global art markets for his Cubist style that engaged with the idea of the nation and married the religious and the secular, and the elite and the popular, but he was attacked by Hindu political groups for his nude depictions of Hindu goddesses, and finally exiled from the country in 2006 (Zitzewitz 2014).

To challenge this political intolerance and reclaim the city as a cosmopolitan hub of creativity, the Kala Ghoda Association was formed in 1998, with the objective of preserving and restoring the built heritage of the precinct (Zitzewitz 2014). Colonial architects had used a combination of elements from Islamic, British Gothic, Hindu, and Jain architectural styles in the design of these buildings, to represent the influences of the different communities that lived in the city. The conservation of the area, therefore, was an attempt on the part of the Association to foreground the syncretic history of the city once again. In 1999, The Kala Ghoda Association started the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival to open the elite art district, and to highlight rationalism and secularism as a part of the urban imaginary of the city (source: KGAF website).

Zitzewitz traces the ideology of the festival organisers back to the modernist art movement in the city, and its emphasis on individual ethics and politics. The artists who built the original art spaces at Kala Ghoda, had a modernist view of their role in society, and much of their art spoke to the possibilities of a new, socialist, secular, democratic republic, and the exploration of the human condition. Zitzewitz argues that along with adopting this framework, the festival committee, aware of the "massive social gulf between the rarefied and elite spaces of art and the everyday life of the vast majority of Mumbai's citizens", also uses "bourgeois models of the public sphere" (2014, 92) such as organising art workshops for NGOs that work with disabled and underprivileged groups, in an attempt to cut across these social differences. At the same time, to illustrate the limits of the way in which public space is understood and whom it is meant for, Zitzewitz notes that as a part of their contribution to civic improvement, the committee funded the construction of public benches in the area, but settled on a U-shaped steel tube design that would be suitable for sitting only for short periods of time, but would discourage rough sleeping (2014, 92).

On the first day of Kala Ghoda Arts Festival 2020, I was struck by the how little of an impact the political tension in the country had had on the festival. Only a few kilometres from the festival, the Muslim community had been protesting the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which would

disproportionately affect religious minorities. As a precautionary measure, there was heightened security at KGAF. Organisers told me that they had been warned that permissions for the festival might be withdrawn at short notice, and artists said they were given an unusually short amount of time to set up. Police officers and private security with guns staffed the perimeter of the festival street, and long lines formed at the entrance each day, where visitors were patted down, and bags were sent through security scanners. I heard of rumours of a terrorist attack, and rumours that the rumour was created by the government to justify the increased police presence, which was there to prevent any CAA-related protests. Despite this tension behind the scenes, unfazed visitors with camera phones meandered through the exhibition space on the festival street, taking selfies with the installations, and browsing through the stalls. The installations avoided political messaging, although many took on a moral tone, promoting social causes like women's education or depicting the effects of the climate crisis. Later, when I asked the participating artists if they had been asked to avoid controversial subjects, most said that they had not been briefed either way, it was just that they saw the festival as a social space rather than a political space. It is important to note that the festival conducts several rounds of selections, for which artists are required to submit detailed descriptions, plans and concept notes, and that censorship perhaps occurs at various levels throughout this process.

It would be easy to classify KGAF as one of the "Insta factory" galleries and museums designed and built for networked photography and catering to visitors who want to make content for Instagram, that have popped up in cities like London, New York and San Francisco and discussed in Chapter 1. But although there is a startling imbrication of art and commerce at the festival, KGAF is different from these strategically designed interactive retail "experiences", in its organic evolution into an Instagram location, without the express intent of the organisers, but instead through an encouragement of socially acceptable modes of leisure, as evidenced by the example of hostile architecture that Zitzwitz describes, and now extending to the expectations for opportunities for networked photography brought to the festival by visitors. The festival also has a unique history as a space for dissent, however limited and evolving, within the formulation of the nation and the city. As a result of this history, I argue that the selfies and digital images made at the festival, communicate a far more complex idea than the traditional selfie at an "Insta factory" or a purpose-designed selfie point. In this following sections, I attempt to break down the aesthetic mode of KGAF, to understand how the presence of the networked camera technologies and the logic of the Instagram algorithm have altered traditional ideas of exhibiting at and attending the festival, and how the selfie in particular, as a mode

of photography and documentation, has collapsed binaries of subject/object, spectator/operator and curated image/curator (Shipley 2015) in the way that public art is imagined and experienced.



Figure 2.2 A "selfie contest" poster at KGAF2020

# Method

In Chapter 1, I discussed my use of a camera, audio recorder and smartphone, in the documentation of the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival 2020. I saw this recoding as a visual participatory method, that would allow me to engage in the same way as visitors, photographing and sharing images on Instagram, and maintaining a video diary or "vlogs" of my visits. I also conducted in-depth interviews with one of the curators of the visual arts section of the festival, several exhibiting artists, festival volunteers and visitors. The curator offered me insights into curatorial practices as well as her experience exhibiting as an artist elsewhere in the country. Four of the artist groups I interviewed were from Mumbai, were from different age groups and had attended or exhibited at the festival previously, and so were familiar with the festival. One artist was from Germany and was exhibiting at the Kala Ghoda for the second year in a row. Of the artists who were unfamiliar with the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival and Mumbai city,

one group of student artists were from Ujjain, and two other individual artists were from Auroville and Hyderabad respectively. The visitors were similarly from diverse backgrounds and had different relationships with the festival. Before the start of the festival, I visited one Mumbai-based artist and assisted in assembling his installation.

In the interactions with the curator and the artists, I paid attention to how they understood the festival, their role in it and expectations of it, and their opinions about how their art was received and depicted on social networking platforms. I asked questions about the concept and execution of their installations and why and how the KGAF was different from other exhibitions. The interviews were open-ended, but at times fragmented and conducted in short bursts, given the fast-paced crowded environment of the exhibition space. Since the festival lasted for nine days and most artists spent some part of the day at their installations, I was able to make repeat trips to chat with the artists. Over the duration of the festival, our relationship developed and the artists became more comfortable with me, and often had new insights based on their observations of how visitors interacted with their installations. These insights and evolving thoughts of the artists became important to the way I understood the exhibition space and visitor photography.

For the interviews, I initially started with snowball sampling, using some existing contacts of artists and curators to generate more interviews, but later immersed myself in the physical space and interacted with as many people as I could, at different times of day and doing different activities – from stopping for a cup of chai at a stall in the corner of the festival, talking to festival volunteers while they were wrapping up on the last day, offering to photographs groups and then starting conversations with them, chatting with people who looked intent on their photography, striking up conversations with people sitting next to me, and hailing down people I recognised. Given the fast pace and the crowds, most people were not keen on more than a short conversation, and although I tried to get a balance of educational, gender, class, and age backgrounds, I by no means had an exhaustive sample. I instead tried to engage with a cross-section of the crowd, asking visitors, content creators and volunteers questions about their opinions of the festival and the exhibition, similar spaces in the city, their interest in visual art, photography and their opinions on selfie cultures and social networking platforms.

On the festival street, I observed the materials, techniques, concepts, and influences that the artists had used, and how people moved through the exhibitions space: where they stopped, what they looked

at, and what and how they photographed. In terms of observation on Instagram, I kept track of trending tags related to the festival, and "followed" the main festival Instagram account as well as the accounts that artists had created for their installations. I paid attention to patterns that emerged in images that audiences shared, and images that artists reshared. At the end of the festival, I had field notes, audio and video recordings, recorded interviews and screenshots of images on Instagram that had been geotagged. In the next sections, I use these observations and insights to consider why selfies evoke a sense of discomfort and invite criticism from the cultural elite, and to imagine what alternative interactions selfie cultures might facilitate.

## The face of the horse

Physical space in Mumbai is often deeply contested, with different political groups marking their agendas and identities on the city through the built heritage. Kala Ghoda is a prime example of this palimpsestic, folded nature of the city. The area of Kala Ghoda (*kala* meaning black and *ghoda* meaning horse in Hindi) derives its name from the bronze equestrian statue of Edward VII (the then Prince of Wales), which was erected in the area by Albert David Sassoon, a Baghdadi Jewish immigrant businessman and benefactor of Bombay, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Prakash 2010). After Independence and during the political movement for the creation of the separate state of Maharashtra in 1965, along with several other colonial statues, the equestrian statue of Edward VII was removed from its location and moved to the backyard of the Bhau Daji Lad city museum (previously the Victoria and Albert museum) in Byculla (Prakash 2010), and then to the neighbouring Veermata Jijabai Bhonsale Udyan (previously Victoria botanical gardens) in 2007, where it stands today.<sup>1</sup>

However, the area continues to be referred to as Kala Ghoda, four decades after the removal of the statue. In December 2016, a new statue of a riderless horse was built in the original location of the equestrian statue of Edward VII, which had been replaced with a parking lot. A plaque at the base of the statue states that it is commissioned by the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai and funded and erected by the Kala Ghoda Association. It proclaims "Kala Ghoda is the essence of art, culture and the free flow of ideas. It is a symbol of the heritage of the art district of Mumbai."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> I use the previous names of these spaces to draw attention to their colonial roots. Many of these places have colloquial names that draw from their colonial names rather than their current official ones. The Veermata Jijabai Udyan, named after Shivaji's mother, is known as Ranibaug (queen's garden) which could refer to either of the two women after whom the gardens have been named. The name Ranibaug is also used officially when abbreviation is useful, such as by the public BEST bus service.



Figure 2.3 The original Kala Ghoda statue, in its location at Fort



Figure 2.4 The original Kala Ghoda statue, relocated to the Veermata Jijabai Bhonsale Udyan

Historian and architect Mustansir Dalvi reminds us that this new statue, in its inconsiderate placement in the middle of a busy parking lot, takes away a precious urban utility. According to Dalvi, the statue is "forced iconography for brochures and logos, for future tourist maps" and "embodies Mumbai's efforts to create a false memory" (2017, para 12). "The rider is absconding", Dalvi writes, and the

statue is "territorial appropriation [...] the final label, the literal declaration of the Kala Ghoda as an art district" (para 14). Zitzewitz has a similar criticism of the statue and the festival committee's approach to the name of the area and the festival. She writes, "The festival views the attachment to the name as habitual, the triumph of an everyday method of relating to the city's history over political ideology" (94). Zitzewitz sees the committee's celebration of the "kala ghoda" and its annual update by artists at the festival, as indexical of the committee's "superficially anti-ideological stance" (94), in its refusal to challenge the political parties responsible for the systematic erasure of the city's history.



Figure 2.5 The 'Spirit of Kala Ghoda' statue facing the David Sassoon Library



#### Figure 2.6 A rendition of the Kala Ghoda by artist Sunil Padwal on the façade of a nearby building

In 2020, KGAF was unable to secure adequate funding to run the festival and had to offer several installation spots to brands in exchange for sponsorship. The centre of street, which would usually have been reserved for the most impressive installations that re-interpreted the equestrian statue, was given to Fevicol (a popular Indian adhesive brand), that erected a cardboard "Horsey", on which visitors were invited to paste paper decorations; and an Enrich salon stall, where visitors could get their hair and makeup done. The main sponsor of the festival R City Mall, a mall in Ghatkopar a suburb of Mumbai, had three installations, the largest of which was a horse-shaped archway, positioned at the entrance of the festival at Rampart Row, and printed with images of shopping bags and price tags. Visitors taking selfies and using the installations as backdrops did not seem to differentiate between the art installations, many of which also incorporated the image of a horse, and the installations and stalls sponsored by brands. Instead, the brands that used the horse as a symbol, blended into the exhibition space, and visitors took selfies in groups, framing them so that faces of the horses in the installations would appear as another face in their selfies.



Figure 2.7 Visitor selfie at KGAF2020



Figure 2.8 A poster requesting visitor donations at KGAF2020

One way to understand the dissatisfaction that Dalvi, Zitzewitz and long-time visitors of the festival feel with the way that the *ghoda* has been appropriated, first by the festival committee, then by the brands and sponsors at the festival, and finally by visitors taking selfies, is to approach it from the Deleuzoguattarian concepts of the nomad and becoming. Using this framework, we could argue that

the locality is referred to as Kala Ghoda not for some reason of colonial nostalgia, nor as a resistance to current regimes of power, but because the *ghoda* cantered off into a nomadic existence, away from the realm of identity and stability, towards complexity and minority. In this becoming-animal, the *ghoda* persisted in public memory, and escaped easy signification. The territorialisation of the animal, first by the festival committee, and then by corporate sponsors, is a movement away from becoming-animal, a reigning in from molecularity to majority. At the same time, as Dalvi observes, the statue of the horse is also a "territorial appropriation" of the parking lot and the road of K Dubash Marg by the Kala Ghoda Association in order to declare the area as the definitive art district of the city.





Figure 2.9 Visitor selfie at KGAF2018

Continuing with Deleuzoguattarian metaphors, one might consider how the process of faciality, which is understood as an abstract machine of modernity, that overcodes (or reterritorialises) the body on the face, making it representational, might be applied to the "selfie with *ghoda*" imagese that visitors take for their Instagram feeds. At the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, the *ghoda* is turned into the social production of the face, performing "the facialisation of the entire body and all its surroundings

and objects, and the landscapification of all worlds and milieus" (1980, 168), or in other words, becoming a signifier of the festival and all the meanings attached to it. As faciality-machines, representations of the ghoda produce empathy between the human subject and the art object through smooth lines, which mirror back an apparently reassuring image of our own subjectivity. This explains why forsaking the abstract or conceptual installations, visitors are drawn to the approachable image of the horse. As faciality machines, the representational images of the horse or the ghoda, in the various ways that it is depicted by artists in the exhibition space, become easy or approachable props for people's photographs, but do not offer the same lines of flight or the ability to generate affect, and the transformational potential of art is lost in this environment. A selfie with the ghoda becomes the ultimate act of facialisation, with the human face and eye arrested and drawn into commercial algorithmic circuits. The potential for "becoming-other" in the Deleuzean sense is eliminated, and the artists, the installations and the visitors are territorialised by the physical-digital assemblage, which is activated by the Instagram algorithm and networked devices. This idea is often distilled into phrases like "now the festival is too commercialised and draws only selfie crowds" which curator Ami Patel told me she hears often from her contemporaries, artists, and art afficionados who have distanced themselves from the festival. In the following sections, I further unpack this argument, looking at how the algorithmic logic of social networking platforms underscores the exhibition space, but also considering what affective potential it unlocks.

#### "Vibe" and algorithms

In the nine days of the festival, I watched people take photographs of the installations, of themselves and of each other. People were rarely self-conscious and often asked strangers to take their photographs, although I noticed a peculiar anxiety about getting the "right" photographs and selfies. One group of young women, first-year engineering and medicine students, who asked me to photograph them in front of an installation, explained why the festival is popular for photographs, and what they plan to do with them:

Me: And you were saying you were going to put only one picture [on Instagram]?Visitor 1: Yes. The one that I liked the most, the one that I feel "vibes" with my profile.Visitor 2: And also the vibe here, it's pretty vibrant and we really came for that.Me: Are there other places that are similarly vibrant?

**Visitor 2:** Yeah, I just recently visited the Lil Flea, which was similar, anything which involves art is, you know, attracts people, so, it attracts a lot of crowd and I think most of the people come to click pictures and when we get a good picture we are happy.

**Visitor 2:** Stories is less of a commitment, like once you put a story, okay we will watch it, not watch it whatever. But once you [**Visitor 3:** it's a part of you] a post is more engaging, we constantly keep on checking how many likes we've got, what comments, replying on the comments, more time engaging sort of...

**Visitor 2:** And also, to other people it also shows who you are on social media, because it's on your profile, it's right there, so it's more of a commitment, like she said.

Me: So you want to be more careful with what you put on the feed?

Visitor 3: It's more work, for me – captions, engaging.

In this interaction (also documented in Appendix 1), and several others that I had at the festival, the word "vibe" was used often, as a verb and as a noun. The noun, "vibe" and the adjective "vibrant" encompass the atmosphere of the festival, the movement of bodies, the pastel and rainbow colours, the shiny acrylic sheets and LED lights that turns the street of the festival into a physical space that is suitable for Instagram content creation. It is also shorthand to communicate the secularism and Western influence of the festival, where brands like Tinder with their massive hoardings coexist with artworks. Together, they represent a rejection of tradition, a desire for autonomy and purchasing power. In the above conversation, the visitor likens KGAF to The Lil Flea, a gentrified version of a flea market, with an entry fee, live music, experimental fusion food stalls and expensive handmade clothing and accessory shops. For many of the younger visitors, KGAF is not different from other interactive retail experiences: they visit as much to look at the art, as they do to participate in the crowd and to take photographs. The stalls lining the exhibition street become extensions of the festival space in how they seamless integrate this idea of the production of the self. Tellingly, they are the only spaces where cameras are not invited. At the stalls selling clothes, trinkets and household items, visitors are encouraged to spend time and money, and can walk away with material possessions. Selfies in these spaces are not deemed productive, as people with cameras block access of people wanting to make purchases.



Figure 2.10 Visitors at KGAF2020 with Tinder advertising in the background

As a verb, "vibe" is also reminiscent of mechanical devices, oscillations and frequencies. It evokes the technological aspect of the festival for young visitors and highlights the importance of the exhibition space for the production of Instagram images, to add to the curated personality of the visitor. The technological coexists with the physical here, and the participation of the visitors in the festival space is underscored by labour or having to "work": to identify frames, take photographs, select a few, edit them with filters, title them with captions, share them online with location tags and trending tags, and finally engage with other "users" or people who comment on the photographs, and return the engagement on their posts.

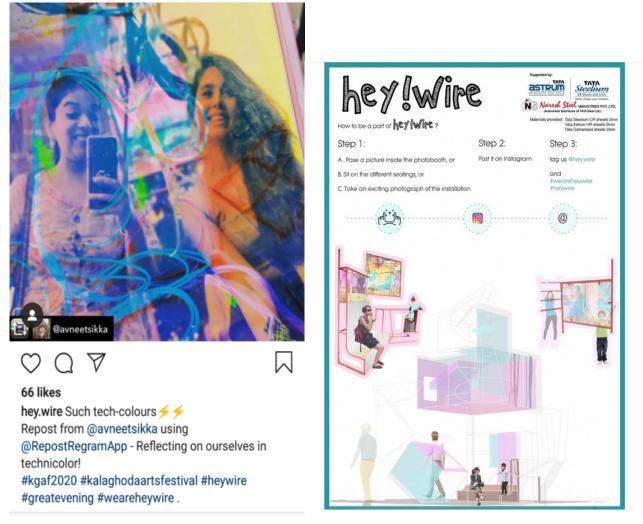


Figure 2.11 Instagram image from @hey.wire

Figure 2.12 Instagram image from @hey.wire

In *The Cinematic Mode of Production* (2006), Jonathan Beller argues that because of technological developments in cinema, and its popularity within society in the twentieth century, when we see an image, we also see the logistics of the production of the image. To make his point Beller invokes Jonathan Crary's historical analysis of the production of the observer in the nineteenth century, along with the industrial society's production of the regimentation of the capacities of the eye. More recently, it has been argued that social networking sites and personal networked devices, as well as "the host of digital technologies that are still to come" have taken on this role of defining our current mode of cultural vision (Jurgenson 2019, 23), substantially reorienting our perception of the world and what "both social visibility and invisibility mean" (Jurgenson 2019, 30). In *Visualising Facebook* (2017), Daniel Miller and Jolynna Sinanan demonstrate how networked photography, among youth in different cultural contexts, is not only used to document memories and experiences, but is a crucial act that enables the forming of social bonds and having fun (13). These cultural shifts, and specifically the influence of the algorithmic logic of social networking platforms, as I will argue, offer

explanations for how in the exhibition space of KGAF where the visitor was once expected to view or perceive, the visitor has now become a crucial participant in the production of space, not to exchange ideas, but as bodily labour for the production of capital. Crucially, since this production of images is within a framework of capital labour, I examine how we both "maintain ourselves as image" and "we labor in the image" (Beller 1998, 60).

As discussed in Chapter 1, Whatsapp and Instagram are the most widely used social networking platforms in India, and Meta is the dominant corporate entity within which selfies circulate. The financial model of Meta is based on targeted advertising, by the collection of users' data and behaviour. This is done by algorithms, which are difficult to define as they are ever expanding, but consist widely of input; code that defines data sets and calculations a set of instructions or a sequence of tasks; and output (Kitchin, 2017 and Seaver, 2013 quoted in Klinger and Svensson 2018, 4654). These proprietary algorithms have also been understood to encode social knowledge, with the aim of converting it into exchange value (Terranova 2014, Flisfeder 2018) and can be seen as both material and social processes, with calculations based on human programmers and designers, on data sets which they calculate, and data that they generate based on these calculations (Klinger and Svensson 2018, 4655). Algorithms cannot be classified as neutral, for they carry the biases of human designers, and their distribution and usage reflect societal power structures (Klinger and Svensson 2018, 4656). They have instead been compared to the 1990 "coolhunting" practices of market research, that employed human ethnographic research methods to identify trends and convert them into monetising opportunities for brands (Brodmerkel and Carah 2016).

Recognising that commercial exchange is the central function of the social media platforms, Instagram (among other platforms) has been conceptualised as "an image machine that captures and calibrates attention", by serving a continuous flow of images, which capture the attention of the user, forcing bodily responses such as tapping and scrolling, in order to collect personal data through this engagement, to serve targeted advertising to the user (Carah and Shaul 2015, 69).

Maurizio Lazzarato's discussion of algorithms, within a Deleuzean framework of subjection and machinic enslavement, has been widely adopted by the academic community to analyse the processes of the "user" or the individual on social networking platforms. Explaining how he uses Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the projection of subjectivity by capitalism by the dual apparatuses of social subjection and machinic enslavement, Lazzarato writes, "[s]ocial subjection equips us with a

subjectivity, assigning us an identity, a sex, a body, a profession, a nationality, and so on. In response to the needs of the social division of labor, it in this way manufactures individuated subjects, their consciousness, representations, and behavior. But the production of the individuated subject is coupled with a completely different process and a completely different hold on subjectivity that proceeds through desubjectivation. Machinic enslavement dismantles the individuated subject, consciousness, and representations, acting on both the pre-individual and supra individual levels" (Lazzarato 2014, 12).

Applying this theory to algorithms, Lazzarato claims that through a process of subjection, individuals are constituted as users, who are defined by the actions that the machine demands. Then, through a process of machinic enslavement, the algorithms constitute individuals as parts or cogs, that enable the functioning of the machine. While subjection operates at the molar level, enslavement operates on the molecular level. Enslavement also produces the "dividual". "The dividual does not stand opposite machines or make use of an external object; the dividual is contiguous with machines [...] Not only is the dividual of a piece with the machinic assemblage but he is also torn to pieces by it: the component parts of subjectivity (intelligence, affects, sensations, cognition, memory, physical force) are no longer unified in an "I," they no longer have an individuated subject as referent. Intelligence, affects, sensations, cognition, memory, and physical force are now components whose synthesis no longer lies in the person but in the assemblage or process" (26-27, emphasis original). The dividuation of the discrete self is the endlessly division into samples, data and markets, and information is separated and recombined in new ways (Deleuze 1992).

In Lazzarato's model, each of the components is a desire-machine, and "[d]esire is not the expression of human subjectivity; it emerges from the assemblage of human and non-human flows, from a multiplicity of social and technical machines (Lazzarato 2014, 51)". Privileging the "desire" of the user or the individual and acknowledging the financial profit motives of algorithms in the context of social media, Matthew Flisfeder applies a Lacanian-Marxist critique to Lazzarato's theory. Explaining the reasoning for this restructuring, Flisfeder writes, "Lazzarato's view, which prioritizes enslavement, or the intersection of enslavement-subjection, misses the priority of exploitation, and therefore the role of the class struggle, itself, at the heart of the mode of production. I argue instead that algorithmic and social media make possible a deeper identification between the production of surplus value through exploitation and the lire of desire in what Lacan referred to as surplus-enjoyment" (460). In Flisfeder's model, "users are exploited as prosumer commodities, but are also

inscribed into the productive assemblage through their participation in the production of their own surplus-enjoyment". This model is significant in how demonstrates that "depending upon who is in control – that is the class power that programs and gives them purpose – automation and algorithmic logic can either be a means of exploitation, or a means of emancipation" (470).

Applying these ideas to the networked practices at KGAF, we see how the assemblage of installations, artists, visitors, curators, camera technologies and social networking platforms, "animate" each other through the desire of networked visibility, of images created and shared. The young visitors are brought to the festival by the trending tags that they have seen on Instagram, and the content created by the influencers that they follow. The images convey a celebration of modernity, independence, cosmopolitanism and liberal, Western values. These new values conveyed through the photographs on social networking platforms are enshrined within a neoliberal logic of commodification, in stark contrast with the original discourse of the festival that privileged the collective values of the socialist nation state. Instead of engaging with the space as citizens of the nation or Mumbai, as was the intention of the organisers, visitors engage as members of a digital global collective.

The entire arena of the festival, the art installations and the commercial branding, become borrowed images which with young visitors brand digital versions of themselves as global and modern. This is often evidenced by their clothing, which is far more performative than it would be on a usual weekday, often drawing from the "bohemian" Coachella aesthetic that has been popularised on social networking platforms. The presence of brands and commercial establishments replicate the visual terrain of a mall, which is designed with the purpose of turning the spectator into a consumer, and instead of detracting from the "vibe", are crucial elements in the production of this space.



Figure 2.13 Visitor selfie at KGAF2020

At the festival, these young visitors are desubjectivated by the logic of the Instagram algorithm: instead of engaging with the installation as a work of art, visitors treat them like photo-booths or "selfie points" in the production of a certain kind of image that is Insta-worthy. They have already seen the digital version of the festival and the installations on social networking platforms: it is what brought them there in the first place. They know, already, where they want to go, and what to photograph: their visit to the physical festival is largely so that they can participate with the digital festival. This also explains the lack of self-consciousness when posing for selfies or asking strangers to take photographs – the festival is a space for staging identities rather than introspection or contemplation. At the same time, this interaction is generative and pleasurable and could be seen as emancipating visitors from several notions of propriety that otherwise burden them.

## Content creation as a mode of jugalbandi

In the influential essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1968) Walter Benjamin predicted that with changes in modes of production, and the possibilities of mechanical reproduction afforded by photography and film, the nature and perception of art would undergo a change, liberating art from the ritual, turning it into an object designed for reproducibility and diminishing its "aura" or its situatedness in time and place. This dispelling of the aura, Benjamin argues, creates avenues for people who have been traditionally excluded from highbrow society to be drawn into the artistic field, allowing art to be rendered political in radical and new ways. Benjamin's prediction, even as it has been updated and challenged by academics over the years, seems to reflect the way in which the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival has evolved. In this environment saturated with smartphones and images, the only way to not sink into oblivion online is to continue producing, as one young visitor, Rupesh (name changed) told me:

If you know Garyvee? Gary Vaynerchuk. I am a big fan of his. He is my mentor. So he always tells us, like if you are an individual, you should post sixty things on anything, on social media, in a day. Forty to sixty. [Incredulous laughter from me]. It's easy, if you have captured a YouTube video, convert it into a podcast and then post it on iSongs [iTunes], Spotify, Saavn and all. Then take, a YouTube video is divided into a minute video, like if you get clicked by a thing at one minute, so you can write your comment and there's a comment "at one minute it clicked me". So Garyvee will take that one minute video and post it on different platforms. If you are posting ten on ten platforms, it will be one, two, three, four, five, six, seven... like it will be ten. So, like, you are making one content in a day, but you are distributing on sixty platforms, dividing in sixty posts. So that's interesting. It's a "content model".

This breaking up or dividing of creative artifacts to "game" the algorithm for maximum visibility, is reminiscent of the Deleuze and Guattari's dividual: contiguous with machines, formed at the cost of the individuated subject. Although the possibility for the artwork to affect the viewer is lost, when the art is perceived as a creative tool rather than an object to be viewed, the exhibition space is turned from a hierarchy into a generative physical-digital assemblage, underscored by a sense of embodied interdependence and collaboration.

It reminds me of the concept of *jugalbandi* from Indian classical music. *Jugalbandi* translates to "entwined twins" or "tied together" in several Indian languages and is a term for an extempore musical duet between two solo musicians of different instruments or styles. Outside the sphere of music, the term is used in India to talk about historic partnerships such as between two cricket batsmen or two politicians. I use it here to think not just about how visitors are equal producers of the festive space, and the dialogue between artists and visitors, but also about the pleasurable, generative outcomes of the dialogue.



Figure 2.14 A screenshot of a YouTube vlog from KGAF2020

I encountered Rupesh when he was lying on the ground, trying to capture an installation from a unique angle on his camera phone. He proceeded to show me his Instagram feed and tell me that for him, "good" photography was representing objects in ways and from angles and perspectives that the human eye does not naturally perceive. Rupesh cited Gary Vaynerchuk, a Belarusian-American YouTuber who has styled himself into a motivational speaker, as his creative guide, and told me of his desire to be a content creator. For Rupesh, the festival presented an opportunity to practice his art, and to build a portfolio of images on Instagram, that would hopefully allow him to build a creative career.



Figure 2.15 Visitor selfie at KGAF2020



Figure 2.16 Visitor selfies at KGAF2020 Figure 2.17 Visitor selfie at KGAF2020

Because of this democratic embodied interaction, installations often sustain physical damage. Like Rupesh, many others walked around with their personal devices, trying to take photographs from different angles, often disrespecting the implicit rules of the installation, ignoring entry and exit points, to instead put their phone-wielding hands through parts of the installation that were not meant to be touched. Sudipta Kaviraj, in his exploration of the concept of space in Calcutta, examines the binary of ghare/baire, which he translates to self/not-self, although it would literally translate in English to house/outside (1997). Kaviraj concludes that the word "public" in urban India has come to mean that which is not private "[b]ut this logic is also interlaced with the conventional idea of the baire. Precisely because there is no conception of the civic that bears a strong equation with the public, the idea of publicity in its altered Bengali version can mean merely an empty, valueless negative of the private. It comprises assets that are owned by some general institution like the government or the city municipality, which did not exercise fierce vigilance over its properties as individual owners did and that allowed, through default, indifference, and a strangely lazy generosity, its owned things to be despoiled or used by people without other means. The public is a matter not of collective pride but of desperate uses that can range from free riding to vandalising" (105). Kaviraj's observations about public space would hold true not just in Kolkata, but also in other Indian cities,

including Mumbai. I discuss "beautification" projects initiated by local authorities as an attempt to counter this binary in Chapter 4, but for now, continue to think about how Kaviraj's observation about the duality of space, and the *baire* or the non-private might be used to think about the ways in which the festival and the art on exhibition are approached by visitors.

At the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, the location of the visual arts exhibition and decisions made by the organisers in terms of how they think about accessibility, contribute towards the way in which the installations are seen as non-private. Given the cultural approach to public property as theorised by Kaviraj, objects exhibited on a street or in a maidan, unlike at the neighbouring Jehangir Art Gallery, where paintings and sculptures are displayed along gallery walls or placed behind cordons, the installations on the KGAF street, are unprotected and therefore available equally to everyone to touch or manipulate. They are also susceptible to natural elements such as wind and dust, as well as the throngs of visitors who visit the festival. Crucially, the dense crowd on the exhibition street can often obscure the name of the artist and their concept note, detaching the installation from its owner and creator, and opening it up to interpretation and photographic possibility. One might even argue that the algorithmic logic of Instagram contributes to this situation, by equalising the value of the entire festival for the visitor: the installations, the backdrops, advertising hoardings and standees, and stalls all have the same value in terms of what they offer for a worthy photograph or "content". Once the value of the installation as a work of art has diminished, and it is seen instead as a collaborative tool that facilitates networked photography, the visitor has equal ownership, an equal right to manipulate the installation to get the right angle.

Many artists at KGAF who were aware of the damage that the visitors would inflict on the installations, made structural decisions about their artworks to ensure that they would survive the wind, the dust and the crowd. Some included printed signs which instructed visitors not to touch or sit on the installations, which were usually ignored, and a few that had used expensive materials or complex structural elements that could not be easily fixed, hired guards with whistles to scare off visitors who might try to touch the installations. Even as they might have dampened the festival's claims of openness or democratic access, these manned installations offered an antithesis to the installations which were not guarded with the same vigilance, making them even more inviting to the visitors wanting photographs.



Figure 2.18 Sign informing visitors to not touch or sit on an installation at KGAF2020

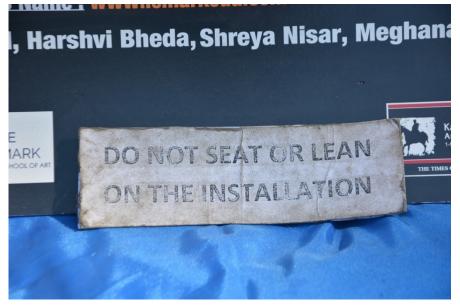


Figure 2.19 Sign informing visitors to not sit or lean on an installation at KGAF2020

Perhaps placated by the images they had seen on Instagram the previous night, most artists returned every morning to fix damaged elements of their installations, cheerfully pruning live plants, replacing broken metal chains, torn paper and cardboard elements and organising things like rubber tyres that were rearranged during photoshoots by visitors who seemed to think that the objects had been placed in haphazard order. Some artists told me that the images they had seen on Instagram demonstrated to them that their installations were not received as objects of reflection, but as creative prompts that generated embodied and affective responses. The artists seemed to feel that their own their experience of the festival had been enriched by this visual *jugalbandi*, and I often heard them say that their perspective had been changed when they saw the images that visitors had posted on Instagram.

At the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival 2023, at an installation titled "Art Attack" made by a group of artists represented by Udayan Art Studio, visitor selfie practices inadvertently contributed to the concept that the artists were exploring. Thematically, the installation considered the impact that vandalism has had on art, and to demonstrate this, depicted other famous artworks in dialogue with each other, on the walls of a large room-like structure. On one panel of the installation, Hokusai's The Great Wave off Kanagawa was depicted alongside the Bandra-Worli SeaLink, offering a commentary on rising sea levels as a consequence of human activity, while simultaneously commenting on the massification of the Japanese woodblock print. On another panel, a mirror and chair were set up alongside a papier mâché tree, to demonstrate the vandalism of nature by capitalism, which the artists argued preys on human vanity. Ironically, visitors to the installation were drawn to this mirror and possibilities that it offered for selfies. They took selfies and images of each other while sitting on the chair and looking into it, oblivious to the fact that they too were inadvertently participating in the installation and its commentary, by vandalising it with their selfie photography. In the way that it turned into a "selfie point", the evolution of the installation reflected the arguments that the artists made in the concept note, which was that just as art reflects society, the vandalism of art and its treatment by society, is a commentary on that society.



Figure 2.20 Instagram image from @udayan.artstudio

# Originality, replication/repetition and the body

To fill the lacuna created by established artists withdrawing from the festival over "selfie crowds" and a growing interest from global markets in Indian art (Zitzewitz 2014), KGAF has steadily turned to young artists and design students. These artists fund the installation costs themselves and hope to recoup costs by selling the installation to corporate builders or making business contacts at the festival. As a result, popularity with visitors and on Instagram is important to most exhibiting artists.

A pair of advertising professionals, Monika Prasad and Niranjan Vast, exhibiting at KGAF 2020, reflecting on the theme of the year "thread", created a model of an Indian cricket batsman who symbolised the love of cricket that united the country. They planned to monetise the installation and recoup its costs by renting it to malls during the release of a Bollywood film about cricket which was due to release soon. They told me that it had always been a dream to participate in the festival, and that they underwent several rounds of interviews and demonstrations and pitched multiple ideas to the curatorial team before they were selected to exhibit at the festival.

Their model consisted of different human body parts dressed in cricket gear, and a cricket bat and a ball, connected to each other by metal threads. The artists said that they were forced to use the thick metal thread, instead of a less visible material, and had to cordon off the installation from the crowds to prevent it from being vandalised. Viewers had to stand at a specific point for the different parts to align and present themselves as a unified body, and this spot was always crowded, with people taking turns to hold their camera phones at the exact angle. In our conversation, the artists revealed:

To attract people, we have to keep a space where people can interact with the artwork as well, right, that's how it is. If you don't keep such spaces, such things, maybe people won't attract, "*theek hai, kuch hai aur chale jayenge*" [just glance at it and walk away], but when you keep such places, they'll be like "*chalo, rukte hain, photo kheechte hain*" [let's stop and take a photo] "*agar photo kheechne ke baad aisa lagaa chalo padh lete hain*" [and maybe after the photo, they'll stop and read]. In whatever way, maybe the concept, maybe in the photos, however, people are liking it. And somewhere social media has turned into a place where people want to be, like even our artwork is on to that, so it's like that is turned into a place that people want to go. It's a need now. Social media is good for promoting things [...] like brands [...] because somewhere it gets connected to people. *Ek se doosra, doosre se teesra tag hote hote* [One to the next, they keep tagging each other].

In Prasad and Vast's reflection, the interaction between the installation and the visitor is predicated on the capturing of the image, which initiates and prolongs the encounter. I found parallels between my earlier discussion of networked photography and the "vibe" of the festival and the way in which the artists spoke about social media as a place of aspiration, as somewhere that people "want to go" and where their art must also be, for it to be recognised and appreciated. Prasad and Vast, who both had full-time jobs in advertising, talked about the value of social networking platforms for brand advertising, and how the creation and proliferation of images on these platforms, of people tagging each other on posts, and sharing them from one person to the next, generated publicity.

On the other hand, the curator of the visual arts section of KGAF, Ami Patel, also an artist, told me that after visitors share photographs of her art on Facebook, gallerists refuse to exhibit this art saying it has already been seen by too many people online. These contradictory effects of the proliferation of repetitive photographs of art, suggest that there is a certain type of installation that continues to be interesting or novel even in the age of networked photography. It seems almost that installations which invite human bodies to participate in images, resist replication which would reduce their value as novel visual objects, and instead promote repetition which increases their value as experiential objects, which can only be completed and interpreted by the human body.

This leads to my next idea, of *jugalbandi* not just between the installation and the viewer as a singular subject, but also between the visitors themselves. Prasad and Vast told me that on the opening day of the exhibition, another artist approached them saying that he had used a similar perspective trick in an installation in a previous edition of the festival, and that he suspected that Prasad and Vast had seen his art and had copied the idea. The pair of artists were upset about his allegation, and said that experimenting with perspective is a common strategy in installation art. I remembered the other installation and wondered whether the curators had positioned both in the middle of the exhibition street because installations that play with perspective are popular with visitors. At both, visitors did not have to negotiate the crowds to read the instructions or the artists' statements: they merely had to watch the people before them and pick up their cues. At Prasad and Vast's installation, a constant cluster of people at the viewing point would inform the people on their way to the installation on how and where to position themselves for the discrete parts of the installation to align for them.

In another section of the exhibition, two installations that looked very alike were positioned next to each other. Conceptually they dealt with different ideas, but both incorporated colourful yarns, arranged in taut vertical, cylindrical patterns, which visitors could walk through. The two installations were made by groups of students from different institutions, and during assembly, when they realised the visual similarity and that they would be exhibited side-by-side, both groups were concerned that visitors would make unfair comparisons. As visitors arrived, however, instead of drawing comparisons between the two, they treated the installations as continuations of each other, using them as backdrops for their selfies, gravitating towards the less busy one and taking cues on how to pose from other people in the area. In this way, with the visitors in *jugalbandi* with each other, the installations were literally relegated to the background.



Figure 2.21 Instagram image from @aikapadya7



Figure 2.22 Instagram image from @aikapadya7

In Douglas David's response to Walter Benjamin's original thesis, he focuses on the discussion of the "aura" and points out that Benjamin failed to take into account "antilogic" (1995, 384). According to David, "What begins to emerge in the first digital decade is a fine grained sensitivity to the uniqueness of every copy" (385). "When I deconstruct meaning, I recreate it within a subjective context that is inevitably unique, no matter how ordained or predestined" (384). On Instagram, this repetition is characterised by the bodies of "users" who "not only reproduce brands' preferred depictions of bodies, but also make their bodies available to the increasingly calculative nature of these media platforms" (Carah and Shaul 2015, 70). Using Latour's concept of the body as a "sensory medium" (xiii), Brodmerkel and Carah approach affective practices as encompassing both human psychology, as well as "objects, spaces and the built environments" and see the devices developed by advertisers as "affect switches" that stimulate and translate "human action, judgement and affect into data for further modulation" (xiv), by using data and predictive analytics. They write, "Together the

smartphone and a media platform such as Instagram constitute an architecture that enables spaces such as clubs, cultural events and other locations where bodies and web-connected smartphones appear to become sites where affect is released, channelled and directed" (140). The smartphone, or other material devices used by advertisers, become "affective switches" that transfer "the capacity of a living being to affect into the calculative apparatus of media infrastructure" (103). Creative content by consumers or users arising through these affective switches, speak not only to other humans, but also to the "algorithmic logic of media platforms" (xviii). The Instagram algorithm recognises repetitive, coherent behaviours by users and harvests the data to serve users with targeted advertisements. In the 1990s, the advertising industry had used "brand activations" or purpose-built spaces that created this repetitive behaviour from target groups; today, these activations are critical devices that calibrate attention in cultural spaces and are complemented by tags to ensure the production of thematically and aesthetically repetitive images for algorithms to recognise on social networking platforms.

The young artists who are well-versed with the visual vocabulary of social networking platforms, know instinctively how to extend the life of their installations online, beyond the nine days that the physical festival offers. The students of Pearl Academy, a design school and an official sponsor of KGAF 2020, seemed to have used this very approach to design their installation titled "My House My Mumbai". The installation consisted of a square room, with windows in each of the walls. The windows each incorporated elements from architectural styles of different communities and time periods, and the installation was meant to be a depiction of the syncretism of Mumbai architecture. The installation was immensely popular, with people queueing up to enter the room, and posing from inside the installation, through the windows, for photographs. Along with the colourful windows, "Instagram bait" or photo props were supplied to visitors, in the form of cardboard placards with funny quips about the city. The team of artists who had worked on the installation manned the entry and exit points, ensuring that each visitor had their turn. Other installations made by students from architecture schools were equally popular, and similarly included photo "triggers" that calibrate attention, in the form of reflective surfaces, seating and face-framing details within the installation. Their youth and understanding of the physical-digital hybridity of the festival space, gave them granular insight into the self-branding strategies that would engage visitors. The repetitive images generated on Instagram, aggregated through the tags provided on materials near the installation, fed the Instagram algorithm, creating more publicity for the installation and Pearl Academy. Visitors formed longer and longer lines each day, offering their bodily labour to the brand and the festival.

The tags used and recommended by the festival, #kgaf, #kalaghodaartsfestival, as well as the tags invented by each artist team, became a bridge that joined the activity in the physical space to the activity in digital space, and drove people from each space to the other.

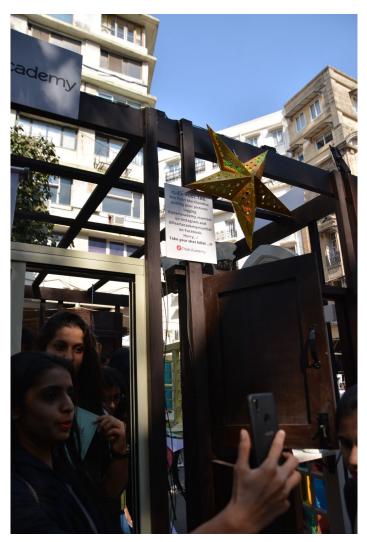


Figure 2.23 Visitors taking a selfie at the Pearl academy installation below a sign encouraging visitors to "CLICK. POST. TAG" at KGAF2020

Although many installations thematically engaged with the idea of the digital, German new media artist Christian Lölkes was the only artist exhibiting at KGAF 2020 whose art was defined by code. One reason that other artists at KGAF shy away from incorporating technology might be the lack of access to skills: new media art is not offered as a subject in educational institutions in India, and since most of the other artists were young students from architecture, design and fashion schools, they did not have the skills or training to incorporate code in their installation. A second obstacle, even for experienced coders, is posed by the format of the festival: abstract tech-enabled images or objects that might have expensive or delicate parts and are not immediately decipherable or maintainable in

an environment where visual practices and embodied responses are attuned to the crowded, open-air venue where most installations vie for attention through an already established set of parameters including bright lights, colours and representational or evident images. To compete in the visually dense space, Lölkes conceptualised an installation that consisted of two parts, the first a physical element that would attract people to the installation, and the second a software-enabled interactive element. Titled "Blended Realities", the installation thus consisted of two elements: the first was a metal frame, with a mirrored ceiling and dangling strings of multicoloured LED lights. The function of this element of the installation was merely to draw people to the installation. The second element was a set of QR (quick response) codes one on each side of the square frame, which when scanned, would take the user to a website where neon three-dimensional illustrated elephant heads would appear at the location of the QR codes. Visitors could take screenshots of the resulting hybrid physical-digital image that would appear to be a selfie of the visitor with the Augmented Reality elephant. Lölkes said that he conceptualised the installations. This installation was his attempt to engage with the selfie-takers, through a shared technological language, defined by digital code.

According to Lölkes, the biggest challenge while planning his installation, was figuring out how to host the digital aspect of his installation. This website or application would have to cater to several specific requirements in order for it to perform its function: it would have to be accessible to as many devices and mobile phone models and operating systems as possible, while consuming very little internet data and responding and loading images simultaneously and promptly for multiple devices. This was especially crucial in a crowded, fast-paced environment, where the installation would be competing with others for attention, and visitors would have to be motivated to spend the time downloading or loading a new application or website which they would only use once. As it turned out, even though Lölkes was able to design an efficient hosting system, the installation struggled at the point of communication. The Augmented Reality aspect of the installation, which was revealed by loading a website and then pointing a camera at the QR codes which were printed on cardboard and mounted at the top of the metal frame, was easy to use if the instructions were deciphered correctly, and revealed computer-generated neon elephant heads, with which visitors were encouraged to take a selfie.

Despite this intent to engage visually, the installation could only be deciphered through a lengthy set of directions that explained how to use the QR codes. I found these directions convoluted and only understood the rules of the installation after watching the artist demonstrate them to another group. The instructions were also written in English and not adequately translated into any Indian language, making the installation even less accessible to the visitors. Instead of bothering with the written instructions, most visitors treated the mirrored ceiling like the main attraction, taking a photograph with it and then moving on. Despite its lack of clarity in instructions to visitors, the installation was a fascinating contribution towards a physical and digital "hybridity" (de Souza e Silva 2006), perhaps indicating the future direction of installations at KGAF, and the festival itself.



Figure 2.24 Image of *Blending Realities* at KGAF2020

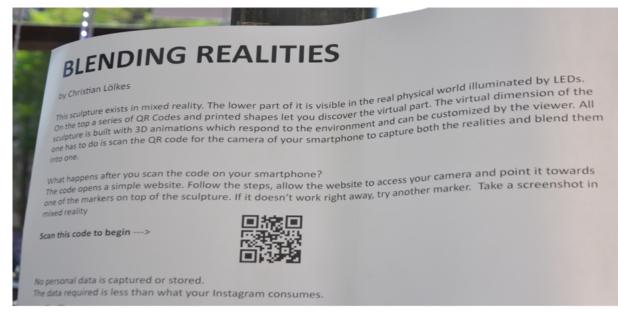


Figure 2.25 Concept note for *Blending Realities* at KGAF2020



2.26 Screenshot to demonstrate the selfie and website interface from *Blending Realities* at KGAF2020

## An artist's Instagram

I met Jeet Soneji, a young architect exhibiting at KGAF 2020, a few days before the festival, and helped with assembly. Soneji's installation consisted of nine-by-nine-foot pentagon-shaped wooden panels, covered in different textural elements, mounted on wheels and connected by a rudimentary track. While I helped him assemble his installation, Soneji told me about how he wanted his

installation to be interactive so that "the people become the installation in a way". He described how he hoped that by touching each surface and walking through each module, people would "start interacting with themselves even while looking at the installation". This was his method of connecting people with each other through the installation.

This intent of using art to bring people into physical proximity, became popular in the late 1990s and termed "relational aesthetics". The art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud, who first used the term, defined relational aesthetics as "an art form where the substrate is formed by inter-subjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme" in which the "the liveliest factor that is played out on the chessboard of art has to do with interactive, user-friendly and relational concepts" (Bourriaud 2002, 15). Relational aesthetics has been seen as an appropriation of the philosophy of the Guattari by the contemporary art market (Alliez 2010). Eric Alliez argues that instead of representing a break from subjection, this approach to art, in its reification of conviviality, produces a form of populism in which relation is reduced to transaction. Relational aesthetics "tests out new criteria of commodification and the participatory management of life by means of these exhibition-dispositifs that stage the driving role of the 'culture of interactivity" (90).

However, the presence of networked camera technologies at KGAF altered the original intent of Soneji's installation, pushing it perhaps without the intention of the artist, into the twenty-first century "meshwork" (Pink and Hjorth 2012, 152) or to the "hybrid" space of overlapping physical and digital space, as a result of the use of mobile technologies as interfaces (de Souza e Silva 2006). The physical bodies of the people participating in the assemblage of networks, devices and physical spaces, were divided into its constituent parts, and reterritorialised for new function and the faces, the hands and the eyes of the visitors take on new roles. Phenomenologist Mika Elo makes a strong case for the privileging of the "digital finger" in the study of the digital (2012). The human hand was seen by Husserl as metonymic of the body, of immediate and perfect presence, by its ability to sense touch as well as be visible to the bodily subject. By privileging the hand in this way, Husserl also privileged touch, based on the "visibility of the hand and the seamless interplay of hand and eye" (9). Here, Elo says, "as the metonymic figure of touch, the hand is linked to the service of optic intuitionism" (9). Derrida argued that there is not necessarily "a seamless interplay of hand and eye", since "the hand is always open and follows a logic of supplement", and that "the apprehension of the hand must be studied in relation to the potentialities of the hand"(9). Elo argues that Derrida's formulation allows for the possibility of mediation, and from this concludes that digital interface design that aims at

haptic realism, conceals the "pathic" sense of being exposed, or the feeling of being in the world, in the Husserlian sense, in the way in which it conceives of touch. In the phenomenological tradition, "[t]he sense of touch can only sense what it itself is not, i.e. a difference. In relation to itself – or rather, in relation to the same – it is insentient" (7). But in media and technology fields, feedback is understood as "narcissistic feedback", in which the psychological pleasure of the user is privileged along with "richness and realism of sense feedback" (10). Elo's discussion is based very much on digital interface, but much of what he argues for can be extended to this discussion of public art designed for digital photography. Returning to image of Rupesh lying on the ground, his body contiguous with his device, I was able to see how, following the desire for "content" and feedback on Instagram, the physical body of the person participating in the assemblage of networks, devices and physical spaces, is divided into its constituent parts, and reterritorialised for new function and the faces, and how the hands and the eyes of the attendees take on new roles.

On the first day of the festival, Soneji noticed that most of the visitors were stopping at his installation to take photographs, rather than to simply walk through it, as he had initially imagined it would be experienced. Soneji moved the halogen lights which had originally been placed near the centre to light up the entire installation, to the front, to light people's faces for when they took photographs or selfies. Midway through the festival, when I went back to check on him, he asked if I wanted to see how he could "irritate" people. I said yes, and so he switched off the halogen lights. The small crowd of about ten visitors looked visibly disappointed and dispersed. Soneji said that he did this often, to force people to walk through the installation and appreciate its overall design and structure. As soon as he switched the lights on again, people would begin to gather for photographs, and often not walk through the installation but leave after taking a photo at the front. Soneji had expected the eye to function as a haptic organ (Marks 1999), and the various surfaces of his installation: the crushed tin cans, soil, bottle corks and circuit boards to demand human touch. He had very strategically placed mirrors and lights to make the installation inviting, to make it fit into the "vibe" of the festival, but he had not anticipated that people would only take photographs. The visitors' eyes had been reterritorialised by social networking platforms through the visual filters, the continuous scroll function, archiving and geotagging functions and narcissistic feedback loops on Instagram. Their eyes and their hands, mediated by the networked camera phone, did not only seek physical feedback in the sense of touch, but also technological feedback, and the pleasure of taking a photograph and sharing it online, participating in larger feedback loops and the machinic assemblage of the hybrid digitalphysical festival.



Figure 2.27 Visitor photo at Sque-Whirl-Tagon at KGAF2020 demonstrating the use of halogen light



Figure 2.28 Visitor photo at Sque-Whirl-Tagon at KGAF2020 demonstrating the use of halogen light

As an architect, Soneji's attempt at experimentation had been with structure, and he had planned that the panels would move along tracks fixed to the base, so that visitors could move the installation like an accordion. After the first day, however, the weight of the panels shifted the tracks and the panels which had been mounted on wheels had to be bolted down to prevent the whole installation from toppling over. Despite this setback, Soneji's well-wishers who attended the festival focused on the installation's success on Instagram. Amongst these supporters, his former employers, a boutique architectural firm, shared an Instagram story congratulating him for the "most Instagrammed installation" at the festival. Soneji, as expected, re-shared it like all the other congratulatory messages that he had received. A few of his friends who visited towards the end of the festival, confided to me that the installation looked better in the photographs they had already seen on Instagram, and after the artist-led walkthrough, where they were encouraged to walk through the arches, touch the surfaces, try out the mechanism and hear about its concept of "connecting people", they each handed their phones to each other and posed for photographs, using the installation as a photo frame.



Figure 2.29 An Instagram story by @jetson.in



Figure 2.30 Close up of the Instagram story by @jetson.in

On the final day of the festival, just before the de-installation, Soneji climbed to the top of the installation and asked me to photograph him, and then asked each of the construction workers who had come to help him take apart the installation, to stand at the front for a photograph. Soneji, who did not have storage space for the installation and was hoping it would be picked up by a builder for a commercial property, eventually gifted it to an NGO outside the city. This was potentially the last time he would see this artwork that he had spent months on, and the photographs might have just been a way for him to preserve its memory, but after the photo session, he kept swiping through the filters on Instagram and remarking, "it looks so kickass, *na*", already anticipating the nostalgia he would soon feel, but also admitting (or so it seemed to me) that the digital image of the installation was more alluring that the massive structure in front of him.



Figure 2.31 Jeet Soneji sitting on his installation Sque-Whirl-Tagon at KGAF2020

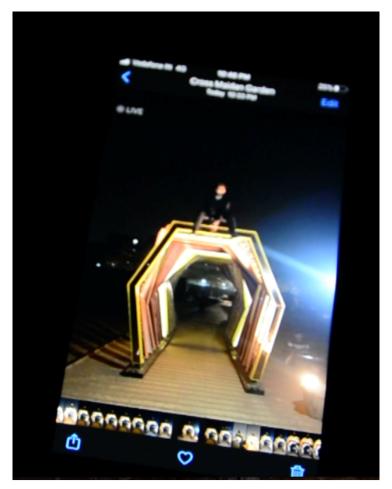


Figure 2.32 A photo of an image on Jeet Soneji's smartphone camera roll

Even as image manipulation, Instagram filters and face swap technologies become imbricated in digital visual cultures, Joanna Zylinska argues that images on social media platforms are often circulated with a seemingly incongruent "pics or it didn't happen" attitude, or as evidence, indicating altered notions of authenticity (Zylinska 2020, 69). Zylinska explains that in this situation, digital photographs function as affect-building devices, increasingly understood "not as surfaces to be looked at and decoded but rather as digital gestures to be transmitted via email and social media, with a view to signalling affection, remembrance, call for attention or loneliness" (70). An image shared on social networking platforms demands feedback and creates potential for dialogue and interaction, as we have seen in previous examples. In Soneji's case, it was not just the evidential, gestural or affective potential of the photographs that made him spend the evening posing with his installation, but also the act of photography that seemed to be charged with emotion. Although the images would later serve as reminders of his experience and the work that he had put into the installation, Soneji had seen how people had enjoyed his installation, participated equally in the physical-digital assemblage of the festival through the editing capacities of their phones and apps and interpreted the installation

visually in their own way. The camera and editing technologies which had given visitors the opportunity to equally participate in the digital version of the festival, had also reduced Soneji's control over the perception and depiction of the installation. Soneji's last evening of the festival was spent making his own images so that he could add his own visual commentary to the discussion online, on the Instagram account that he had started for his installation. Climbing on top of the installation, a dangerous operation that required his team to bring him a ladder and wait nervously under it, and permitting himself to risk the structural integrity of the installation, which he had not allowed anyone else at the festival to do, was not an idea that would have struck Soneji if he had not seen how the visitors had experimented with all the installations, and to me it seemed almost a way to maintain physical authority over the digital version of his installation. The physical act of taking the photographs allowed Soneji, like others, to drop his inhibitions and engage through his body with the installation, impossible with the crowds of people swarming around, unless negotiated through the unique sense of intimacy and limited field of vision offered by the screen of the phone.

After he had climbed down and as he was swiping through the images that I had taken of him on his phone, Soneji asked, "do the stones look Photoshopped?". I had to reassure him that they did not, even as I contemplated the instability of the representational properties of digital photography. As I answered Soneji, I continued to record video on my DSLR camera, and fiddled with the focus ring and exposure settings, trying to capture the clearest image. Returning to analyse the materials I had collected, I was often negotiating three devices or screens – the screen of the participant I was recording, the screen of my video camera, and the screen on which I was revisiting the images. My own *jugalbandi* with these technologies became apparent to me as I sifted through the visual materials that I had captured, and those that I collected from Instagram. This simultaneous feeling of connection and mediation offered by devices that can zoom, adjust light exposure, crop, frame and edit, is captured in the last few seconds of video Appendix 1.

#### Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored evolving interpretations of modernity in Mumbai and the role that networked photography and selfie cultures play in the way that it is understood today by tracing the evolution of the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival. Although I argued that selfie practices limit the transformatory potential of art and contribute towards the "commercialisation" the festival, recognising that the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival was set up with the intention of allowing the public access to art which had otherwise been restricted to elite groups, I demonstrated how networked photography makes the festival more appealing to a wider audience. Especially in India, where most social spaces are dictated by complex hierarchies, the festival in its current avatar, offers people space for physical movement and expression, despite this being in a mode that is underscored by neoliberalism and commodification. If, in earlier decades, the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival provided a place to contemplate modernist art, I argued that now it also offers possibilities for visitors to participate in the visually experiment of situating themselves within a changing society.

In my descriptions of visitors and their digital photographic practices, I argued that boundaries of thought are pushed by visitors and their networked visual practices, rather than by the installations and the artists. The idea of *jugalbandi* that I introduced and discussed in this chapter demonstrates the interactive, collaborative potential of selfie cultures. I illustrated how camera phones at KGAF transform traditional understandings of object production and meaning-making, opening the art installation to visual interpretation through creative Instagram photography and turning the artist and the viewer into equal producers of the physical-digital assemblage of the festival. I also used this concept to highlight how the festival is underscored by a sense of embodied interdependence, with people taking cues on how to pose or frame their photographs by watching one another.

At the aesthetic level, the selfies that emerge from the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, contrast the rising Hindutva aesthetic that has taken over Mumbai as four warring Hindu political parties (the BJP, the two rival Shiv Sena parties and the MNS) attempt to stake their claim over the city. Instead of the colour saffron, traditional Hindu outfits and aggressive motifs such as flaming torches, Western clothes which are less likely to reveal religious or caste identities, neon lights and bright colours dominate the "vibe" of the festival and the selfies that emerge from it. In these selfies, Western brands like Tinder take on the added significance of autonomy and communicate a desire or willingness to connect with other people based on shared interests regardless of social hierarchies.

Currently Mumbai appears to be in the process of reinventing itself, as the digging for the underground Mumbai Metro, development of the Coastal Road, and large-scale redevelopment projects in residential areas, including India's largest urban renewal project at Bhendi Bazaar are simultaneously carried out (Rossi 2018). Corrugated metal sheets surrounding the excavation sites for the Mumbai Metro promise "Mumbai is upgrading", even as air pollution rises to dangerous levels due to increased construction activities and vehicular traffic (Virani 2022). Mumbaikars seem to be tolerating the present in the expectation of a better future, and social networking platforms become

spaces for residents to practice these future modes of living, while waiting for their leaking, crumbling homes to be redeveloped into high rises and for their Victorian trains, with their exposure to dust and rain, to give way to underground rapid transit systems. In this context, the futuristic aesthetic popular with selfie takers at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival could be seen as not just an attempt to mimic Western modes of leisure or consumption, but also a way of imagining or practicing a better quality of life with cleaner air and shorter commutes, and to make the present more bearable while waiting for these promised amenities.

In the next chapter, I turn my attention to the Ganapati *utsava*, to ask how some of the questions about the role of networked technology and the human body and the physical-digital assemblage translate from a contemporary art festival to a Hindu festival. If at KGAF, we understand the selfie and the relationship with installation art as a reterritorialising of the human body and mind by the algorithms of social media platforms, and the site of the festival as a space of co-creation rather than exhibition, how do we understand shifts in the Ganapati pandal as a result of the popularity of selfie practices, especially considering the social and sacred hierarchies of the festive space?

## **Chapter 3**

## Selfie with Bappa: Networked devotion and the Ganapati utsava

#### An excerpt from my field notes, September 2020:

Today I spoke on the phone with Pankit Sheth, who told me he's a Ganapati enthusiast. He explained that he identifies as agnostic, but each year diligently takes leave from work on the eleven days of Ganapati utsava to visit pandals across the city. Pankit is a photographer and filmmaker in his late 20s and we talked about how the festival has changed since our childhood. Sometimes I'm on train on my way to a pandal for the aagaman (arrival) ceremony, he told me, and I'm running late, and I know I'm going to miss the moment at which they reveal the murti. They are also live streaming it on Facebook, and I have to decide: do I want to see it first in person and get the full effect or do I want to see it in real time on my phone. Later, Pankit sent me some of his selfies from Ganapati visarjans. In one of them, he is seated on another person's shoulders, and is using a selfie stick to capture the image of himself amidst the celebrating crowd, with a murti in the background. To the left, a saffron flag of Shivaji flies in the air, and below it, a pair of hands hold up a phone for a photograph. A few days after we spoke, Pankit posted a collage on Instagram: two selfies amongst crowds covered in gulaal, taking the Lalbaugcha Raja murti under the Lalbaug flyover, sandwiching a selfie of Pankit standing alone, in the middle of the deserted road. The image titled "A glitch in the matrix" is a powerful piece of visual storytelling, a reminder of the long history of the festival and a documentation of the first time that public celebrations of the festival were called off since 1895, to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus.



Figure 3.1 Pankit Sheth's selfies at the Ganapati utsava from Instagram @pankit\_sheth

The Ganapati *utsava* (festival in Sanskrit, Hindi and Marathi) is an annual eleven-day festival in India, celebrating Ganapati or Ganesha, the elephant-headed Hindu god, son of Shiva and Parvati, popularly worshipped as the *vighnaharta* or the remover of obstacles, and the god of wisdom, knowledge and wealth. The festival usually falls in the months of August or September of the Gregorian calendar. In the Hindu calendar, the celebrations start on *Ganesha Chaturthi*, the fourth day of the *shukla paksha* (bright fortnight or waxing lunar phase) in the month of *Bhadrapada* and end on *Anant Chaturdashi*, the fourteenth day of the month.

In Mumbai, the festival is celebrated by bringing *murtis* (idols) of Ganapati, of varying sizes, from two feet to twenty-five feet in height, which are built in temporary workshops in Mumbai and rural Maharashtra, to homes, building compounds or communal areas of housing societies, where they are worshipped daily. In homes, the murtis are seated in temporary shrines, and people visit their family and neighbours to admire each other's decor and share prasad or food made specially for the occasion. In public, the murtis are displayed on stages in *pandals*, or temporary cloth and tarpaulin tents that vary in size and grandeur with most built within a few square feet along the sides of arterial roads, and some designed to accommodate thousands of people at a time. Each *murti* is brought to its place of worship for a pre-decided length of time each year, usually one-and-a-half, three, five, seven or ten days. Once brought to its place of worship and after the mukh darshan or the unveiling of his face, and *aavahan* or consecration ceremony, the *murti* is understood to have taken on life. After this, Ganapati is never to be left unattended, and groups of people take turns maintaining all-night vigils to keep him company. The *murti* is worshipped thrice daily with *aarati* (oil lamps), flowers and modaks (a rice flour dumpling made with jaggery and coconut). At the end of the pre-decided duration, the *murti* is taken in a public festive procession for visarjan, to be bid farewell and ceremonially submerged in a water body. The Ganapati utsava is as much a social event as it is a religious festival: Ganapati is a friendly god, treated like a visiting friend or family member. His round belly is an indication of his love for food, and his favourite modak is made and distributed freely during this time. A popular chant during the visarjan, or the final ritual when the murti is taken to water bodies to be submerged, "Ganapati Bappa Morya', pudhchya varshi laukar yaa" [Ganapati Bappa of Morya, come back soon next year] demonstrates how his annual visit is fondly anticipated.

The opening excerpt and images illustrate ideas that I proceed to unpack in this chapter. They communicate the scale and mood of the annual festival, especially the *visarjan* processions, the raucousness and sense of fun evidenced by the crowds and the *gulaal* (a red powder thrown at crowds

during public Hindu festivals such as Holi) and the imbrication of politics in festivities, denoted by the saffron flag. Like Sheth, many people who celebrate the festival have a fondness for Ganapati that does not necessarily stem from deep religious devotion. Sheth's dilemma about whether to wait to see the *murti* in all its grandeur at the site but risk chancing upon a "spoiler" image when scrolling through Instagram, or to participate in the communal viewing of the ceremony online, bring up questions about the significance of physical presence in devotional settings and negotiations between physical and digital spaces and communities. The image of Sheth on the deserted streets visually represents the moment at which these observations are recorded, with the coronavirus pandemic restricting movement and public gathering.

#### Background

As a *sarvajanik utsava*, the Ganapati *utsava* is a public community festival, celebrated by groups of people in public areas, and unique because anyone, regardless of religion, gender and caste, is meant to be allowed entry to public celebratory spaces. This *sarvajanik* aspect of the festival developed in 1895, as the movement for Indian Independence gained momentum, when the Ganapati *utsava* was reinvented from a quiet festival celebrated within the home into a public festival by the Independence activist Balgangadhar Tilak. During this time, taking advantage of the colonial policy of non-interference with religious events, independence activists used religious activities as a ruse to organise, and the Ganapatu *utsava*, as a Hindu festival in Western Maharashtra, became one such focal annual resistance site (Prakash 2010, Kaur 1998, Pinney 2004, Chandavarkar 2009). It was also strategically organised to distract Hindus from the Islamic sacred month of Mohurram, which in the nineteenth century, was as much a secular festival as the Ganapati *utsava* is today (Chandavarkar 2009).

During the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement in the late 1950s, the Ganapati *utsava* adopted several collectivist, secular practices of Mohurram, such as lectures on political themes, modelled on the *waaz* delivered in mosques (Chandavarkar 2009). Until the 1970s, the Ganapati *utsava* had a strong secular aspect, and Ganapati drew the affection of the masses because of what historian Rajnarayan Chandavarkar terms his "benign sense of mischief and his good-hearted fallibility" (Chandavarkar 2009, 137). At the time, the festival was seen as primarily a means to gather people to foster a pride in locality. By the 1980s, with the rise of the Shiv Sena, Chandavarkar writes that "what had been an open, all-comers ritual of inversion and celebration of mischief and irreverence became an expression of 'Hindu' triumphalism" (137). During this time, *murtis* that would traditionally have been in seated

positions, were designed in upright active positions, holding weapons and sometimes poised to attack (Chandavarkar 2009, 137). In the 1990s, the festival was commodified by the influence of the print and television media, through competitions that encouraged spectacular decor and trending themes, along with a focus on social awareness and themes of national integration, to suit the interests of commercial sponsors and political organisations associated with these media organisations (Kaur 1998).

Today, political agendas, brands and commercial advertising continue to dominate the visual arena of the festival, and social networking platforms play a significant role in extending the reach of the *pandal*. Given the possibilities for advertising within a *pandal*, organisers have a financial incentive to attract visitors, and topical thematic depictions of Ganapati have also become increasingly popular. As a public social festival, the Ganapati *utsava* encourages this form of relatable, amusing interpretation, and as an annual festival, demands novelty. *Murtikaars*, while producing traditional *murtis* for commercial sale, often devote their energy to making one *murti* which creatively considers how Ganapati might occupy himself that year. In the images below, of *murtis* from the year 2020, in which Ganapati, as the obstacle remover, is interpreted fighting the COVID-19 virus in two different ways, we can see how the creativity of the *murtikaar* is expressed through these thematic renditions.

In Figure 3.2, the *murti* is depicted as a contemporary medical doctor, dressed in a white coat (but also wearing his traditional ornaments) and assisted by his *vahana* mouse, who holds a tray of medical supplies and a has a supportive smile. The murti uses a stethoscope to examine a patient on a hospital bed, who appears to be suffering from COVID-19 since he on a respirator and wearing PPE (Personal Protective Equipment). In Figure 3.3, the *murti*, styled as a traditional Hindu god, is shown to be vanquishing the COVID-19 virus with his foot and a trident. The virus particle is recognisable as such from its anatomy, but taking the place of an *asura* or demon, its *asura* face is depicted grimacing in pain as it is squelched under Ganapati's foot (Figure 3.4).



Figure 3.2 Ganapati fighting the Covid-19 virus in 2020



Figure 3.3 Ganapati fighting the Covid-19 virus in 2020



Figure 3.4 Ganapati fighting the Covid-19 virus in 2020

In these examples, we see how contemporary topics are interpreted in various ways within a Hindu context, and how the festive imagery is welcoming of public and political debate. Raminder Kaur, in a study of contemporary praxis of the Ganapati utsava festival in Mumbai and Pune, uses the term "performative politics", "to describe the arena of devotion, entertainment and pleasure, which can support the hegemonic project - that is, it is a phrase to describe public events that have more than one face, not strictly religious or entertaining, but also exercising various other political agendas" (1998, 15). Kaur examines the role of the *murti* and *pandal* art in mediating this performative politics and examines the way in which political parties and the media sponsor artistic competitions among Ganapati pandals, among other strategies, in order to maintain hegemony. Kaur's observations can be demonstrated with an example from 2019, when the Hindu populist demand for a new Ram Mandir (temple) to be built at the Babri Masjid site in Ayodhya was used as a campaign strategy by Hindutva political parties gearing up for Maharashtra state election a month after the Ganapati utsava, and several *pandals* and *murtis* thematically engaged with the idea of the Ram Mandir. That year, the Mumbaicha Raja pandal at Ganesh Gully, one of the most popular pandals in the city, was designed to resemble Ayodhya city, based on a rendering of the expected Ram Mandir. The Ganapati murti carried a bow and arrow, Ram's astra (divine weapon), instead of Ganapati's traditional hatchet. By 2022, when the construction of the temple was completed, the theme had been adopted by several other *pandals*.

In her examination of the involvement of the print and television media in the Ganapati *utsava*, Kaur expands Sandria Freitag's theorisation of the 'public arena' in India (2001), or the concept that public gatherings are prime locations for consciousness-raising, to include media circuits. Kaur uses the

historical imbrication of the media in the organisation of public events that were conducted with the aim of raising nationalist consciousness (84-85), to suggest that the media and public participative events are "discursive practices that shape, inform and constitute each other" (96). Today, even as traditional media continue to cover the festival, individuals add to this commentary on social networking platforms. The selfie, as a popular genre to document participation in these spaces and to join in on the commentary on digital platforms, is encouraged by the pandals and by the media.



Figure 3.5 A "Selfie with Bappa" hoarding at Dadar in 2019

A selfie in a politico-religious setting such as the Ganapati *utsava* allows people to present themselves within these cultural and political frameworks, to create images that are purportedly devotional, but communicate traces of exclusionary political messaging. Taking a selfie in a *pandal* or with a *murti* is not just as an act of constituting the self as a devotee but also possibly as a resident or political ally. A devotee taking a selfie in an Ayodhya Ram Mandir-themed *pandal*, or with a politically motivated, aggressive Ganapati *murti* is signalling not just their devotion to the deity, but also their allegiance with the Hindutva political parties. Three timelines are reflected in these *pandals*: that of contemporary politics and the demand which has now been met for the construction of the temple, the historic 1992 demolition of the temple which was under review at the Supreme Court for two

decades, and the mythic birthplace of Ram. Identities that are projected in these selfies are similarly complex: local identity and an allegiance to the specific *pandal* and its *murti*, political identity and allegiance to the political parties such as the BJP and the Shiv Sena, both who claimed they began the debate of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, and Hindu identity as a devotee of Ganapati and Ram.

In the following sections of this chapter, I examine other selfie practices at the Ganapati *utsava*, and ask: What function does the selfie, as a form of self-presentation, have within the context of a devotional festival and how does it fit into the performative politics of the Ganapati *utsava*? If, following Kaur, we see media and public participative events as practices that mutually reinforce each other, what new interactions do we see as a result of the popularity of networked visual practices? How do networked camera technologies alter ideas of community festivities, local identity and devotional practice at a time of migration and global movement, especially during a pandemic?

## Method

At the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, I had immersed myself in the physical site, observing people interact with the installations and each other, and striking up conversations with visitors and artists. I had planned a similar approach for the Ganapati *utsava* in August 2020, but I was unable to travel to the field because of Covid19 restrictions. The local government had restricted the number of people who could gather in public and mandated that no Ganapati *murti* could be built taller than four feet ("Covid-19 impact" 2020), so organisers could maintain social distancing while bringing the *murti* into the *pandal*. Most *mandals* chose to bring a four-foot *murti* and continue with worship but put limits on visitors. Some, such as at the Andhericha Raja *pandal* in the Western suburb of Andheri, set up screens on which they projected enlarged images of the small *murti*, so that visitors could maintain social distancing and participate in the festivities from a distance.

While the festival is usually organised and experienced on-the-ground, in 2020 the physical and digital celebrations of the festival were far more imbricated in each other. For devotees unable to visit *pandals* in person, several *mandals* organised live streaming of the worship and the deity on YouTube and Facebook. These live streams ranged in quality and scale, from amateur handheld camera phone set ups to slick television-quality 24-hour footage with multiple cameras mounted on moving cranes. People also found innovative ways to keep the community spirit of the festival alive, through video conference and the use of social networking platforms. Groups of friends and families set up Zoom

sessions to offer tours of their home shines to one another, and to take turns leading *poojas* and recitations.

Given the circumstances, I decided to change my method of fieldwork, and focus instead on conducting interviews through video conferencing tools and attending live streaming events organised by *pandals*. I followed social media pages and hashtags that aggregated photographs and videos of celebrations and watched several hours of live streams from *pandals* in the city. I interviewed people participating in Zoom *poojas*, and on live streams, and gained access to new communities: groups of people on a "live chat" on Facebook, sending messages to each other as we watched the proceedings from all over the world. I also recruited friends and family to photograph celebrations as and when they encountered them on their daily travels in the city and kept track of news reports and Instagram pages of pandals, to understand the different ways in which the festival was being observed. Watching live streams yielded surprising results, allowing me a vantage point from which I could make observations that I would have otherwise missed, when people were alone with the *murti*. I also made notes of my own experience as a participant watching live streams and trying to involve myself in festivities from my remote location.

In the interviews I conducted with devotees, *murti* artists, local organisers at different scales, and people working in the media, I focused equally on 2020 celebrations and on celebrations of the festival in the previous years. While I did gather some data on differences in physical and digital practices during times of social distancing, in this chapter I focus on meanings associated with and relationships generated by selfie practices. I asked interviewees about historic shifts in the celebration of the festival, their experience of taking a selfie or designing a space for selfie photography, what meanings the act and resulting images held, and where they were shared. The people I interviewed came from a range of backgrounds, age groups and locations: from third generation *murtikaars* in Mumbai, to diasporic groups in the UK and USA.

In the next year of fieldwork, similar restrictions were maintained, to prevent another wave of the pandemic. With more time to prepare, the larger *pandals* organised highly produced videos and live streams with brand advertisement graphics and hyperlinks for donations. Although celebrations continued to be quieter than usual, with many withdrawing from festivities to mourn personal loss, there was also a renewed sense of public participation and devotion. In 2023, celebrations of the festival were grander than usual, with people making up for the previous years' lack of festivities. I

spent the duration of the festival visiting *pandals*, to note the different ways in which networked technologies were used in the design of the *pandal* and how they impacted the way that people interacted with the *murti* and each other.

In anticipation of this project, when I typed the words "Ganapati selfie" in Google Search, I was met with a rich variety of results: a video interview of the designer of a "Selfie Palace" pandal; a video of a robotic *murti* whose smartphone-wielding arm swung up to his face and back down; a song advertised as a "nonstop DJ song" titled "Ganpati ke Saath le le Selfie" (take a selfie with Ganapati) with 200,000 views on YouTube. On Instagram, variations of tags that included the words "selfie" "ganesha" and "ganapati" threw up thousands of selfies with *murtis:* from sponsored competitions organised by brands and political parties to selfie of children with *murtis* that they had made from craft materials. I continued to search for such selfie objects and images over the next three years. At the end, the material I have collected, in the form of recorded interviews, live streams, songs, images and news reports, reflect a tentative negotiation of physical-digital assemblages. In the following sections, I examine some of the ideas that emerged from these materials.

#### Vatsaylabhava and the selfie

Rachel Dwyer, while discussing Ganapati as a religious figure in Mumbai, draws from on the concept of the "gentrification of the gods", a term coined by Joanna Punzo Waghorne and used to discuss the effect of the global bourgeoisie on Hindu devotional practices in India. Dwyer observes that the rising popularity of the Siddhivinayak temple in Mumbai, a Ganapati temple complex built in the 1990s and frequented by film celebrities, high profile businesspeople and politicians, is among the many changes that involve a "turning away from philosophical religion to ritualistic religion based on temples, pilgrimage, processions, and rituals, while public life sees a new mix of state, temples, and business" (2015, 272).

Dwyer also considers the sentiment of *vatsalyabhava*, or tender feelings that are generated by the worship of gods depicted in their child form. Forms of worship that evoke *vatsalyabhava* have developed especially in the worship of Krishna. On Krishna Janmashthami, Krishna's birthday, murtis of Krishna are often placed in rocking cradles or swings, and children enact naughty scenes from his youth, such as Krishna's stealing of butter from the *gopikas* or cowherds. Like Krishna, Dwyer argues that Ganapati is a "second generation deity" in Philip Lutgendorf's model of Hindu gods, or gods with a birth narrative and childhood stories, and therefore welcomes this form of playful

worship (267). Depictions of Ganapati as a human baby with an elephant head, according to Dwyer, evoke at once "the sacredness of children and the cuteness of animals" (266). In this context, Dwyer discusses the numerous animated films with Ganapati as the protagonist, in which he is depicted as childlike, playful and gentle, which have become popular in recent years with middle-class urban families wanting to pass on devotional and cultural values to their children (266).

The two ideas of gentrification and *vatsalyabhava* together offer a way of thinking about selfie cultures at the Ganapati *utsava*. Consider this depiction of a divine family selfie: Ganapati, holding a selfie stick with a smartphone, sits in the centre. His parents, Shiva and Parvati on either side, arms draped around each other, tilt their heads at an angle to fit in the frame. Shiva's right arm appears to be holding onto his *trishul* or trident for stability, while Kartikeya, Ganapati's brother, sits at his feet and looks up at the camera, his arm lovingly resting on his brother's knees. Shiva's *vahana* or vehicle Nandi the bull, pulled into the frame by Parvati, also looks up at the camera phone. Ganapati's right hand appears to be in motion, seemingly to direct the composition of the family photograph, and the others appear to be indulging him, their youngest family member.

Here, we see the family in the act of constituting and presenting themselves as an ideal contemporary nuclear family unit: as parents with two children and a pet. This depiction is reminiscent of a chromolithograph described by Pinney in *Camera Indica*, in which the divine family is seated together in the act of having their photograph taken in a photo studio (1997, 116-117) and reminds us of the iterative imagining of this family over the last few decades. As I have demonstrated earlier in this chapter, gods are often depicted as participating in popular culture and this presentation of the family demonstrates how selfies (or group selfies) are considered a contemporary mode of self and group presentation. The significance of the selfie is not to be missed: as the god of prosperity and luck, Ganapati, depicted as the child engineering the family selfie, brings the gods into the twenty first century of networked photography, "gentrifying" and domesticating his wrathful, ascetic father Shiva, the god of destruction, for residents of the global, performative, commercial city that is Mumbai.



Figure 3.6 A family selfie murti



Figure 3.7 A family selfie murti

In another image, this time a digital illustration for a selfie competition organised by Birla Steel Rajasthan, Ganapati holds a smartphone up to his face with his elephant trunk. The large head, big eyes, elfin ears and curly hair and eyelashes make him look cute and childlike, and the ingenious use of the trunk to hold the phone at a distance generates a sense of fun or *masti*. As the god of knowledge

and intellect, the figure of Ganapati seems to encourage and facilitate these clever interpretations, and depictions of him are open to experimentation, striving to connect with viewers in their specific contexts. Engaging in this low cost, shareable mode of interaction in which the distinctions between subject, object and viewer collapse, Ganapati presents himself as autonomous, independent of traditional religious hierarchies and mediations, welcoming direct engagement with his devotees.



Figure 3.8 An Instagram image from @birlamtsteel



Figure 3.9 A Selfie with Daughter Ganapati murti

In the Figure 3.9, we see a transmogrification of Ganapati into a father/father-figure and daughter, posing as if to take a selfie in response to Modi's Selfie with Daughter campaign. For both the maker and the viewer of the *murti*, it does not seem to matter that the *murti* is dissociated from Hindu mythology, in which Ganapati does not have children, or that given the unique story by which he came to have his elephant head<sup>2</sup>, no other creature will likely resemble him. It seems enough that the "half-seen in advance" (Pinney 2004, 145, 2014, 86) Selfie with Daughter sign is politically efficacious, reminding the devotee or viewer of Modi's national campaign to improve the female to male ratio and encourage the education of girls. The contemporary iconography of this *murti* is worth noting: the femininity of the child Ganapati indicates her youth. The selfie-taking Ganapati, dressed in Modi's trademark sleeveless jacket, has one hand outstretched with a camera phone as if taking a

 $<sup>^2</sup>$  In Hindu mythology, it is said that the Goddess Parvati created a human child out of clay from her body to guard her house while she bathed. When Shiva, her husband, arrived home and was refused entry, he cut the child's head off in anger. After being confronted by Parvati for killing her child, Shiva ordered his men to find a new head to be found for the boy and was presented with the head of a young elephant, which he then reattached to the child's body, bringing it back to life.

selfie, and the other hand, which would traditionally be in the *abhaya mudra* or with the palm of the hand facing outwards and upwards, gestures the "v for victory" sign.



Figure 3.10 A selfie stick Ganapati murti

On Google Images, a search for "selfie Ganapati" presented yet another image of a young Ganapati taking a selfie (Figure 3.10). Analysing the image, it appeared to me that given the differences in colour and shadows, the sunglasses, selfie stick and camera phone had been overlayed on an existing image of a *murti*. In the hands of the *moushak*, or the mouse that is Ganapati's *vahana* or vehicle, I noticed what appeared to be a kite reel, and surmised that in the original *murti*, Ganapati had perhaps been depicted as flying a kite for the celebration of Makar Sankranti, the annual kite flying that marks the arrival of Spring on January 14. Given the similarities in body orientation needed for the flying of a kite and the taking of a selfie, this *murti* offered an opportunity for digital manipulation through minor image editing, or a chance to reuse an image, while updating it for contemporary interests. This reworking of an already existing image demonstrates the possibilities offered by editing applications as well as the palimpsestic nature of representation associated with Ganapati.

The ease of creating and editing images, and publishing them on social networking platforms, seems to have also engendered a new form of direct address, or a speaking on behalf of the deity. A few

weeks before the Ganapati utsava in 2020, when the pandemic was raging and the local government was still unclear with their messaging about the festival celebrations, the Giragaoncha Mahaganpati Instagram page published an image of Ganapati descending from the skies into the courtyard of the building of the pandal area, with the words "ghabru nakaa mee yetoy", or "do not worry, I am on my way". At the top right of the image the phrase "# WarAgainstVirus" contextualises the Marathi phrase, implying that Ganapati's presence during the festival will settle or prevent the rise of COVID-19 cases. Although not a traditional selfie, the direct address of the text written in the first person, as spoken by the deity, highlights the roles of the social media managers of larger Ganapati mandals, and their responsibility in the dissemination of the first-person word of God within a contemporary, technological context. The manager of the Instagram and Facebook pages of the Giragaoncha Mahaganpati (Girgaon's megaGanapati), Sanket Chaudhary, a man in his mid-30s who works as a personal fitness trainer for the rest of the year, confessed that he is only a "believer" for the first two days of the festival when a smaller *murti* is consecrated and worshipped in his family home. He told me that he had volunteered to take on the role of managing the accounts after seeing what other similar *mandals* in the area were publishing, and that running the account was almost like being a social media manager for a celebrity. Chaudhary had planned the layout and text for the image, and commissioned a young cousin trained in graphic design to put it together. He told me that he had received good feedback, and responded to people when they wrote to the account, and "liked" their comments. The final comment on the image, "Too good", from the user kotharejatin, seems to be simultaneously an acknowledgement of the production and the workings of the image as well as its affective impact on the viewer, demonstrating the fluid yet complex ways in which these images are created and received.



Figure 3.11 Instagram image from @girgaonchamahaganpati

# Technology and darshan

While technology as a concept is invoked in the representation of Ganapati to depict him as a modern, evolving deity participating in contemporary life, the earlier example illustrates how it can also be adopted as a tool to maintain and facilitate traditional rituals. To explore this idea in more detail, I will now focus on the act of darshan, and advance an argument about its role in popularising selfie cultures at the Ganapati utsava. Darshan is the practice of seeing, and in turn being seen by the deity (Eck 1981, 3, Babb 1981, 387) and scholars have located it, and by extension the visual, at the core of Hindu worship (Eck 1981, 3, Pinney 2004, 193). Vision, or the process of seeing, is understood in Hindu worship as a material medium and compared to the flow of a fluid, through which the seer and the seen come into contact (Babb 1981, 397). Since eyes are associated with interiority (Eck 1981, 7, Gell 1998, 136), they are considered one of the most important features of the deity, and the consecration of the eyes is associated with the activation of life in the deity (Eck 1981, 40). At the Ganapati utsava, the eyes of the murti are often the last details to be completed by the murtikaar, and special attention is paid to make them look life-like and attentive. During transportation from the workshop to the *pandal*, the face of the *murti* is often covered with a veil, and it is usually lifted just before the *aavahan* or invocation of life into the *murti* on Ganesh Chaturthi or the first day of the festival.

Although there is a mutuality of gaze in the act of *darshan*, the relationship is not one of equality, and it is a "gift of appearance" (Gell 1998, 116), a visual relationship activated only by the "benevolence of the powerholder" (Freitag 2001, 42): the deity gives *darshan*, while the devotee receives it (Eck 1981, 6). Devotees phrase the act of visiting a temple or shrine as "*darshan lene ja rahe hain*" (going to take *darshan*) where the word *darshan* is used synecdochally, as the most important ritual of the proceedings. But even in this hierarchical relationship, the devotee remains an active agent and the reception of *darshan* is contingent on the act of taking it (Gell 1998, 116).

As Hinduism has adapted to technology, new forms of looking have emerged on digital networks. Following Christopher Helland, Natalie Marsh makes a distinction between "religion online", or information about religion presented online, and "online religion" or religious practice conducted online (2007, 36). Marsh writes: "Online, Hindu imagery designated for *darshan* makes up the largest volume of devotional content. Temple websites have special *darshan* spaces, cell phone companies provide deity wallpapers and animated deity "logos," and individual devotees create personalized meditative darshanic videos to share online. The variety of *darshan* imagery is pervasive and ever expansive" (41). According to Marsh, "*darshan*-inspired deity images" such as images designed as wallpapers for mobile phones, offer devotees the opportunity to receive *darshan* on their devices throughout a busy day. Apart from these images designed for viewing, other interactive spaces offer "virtual pilgrimage" and "virtual *puja*" opportunities, from surrogate services, in which a devotee can pay for a ritual to be conducted on their behalf, and receive *prasad* in the post, to video recordings and live streams in which "the online devotee's virtual presence is implied—the camera lens serving as metaphor for the devotee's eyes and vision" (34).

During celebrations of the Ganapati *utsava* in Mumbai, devotees walk into *pandals*, and up to the *murti*, to make eye contact, seek *darshan* and blessings. At the larger, popular *sarvajanik pandals* where the *murtis* known as *navas* or *mannat Ganapatis*, are believed to have wish-granting powers, millions of devotees wait in line for several hours to see the *murti*. Funded by corporate sponsors and donations from devotees, the *pandals* have large budgets that run into millions (source: interview with Arun Dalvi). They use technology such as lighting, sound and screens to expand the scale of spectacularity, as well as to create different mediums for sponsors to communicate their messaging. Large screens are set up to broadcast live recorded images of the inner sanctum of the pandal to devotees waiting in line or outside the *pandal*. On YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, *mandals* set up live video streams to broadcast significant rituals such as the *aagaman* ceremony or the arrival of

the deity into the *pandal*, and the daily *aarati* (waving of a lamp accompanied by songs in praise of the deity) for people to watch from their homes or workplaces. Instead of reducing the number of visitors to the *pandal*, these broadcasts and the activity on social networking platforms become a form of advertising, adding to the grandeur of the *murti* and the *pandal* and attracting more devotees each year. In the lead up to the festival and through the rest of the year, organisers run Facebook and Instagram outreach or marketing pages where they share archival or historic images, images and selfies by devotees, images of preparations, countdowns and "sneak peeks" and social information messages, greetings and wishes from important people such as politicians and celebrities.

One such *navas* or wish-granting Ganapati is the Lalbaugcha Raja (King of Lalbaug, which is a locality in Central Mumbai), popularly believed to be the most visited of the Ganapati *pandals* in Mumbai. Devotees stand in queue for several hours, sometimes days, for *darshan* of the *murti*. The Ganapati of the indigenous Koli fishing community, Lalbaugcha Raja is believed to have risen in when *Loksatta*, the popular Marathi newspaper headquartered in Lalbaug, began to publicise the *murti* as a *navas* Ganapati (source: interview with Pankit Sheth). The *murti* is now amongst the tallest in the city, and its height used to be increased by a few inches every year to compete with neighbouring *murtis*, a practice which was halted only after a flyover (elevated road), which was built on the main road via which the *murti* is brought in and taken out for immersion, dictated the maximum height of the *murti* (Mhaske 2013). The *pandal* has two queues for devotees: the *mukh darshan* [face viewing] queue which is joined by people who wish to see the *murti*'s face and seek *darshan* from a distance of a few metres; and the *charan sparsh* [feet touching] *navas* or *mannat* queue, which is joined by people who people to have fulfilled by touching the *murti*'s feet, an expression of devotion which is considered more intimate than *darshan*.

The Lalbaugcha Raja is unique for a few reasons: first, the *pandal* is one of the few to not have two separate *murtis* – a smaller *puja murti* for worship and a larger one to attract visitors, a common practice in larger *pandals*. Instead, the *mandal* (committee) performs all the rites and the *aarati* on the large *murti*, and allows prominent members of the public, politicians and film and media celebrities to book slots to do the *aarati*. Lalbaugcha Raja is estimated to generate the most money from amongst the Mumbai *pandals*, through advertising sponsors and donations from devotees. Second, unlike other topical *murtis*, or *murtis* that are depicted in different positions or outfits every year, the Lalbaugcha Raja *murti* is patent protected by the *murtikaar* Kambli family, and remains the same every year, seated in the same position, with the same expression and facial features. Novelty

in the presentation is instead introduced through annual updates to the throne on which the *murti* is seated. From 2015 to 2017, the *murti* was seated on different animals: the owl in 2016 drew criticism from devotees who saw it as an inauspicious animal, and they had to be placated by the *mandal* that reminded them that the owl is the *vahana* (vehicle) of Goddess Lakshmi (reference: interview with "Ganapati *utsava* enthusiast" Pankit Sheth on 3 August 2020). In addition to the throne, each year the *pandal* is designed by the Bollywood set director Nitin Desai, prominent member of the Shiv Sena political party, who offers his services *pro bono* to the *mandal*, as a gesture of his devotion to Lalbaugcha Raja (reference: interview with Arun Dalvi, trustee of Lalabaugcha Raja on 1 September 2020). In 2018, to mark its 85<sup>th</sup> year, the throne was given a technological update, and replaced with an LED screen playing the video of a flowing waterfall. In 2019, to celebrate Chandrayaan, India's mission to the moon, the backdrop and throne were replaced with a whole wall of screens, with changing images of the space and the moon, and spacesuits were hung from the roof, to appear to float on either side of the *murti*.



Figure 3.12 An Instagram image featuring the Chandrayaan theme of Lalbaugcha Raja on @raje\_mumbai\_che

In my discussions with devotees who had visited the *pandal* in previous years, I found that people often compared the mood of the Lalbaugcha Raja *pandal* to the frenzy of a live event like a music concert or sporting event, with attendees willingly putting themselves through severe physical discomfort to demonstrate their devotion and get a glimpse of the *murti*. London resident Rohan

Jadhav, who visited Lalbaugcha Raja for the first time in 2018, was amazed by the scale of the production and way in which the mood felt like a "Beyonce concert", with people hysterically trying to get photographs of and selfies with the *murti*, as they jostled each other in the moving crowd. Vineet Kajrolkar, who visited Lalbaugcha Raja in 2019 with his sister who was pregnant and wanted to get the blessings of the *murti*, stood in the *darshan* line for over twelve hours. In that time, he noticed that the traditional tableaux art that would have entertained people who were waiting in line (described in detail in Kaur 1998, 317-360), had been replaced with screens that displayed video advertisements of sponsors and social messages such as "*paani vaachva*" [save water] and a selfie installation by Frooti (a popular brand of packaged Mango juice). While people stood in line, they took photographs of themselves and each other to keep themselves entertained. Kajrolkar remembered that the line was constantly moving, and as soon as the *murti* came within view, people tried to get the clearest photograph of the *murti* on their camera phones as they were being pushed along. Each person only had a few seconds to look at the *murti* before having to turn around and keep walking in the line that led out of the *pandal*. As they turned, people used their front-facing cameras to take selfies with the *murti*.

In 2020, the Lalbaugcha Raja *mandal* cancelled their public celebrations and organised a health camp, at which they conducted blood and plasma donation drives and offered check-ups free of cost, to identify comorbidities and at-risk communities. On social networking platforms, they published selfie videos of film and sport celebrities like Amitabh Bachchan, Madhuri Dixit, Sachin Tendulkar and Raveena Tandon sending their wishes and publicising the health camp. It seemed almost in the absence of the celebrity *murti*, film celebrities were invited to take centre stage, to maintain the glamour appeal of the *mandal*.

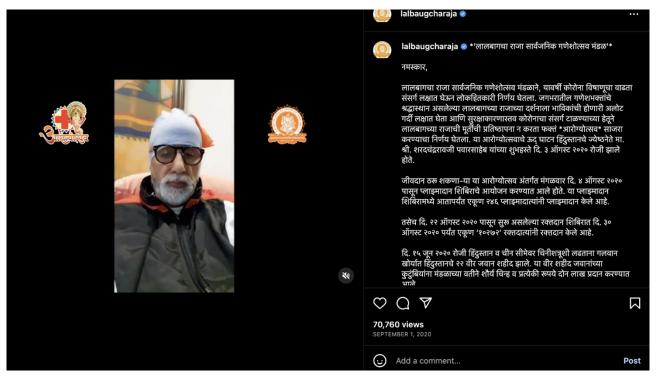


Figure 3.13 Instagram post on @lalbaugcharaja featuring Amitabh Bachchan



Figure 3.14 Instagram post on @lalbaugcharaja featuring Raveena Tandon

In 2021, *murti* worship was resumed, but with social distancing measures in place. The public was still not invited to visit the *pandal*, but in place of physical *darshan*, the *mandal* organised a 24-hour

live stream on Facebook, YouTube and Shemaroo Bhakti (a cable television channel) so devotees could watch the daily *aaratis* and *poojas*. The *murti*, whose height had to be capped at four feet, was seated on a tall seven-headed *naga* or snake. The painted greyscale backdrop, of mountains and a lake foregrounded by painted pillars decorated with naga motifs, communicated a sense of restraint and solemnity, while still offering a sense of expanse through the depth-of-field of the image. Several cameras, both handheld and mounted on dollies, offered visuals of the murti's face, his feet, his gold jewellery and silk robes, and visuals of the person performing the *aarati* and the accompanying choir seated nearby. On the live streams, the magnification of the image changed constantly, from close ups, to sweeping wide shots, and occasionally the image would be rotated upside-down. On the Live Chat section, where viewers could send public text messages, people asked Ganapati for blessings and sent their pranaams or salutations with emojis of joint hands and flowers. For the final visarjan procession, as the *murti* was taken for submersion, despite police patrols, crowds of young men with camera phones in their hands gathered around the truck, trying to get a glimpse of the *murti* and to take a photograph. Pankit Sheth, who I introduced at the start of the chapter, was part of this crowd, and managed to get a selfie with the *murti* to continue the tradition that he had started a few years before. Observing the space as it evolved over these three years, and through conversations with devotees, I noticed different meanings associated with technology in the pandal, and specifically, with selfies with the *murti*. Using Lalbaugcha Raja as the anchor to the discussion, and with supplementary observations and anecdotes from other spaces, I now proceed to explore each idea.



Figure 3.15 Screenshot of live feed of Lalbaugcha Raja on YouTube



Figure 3.16 Screenshot of live feed of Lalbaugcha Raja on YouTube



Figure 3.17 Screenshot of live feed of Lalbaugcha Raja on YouTube



Figure 3.18 Screenshot of live feed of Lalbaugcha Raja on YouTube



Figure 3.19 Screenshot of live feed of Lalbaugcha Raja on YouTube



Figure 3.20 Screenshot of live feed of Lalbaugcha Raja on YouTube



Figure 3.21 Screenshot of live feed of Lalbaugcha Raja on YouTube



Figure 3.22 Screenshot of live feed of Lalbaugcha Raja on YouTube



Figure 3.23 Instagram image on @pankit\_sheth at the Lalbaugcha Raja visarjan

# **Enabling circuits of commerce**

At the Lalbaugcha Raja *pandal*, dominated by screens that magnify and broadcast images of the *murti* and advertisements from sponsors, and backgrounds and decor that celebrate contemporary national accomplishments such as India's research mission to the moon, the "vibe" of the festive arena, a term that I explored in the KGAF chapter, is decidedly technological. The descriptions of the way in which people who waited in queue for several hours used their camera phones to photograph themselves, echoe the descriptions of selfie cultures at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival. At the Ganapati *utsava*, people seem to be primarily creating selfies as evidence of participation, like they would at a Beyoncé concert as was mentioned previously, or a similarly exclusive event where access is restricted, and where presence signals political power, popularity, perseverance or physical endurance. The presence of other digital objects like the Frooti selfie "activation", much like the Fevicol "Horsey" at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, encourages networked photography and a creative visual *jugalbandi* between the visitor and the *pandal*.

Writing about the Durga Puja, a similarly *sarvajanik* Hindu festival celebrated in West Bengal with as much enthusiasm as the Ganapati *utsava* is celebrated in Maharashtra, Swati Chattopadhyay argues that religious festivals have a contrary position in capitalist economy. She writes, "As significant moments of consumption on the part of the populace, they are profitable", and yet, they "insert a different conception of circular and/or mythic time into the homogenous, progressive time of capital, interrupting its accumulative logic. They halt "work," that is, the regime of productive capital, by insisting on withdrawing labor from the circuit of exchange to be devoted to producing enjoyment as use value and religious merit as symbolic value. This is the moment the laboring body asserts its autonomy through leisure or nonwork [...] As expenditure of money, festive celebrations appear as waste because they disrupt the circularity and circulation of money." (2012, 225-226). Chattopadhyay's observation about the contrary position that the festival occupies in an increasingly capitalist society, which could also apply to the Ganapati *utsava*, offers an interesting question about what role the selfie and networked photography might play in resolving this conflict, by bringing the body from leisure into circuits of work.

Much like the selfie prompts and installations at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, where the bodies of visitors are territorialised for commercial profits by brands and the organisers, the bodies of the devotees and visitors at the Ganapati *utsava* could be seen as being made to perform work for the profit of the *mandal*. Like in the case of the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, these installations also bring

the bodies of the devotees into circuits of commerce, and the bodies perform labour in the service of the *pandals*. Recognising the potential of this interaction, organisers seem to be embracing selfie practices in a few different ways. At the same time, even as I have likened these networks of commerce, algorithmic visibility, creative interpretation and image-making to the practices at the KGAF, the element of devotion and community identity at the Ganapati *utsava*, and the autonomy that the selfie allows, which is especially significant in a hierarchical Hindu space, challenge and complicate totalising criticisms of the territorialisation of the eye and body.

At Abhyudaya Nagarcha Raja (King of Abhyudaya Nagar) in Parel, the *pandal* theme for 2019 was "Selfie Palace". The pandal was bathed in pink and lavender lighting, decorated with elaborate "*jhumka* diamond" or glass chandeliers, costing "27-30,000 rupees" (roughly 300 British pounds) and water fountains. The total cost of the *pandal* was 12 lakh rupees (12,000 British pounds). Chandrashekhar, the designer of the pandal, told a news channel, "*Toh yeh nayaa kuch hai. Kyunki log Facebook pe Instagram pe, ya Whatsapp pe apna photo Bappa ke saath rakhte hain, toh yeh mahal ki khaasiyat yeh hai ki aap aao, selfie nikalo aur share karo. Toh anand jo aata hai na, aap jaise andar aao." [This is a novel idea. Because people put photos of themselves with Ganapati Bappa on Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, so the speciality of this palace is that you can come here, take a selfie, and share it. As soon as you enter, you feel happy.]* 



Figure 3.24 Screenshot of a video festuring the Selfie Palace on News Nation on YouTube

Ravindra Parab, one of the residents of Abhyudaya Nagar, where this *pandal* was located, told me that younger people in their 20s and 30s were beginning to take on leadership roles in the *mandal*. Older members were happy to let them choose youthful themes like selfies, to encourage them to take initiative and participate in the organisation of celebrations. It might be useful to note here that the

term *utsava* is derived from the word *utsaha*, meaning pleasure or zeal, and that despite several shifts in the way that the festival is understood and celebrated by different socio-political groups, there is a consensus in the appreciation for public gathering, celebration and enjoyment and that the Ganapati *utsava* serves an integrative role in society more so than other Hindu festivals (Kaur 1998, 86-88). Following Kaur, one could surmise that the selfie as a youthful form of engagement with the Ganapati *utsava*, is approved of by older or more traditional devotees because of the festival's associations with celebration, integration and local pride and the way in which it can physically draw visitors into the devotional space.

It was also evident that the "Selfie Palace" theme not only appealed to younger local mandal members, but also generated foot traffic and was considered valuable for its potential to extend the reach of the mandal and increase opportunities for advertising revenue. Several other pandals similarly use selfies as a feature, at varying scales, to attract camera-wielding visitors, for whom the time of year is as much a time for devotion and gathering, as it is for content creation and online engagement. At the Giragaoncha Mahaganpati pandal, Sanket Chaudhary, previously introduced in this chapter as the manager of the social media accounts of this mandal, designed what he called a "selfie chair" in 2019: a simple wooden chair, placed at a specific distance from the murti and built at a custom height that allowed the visitor to sit "aaram se", at ease, while taking a selfie with the murti in the background. The carpenter who was contracted to build the chair asked Chaudhary why he couldn't use a "throne", an armchair with a gilded frame and velvet upholstery, often used to seat couples at their wedding, and considered more appropriate for Hindu celebrations. Chaudhary had to explain to him that the height of the headrest would obscure the background and ruin the selfie. This focus on contemporary aesthetics and a consideration of the Instagram value of a piece of decor, rather than its role in contributing to the shaan or traditional opulence of the decor, reflects a move away from tradition and the increasing imbrication of commerce, technology, religion and global aesthetic trends. As a gesture of hospitality, the selfie chair acknowledges and privileges visitors' desire for a selfie and networked interaction over physical comfort and traditional aesthetics. At the same time, the selfie chair, as an "activation" generates advertising by the visitor on social networking platforms.

Chaudhary told me about a new career that had emerged in the increasingly corporatised festival, of the *dalaal* or the broker. For a semi-famous *pandal* like the Giragaoncha Mahaganpati, in a busy location and with a Facebook and Instagram presence, a broker could arrange for an advertiser to pay

1 lakh rupees (approximately 1000 GBP) for a banner at the pandal and take thirty percent as his brokerage fee. The pandal usually has five or six such banners each year and generates an income of around four lakhs (approximately 4000 GBP) from advertising. To affix the value of one such banner, among other metrics to quantify the popularity of the pandal (including number of daily visitors, amount of money collected and news coverage by local and national media organisations) a new metric that has emerged is the "traffic" or engagement generated on social networking platforms. Chaudhary's posts on Instagram, discussed earlier in the chapter, and selfies of visitors, especially celebrities, bring followers both to the Instagram accounts as well as the physical *pandal*. The selfies, as evidence of visits from these celebrities, offer quantifiable popularity of the *pandal* and creates possibilities for commercial collaborations with brands looking to advertise their products to devotees and participants of the Ganapati utsava. In Figure 3.25, we see photographs of Jeetendra the film actor visiting the Girgaoncha Mahaganapati pandal collated into a Facebook album. The words in the caption which provides this information are individually tagged to make each word searchable on the social networking site, essentially archiving this album for public viewing. Like the selfie videos posted by celebrities on the Lalbaugcha Raja Instagram page during the COVID-19 pandemic, these images of Jeetendra are evidence of celebrity endorsement, and are expected to drive traffic both to the social networking site pages, as well as the physical pandal. In 2019, the profits that the Giragaoncha Mahaganpati pandal made from advertisements during the festival were put towards buying umbrellas for all the building residents, camera equipment for the youth group that volunteered to handle the media and outreach for the pandal, and t-shirts with logos of the pandal, sold at cost price to organisers, locals and devotees. In this way, the profits were once again used to generate and maintaining a community identity.

Wetch choudhary is a tending an event with Mahadev Adavakar and context. September 14, 2018 . A september 14, 2



Figure 3.25 Facebook images of actor Jeetendra at the Girgaoncha Mahaganpati

### Selfie as corporeal gesture and to constitute the self

In Guha Thakurta's discussion of the Durga Puja, we see how photography becomes a way to arrest mythic/circular time and the impermanence of the festival. Guha Thakurta describes how "pandal hopping" or visiting several *pandals* over the course of the evening, an integral activity during Durga Puja, is often documented with photographs which are shared on social networking platforms. She uses John Frow's description of photography "as witness, as commemoration, as aesthetic framing partakes of just that mix of the sacred and poetic' that transforms a mass touristic practice in such impersonal crowded spaces into a form of personalized experience and intimate possession of the moment of viewing and touring" (2007, 65) to argue that spectatorship at the Durga Puja in Kolkata

"rests on a similar process of authentication between origin and trace—where the ephemeral experience of the tours finds its main gratification in the permanence of the clicked image, and in the pleasures of its future consumption and sharing" (65). She writes, "It is the impossibility of any long or close viewing that makes for the increasing frenzy of crowd photography inside every spectacular pandal, before every stunning Durga image. The epiphany of *darshan* is displaced here by the climactic act of the clicking and storage of images. The fleeting nature of these tours must be compensated by the photographs that will remain for sharing and relishing long after the festival is over" (65). In contrast to Guha Thakurta's observation of how photography replaces *darshan*, however, the networked devices and camera phones at the Ganapati *utsava* supplement *darshan and* create new forms of engagement between the devotee and the deity.

In 2021, with public gathering still restricted by the Mumbai Police and devotees hesitant to return to crowded spaces, many took to YouTube for *darshan* of their favourite Ganapati *murtis*. MyChannel Darshan, a Mumbai-based television channel which streams "online *darshan*" or live footage of popular deities and temples from across India, was live streaming video from the Khetwadicha Ganaraj pandal on YouTube. I watched the area around the pandal fill with local devotees, and then empty out, as people arrived in small, socially distanced groups for the *aarati*. People took images of the deity, images of each other posing alongside the deity with hands folded or touching the feet of the deity, and selfies with the deity in the background.



Figure 3.26 Screenshot of live footage streamed from the Khetwadicha Ganraj pandal 2021 on YouTube by Mychannel Darshan



Figure 3.27 Screenshot of live footage streamed from the Khetwadicha Ganraj pandal 2021 on YouTube by Mychannel Darshan



Figure 3.28 Screenshot of live footage streamed from the Khetwadicha Ganraj pandal 2021 on YouTube by Mychannel Darshan

While watching these images from the Khetwadicha Ganaraj *pandal*, I began to think about the rituals associated with Hindu worship, and where networked photography might fit into devotional practice. One of the most popular forms of worship, the *pooja*, is a symbolic set of rituals performed at varying scales and in a range of contexts. At the Ganapati *utsava*, for the duration of the festival, the most popular and well-atttended ritual of the *pooja* is the *aarati* or the waving of the lamp, which is performed several times a day and is accompanied by traditional songs in praise of the deity. Given the *sarvajanik* aspect of the Ganapati *utsava*, the caste of the individual performing the ritual is not usually considered relevant, but the *aarati* is usually only conducted by men. At some *pandals*, including the Girgaoncha Mahaganapati, male organisers take turns to lead the ritual and hold the lamp. At the larger *pandals*, such as Lalbaugcha Raja, male celebrities and politicians are invited to conduct the *aarati*. Family members of the person conducting the ritual are usually invited to stand behind the individual, and others participating in the ritual join in to sing the *bhajans* or hymns.

Traditional corporeal acts that constitute the *pooja*, such as bowing in front of the *murti*, performing *aarati*, taking *prasad* (devotional offerings in the form of food to be consumed by the devotee) or touching the feet of the *murti*, are also performed as gestures of respect or auspiciousness in other social contexts: younger people might touch the feet of an older person to seek their blessings or as a respectful salutation, and older people might wave a *diya* or lamp before a young person for events

that would benefit from an auspicious start, such as an important examination, a job interview or a journey. In a similarly respectful, hierarchical relationship, such as when one encounters a celebrity, it is now customary for an individual to request a selfie, not just for the sake of documentation, but also as a symbolic request conveying appreciation, respect or fondness, which is acknowledged by the celebrity in their acquiescing to the selfie. The final image, therefore, demonstrates not just the meeting, but that the two people spent a few moments standing together, with their attention focussed on a single device and act. Although they stand side-by-side, there is an inherent acknowledgement of social roles. Like the practice of *darshan*, one party requests the selfie and the other permits it.

If Hindu gestures of auspiciousness have migrated from the realm of devotional worship to social life, could we similarly argue that the selfie, as a corporeal demonstration of respect being offered and received, has been adopted into the devotional sarvajanik sphere, when the self-sufficiency of the selfie offers individuals regardless of their gender or social status, a chance to perform an act of devotion to mark the moment of meeting the *murti*? For the devotees watching the *pooja* and *aarati* and unable to participate because of their gender or social status, the selfie as an act of participation in the ritual proceedings could be understood as what Christopher Pinney terms "corpothetics", aesthetics which simultaneously and synaesthetically mobilise all the senses through the eyes (Pinney 2004, 194). In Pinney's examination of the worship practices of Scheduled Caste communities in the village of Bhatisuda in Madhya Pradesh, darshan empowers those who are not permitted to visit temples because of caste restrictions, to see and to be seen by their deities at home. In their homes, these members of the community who do not have access to the *murtis* they worship, imbue chromolithographs of deities with the power to return their gaze, by decorating the images with zari, flowers and other adornments which transform paper chromolithographs into powerful deities. Bodily performances such as the folding of hands and the uttering of *matras* further reinforce this power of the deity. Similarly, we could see the practice of taking a selfie with the murti at a crowded *pandal*, as a corpothetic gesture that creatively simulates closeness and allows the devotee to perform their devotion, when other modes of worship are unavailable.

Another way in which to think about this process is to consider parallels between the way in which the screen of the device and the front facing camera reflect the image of the selfie taker back to them, and the role of the mirror in traditional Hindu worship. Alfred Gell, in an examination of the agency of Hindu devotional images, credits the mirror-effect created by *darshan* as the action that animates the image (118, 1998). He writes:

The eyes of the god, which gaze at the devotee, mirror the action of the devotee, who gazes at the god. Sometimes (as in Jain temples) the eyes of images are set with little mirrors, so that the devotee can see himself or herself reflected in the image's eye in the act of looking. Even in the absence of actual mirrors, the image, so far as its ocular activity goes, reflects the action of the devotee [...] the situation is defined in terms of the devotee's own agency and result; the devotee looks and sees. The image-as-mirror is doing what the devotee is doing, therefore, the image also looks and sees [...] [I]n image-worship, the devotee does not just see the idol, but sees herself (as an object) being seen by the idol (as a subject). The idol's 'seeing' is built into the devotee's own self-awareness at one remove as the object which is seen by the idol. She sees herself as the idol sees her, kneeling before it, gazing upwards. In that she can see herself seeing the idol, the idol must see her, because when she sees herself seeing the idol (from her point of view, a datum of immediate experience) the idol is seen by her as seeing her. The 'idol seeing her' is a *nested component* of 'her seeing herself seeing the idol' (118-120).

Gell's theorisation of the mirror-effect of darshan, while useful in the attention it brings to the complexity and dynamism of *darshan*, could be critiqued for its attempt to use empirical justification for Hindu worship, instead of acknowledging a different, non-Western mode of conceptualising life forms and divinity. In Hindu worship, divine energy is invoked into the murti, after which the murti is understood to have taken on life. The deity is given its specific form because is both a representation of the divine, as well as a receptacle for the divine. The role of the mirror in Hindu worship is perhaps better explained by Pinney in his discussion of the frames of the chromolithographs that are worshipped in Bhatisuda. Pinney argues that surfaces of home shrines are mirror glazed so that people who are denied access to communal places of worship because of their caste identities, can see themselves inhabiting the same space as the deity during their worship, and thereby can empower themselves as devotees in an act of co-presence (2001, 168). As a sarvajanik festival, originally designed to raise awareness about anticolonial sentiment and the movement for Independence, the function of the Ganapati utsava has always also been about the recognition of the potential of community action, and by extension, recognition of the role or the potential of the self. If we were to therefore apply Pinney's analysis of the role of the mirror in Hindu worship to contemporary selfie practices at the Ganapati utsava, we might similarly see the act of seeing oneself on the screen of the camera phone in the same frame of the *murti* in the process of taking a selfie, an act of constituting oneself as the devotee, resident and citizen. The medium of photography and the act of spectatorship have also been used to think about subjunctive citizenship (Azoulay 2009, 2010, Citizens of Photography 2022) and the "contract" between citizens (Azoulay 2009, 17). Azoulay, who uses images of Palestinians from the Second Intifada to discuss this "contract" specifically used the word to ground the discussion in a political sphere in which participants have rights and a "shared duty toward one another" (17), and in which the addressed recognises their role in this formulation through

their spectatorship. Following Pinney and Azoulay, the act of using the networked front-facing camera, as a technology that is operated by the self, and which gives the individual a greater influence on the composition and dissemination of the image than other modes of devotional memorialisation, and the selfie as an object, give the devotee agency to see and situate themselves within the social and political order for the external networked world.

The selfie, as a mode of self-directed photography, also marks a point of departure from previous forms of memorialisation in Hindu worship, which are controlled and monetised by the religious order to maintain preexisting socio-religious distinctions. At the Nathdwara temple in Rajasthan, for example, when Manoratha, a centuries-old practice of painted memorials which depicted priests and devotees standing on either side of the deity Srinathji, was replaced with photography, the priests in the temple developed an innovative technique to maintain control over the production of these new memorials, by having devotees photographed in profile, and then charging a fee to paste the cut-outs of the photographs alongside an image of Srinathji (Rajadhyaksha 1993, 59, Jain 2007, 118). In this way, while maintaining the traditional framing strategies of the memorial but replacing the time-consuming medium of paint with photography, and by turning the exercise of cutting and pasting into a ritual, Ashish Rajadhyaksha observes that the "mechanical-reproductive faculty took on a divine aspect, and the ritual of sticking it on (not permitted except by those authorized by the priests) not only acknowledged the fact of the devotee's presence but denoted his deliverance" (1993, 59).

Unlike the highly controlled Manoratha, however, at the Ganapati *utsava*, the selfie and the social networking platforms on which images are circulated, give the devotee more autonomy over the ways in which they construct and present religious memorials. Moreover, for devotees unable to visit *pandals* during the Ganapati *utsava*, mobile and desktop applications offer the opportunity to visually construct the pilgrimage. People can choose from a variety of depictions of Ganapati: from a young, cartoonish Americanised Ganapati wearing a reversed baseball cap and holding a guitar, to an elegant Ganapati presented in hues of purple and holding a lotus the symbol of enlightenment in one hand, a bowl of sweets in the second, and offering the viewer and selfie-participant his blessings with the third. Again, this is not a new form of imagining: to demonstrate how mass-produced images are actively shaped by the individual, thereby turning the consumption of the image into a simultaneously shared and particularised experience, Freitag describes a pastiche photo by a Birla Temple photographer, in which the temple is foregrounded with a studio portrait of three generations of males in the family, and Shiva, with his hand in blessing pose, is titled diagonally into the frame (2003,

377). In her discussion of the example, Freitag explains that while it does not necessarily evidence a physical journey, the image demonstrates how modern technology can give individuals the agency to actively create surreal connections and picture their devotion. Similarly, in the Selfie with Ganesha mobile applications, devotees can imagine and experiment with constituting themselves as devotees. The frontal address of Hindu deities, unlike the 'disinterested' representation of Western figures (Pinney 2001, 168), invites a direct gaze and perhaps even makes a selfie with the deity particularly appealing, in the way that the orientation of the body allows the devotee to present themselves alongside the deity, occupying the same frame and addressing the viewer together, like two people taking a selfie together might do.

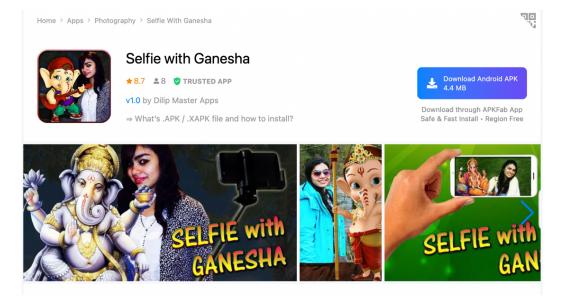


Figure 3.29 Screenshot of the Selfie with Ganesha application on Google Play

"Selfie" *bhajans* (songs addressed to or praising gods) and *bhakti geet* (popular devotional songs) on YouTube, which either entreat the deity for permission to take a selfie, or encourage people to take a selfie with the deity, reveal the fascinating ways in which these images are used or circulated, and continuities in technology, devotion, and other aspects of life. Following in the *biraha* tradition of Bhojpuri folk music (Marcus 1989, 99) or the *lokageet* Marathi tradition, these *bhakti geet* usually have simple tunes and rhyme schemes and are produced by large record labels. The lyrics often incorporate analogies to technological trends or other topical elements of contemporary life, for the songs to be relatable or memorable. The following lyrics, from the song "Ganpati ke saath le le selfie" by Kasam Kawal give us an indication of the sacred value that a selfie with Ganapati as a digital image might offer a devotee: Bigde banenge tere kaam re sabhi mere ganpati ke saath mein le le selfie mushkil mein pyaare tere kaam ye lagegi phone mein tere virus na rahegi ho sakta hai call kare re Modi mere ganpati ke saath mein le le selfie

Your obstacles will be overcome Take a selfie with my Ganapati It will be useful in times of distress Your phone won't be infected with a virus You might even get a call from Modi Take a selfie with my Ganapati

In the song, the singer urges the listener to perform the physical act of taking a selfie with a *murti* of Ganapati, to generate luck and protection. The device and user are imbricated, and the device on which the image is captured and stored is equally blessed by the act of selfie-taking. Luck is expressed in telephonic terms, in a potential phone call from the Prime Minister of India (well-known for his fondness of the selfie) and the device, and by extension the user of the device, are protected from digital malfeasance (or viruses) by the image. Like material substances such as fire and water, that are used to ritually purify and protect devotees (Jain 2007, 262), the selfie, as evidence or a reminder of physical proximity between the *murti* and the devotee, acts as a technological talisman, transmitting divinity from the deity to the devotee, as well as the networks and devices on which the selfies are taken and stored. The image of a selfie with Ganpati, as a freeze-frame of the moment at which Ganapati's sacred affective power is transferred to the devotee, becomes a symbol of the blessing of knowledge, wealth, fortune and luck, which suffuses the devotee's phone and their interactions on it, extending to digital networks and potential human relationships that are enabled by the device.

#### Jugaad and hybrid darshan

In my discussion of the devotee experience the Lalbaugcha Raja *pandal*, I described how people regularly queue for several hours for *darshan* and to touch the feet of the *murti*. Like at other popular *pandals*, smartphones provide a source of entertainment during the wait: people take photographs,

selfies and videos, browse social networking platforms and talk or chat with friends. The queue is constantly in motion, and even when devotees reach the front, they have only a few moments to take in the splendour of the *pandal* and the *murti* and seek *darshan*, before being made to turn around ushered towards the exit by *pandal* organisers and the Mumbai Police. People maximise these few highly anticipated moments by taking photographs and videos on their phone as soon as the *murti* comes into view. The smartphone camera gives them something to do and provides an embodied affective gesture with which to engage with the *murti* while waiting their turn to touch the feet of the *murti*. Once the devotees have reached the front and have had a moment for contemplation and prayer, they are made to turn their backs to the deity, the main stage now completely out of view.

In this new temporal and spatial position, turned away from the *murti*, many use the front cameras on their phones to continue looking at the deity, who is now in their background. Here, the front-facing camera becomes as much as a tool for selfie photography, as a mirror by which to continue the moment of darshan. We might think of this creative use of the front camera and the screen of the smartphone as a form of jugaad, a "Punjabi word that means workaround, hack, trick, or make do" (Rai 2019, x). Rai explains, "today in ultranationalist, globalized India, it is both hailed and derided as a characteristically nationalist form of frugal innovation and also a possibly mediocritizing habit for shortcuts" (Rai 2019, x). In Keywords for India: A Conceptual Lexicon for the 21st Century, Lallan Baghel similarly explains, "Jugaad is not as much about a new innovation as it is about the assembling of already existing technology, in order to make it more suitable to local needs while also being cost-effective (2020, 317). Baghel discusses the two ways in which the term is used, "The first, is when it is used for local technological innovations and the second usage is to denote the gain of personal favours through the bypassing of formal institutional norms and procedures in the public domain [...] In its more positive sense, it points to the creative enterprise of Indian masses who innovate and use technology for their own empowerment, without ever bothering to claim the jugaad as their own. Jugaad, here, is innovation sans patents. In its negative connotation, jugaad points to the vulnerability of masses and craftiness of the society and system at the same time. In a deeper sense, jugaad points to where the Indian democracy falls short." (2020, 317).

Both the positive and negative meanings of *jugaad* which Baghel discusses in his explanation of the term, can be understood as emerging from the same set of circumstances. As much as the positive associations with the word *jugaad* refer to innovative responses to a lack of resources, the negative connotations of the word similarly acknowledge the ways in which ideas of fairness are abrogated

when confronted with limited or unevenly distributed resources. Even though the Ganapatu *utsava* is celebrated as a community event, the personal relationship between the deity and the devotee is special, and the ritual of *darshan*, as a private exchange, exemplifies how this private relationship is fostered in a crowded, bustling setting. At the Ganapati *utsava*, if we see the time and space for this personal relationship as the resource which is limited, the smartphone camera and screen could be understood as *jugaad* strategies that are used to expand access to this resource.

Following Rai and Baghel, we might think of the selfie practices in the queue, or the re-assembling of the already-existing technology of the front camera and the screen of the smartphone, designed originally for people to look at their own faces while taking a selfie, as jugaad strategy developed by devotees to continue making eye contact with the deity, constituting themselves as devotees and extending the moment of darshan even after their back is forcibly turned to the deity. The jugaad act of taking a selfie with the murti in the queue making its way out of the pandal, unlike other selfie practices designed to quantify the human body for profit, can be understood as a practise that is "implicitly against capital" (Rai xiv), in the way that it is not designed or encouraged by the organisers or mandal members, but is instead a collective, creative and embodied affective act. As Rai argues, "[i]n a jugaad event the boundaries of what is both possible and necessary become plastic through a more or less pragmatic experimentation in habits, capacities, material processes, collective enunciations, and assemblages" (Rai 2019, xiv). Rai's comment can be used to think about the way in which the selfies taken in the queue heading towards the exit render time and space plastic. Despite being shepherded out of the pandal, devotees can extend the moment of darshan and in this way, the act of looking into a smartphone screen becomes an embodied resistance to the governmental forces controlling the pace and flow of people, their vision, and their devotion.

Another way in which the front-facing camera on networked devices is used for *jugaad darshan*, is when people visiting *pandals* video call their friends and family who are physically present at the *pandal*, to include them in the moment of *darshan* of the *murti*. Although *darshan*, and the exchange of sight between the deity and the devotee remains free from gendered (and to some extent castebased) discrimination at *sarvajanik* festivals, mediation itself is not new to Hindu worship. In *savarna* (caste Hindu) worship, longer or more elaborate rituals are often conducted through the medium of a priest, who recites the *manta* or chant, and regulates the religious ceremony, only inviting the beneficiaries to participate in specific aspects of the proceedings, such as by repeating certain phrases or by sprinkling *ghee* in the *havan* or fire. While this mediation often denies direct access, it

accommodates other possibilities, such as long-distance worship. For example, many temples offer mail order services, through which devotees can send money to have rituals conducted on their behalf (Marsh 2007). To signify and complete the ritual, the temples, after having completed the rituals, send edible substances, powders or ashes as *prasad* (blessed offerings) by post to the devotee, which are meant to be consumed or daubed on the body for the devotee to imbibe the blessings from the ritual. Photographs and selfies could similarly be seen as a way of generating a sense of long-distance worship or worship-by-proxy, in which the person present at the devotional site, connects with people in other places over video call, and allows them a chance to witness rituals and seek *darshan*.

Following Marsh's uses the term "online religion" for religious artefacts and their worship on the Internet, I propose the terms "hybrid religion" and "hybrid *darshan*", to consider devotional practices that exist between the physical spaces and digital networks. "Hybrid space" has been increasingly conceptualised as a space of potential and becoming (following Deleuze) which is created by "the constant movement of users who carry portable devices continuously connected to the Internet and to other users" (de Souza e Silva 2006 262) and important to consider because as "mobile users create a more dynamic relationship with the Internet, embedding it in outdoor, everyday activities, we can no longer address the disconnection between physical and digital spaces" (de Souza e Silva 2006 262).

Hybrid religious practices include live streams organised by *mandals*, which devotees can participate in either by being present in physical space of the recording or by watching online, QR codes and other material artefacts like selfie points or selfie-themed objects that prompt people to engage digitally. This idea of hybrid space at a devotional site takes on a deeper significance in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic, when people wanted to seek solace in devotion, but were unable to travel to the physical sites because of physical vulnerabilities and the risk of contracting or spreading the virus. Video calling technologies, which became popular during the pandemic, offered a way of overcoming some of these restrictions, and seem to continue being popular even after the pandemic restrictions were lifted. At the Ganapati *utsava* in 2023, I noticed many visitors at the *pandal* make video calls to friends and family members, to show them the *murti* and the decorations, and to offer them the ability to take *darshan* of the *murti*. The video call, particularly in selfie mode, is as important intervention here, as it allows not just the person on the other end of the phone to see the *murti*, but also to be seen by the *murti*, a crucial aspect of the practice of *darshan*. In yet another interaction, I noticed the social possibilities but also some restrictive aspects of hybrid darshan practices. As Gordon and de Souza e Silva note, co-presence in hybrid spaces must be understood to include not just the people present in physical space, but also people who are connected remotely (2011). The Ganapati utsava celebrations are at once personal between the deity and the devotee, and a communal experience, shared by groups of varying sizes, such as the nuclear family, extended family, housing society, locality and city. The idea of local identity and placemaking is central to the celebrations of the festival for long-term residents of Mumbai, and during the Ganapati utsava, it is common for people to return to their childhood homes, especially if they grew up in areas that have sarvajanik Ganapati pandals, and to participate in organising the festival. Many people who live further away from the city, however, are unable to make this annual journey. Especially since the areas in which the sarvajanik pandals are situated are densely populated with small one-bedroom flats, older residents who have retired from work tend to return to their ancestral homes in Gujarat and Maharashtra, leaving the flats for their children and grandchildren who work and study in the city. The pandemic, too, prompted an exodus from these "old" parts of Mumbai characterised by chawls or tenement housing, in which amenities like toilets and bathrooms are often shared by flats, and living communally, while often pleasurable for its social aspect, were unsuitable for immunocompromised individuals. Returning to the festival for the Ganapati utsava, while often an annual tradition, might not be an option for many who left the city because of a lack of safe housing. Video calls, in these situations, offer the possibility for hybrid co-presence and the opportunity to build and maintain traditions and relationships based on place, when physical space is rendered unsafe.

The affective and social possibilities that hybrid religious practices offer to families and communities were demonstrated to me at a small *pandal* in the by-lanes of Girgaon during the Ganapati *utsava* in 2023. There, I met a pair of women who were visiting the *pandal* with their young children. This was their local *pandal*, they told me, and they had brought *laddoos* or sweets to present to the deity on behalf of their mothers-in-law. While talking to me, the women video called their mothers-in-law, who were in Ahmedabad, to show them that they had completed the task assigned to them, and to show them the *pandal* and to let them take darshan of the *murti*. To me, this moment demonstrated not only how mobile video technologies and digital literacy might enable the building and sustaining of traditions and communities across physical distance, but also how these technologies can be used to monitor and control, an idea I explore in Chapter 5.

Religious festivals, because of the large numbers of audiences they attract in India, and consequently the amount of revenue they generate through advertising, are also at the forefront of experimentation in online video streaming. Another aspect which makes hybrid religion appealing is the way in which it might alleviate the tension between maintaining exclusionary practices in the name of tradition and relaxing them in favour of changing social norms. Traditionally, although people travel great distances for darshan of the Lalbaugcha Raja murti during the Ganapati utsava and the final visarjan procession, only the male members of the aboriginal Koli community are permitted to attend the final stage of the visarjan, when they wade into the Arabian Sea at Girgaon Chowpatty to submerge the murti into the waters. In 2023, the Lalbaugcha Raja visarjan event was live streamed on YouTube and Instagram, and I watched the proceedings with people from around the world. The footage was recorded by a middle-aged man from the Lalbaug Koli community on the boat with his smartphone and did not have any of the production value of the professional live streams from the pandal. The footage was shaky and grainy, and while recording, the man continued to shout instructions to younger men in the boat, while they struggled to lower the weighty murti into the sea. In the live chat, alongside their salutations to the *murti*, people offered help by commenting when the recording was accidentally muted or when the visuals were unclear. Although the amateurism of the recording created a sense of intimacy and participation, and watching the rolling, embodied footage and listening to directions being shouted out across the boats created a feeling of almost having been present at the boat, in coming years the quality of the broadcast is likely to become more professional and lose some of its intimate charm. If these new hybrid darshan practices signal a shift in the way that devotion is performed and experienced, it will be interesting to track how forms of digital participation and viewing practices will evolve with the development of Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and other technological innovations.

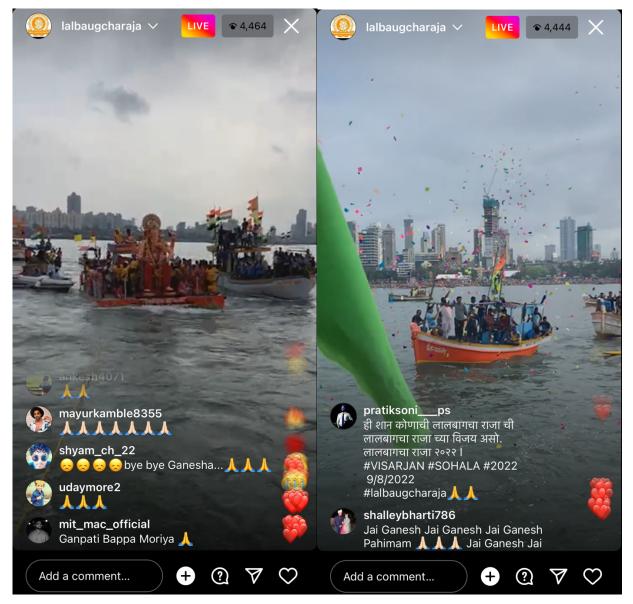


Figure 3.30 Screenshot of the live stream of the Lalbaugcha Raja visarjan in 2023

### Conclusion

Shifting from the focus on the collaborative aspects of the selfie, which were the focus of the previous chapter, in this chapter, I considered what new meanings emerge when selfie practices take on a divine aspect. I demonstrated how the divine figure of Ganapati is depicted as a selfie-taking young person to present him as trendy, urban and approachable, and to make the figure of Ganapati amenable to marketing brands and products.

I also considered the imbrication of national Hindutva politics in celebrations of the festival by considering a Selfie with Daughter Ganapati *murti and* discussing the potential interpretations of a selfie taken in an ideologically motivated *pandal*. In my discussion of selfie-themed objects in the

festival *pandal*, I examined how the selfie is used as a commercial tool to bring people to the site and monetise their presence and their social media content through advertising, a theme consistent with the previous chapter. At the Ganapati *utsava*, however, unlike commercial festivals and events, the historical background of the festival as a space for people to collectivise for political and social action, supports to a certain extent, the redistribution of profits within the community for development projects.

One might have assumed that the devout older population of devotees at the Ganapati *utsava*, like the cultural elite older generations at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, would be critical or dismissive of selfie cultures, seeing them as symptomatic of the vanity of younger generations. However, although it is accepted in cultural circles that contemporary art demands a rigour or a correct way of engagement, the willingness to encourage selfies at the Ganapati *utsava* appears to be influenced loosely by *bhakti* philosophy, or the belief that a surface or fun interaction has the potential to facilitate a deeper engagement, drawing the devotee to spaces of worship and generating both a physical proximity and an emotional connection that comes from an aesthetic appreciation for both the self and the deity.

This chapter also highlighted the various ways in which selfie cultures have been adopted into Hindu worship. In her study of *darshan* and Sathya Sai Baba, Sophie Hawkins observes that devotees make a distinction between the guru in his physical form, and two-dimensional images or electronic images of him, believing that darshan can only be obtained from a personal encounter and not from representations of him (Hawkins 1999). Two decades later, technology seems to have become contiguous with devotional rituals. For devotees, the selfie offers a technological update of traditional modes of memorialisation. Selfies are also adopted as a gesture of appreciation and salutation and on digital circuits, Ganapati's gaze arrested in the selfies, continues to protect and bless devotees. As a form of image-making which presents a mirror to the subject-object, the selfie generates opportunities for *darshan* in the sense of constituting the self as devotee through a mirror image reflected to the devotee, as well as by extending the spatial and temporal constraints of the busy *pandal*, to extend the moment of *darshan* and to share it with friends and family who are not physically present. In opposition to traditional ways of understanding the selfie as an act of *jugaad* to alleviate the pressure on time and space. Innovative use of the selfie camera also enables hybrid connections and

possibilities for people who cannot attend the festival in-person to digitally present themselves to the murti for *darshan*.

In the next chapter, I continue the discussion of *darshan*, looking at how the concept has been translated in the context of national politics and observing the influence that these political visual practices have on placemaking, the landscape of the city, artistic practice and ideas of leisure. I trace the origin of selfie points to algorithmic aesthetic practices that developed at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival and through this discussion, I demonstrate how global and local trends influence each other.

# Chapter 4 #LoveMumbai: selfie points and placemaking

## An excerpt from my field notes, January 2020:

On Republic Day, I visited the Mumbai Selfie Point at Juhu, expecting the park to be busy. The only people there, a group of young men, told me they were doing "timepass" hanging out together on their day off from college. When they noticed the selfie point sign, they entered the park to take selfies and photographs of each other at the installation. A woman and her teenage daughter walking by saw me with my DSLR camera and entered the park to take photographs. They told me they were from the nearby basti (informal settlement). Thinking about differing opinions towards selfie point, I remembered what an aspiring influencer I met at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival had said: "If it's called a selfie point, and everybody else is taking photos there, I can't take photos there. I have to find more interesting places in Bandra or Fort to shoot my content". On Google Maps, I found hundreds of reviews of the selfie point, which had been categorised as a tourist attraction. Data gathered from people's location services on their smartphones displayed as charts, illustrated the statistics of busy and lean days of the week and times of the day.



Figure 4.1 Mumbai Selfie Point at Juhu in January 2020



is great.

Jeet Khuman Local Guide · 25 reviews

The spot has a great potential to attract more tourists but

The statue of Mumbai is broken at places and the garden

due to no management of the place it isn't do great.

 $\star \star \star \star \star \star$  8 months ago



RANJIT KUMAR Local Guide · 24 reviews

#### ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ↓ 4 months ago

The city of dreams, Mumbai is worth seeing. My experience was good, everyone talks very well. Just here the world gets a little faster. Everyone is busy in their work. If it is said that it is fun, you must also come once to roam



🖒 Like 🛛 < Share

## Figure 4.2 (left) Screenshot from Google Reviews in January 2020 Figure 4.3 (right) Screenshot from Google Reviews in January 2020

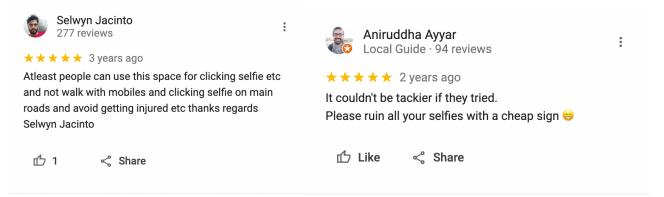
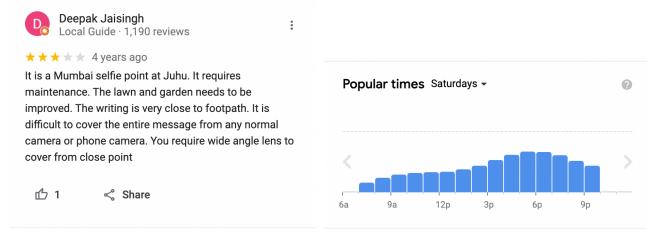


Figure 4.4 (left) Screenshot from Google Reviews in January 2020 Figure 4.5 (right) Screenshot from Google Reviews in January 2020 :



## Figure 4.6 (left) Screenshot from Google Reviews in January 2020 Figure 4.7 (right) Screenshot from Google Reviews in January 2020

A "selfie point" in Mumbai is broadly understood as a physical site designed for people to take images on their digital devices but has come to be understood as a specific type of installation that can now be seen in almost every locality. The term was first coined by the media in their descriptions of the first few sites and quickly adopted by local governing authorities and residents. The word "selfie", when the first selfie point was created in 2016, was catchy and made for good headlines, and "point" probably comes from the terminology for fenced-in areas are identified by official names like "Sunset Point" and "Monkey Point" that offer panoramic views of the hills and valleys in nearby tourist spots like Matheran and Lonavala.

In this chapter, I focus on public installations demarcated as "selfie points" with a signboard at the location, or a typographic installation in a public place that uses the word "love" or includes a hashtag (#) symbol (which references the symbol used to archive words on social media). I explore ideas that emerged from the opening anecdote and the Google reviews, including responses to this "branding" of the city, the selfie point as a disciplining safety mechanism built to attract people away from the dangerous or inconvenient photogenic spaces, derision for the "tacky" installation, the unsuitability of the design of the park and the installation for mobile phone photography, the lack of and need for maintenance of the installation, the potential of the space in terms of attracting visitors, and creative ways in which visitors made images of themselves and the selfie point.

The Google Maps graphs of popular times alerted me to how residents' data is commodified by location mapping technology to be made available to marketers and researchers including me, and equally the potential for generating communities or avoiding crowds in the way the information might

be used by residents and tourists when making decisions about when to visit these spaces. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the digital methods that I used for data collection impact my analysis or interpretation of the phenomenon. In the following sections, I ask: what gaps emerge when an algorithmic, networked trend is transplanted onto a city and how can we consider this in relation to discourses about "smart cities" and development? How do the citizen and the resident configure within the assemblage of devices and installations and localities, and what meanings are associated with and emerge from the images?

#### Background

The template for the selfie points that now dot the city was first devised by typography artist Hitesh Malaviya and displayed as an installation at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival in 2016 on the main exhibition street of the festival. At the end of the festival, the social media account Humans of Bombay started a Facebook petition addressed to the local government, Brihanmumbai Mahanagar Palika (BMC), to move the installation to a permanent location in the city. St+Art, the organisation that Malaviya was working with, joined the petition and by March 2016, Aaditya Thackeray, (then leader of the Yuva Sena, the youth wing of the Shiv Sena, Cabinet Minister of Tourism and Environment for the Government of Maharashtra and son of the Chief Minister of Maharashtra and leader of the Shiv Sena), took over the cause and announced through his social media page that the installation would have a permanent home at the Bandra Reclamation Promenade, against the backdrop of the Arabian Sea and the city skyline. The area had recently been "beautified" with an amphitheatre and a meditation park and offers views of the Arabian Sea and the Bandra-Worli sea link. Here, the installation added to the contemporary aesthetic of the recreational space and functioned as an additional feature or source of entertainment.

The following year, local newspapers reported on a battle for the control of a selfie point by three political parties at Shivaji Park, an open ground in Central Mumbai. Shivaji Park is frequented by several groups of people for different reasons: on most days, it is where people meet to exercise, run, walk dogs and play cricket, and where many cricket legends first learnt and practised the sport. Shivaji Park is also an important political ground on which the Shiv Sena holds its annual Dussehra rally, and where Ambedkarites congregate every year on 6 December to mark Mahaparinirwan Diwas, the death anniversary of Dr BR Ambedkar, social reformer, Dalit leader and chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution. The park is also close to the headquarters of the Shiv Sena, and its offshoot the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS).

At Shivaji Park, the local corporator of Dadar West, Sandeep Raut, a member of the MNS, first set up an art installation next to the main entrance, consisting of a canopy over a short stretch of the jogging track encircling the park, with colourful objects dangling from it. The objects changed with the seasons: umbrellas in the monsoon and plastic butterflies in winter. A poster nearby identified it as a "selfie point" and invited people to take selfies with it. On 1 March 2017, soon after MNS's defeat in G-north ward, Raut announced that it was difficult to raise the annual 12 lakhs (approximately 13,000 GBP) required for the upkeep of the selfie point through Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, since he was not allowed to use civic body funds to maintain it ("Mumbai's first selfie point" 2017). Soon after this announcement, the Shiv Sena and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) said that they would take over the selfie point. Following the Shiv Sena and BJP announcement, the MNS claimed they would find a way to continue to fund the selfie point ("All three parties" 2017). On 3 March, the BMC granted all three parties spots to construct selfie points, 50 metres from each other. The BJP Mumbai President Ashish Shelar took to Twitter to announce "The selfie-point at Shivaji Park in Dadar, which gained popularity among the youths, will now be redeveloped by BJP in a more attractive manner. Let's meet at the selfie point soon." ("Tussle in BJP" 2017).

Eventually, the original MNS selfie point was taken down, and the other political parties began to build selfie points elsewhere. But the way in which the selfie point aesthetic was adopted from the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival and promoted on Facebook and the involvement of political parties and their choice of locations, lay the foundations for a trend which would take over the city and the country. In this chapter, I look at the emergence of the trend and how it relates to other branding exercises and the politics of locations, positions and names of the selfie points.

#### Method

Since the Kala Ghoda festival is bound to the art district for two weeks in February, and the Ganapati *utsava* is celebrated over a ten-day period in the months of August and September, I had clearly defined temporal and spatial boundaries to focus my attention during data collection for Chapters 2 and 3. To document the selfie points for this chapter, however, I had to alter my methods as the trend emerged and evolved in the city.

I began my fieldwork with a month-long pilot trip to Mumbai in February 2020. The purpose of the trip was to attend and document the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, and I decided to allocate a section of

it to document the selfie points. As a first step, I created a list of selfie points in the city. I had already encountered a few in the media and on my daily travels, and at times I chanced upon a few selfie points while I was looking for another one in the same area. I identified about seven selfie points in this way, but I quickly realised that most installations were in unexpected locations: in residential localities, business districts and along highways. To create an exhaustive list of new structures, therefore, I realised that I would have to turn to the Internet.

On Google Maps, I used trial-and-error by typing the name of each location, preceded by "love" or followed by "selfie point". Many of the larger selfie points had been added as locations on Google Maps, and some had been classified as recreational spaces and rated and reviewed by other users. Google Maps also became a navigational tool, which I used not only to find my way, but also to optimise and schedule my visits to the selfie points. Using it, I was able to measure distances and travel times. I grouped the selfie points by the most convenient rail line: the Harbour, Central and Western lines, as well as whether they were located on the east and west of each railway station<sup>3</sup>. I then drew up a schedule that involved taking the train to the furthest location, and autorickshaws between shorter distances. In this way, decisions that I made in the mapping of the selfie points was informed equally by digital tools and my lived experience of the city.

At each selfie point, I photographed the installations and the surrounding space with a DSLR camera. My main aim with these images was to document the location of the selfie point, the name of the person who had commissioned/built the installation and the size, colour, script and other icons used. The camera also became a tool to justify what would have otherwise been seen as suspicious "loitering". At busy roads and intersections, mounted on a tripod, the camera set up became a fixed boundary, forcing people and cars to slow down and move around me, and allowing me to focus on the act of observation.

Along my journeys, and while documenting the selfie points, I also took casual photographs and shared them on my Instagram stories. This regular posting brought my Instagram "story" to the front of the queue for friends who follow me on Instagram. After I had posted a few images, I would use

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The railway line not only divides the city, but also – for example, localities to the east of the railway station are usually residential while localities to the west are a mix of residential and commercial properties, are often more desirable and have a higher real estate value.

the "ask a question" sticker on Instagram to ask people where else they had seen similar installations or typographic displays in Mumbai. This was the quickest way to crowdsource information, and although I have a relatively smaller number of Instagram "followers", most are friends from Mumbai and sent recommendations of obscure selfie points they had seen including in private residential building compounds, under train tracks and at dusty road intersections in industrial areas. Involving other people in the hunt also offered me insights in terms of how others remembered selfie points. For example, since this information came from friends, it would often by accompanied by a joke about the impracticality of the selfie point, or opinions about the locality or use of space.

Conversely, on the street, I often found that selfie points escaped the attention of locals, who could not point me towards selfie points, even if I had a landmark or a general idea of the location. Instead, once I had reached the area, I used Google Maps to find the exact location. Once I was had spotted the selfie point, I started conversations with food vendors in the area, passers-by and taxi and autorickshaw drivers, who would at times get involved in my search and offer opinions of "better" places to study that in their opinion were more worthy of academic investigation. I very rarely encountered people at the selfie points, and many of the discussions in this chapter factor in this apparent unpopularity or rejection of the installations. I also brought up selfie points as a topic of conversation when discussing my research topic with friends and family I met during the trip, and people I met at the Ganapati *utsava* and at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival. These informal, spontaneous interactions were especially enriching. For example, recommendations of similar "beautification" projects or public art in the area, gave me a sense of how people categorised public art and how they thought about its function. Silence or a refusal to comment, especially on the street, indicated people's discomfort with the installations and how selfie points were understood as a demonstration of political power rather than as a space built by local civic representatives for recreation.

My attempts to discuss selfie points with the firms that had designed the installations and engineers involved in the process of constructing "viewing galleries" were generally unsuccessful. People who did respond would politely decline to speak with me, saying that they could not publicly discuss their projects commissioned by government bodies and made with public funds. I had a little more success with the few MLAs and elected officials who agreed to speak with me, but they avoided questions about funding, and instead told me about how the various "beautification" projects they had overseen had been at the demand of the public and how well-received they had been. This issue with oral history has been observed especially in attempts to interview elected or highly placed public officials,

who are unlikely to reveal any information that is not obvious or publicly available (Swain 1965, 67). Part of the reluctance to speak about the topic openly might have been the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and a coup within the Shiv Sena which was revealed publicly in 2022 and appears to have been in the works while I was conducting fieldwork. To supplement my understanding of commissioning authorities and funding sources, I turned to media reports and video clips from news channels of the inauguration of selfie points and speeches on the topic by local government representatives.

When the coronavirus pandemic started, I had to respond by factoring restrictions in movement – both my own and of residents of Mumbai, whose movement in public space was strictly policed. The pandemic rendered physical public space uninhabitable and made selfie points redundant even though they curiously continued to be built. I kept track of the selfie points by regularly checking Instagram, Facebook and YouTube for images and videos that people had uploaded and archived with location tags or keywords. While writing this chapter, I had several types of data to analyse: photographs that I had taken of the selfie points; notes from the process of locating them online, making the physical journey, surveying the area and speaking to locals; images from my phone and responses to them on Instagram; images from other social media platforms; opinions from residents of the city; and finally reviews uploaded by people who had visited the selfie points and pinned them on Google Maps.

Since I began this documentation, I have discovered thirty-three selfie points in the city (Appendix 4) and continue to receive images from friends of new selfie points from other cities in India. Unlike the selfie point at Shivaji Park, which remained novel because it changed seasonally, the other selfie points are static. Many resemble the LoveMumbai installation at Bandra Reclamation, but have replaced the word "Mumbai" with the locality that they are situated in. At some, the red and white colour scheme has been changed or other elements that represent local communities have been added, but all the selfie points are derivative of the initial one in some way. In the following sections, I examine the functions of the selfie points, analyse the aesthetic choices and consider the ways in which they are perceived by residents of the city.



Figure 4.8 "I Love Jogeshwari" in January 2020



Figure 4.9 "I Love Kalina" in January 2020



Figure 4.10 "#Orlem" in January 2020

#### Smoothening the city

Around the time that the first selfie point was installed in Mumbai, India was going through a political and cultural rebranding process. In 2015, the Modi Government had launched the Digital India campaign, to improve digital infrastructures and make government services available electronically. The Incredible India marketing campaign, which was first launched in 2002 to attract global tourists and foreign investment, was revived in 2017, as "Incredible India 2.0" by the Ministry of Tourism. Ravinder Kaur notes that the slogan "India 2.0" "is not just a clever reference to the IT industry, it discloses the presumption of a core, settled matter that can be improved, altered time and again to fit in with contemporary times [...] The global aesthetics of India 2.0 are located within these seeming contradictions of change and continuity - the idea of versions providing the necessary frame" (2016, 322-323). The word "smart" appears often in Kaur's fieldwork: "smart vibes, smart frame, smart image, smart look, smart feel, smart logo, smart design or just being smart - conjured to describe the quality of a given image campaign. The word smart invokes a range of meanings - sharp, intelligent, quick, witty and neat - to paint a picture of impressiveness [...] The work of the Incredible India images [...] was to imbue and convey the attributes of smartness to the nation - to effectively transform the old exotic into the new post-exotic (2016, 311). Kaur uses the term "remix" from popular art and music, to argue that the "remixed version" of India presented to global audiences erases poverty and the colonial past in favour of "scrubbed" images that are "cleaner" and more in line with contemporary global aesthetics (Kaur and Hansen, 2016 272). This national branding strategy also reveals clues about how Mumbai has been presented and "updated" in recent years.

As India was being re-launched on the global stage, Mumbai too was preparing for the future with the Mumbai Metro project and the Coastal Road, and the LoveMumbai selfie point became the symbol of an ambitious project of urban renewal. Aaditya Thackeray had spent the last few years attempting to make Mumbai a world-class tourist city, successfully petitioning the BMC for 24/7 licenses for malls and restaurants to transform Mumbai into a global tourist city ("Mall, eateries can stay open" 2020). During the time, the Shiv Sena had won its first election, forming the Maharashtra government in alliance with the BJP. Thackeray's ambitions for the city were equally a part of the strategy to modernise the Shiv Sena and appeal to the liberal elite. His late grandfather and founder of the political party, Bal Thackeray, had made similar attempts to liberalise the appearance of the populist party, by bringing Michael Jackson to Mumbai in 1996, and organising the first international pop music concert of its kind in the city (Kamdar 1997).



Figure 4.11 "LoveMumbai" selfie point at Bandra Reclamation in January 2020

At the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, where the installation was among many other artworks, its concept note explained that the merging of Roman and Devanagari scripts was a reflection of Mumbai's linguistic diversity, and the heart shape created by the two terminals of the Devanagari letter "L", symbolically repeating the "Love" transliterated from English into Devanagari, a comment on Bollywood kitsch and the popular culture of the city. In its permanent location and as a logo for the city, the aspect of "smartness" in the hidden symbol of the heart and the effort at remixing that Kaur

describes in the Incredible India 2.0 campaign becomes evident, not just with the mix of scripts and languages which is also a common practise in music remixing, but also by the adoption and adaptation of the New York and Amsterdam city branding trends. Both these logos had been created as part of branding strategies when the cities were in states of economic decline, and there was a need to incentivise businesses and tourists to return. The New York city branding campaign, created by *New York* magazine's artistic director Milton Glaser after the 1970s fiscal crisis, was an effort to rebrand the city as consumer-friendly and pro-business (Greenberg 2008, 27). The Iamsterdam campaign, designed in 2004, uses the same memorable red and white colour scheme as the "I Love NY" logo, as well as the simple font and clever spacing of letters. The most enduring aspect of the Iamsterdam and instead encourage cultural and family tourism, was an installation 2 metres tall and 23.5 metres wide, installed in the Museumplein near the Rijksmuseum (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2006)). In 2018, the letters were removed from their permanent location by the City of Amsterdam after it was decided that they were attracting too much attention from tourists who had turned the area into a "selfie spot" (Adams 2018).

As a copy of these artworks ("Does your art ..." 2016) which were used to create a marketable sense of place (Zukin 1995), the LoveMumbai selfie point could be criticised for homogenising space and exacerbating the "theme-parking" of cities (Soja 2000). Even as cities like Amsterdam attempt to undo undesirable selfie cultures, Indian authorities appear to be encouraging them in a move to generate global tourist interest and to create controllable spaces for "engagement" with local youth. Still, despite the attempt of Mumbai authorities to join in a global visual language of "junkspace" (Koolhaas 2002), the proliferation of the selfie points, their locations and iconographic specificities demand a closer study within the current political context of the nation and the city.

In their edited collection about the aesthetics of "post reform India" or the 1990s when the Indian economy was opened to global markets, Kaur and Hansen invoke Ranciere's "theatre without spectator", "a performative space where the gap between actors, spectators and the stage is blurred so that spectators become actors in a theatre that can be performed without spectators", to discuss new cultures of spectacular public visual culture. They argue that the "ultimate success" of the images designed to represent India "lies in inviting the participation of those who look at it desirously from afar – investors, tourists and global capitalists – to come and invest in the India Story" (Kaur and Hansen 2016, 269). These findings and Kaur and Hansen's use of Ranciere, gain a particular

significance when applied to contemporary visual practices used to appeal to an internal audience. In the context of selfie points, we might think of why and how this invitation to spectators to participate in the theatrical production of the city is conducted through the selfie, given that selfies collapse traditional distinctions between subject and viewer or actor and spectator, and are now seen as an easy tool to mobilise publics and generate participation.

In the last decade, citizenship and notions of belonging and participation have been central to recent modes of public debate and political rhetoric in India. Under two ideologically different governments, two controversial national identification programmes, namely the Aadhar scheme (Unique Identification scheme) of 2009 and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) of 2019, have drawn criticism from across the country, leading to large scale protests and uniting people across gender, class, religion and caste (Malhotra 2017, Iyer 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw mass mobilisations of a different kind, with migrant workers travelling long distances on foot from urban workplaces to their villages, after the announcement of surprise national lockdowns (Dhillon 2022). The pandemic also exacerbated concerns about overpopulation, rising costs and crumbling infrastructure in Mumbai on social networking sites. Although concerns over Aadhar were related to questions of privacy and the government's increasing willingness to provide data to private companies, the CAA and NRC protests highlighted the State's religious discrimination, with minority groups (also usually economically disadvantaged groups) having to prove their citizenship through documentation. The migrant workers' crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic was widely seen as an abdication of the government's responsibility towards citizens, and people in their individual capacity stepped in to provide basic resources and transport to those unable to return to their homes during lockdowns.

At the same time, the Indian government has been running several campaigns to generate business within the country, such as Aatmanirbhar Bhaarat (self-reliant India) and Make in India, while also running a global campaign called Brand India to attract business and investment from diasporic Indian groups. In each of these campaigns, the individual and national pride are positioned as integral factors of national economic growth. In 2022, to celebrate 75 years of independence, the government announced the Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav or the Festival of Democracy. As part of celebrations, local governments were instructed to distribute Indian flags to every house under their jurisdiction as part of the *Har Ghar Tiranga* initiative (Every Home a Tricolour), and people were encouraged to hoist

these flags from their apartment balconies and windows and post a "Selfie with Flag" on a website created to host the images: <u>https://harghartiranga.com/</u>.

With these dynamics in mind, the role and design of the selfie points gain a new significance. The aesthetics of global Instagram tourism, popular to the point of becoming a nuisance in Amsterdam, appear to have been invoked to iron out the crisis of the city and concerns over fundamental rights and ideas of citizenship in Mumbai. Much like the Selfie with Flag initiative deployed at a national scale, the selfie points encourage repetitive gestures that generate images for online circulation, gamifying performances of national and local pride and harnessing them to create an overwhelming display of unity. The red colour and the heart symbol connote love and happiness, and the large size of the installations invite people to inhabit the crevices of the letters and integrate themselves in the images that they create. In this way, selfie points construct the city not as a place of work and by extension of workers' and citizens' rights, but as a place of pleasure and consumption, smoothening striated space and contributing to the "Disneyfication" (Zukin 1996) of the city, encouraging civic participation in a mode of romance and fun.

Historically, nation-building campaigns, according to Appadurai and Holston, replace traditional ideas of urban citizenship with that of the national (1996, 188). Within academic debates, the materiality of the city is also assumed to have lost its significance because of global flows of labour, capital and media, which are considered to have rendered place irrelevant (189). Instead, Appadurai and Holston insist that bringing critical attention to the city, with its "concentrations of the nonlocal, the strange, the mixed, and the public", demonstrates how globalisation creates a greater distance between national spaces and their urban centres and how citizenship is negotiated in the latter (189). Following Appadurai and Holston, I privilege an understanding of the city and debates around ideas of citizenship and belonging in relation to place in the following analysis of selfie points, to demonstrate how national anxieties that arise specifically from this concentration of hetereogenous populations materialises in the city.



Figure 4.12 "Love Kandivali" in January 2020



Figure 4.13 "Aapla Dahisar" [our Dahisar] in January 2020



Figure 4.14 "I love Goregaon" in January 2020



Figure 4.15 "I love Aarey" in Goregaon in January 2020





Figure 4.16 Screenshots of tweets on Twitter/X in January 2020

#### **Beautification and erasure**

The history of Mumbai as a British colony is significant to the way in which place (following de Certeau, understood here as physical location), space (or "practiced place" (de Certeau 1988, 262)) and localities have been constructed and continue to be experienced. As a set of islands acquired by the Portuguese from the sultan of Gujarat in 1534, the land that came to be Bombay was gifted to Charles II at his wedding to the princess Catherine of Braganza in 1661 (Fernandes 2010, 39) and built into a fortified port to enable the East India Company in its trade. In search of sources of revenue, the Company began to "reclaim" marshland and tidal creeks and offering enticements to Indian and foreign cotton and diamond craftsmen and traders (Fernandes 2010, 47). Reflecting on the contemporary relevance of these origins, Naresh Fernandes in his biography of the city, writes that "the city that emerged over the next 150 years was well designed to facilitate the profit-making objectives of a joint stock multinational corporation such as the East India Company. The city's layout, as well as the regulations about land use and land sales, was conceptualized not to enhance the comfort of residents but to maximize commercial gain" (Fernandes 2010, 43). This emphasis on commercial gain continues to define the city, and the city remains utilitarian, with not enough greenery or public areas designed for leisure for the millions who live in it. Instead, interstitial spaces such as the local trains, on which most people who work in the city spend more than an hour each day, have become locations for leisure and socialisation in the fast-paced city.

The first development project for workers in the city came in the wake of the bubonic plague in 1898, when the newly formed Bombay Improvement Trust constructed chawls or blocks of one-room tenements to house mill workers.<sup>1</sup> The courtyards of these chawls in Girangaon or the mill village, are now locations for the Ganapati *utsava pandals*, discussed in the previous chapter. Over the next

few decades, reclamation work continued to be carried out north of the city, and new parcels of land were handed over to religious communities to develop and distribute. Christian, Hindu, Jain, Muslim and Parsi communities therefore came to live in distinct communities, and localities took on specific cultural characteristics. For example, Walkeshwar, a wealthy, predominantly Jain residential area in South Mumbai, is "pure veg". That is, landlords and housing societies do not allow "non-vegetarians" or people who eat meat and eggs, to live there (Vohra 2015). Less wealthy localities are jointly shared by two communities, who often live on either side of a road. Byculla, Mahim and Bandra, are in this way shared by the Muslim and Christian communities, while Dadar East (on the eastern side of the railway tracks) is divided by Ambedkar Road into the Marathi-speaking Hindu Colony and Parsi Colony.

Bal Thackeray, the political leader who emerged from the momentum and success of the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement (the movement to include Bombay in the state of Maharashtra during the language-based division of states after India gained independence) and reigned over Mumbai for five decades, challenged this multicultural ethos of the city. Thackeray never contested an election but was able to effectively build a political party by preaching a "sons of the soil" agenda to the families of mill workers who went on strike in 1982 (Anandan 2014) and had few other opportunities in the city. He directed his anger towards Tamil migrants in the 1970s, blaming the community for taking away jobs from local men, and then shifted his rage towards Muslims in the 1990s (Anandan 2014). After the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, egged on by Thackeray, Bombay erupted into communal riots in late 1992 and early 1993 which changed the nature of the city (Hansen 1999, Appadurai 2000, Anandan 2014). Appadurai argues that the Shiv Sena's violence was central to the production of the present terrain of the city into "a sacred national space, as an urban rendition of a Hindu national geography" (2000, 644).

One of Thackeray's methods of demonstrating his power over the city, has been the renaming of places. In 1996, the party announced that the name Bombay, which came from the Portuguese "Bom Bahia" meaning "good bay", would be changed to Mumbai as a tribute to Goddess Mumbadevi (Prakash 2010). This change of name has been widely seen as "provincializing the global city" (Varma 2004, 65), erasing not just the colonial past of the city, but the histories of migration of the Christian, Muslim, Parsi communities. The Shiv Sena had also adopted Shivaji, the seventeenth-century Maratha chieftain, as a symbol of the region's glorious past (Prakash 2010) and turned him into the icon of the contemporary city to legitimise its Marathi identity. In 1996, Victoria Terminus

was renamed Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, by the railway minister Suresh Kalmadi of the Indian National Congress. With the efforts of the Shiv Sena, the Sahar International Airport was renamed Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Airport in 1999. In May 2017, the name of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus was amended to Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus (*chhatrapati* meaning great king and *maharaj* meaning king) and the airport was amended to Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport in August 2018, as a mark of respect to the Maratha king ("Two years on" 2018) but causing much confusion for travellers.

Although the erasure of the city's colonial history is a contentious debate, with many in favour of a new, postcolonial identity that draws from the mythic or historic past, this practice of renaming has now extended to erasing other non-Hindu, Indian identities in the city (Eisenlohr 2015, 420). In the last few years, after the Shiv Sena formed the government in Mumbai, they have changed the name of the train station Elphinstone Road (named after Lord Elphinstone, Governor of Bombay from 1819 to 1827), to Prabhadevi (a local deity)<sup>4</sup>. A new train station, which during development was referred to as "Oshiwara" after the name of the Muslim locality, was officially named "Ram Mandir", after a small (some argued inconsequential) temple of Ram in the area ("Mumbai: State decides" 2016). Critics of the name change saw it as the government's demonstration of their support in the building of the Ram temple in Ayodhya at the Babri masjid site.

Even as the railway stations in the city (which is how most people who travel through the city for work experience and remember spatial organisation) are renamed, for people travelling by road, the new names of localities are reinforced by "selfie points" or large typography installations along highways at busy road intersections. These installations, built under the guise of interactive recreational spaces or "beautification" projects, given their location and inaccessibility, serve little purpose apart from branding the space around them. As Kajri Jain demonstrates in her analysis of the trend of large religious and political statues, India's manufacturing focus on cars and the development of infrastructure for road transport, has meant that automobility has become a "significant force in configuring time, space, and experience" and therefore might even be seen as a as a medium among other media, in the way that it influences "the formation and actualization of publics and the political" (2017). In Mumbai, this could certainly be the case as road dividers, roundabouts ("gol chakkar" in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> this move was delayed by a year, to after the memory of a stampede as a result of overcrowding on a pedestrian foot-over bridge at the station, had faded ("Mumbai's Elphinstone Road station" 2018)

Hindi, or "circles" as they are referred to in Mumbai), railway station walls and buildings along highways have emerged as new locations for graffiti, installations and public-funded art.



Figure 4.17 "I love Bandra" in January 2020



Figure 4.18 An installation of a Pegasus filled with plastic bottles behind "I love Bandra" in January 2020



Figure 4.19 "Prabhadevi" in January 2020



Figure 4.20 "Love Ghatkopar" in January 2020



Figure 4.21 A 13ft installation of a dabbawalla by artist Valay Shende

In December 2022, the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Eknath Shinde, announced the launch of 500 new projects under the Mumbai Beautification Plan to be undertaken by the BMC ("CM launches over 500 projects" 2022). These planned projects included the clean-up of beaches, public amenities such as toilets and roads, and the decorative lighting of significant buildings and public spaces, in a bid to prepare for the G20 summit which was hosted in India in 2022, but also to convince the "Marathi manoos" or the Maharastrian people, who the Shiv Sena argue are the legitimate inheritors of the city, to move to Mumbai. Writing about a previous similar campaign called Clean Mumbai, Appadurai links it to ideas of ethnic cleansing that are at the core of the Shiv Sena's agenda. He writes, "The Shiv Sena retails many dreams of Mumbai, but for our purposes the most interesting is its longstanding effort to create a *sundar*, "beautiful," Mumbai, with a stress on bodily discipline, campaigns against public urination and defecation, and a strange idea of green urbanism. These campaigns and their images and discourses remind us also of the Sena's efforts to cleanse Mumbai of "ethnic dirt," especially its Muslim populations. In effect, the clean Mumbai campaigns play with the subtext of a cleansed Mumbai free of Muslims, Biharis, Bangladeshis, Tamils, Malayalis, and

other forms of urban dirt. Yet this is not a rural or pastoral dream, since the Sena has an ambivalent relationship with the politics of rural Maharashtra." (2015b, 412). Appadurai's analysis of the clean campaigns reminds us of the underlying bigotry of superficial development and "beautification" projects, leading us to think about what the selfie points built under the guise of development and recreation, might be doing.

In August 2018, a year before I began this research project, I noticed the *Mee Dadarkar* ("I belong to Dadar" in Marathi) installation at the Dadar *kabutar khana* (a small enclosure in the middle of the road built for feeding pigeons) on my daily travel route. Constructed by a local Shiv Sena corporator, the Marathi language and saffron colour of the typographic installation, with its connotation of a Marathi Hindu identity, to me felt at odds with the cultural ethos of the area, which is decidedly multi-linguistic and multi-faith. Although close to the Shiv Sena headquarters, this road intersection is surrounded by a mosque, a Jain temple and a church. The *kabutar khana* itself is designated as a Grade 2 heritage structure, having been built in 1933 by the Jain community as a part of their religious commitment to animal welfare. On 13 July 2011, there was also a bomb blast at the location, as part of a coordinated attack on the city (Rahman 2011). Although the blast case is sub judice, the Indian courts are currently trying members of the Indian Mujahideen, an Islamic group declared as a terrorist organisation by the Indian government ("2011 blasts: Charges filed" 2014).



Figure 4.22 "Mee Dadarkar" [I am from Dadar] in January 2020

As a Dadar resident, my instinctive reaction to this installation was of discomfort, arising from a knowledge that the message of this installation was interpellating not all the inhabitants of the area, but only Hindu Shiv Sena supporters. If Appadurai's concept of the "spectral", derived from Derrida's theory of "hauntology" which Appadurai used to discuss the scarcity of housing and how the lack of it haunts the imagination of residents (2000a, 635) was to be applied to the Dadar selfie point, we could see how it continues to haunt the area with the spectre of the 1992-93 riots, when Shiv Sainiks violently re-inscribed public space as Hindu space. As a "selfie point" it is also threatening in its potential for communal mobilisation through digital networks and mobile technologies.

Similarly, in Mahim, a neighbouring locality, the selfie point built by Shiv Sainik Sada Sarvankar, Member of Maharashtra Legislative Assembly and Representative of Mahim, includes a large pouncing tiger, an aggressive Hindutva symbol often used by the Shiv Sena. Situated in the middle of a road that divides a Muslim neighbourhood, a Christian neighbourhood and an aboriginal Koli fishing village, the selfie point appears to attempt to dominate the visual landscape. Paraphrasing de Certeau, Appadurai writes, "transformation of spaces into places requires a conscious moment, which may subsequently be remembered as relatively routine. The production of a neighborhood is inherently colonizing in the sense that it involves the assertion of socially (often ritually) organized power over places and settings that are viewed as potentially chaotic and rebellious." (1996, 183). Following Appadurai, one could say that the process of saffronisation of localities through selfie points began in the neighbourhood of Dadar, which has historically had pockets of Hindu-majority areas. As the idea of Dadar as a *savarna* Marathi neighbourhood became normalised, the saffron Hindutva identity was extended to Mahim under the pretext of constructing a selfie point. In this way, and as a selfie point, the installation not only erases the complex palimpsestic nature of the city, reducing it to a single, shareable image in the aesthetic register of the dominant religious community, but also implicates and attempts to involve its ideal resident in this shift.



Figure 4.23 "Mahim" in January 2020

The methods that I used to crowdsource locations of selfie points on Instagram revealed another aspect of the politics of naming and the positioning of selfie points. In response to the Instagram "ask a question" sticker a friend responded, "There's one in the Park at Chaitya Bhoomi." Chaitya Bhoomi is an important Ambedkarite landmark and pilgrimage site, where Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, who drafted the Indian Constitution and inspired the Dalit Buddhist movement, was cremated. Spatially, it is located right next to Shivaji Park, divided only by a wide road. The road, however, clearly divides the two spaces: Chaitya Bhoomi is next to the beach, overlooking the Arabian Sea, while Shivaji Park is inland, closer to the Shiv Sena headquarters.

When I reached the garden, I realised that the selfie point reads "Shivaji Park Point". The word "Shivaji" is painted in saffron, made to look like flames and invoke the valour of the Maratha chieftain, while the word "park" is painted with green and blue, mirroring the grass and the sky and point is painted white. The issue here, is that the positioning of this selfie point, not inside Shivaji Park, but at another smaller garden next to Chaitya Bhoomi, re-inscribes the Dalit site as a Maratha site and reinforces the hegemonic upper-caste culture of the locality. Yet, the simplicity and the literalness of the selfie point – after all, locals do generally refer to the entire area as "Shivaji Park" as it is the largest landmark in the area, make it difficult to challenge at the aesthetic level.



Figure 4.24 "Shivaji Park Point" at Chaitya Bhoomi in January 2020

The very textures, colours and lights that are desirable in urban digital photography: bright colours, shiny acrylic sheets that can be lit from inside with LED lighting, are vulnerable to the physical elements of dust, heat and bird droppings. Kajri Jain notes that the vulnerability of the fabric of a public statue, is indexical of its lack of anxiety. Dalit statues are made of strong fabrics such as marble and stone, so that they are that much more difficult to destroy by the next *savarna* government (2014, 2021). Using the inverse logic, one could suggest that the selfie points can be built in the social media aesthetic, with materials that crumble and fall apart because, as espousing hegemonic ideals of a global Hindutva nationalism, they are absent of anxiety.

In the eastern suburb of Powai, the Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) Mohd Arif (Naseem) Khan, member of the Indian National Congress, has built a selfie point near the Powai Lake at the Ganesh Visarjan Ghat (immersion point). His name and face feature prominently at the top of the installation. In a video interview to a news channel, Khan's representative says, "There are many selfie points in Mumbai: there is one for Chembur, one for Mankhurd, there's an 'I Love Ghatkopar', but love for the country comes first, and that is why we have named this 'I Love India' and made it in the colours of the Indian flag" ("I Love India" 2019). The representative's comment might seem to be a case of petty one-upmanship, common in the political arena, but in the current situation where Muslims are being discriminated against, this proclamation of nationalism could also arise from a sense of religious anxiety, and a need to prove an allegiance to the nation. Unlike the other selfie points, but in line with the practice at other art installations in the city, the Powai selfie point is cordoned off by a metal grill, highlighting the state's distrust of the public (Dalvi 2017).



Figure 4.25 "My India" selfie point at Powai in January 2020

Despite my observations so far, I do not intend to make the case for selfie points as totalising forces. The visual aesthetic of the city is in a constant state of *jugaad*, regularly shifting to accommodate new ambitions, political and artistic. Each successive elected representative attempts to erase the presence of their predecessor, either for aesthetic or political reasons. In January 2020, when I returned to the area where the Dadar selfie point had been, the installation was missing. When I asked local shopkeepers and vendors on the street about it, they were dismissive of my interest and pretended to have not noticed until one vendor finally told me that it had been vandalised a few days ago by a group of drunk men in the middle of the night and had been sent for repairs. This story which I was unable to verify, along with the need for self-preservation expressed through the locals' guarded responses, cemented my suspicion that the location, text and colour of the Dadar selfie point had challenged the religious, linguistic and caste specificities of the locality. At the same time, although the vandalism might have been an act of rebellion, the installation could just has easily have been damaged on a night of revelry or by a rival political party. When I checked two years later, it had not been replaced.

The cultural elite tend to watch the construction of selfie points, as with all "beautification" projects in the city, with a combination of horror, amusement, and a sense of detached helplessness. Their attitude towards the aesthetic "taste" (following Bourdieu 1979) of the BMC can be summarised in this moment that I witnessed at the KGAF: at the launch of her book Shivaji Park: Mumbai 28, at KGAF 2020, the octogenarian Bombay cultural critic Shanta Gokhale said, "The minute I hear beautification by the BMC I am scared out of my mind." The statement was met with resounding applause and laughter from the elite literary-minded audience. This response also demonstrates how the selfie points, and other efforts political parties make to "vernaculise" the city for their own political gain, has little effect on flows of commerce and on the elite (Hindu) majority, and although unimpressed by these changes, these groups are largely apathetic to what they see as cosmetic changes to the city.

I encountered a similar derision for the selfie points from the elite young people I spoke with at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, but for different reasons. A student artist exhibiting at the festival told me that the selfie points were not for people like him who vacation abroad, but instead for people like the young man employed as a domestic worker by his family, who took his girlfriend to the Mumbai Selfie Point installation at Juhu and uploaded an image of them together as his Whatsapp display picture. The young aspiring influencer I introduced in the opening anecdote of this chapter talked about how she could not use the selfie points as locations for her photoshoots, because even though street photography is a popular choice for contemporary editorial fashion shoots, they involve creative

interpretation of public space and a juxtaposition of high fashion against the ordinary, rather than the use of designated recreational spaces that have already been staged for photography.

### Darshan and political ambitions

Even as the pandemic drew on into 2020 and public movement was strictly policed, I noticed new selfie points continuing to be built in the city. What then, I wondered, is the purpose of these installations, if not to serve as public places of leisure, gathering and photography? Home to the Hindi film industry or Bollywood, Mumbai already has several tourist attractions and spaces for photography that appeal to both global and local markets. Culturally rich neighbourhoods like Khotachiwadi in Girgaon, natural attractions like the Sewri Jetty which is a stop for flamingos along their annual migratory route, and historic forts in Vasai and Bandra attract photographers and content creators. The colonial-era buildings and Marine Drive in South Mumbai have been immortalised in Bollywood films, and the north of the city is known for the residences of Bollywood stars, the most well-known being Amitabh Bachchan's house Jalsa, Shah Rukh Khan's house Mannat and Salman Khan's house Galaxy Apartments. To accommodate visiting fans, these celebrities often allocate one day a week where they appear for *darshan*, or public viewing, and stand at the balconies or meet fans at the gates of their houses. This culture of offering *darshan* which originates in Hindu worship, has permeated the realms of politics and entertainment (Brosius 2005, Jacob 2009) evidenced in the context of Bollywood by the weekly public appearances and in politics, by the selfie campaigns and selfie points.



Figure 4.26 Bollywood stars taking a selfie with Modi in the centre in 2019

In 2015, during the Delhi State elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), extended Modi's digital world to the physical, erecting one thousand stalls with cardboard cutouts of Modi, in malls and public places, where over half a million supporters took selfies with a cutout of the leader ("Narendra Modi takes his selfies seriously" 2015). The BJP has also used selfies for other public service initiatives, such as the #SelfieWithDaughter campaign, intended to reduce female foeticide and infanticide, and encourage the education of girl children in India. This selfie campaign created a model for other publical parties to follow, and the selfie became a viable tool to perform not just political "optics" with the celebrity and political leadership selfies, but any kind of government civic engagement and a legitimate way to take over public space.

To simply see the Selfie with Modi campaign as the virtual rendition of a traditional campaign trail, or an attempt to appeal to young tech-savvy voters who would want to document their interaction with an elusive celebrity, would be an oversimplification. The popularity of the selfie and how it was used in this election campaign, needs to be examined within the context of visual culture histories in South Asia, as well as past political campaigns of the BJP, their deification of political leaders and their systematic use of Hindu iconography and mass media to establish themselves as the rightful heirs of political power in India.

As discussed in the previous chapter, *darshan*, the practice of seeing, and in turn being seen by the deity, is a core ritual of Hindu religious practice (Eck 1981, 3, Babb 1981, 387). It was probably first extended from the religious sphere to the secular by early Hindu kings, who used kinship histories to the epic Hindu kings to legitimise to their rule, and incorporated practices of *darshan* into their courtly proceedings (Jacob 2009). Since then, it has been systematically used by film stars and politicians to lend a sacred air to their personas. A similar strategy was employed by the BJP in 1990, when the leader of the party LK Advani, organised a *rath yatra* (chariot procession), from Somnath to Ayodhya. The employment of the *rath*, according to Caroline Brosius, serves as a 'link-image' connecting the political to the mythic (Arjun and Lord Krishna, riding into the Mahabharata to battle their enemy-cousins) and the religious (pilgrimage processions where it is believed that deities pay a visit to earth), thereby increasing the BJP's legitimacy in the eyes of the Hindu voter (Brosius 2005). Brosius writes extensively about the videos created by the BJP between the years 1989 and 1993, and their exploitation of traditional spheres of local popular culture and audio-visual media technology and the stylistic effects of montage, special effects and docudrama, for political mobilisation. To

theorise the punitive, threatening aspects of these videos, Brosius adopts Sophie Hawkins' definition of *darshan*, as "not only a way of seeing, but as a way of creating worldly power" and compares it to Foucualt's concept of panopticism and technologies of the visible, as well as Michael Taussig's concept of "controlled mimesis", an "essential component of socialization and discipline" appropriated for political means (Taussig quoted in Brosius, 108).

Ashish Rajadhyaksha in his study of the methods of D. G. Phalke, the pioneer of early Indian cinema, notes that Phalke evolved methods antithetical to Western film aesthetics, such as frontal staging and direct address to the camera, by building into the new technology of the cinema the prevailing popular conceptions of viewing, including darshan (Rajadhyaksha 1993). Phalke's film Lanka Dahan (The Burning of Lanka) which released in Bombay in 1917, drew large crowds that prostrated in the theatre when Rama appeared on the screen (Rajadhyaksha 1993). "Darshan-iconography" (Brosius 2005), was brought into Indian popular culture by the Doordarshan television series Ramayana (1987) and Mahabharata (1988), which were broadcast daily for over two years and depicted a compassionate relationship between the Gods and several devotional moods, through the use of close-ups of faces and eyes, music and several other special effects. This broadcast of the Ramayana has been widely seen as pre-publicity that give mileage to the Ram Janmabhoomi movement of the BJP and brought the party into prominence and ultimately led to large-scale communal violence and the permanent ghettoisation of several areas in the country (Rajagopal 2001). This specific history of the BJP offers some clues as to the popularity of the Selfie with Modi campaign. One might argue that Modi has been systematically styled as a sanyasi (sage), in order to appear incorruptible and as the legitimate leader of the nation, and the cardboard cut-outs distributed across the city not only offer a frontal address for citizens to visually constitute themselves as devotees and citizens through selfie photography, but the images of him in public space as well as on the Internet, create and constitute "worldly power" through the devotional mode of darshan (Hawkins 1999, 142).

A parallel trend in political visibility in India, is the use of large posters that announce and celebrate even trivial matters, such as the birthdays of the political leaders. These large posters, routinely made by lesser-known politicians to announce and celebrate even trivial matters, such as the birthdays of the political leaders, are designed to publicise themselves and place themselves and their faces within the party line-up, in preparation for future elections. In this celebrification of politics, it is not just the face of the leaders that are distributed in public space, but several other disembodied faces of smaller local politicians. Apart from understanding this as a demonstration of loyalty, a branding strategy and as power-by-association, it could also be seen as following popular depictions of the Hindu pantheon, where gods like Rama are flanked by loyal followers Lakshmana and Hanumana, who are also worshipped for their sacred powers. In the last decade, there has been much debate surrounding these hoardings, from locals who satirise them, to rifts between political alliances about the size and position of faces, to Twitter broadcasts from politicians, entreating their employees to not waste funds on these public announcements, to finally a court-ordered crackdown ("Be prepared for" 2018).



Figure 4.27 Political hoardings in Mumbai



Figure 4.28 A satirical hoarding celebrating the birthday of Max the dog

At the Malad selfie point, MNS corporator Deepak Pawar has his own permanent selfie point, where supporters and citizens are invited to perform an act of obeisance, by taking a selfie. Pawar's political ideology is contained in the map of Maharashtra that sits at the foot of typographic sign, that he might be a local corporator of an area that has a diverse population of Maharashtrian, Goan and North Indian immigrants, but his loyalties are with the state of Maharashtra and the Maharashtrian citizen, the Marathi speaker. In the age of photo-editing software, it seems almost counter-intuitive and archaic to build a physical photobooth in public space, when real estate is valuable, and the installation competes with advertising billboards and suffers the weather and dust of the city. In this climate of surveillance of the political poster, if the selfie point seen is seen as an iteration of political hoardings, it could be understood as a safer contemporary rendition, which, on the surface, appears to be beautifying the city, while allowing local politicians to have permanent advertising, without the worry of real estate costs or mistakenly upstaging their higher-ups, since these selfie points are locality specific. The added benefit is that the images can be circulated on social media, extending the life and the reach of the physical installation, and the face of the politician.



Figure 4.29 "Love Malad" in January 2020



Figure 4.31 Close up of the poster at "Love Malad" in January 2020



Figure 4.32 A screenshot of a selfie tagged #lovemalad on Instagram by @menariarakkesh

After the death of Balasaheb Thackeray in 2012, attempts have been made to use his face to lend legitimacy, first to the Shiv Sena political party that he founded, which was inherited by his son Uddhav Thackeray, and then by the rival Shiv Sena, which was formed after a rift within the party, when party loyalists argued that the new leaders were straying away from Balasaheb's tenets, of championing the Marathi *manoos* [layman]. Thackeray, who was a rousing orator and a sharp

cartoonist and essayist, had been the most prominent political force in the city from the 1960s to 2012, and after his death, no other political figure has been able to match his charisma or generate the same amount of loyalty from supporters. Both political parties, aware of this lack of powerful leadership, use his face on their posters, at selfie points and for "beautification" projects including at roundabouts and in public parks. Both political parties have also managed to retain the name Shiv Sena as of February 2023, although they use different party symbols. Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena now differentiates itself by calling itself "Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray)" and the new Shiv Sena led by Eknath Shinde (first called "Balasahebanchi Shiv Sena" or Balasaheb's Shiv Sena) has been granted the name "Shiv Sena" by the Election Commission ("Eknath Shinde faction..." 2023).

In the following image, of supporters taking a selfie with a portrait of Balasaheb Thackeray on his fifth death anniversary (organised by Uddhav Thackeray), we see how the act of taking a selfie becomes one of obeisance and an attempt to claim rightful ownership of the image of Thackeray's face. The foreheads of the people in the photograph are anointed with *sindoor* in the same way as the portrait, to demonstrate presence and involvement in the event, but also to show an ideological continuity or party membership. The act of taking a selfie brings all the bodies together in physical proximity and in the selfie object and in the image presented here, the faces are equally present in their digitality.



Figure 4.33 A selfie at the fifth death anniversary of Balasaheb Thackeray, photo by Pratik Chorge

Walter Benjamin's argument about "the cult of remembrance" might offer an understanding of why alongside the battle over the name, the rightful use of the face of Balasaheb Thackeray has become equally important in this political branding war. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Walter Benjamin argues that the human face offers the possibility for re-imbuing photography with cult value, since the aura of a person, according to Benjamin, emanates from human countenance. Benjamin writes, "The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty" (1968, 226). Benjamin's emphasis on the potential of the human face to generate an emotional response and in this way reimbue photography with cult value, offers an explanation to why the tussle over who will successfully appropriate Balasaheb Thackeray's legacy plays itself out through political posters, propaganda public art installations and memorials. In January 2023, when Narendra Modi visited Mumbai, larger-than-life images of Modi, Balasaheb Thackeray and Eknath Shinde were erected at busy intersections across the city, to visually reiterate the alliance between the BJP and the new Shiv Sena (that had distanced itself from Uddhav Thackeray) and to situate Balasaheb Thackeray (and his Hindutva ideology) as a link between Modi and Shinde. The "halfseen in advance" (Pinney 2004, 145, 2014, 86) image of the men marching along the road, with Modi in the lead, is doubly politically efficacious in how invokes the righteousness of the iconic Salt March and the Satyagraha movement.



Figure 4.34 Massive cutouts along the Western Express Highway in January 2023, photo by Atul Kamble

This phenomenon also demonstrates the hold that personality politics has over the city and the country: it is not the political ideology or the track record of a party that people vote for, but the

charisma of the leader. In this mode of politics, "theme parkification" through memorials, selfie points and other spaces where supporters can visit and engage with images of the leader become significant places for political engagement, especially after the death of the leader, when rallies and public addresses are no longer possible, and it is in this way that the power of the leader and their political party is consolidated and maintained even after their death. Glimpses of the ways in which Balasaheb Thackeray's memorial, (which is currently under construction and costing the taxpayer 40 crores Indian rupees or almost 40 million British pounds (Thakkar 2021)), is likely to evolve can be seen at the Amma Memorial Knowledge Park in Chennai, built in 2021 after the former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa's death. At the park, several augmented reality tools allow visitors to interact with computer-generated models of Jayalalithaa, fondly referred to as Amma or mother. At a motion sensor activated booth called Selfie with Amma, for example, visitors can animate a computerrendered model of Jayalalithaa by moving their own bodies ("Knowledge park and museum..." 2021). At another booth Chat with Amma, an animated image of Jayalalithaa, powered by an artificial intelligence chatbot, is programmed to answer visitor questions.



Figure 4.35 A screenshot of the Amma Museum and Knowledge Park promotional video on YouTube

The example of Jayalalithaa's memorial, which outlines her early life, career trajectory and contributions as a leader and invites the visitor to interact with a simulation of her through "gamified" developments in interactive technology, demonstrates how offering these interactive installations, memorials and pop-up political campaigns to the public, including the Selfie with Modi campaign discussed in Chapter 1, have come to be seen as acceptable, even nationalistic, endeavours by political

parties, local authorities and governments. By being framed as a technologically driven "knowledge park", the Jayalalithaa memorial is presented as an enlightening, informative, educational and experiential space. In this way, politically efficacious images from the past as resurrected through futuristic interactive technology to present essentially propogandist spaces as dignifying spaces where visitors can visualise themselves as informed, active and engaged political individuals.

### **Gentri-fiction**

Apart from their role in political advertising, selfie points must also be considered for the role they play in serving commercial interests, especially in India's most speculative real estate market. I borrow the term "gentri-fiction" from Frichot and Metzger (2016, 84), using it to call attention to how selfie points construct space. Frichot and Metzger take the term "gentrification" coined by Ruth Glass in 1964 to discuss the privileged "gentry" or the privileged middle-class and the narratives they create of the city, to discuss images of environmental sustainability generated to promote wealthy neighbourhoods in Stockholm. Discussing the term, the authors write:

A gentri-fiction is a reassuring story we tell ourselves about 'life in the city' that quickly becomes an insistent refrain, a civic song of the city stuck in the head [...] Gentri-fictional images of the city operate in the half-second delay before prepersonal affect becomes an identifiable feeling [...] They generate instincts and format affect [...] Where the slowing down of thought risks producing explanatory practices that simplify the complexity of cities, the speeding up of thought leads to an exhaustion of concepts resulting in default mechanisms that return us to cliché and opinion. The speeding up of the consumption of concepts, we argue, is assisted through the image-making practices of branding [...] Once it becomes a sedimented refrain or a habit of thought, a recalcitrant noological knot, a gentri-fiction can over-determine habits of living, and how the well-to-do denizens of urban space live out their over-curated lives, following the full programme, rarely countering it or reinventing it. (84).

Following Frichot and Metzger, to consider the branding of a space is to consider the instantaneous affective associations that have been developed around it and the influence that these stories have on the way that lives are lived. This idea of the construction of meaning and aspiration through branding, came to me while looking for the Lokhandwala selfie point, when once again like with the Shivaji Park selfie point, the method I used to search for the installation and the way in which its location was described, became significant to my understanding of the installation and its purpose. To reach the Lokhandwala selfie point, the most time- and cost-efficient way for me was to take the Western line train, boarding the train at Dadar railway station and alighting at Andheri. As is often the case, when I hailed an autorickshaw from the Andheri railway station, I was required to state my intended location so that the driver could decide if the trip was worth his time and if he would be able to find

a suitable passenger for the next trip. Assuming that best way to get to the Lokhandwala selfie point was to ask the autorickshaw driver to take me to Lokhandwala, I stated my intended destination, at which he looked pleased and agreed to take me on. To ensure that we were travelling in the right direction and to navigate to the exact location of the selfie point, I had Google Maps open on my smartphone, and I was using it to navigate to the location, but as I read out what developed into a complicated set of directions, the driver got cross and said "Madam aap ne Lokhandwala bola, yeh toh Jogeshwari aa raha hai" (Madam you said Lokhandwala, but we are approaching Jogeshwari). I apologised profusely, blaming Google Maps, conscious that the autorickshaw driver was also probably upset because he assumed that I had lied about my destination in order to get him to agree to the fare.



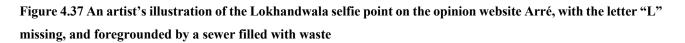
Figure 4.36 "I love Lokhandwala" in January 2020

When we reached our destination, I was surprised to see that the "I love Lokhandwala" installation used the same white and red colour scheme as the other selfie points but was clearly built by a private builder along the wall of a high-rise building that marked the entry into Jogeshwari. The autorickshaw driver, who did not read or write English, was unimpressed by the reason for my visit, and miserable about the heavy traffic and potholes he would have to navigate on his return journey. Lokhandwala is an upscale neighbourhood in Andheri, known for bars and restaurants and high population of television actors and models, and Jogeshwari, a working-class Muslim locality and the next stop on the Western line. The construction industry, much like autorickshaw passengers who tend to bend the truth for their convenience, market a locality by its position as neighbour to a more desirable one. Lower Parel, in real estate speak, is therefore referred to as "Upper Worli" and Andheri is "Upper Juhu". One could surmise that the builder had adopted the selfie point as a branding strategy to stretch the boundaries of the Lokhandwala neighbourhood up to the boundary wall of his property, in order to raise the value of the flats he was selling.

As an image along the facade of the building, the selfie point aesthetic also makes the building instantly recognisable and memorable, turning the building into a landmark in a sea of high-rises. But this form of gentri-fiction has its limits, and the placement of the selfie point calls attention to its fictionality: aside from its locational inaccuracy, the selfie point is located right above a large open sewer, creating a stark contrast between the well-maintained building and its dilapidated surroundings, and rendering the proclamation of love and aspiration ironic. Located along a busy road, the Lokhandwala selfie point is also only ever the object of contemplation for English-literate people stuck in severe traffic and the sentiment communicated by the installation rankles with many as they wait for the traffic lights to change.



Illustration: Shruti Yatam



Gentri-fiction can also be considered in terms of digital representation. Built to attract people away from the dangerous spaces like cliffs, or from busy scenic roads where selfie-takers might cause traffic accidents, selfie points can offer a safe creative solution to the problems caused by street photography.

But as prompts intended to generate affect and behaviours that produce disciplined digital data, they can also be understood in Deleuzean terms as objects that territorialise space and turn the "nomadic" subject into the "monadic" subject, fixing meaning and subjectivity.

Conventions of selfie photography and the focal length of the lens of the front camera on a smartphone fix the ratio of the background to the foreground in the frame and determine the amount of detail in the background. Some of these issues are raised in the reviews of the Mumbai Selfie Point in Juhu (Images 4.2, 4.3, 4.5 and 4.6) such as the inability to easily frame the installation with a camera phone and the disciplining of the body as well as the creative output of the networked photographer. A front-facing camera also offers a mirror-image of a person's face and the background, inverting the text of the "I <3 ----" installation in the image that the selfie-taker sees on the camera and only reversing it after the image has been processed.

Like the Google reviewers of the Mumbai Selfie Point, I too found that at the "Love my India" selfie point in Powai, even as I tried out different framing angles in the space, I was unable to include the dilapidated playground next to the installation, or the men taking an afternoon nap on the swing sets, in my selfie frame. The only background that I could manage to capture in my selfie while standing at the designated point, was the letters of the installation. It was impossible for me to visually represent within the image, any sentiment other than those expressed by the words on the installation, even though, through the field of vision of my eye, I could see the glaring differences between the selfie point and its surroundings. The positioning of the selfie point on a narrow pavement alongside a busy road also prevented me from moving further away to capture a wider background. In this situation, as in many others, I saw how the selfie points and the images they encourage, create a fictional, gentrified digital representation of Mumbai.

The Internet culture of middle-class millennial and Generation Z social media users is also often satirical and emotions on the Internet are typically shielded by irony. The space for an emotion as raw as "love" is limited. This seems to be another flaw in the way in which selfie points have been conceived: claims by authorities that the use of the heart symbol and the emotion of "love" would foster and celebrate local pride seem to have been disproven and instead of being branded and activated by these installations, the city seems to have been opened to criticism by them. A joke I often hear from friends when they bring a new selfie point to my attention is, "But *yaar* [friend], who even loves Ghatkopar/Kalina/Dahisar?" People live and commute through these spaces out of

necessity, and although there is a shift in the way in which the "slum" or informal housing, or undesirable suburbs are culturally perceived, especially with the awareness about the underground rap music culture after the success of the Hindi film *Gully Boy* (2019) and the rising popularity of musicians and stand-up comics who perform in local languages and express nuances of their locality-based identities, the traditionally aspirational quality of the selfie points which is usually associated with glamorous tourist sites, stands in stark contrast to the grimness of these localities.

The failure of the selfie points in generating a regular stream of images on social networking platforms can also be understood by highlighting the difference between Internet cultures and the way in which the selfie points have been designed. Internet trends have life spans and are transient, and these installations are permanent and have outlived their novelty. Transplanted from the temporary, well-funded art exhibition space, to its permanent location on Bandra Reclamation without its concept note, the LoveMumbai selfie point seems to have aged both as an object and in concept, with the letters becoming faded and muddy over the course of a few monsoon seasons, and rude graffiti marking the presence of visitors dissatisfied with the promise of a digital souvenir offered by the selfie point and wanting to leave a more permanent mark of their presence. As symbolic objects representing the city and the direction that political and civic leaders wish to take the city in, the deterioration of the selfie points reveals the literal cracks in the city and this vision. This is especially relevant when considered in conjunction with national campaigns such as "Digital India" and Modi's ambitions to build smart cities. While Hyderabad and Bengaluru become technology and start up hubs, astronomic rents and infrastructural pressures hinder similar economic growth in Mumbai.

In the opening anecdote where I described my visit to the Mumbai Selfie Point, I noted how my presence seemed to renew the interest of passers-by, as if the attention I paid the installation with my camera reinforced its purpose as a space for creative photography. Crucially, my presence as a woman also created an opening for other women to join me in the park. In previous chapters, I noted how the presence of crowds at the Ganapati *utsava* and the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival encouraged networked camera practices through *jugalbandi*, the process by which people picked up cues on how to engage with the installations or the space with their devices, partly also to mitigate the frenzy of the crowd and to generate an intimate connection within the festive space. In contrast to these time-bound, highly populated events, the selfie points as everyday objects installed in neighbourhoods and along busy roads, have become a part of the regular terrain of the city, no longer drawing crowds. The

absence of the crowd has an equally significant impact on the way that selfie points fail to generate networked camera practices in physical space and by extension, a dialogue on social networking sites.

## **Staging identities**

On Valentine's Day on 14 February 2020, I visited the viewing gallery between the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus (CSMT), (formerly Victoria Terminus) and the Municipal Corporation Building or the BrihanMumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) Building. Since the weather was pleasant and it was a Friday evening, I anticipated that couples, groups of friends and families might plan to spend time outdoors and hoped that the viewing gallery would be busy. The viewing gallery had been built three years before, at a cost of 79 lakhs (approximately 80,000 GBP)<sup>8</sup> as a solution to the traffic jam caused by people stopping for selfies on the busy intersection. Although not classified as a selfie point by my own definition for this chapter, its location makes it ideal for selfies with the iconic CSMT building in the background.



Figure 4.38 A selfie at the CSMT viewing gallery

At the CSMT viewing gallery, I sat in a corner with my DSLR camera, watching and recording as people photographed themselves and each other (Appendix 3). Compared to the selfie points, the viewing gallery was livelier, and I encountered a range of people from across age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. While the foreign tourists who visited with tour guides documented the building on their DSLR cameras and only took quick evidentiary selfies, local tourists and residents seemed to have come to the viewing gallery to spend time making images together, trying out various poses with each other and by themselves, with various backgrounds and camera angles. A group of young girls who had skipped university classes and made the trip from Navi Mumbai, took turns perfecting the "follow me" pose popularised by an Instagram travel influencer. Another group of people, dressed in office clothes and appearing to have just finished a workday in the area, took photographs on their camera phones with each other and by themselves, posing against the CSMT building, before heading into it to make the long commute home. Couples and families sat on the metal railings and took photographs of each other and selfies together, sharing moments of intimacy while directing each other and huddling into the limited field of view of the camera phone. Single men of different ages, classes and religious backgrounds walked around the viewing gallery at a leisurely pace, taking selfies from different angles. Photography students armed with DSLR cameras assembled at the viewing gallery as the first stop on an evening photo-walk with their instructor and took photographs of each other and of the building as they waited for everyone to arrive.

I was struck by how in this instance, everyday camera phone photography allowed people to participate with urban infrastructure and insert themselves into the visual discourse of the city, and yet draw on the different connotations offered by the backdrops based on their specific interests. In contrast to the selfie points, the CSMT and BMC buildings hold complex, multiple meanings. As architectural delights designed in the Italian Gothic and Indo-Saracenic styles respectively, they are symbols of city's colonial history. For the tourists and photography students, selfies at the building might have indicated their interest in culture and travel. At the same time, the renaming of the CSMT building, the bright lights that it has been adorned with that often shine in the colours of the Indian flag, and the construction of the viewing gallery are interventions to reclaim the symbol as Indian and Maharashtrian, and to position it as a marker of global modernity at par with other iconic buildings in tourist cities across the world. In Indian films, it has been immortalised as a romantic symbol of travel and exploration, of arrival in and possibilities offered by the city. The CSMT building, as the train terminus for the Harbour and Central lines, is also the point of connection between other parts of the city and the High Court, the gold market and the finance district.

At the viewing gallery, selfie-takers seemed to operationalise these various symbolic values in their poses. For example, for the young people dressed in formal office attire, based on the ways that they posed and framed their selfies, seemed to be communicating their success of having "arrived", both professionally and literally, at the finance district. As the only spectator not using my camera phone, I found myself drawn into the assemblage by people who noticed my recording and covertly moved into my frame, hoping to be recorded by me. Once again, I was reminded of the act of *jugalbandi* I

had encountered at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, where unspoken photographic interaction activated relationships between actors. In the same way in which the Incredible India 2.0 advertising campaigns invite the participation of foreign investors, the viewing gallery in its "theatre without spectator" aspect, could be seen to invite the participation of visitors and residents, to use the space to not only look upon the building, but to visually perform and document themselves in relation to it.

At the time of visiting, the viewing gallery at CSMT was also the only structure to have been built as a direct solution to traffic problems caused by the popularity of networked photography. By the next year, in 2021, viewing galleries have been constructed at the Girgaon and Dadar Chowpatty or beaches, overlooking the Arabian sea. These viewing galleries along the beaches similarly create a comfortable space for people to enjoy the expanse of the sea, important in a city as busy as Mumbai, and serve as places of gathering during festivals such as the Ganapati *utsava* or Chhath Puja when the Arabian Sea becomes a site for worship. In the way in which it responds to the demand from photographers and tourists and at the same time eases the traffic jam caused by them, the viewing gallery at CSMT is a unique purpose-built photography structure that contributes to the infrastructural development of the city in ways that selfie points do not. As a physical-digital assemblage then, the CSMT viewing gallery demonstrates the simple yet effective way in which urban design interventions can improve the experience of the city and generate digital engagement, by strategically harnessing the existing built heritage of the city.

### Conclusion

Paying attention to the growing trend of selfie points in Mumbai, this chapter demonstrated how these purported civic amenities work as instantiations of governmentality, attempting to control and make productive people's selfies or moments of leisure, as well as to perpetuate historic caste and class-based segregations and reinforce strategic narratives about localities in the city, to suit various political and economic interests. In this context, I argued that selfie points encourage the embodied performance of citizenship and politics and urge the citizen to become an active producer of the "spirit" of Mumbai and attempt to erase the multicultural nature of the city or "saffronise" it for political reasons and gentrify it for the financial profit of the construction industry.

As objects either that are either ignored or derided by most inhabitants of the city, I considered why the selfie points fail at engaging with Internet cultures, discourses of "smart cities" and networked technologies. I argued that the dissonance between the claims made, or emotions expressed by the selfie points and the experience of the city from the points of view of residents opened the selfie points up to derision. I demonstrated how the static quality of the selfie points is at odds with the constant evolving trends on social networking platforms and makes the selfie points appear outdated. This obsolescence is accented by the degradation of the physical materials with which the selfie points are often built, that are susceptible to damage from visitors and the natural elements.

The description and analysis of an evening at the viewing gallery at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus with which this chapter closes, presents a contrast to these unpopular and often uninhabited selfie points and offers an entry into ways of thinking about future recreational urban development. The CSMT building signifies the various competing processes of colonialism and postcolonialism, and possibilities of adventure, growth and success, and is therefore a rich background for selfies, visual experiments and performances of identity. The viewing gallery, built as a stage or a platform rather than a sculpture or an installation in the manner of the other selfie points, offers a space for creative expression and interpretation and allows for the foregrounding of the individual. As a simple intervention that at once creates networked interaction with the built heritage of the city, reinterprets and reappropriates this structure and offers practical solutions for both pedestrians and drivers, the viewing gallery stands as an example of a successful physical-digital assemblage in the city, and demonstrates the need to cleverly think about ways in which to weave digital or new infrastructures into already existing behaviours and built heritage sites, rather than as new interventions in inaccessible spaces.

Connecting this study of selfie points to the wider framework of political image production in India, I also continued to think about the idea of *darshan* or the Hindu devotional exchange of gaze from the previous chapter in the context of the Ganapati *utsava*, to consider why faces of politicians dominate the visual landscape of the city and to link the visual processes in Mumbai to the wider framework of political image production in India. Applying the discussion of *darshan* to the political field like others have done before me, I updated the concept in the context of digital agents, arguing that although the emotive force in the exchange of *darshan* between a political leader and a supporter differs from that between a religious *murti* or leader and a devotee, in that the first does not include a spiritual aspect, the power of the representational image of the political image in which the political leader and the supporter are presented in the same frame, thereby extending the power of the leader to the others in the frame.

In the next chapter, I continue the discussion of insights that emerged from the methodology, with a reflection on how images of faces are commodified and use for surveillance purposes in urban India. Broadening the discussion to cultural influences on the ways that people imagine themselves, I think about the impact of cinema and the media on the Indian imaginary, and the way in which the smartphone is perceived and operationalised in different contexts, to alleviate social and infrastructural pressures on residents of Mumbai.

# Chapter 5 Towards a consolidation: the selfie zeitgeist

## The big screen

At the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival 2023, the most popular exhibit on the main street was a new addition: a large LED screen, set up on the steps along K Dubash Marg, projecting live footage of the section of the street that faced the screen. The video was captured by a camera mounted on a swivel tripod, which was set up in front of the steps and operated by a man sitting at the top of the stairs with a laptop. Each day during the festival, the projection on the screen regularly switched between live footage from the camera and recorded advertisements. When the live footage came on, the crowd in front of the camera would swell, with people trying to catch the camera's attention so that their face would be projected on the screen. After ten or fifteen minutes, when the man switched the projection from the live footage of the festival arena to the recorded advertisements, the crowd would lose interest and disperse. A security guard dressed in a navy-blue uniform stood between the crowd and the camera, blowing his whistle at anybody who got too close to the recording equipment. Like the audience footage screened at live sporting events, the live video focused on faces in the crowd, and the people reacted, cheering, dancing, and recording the images on the screen, and the image of their own faces when they appeared on it, with their smartphone cameras.



Figure 5.1 The big screen at KGAF2023



Figure 5.2 Audience at the big screen at KGAF2023



Figure 5.3 The security guard at the big screen at KGAF2023



Figure 5.4 The security guard at the big screen at KGAF2023

After I noticed this new addition to the exhibition street for the first time, I stood in a corner at the back of the crowd, video recording their reactions and the visuals that appeared on the screen. When the advertisements started and the crowd dispersed, the camera operator saw that I was still standing there with my camera. He switched back from the advertisements to the live footage, moving the camera to face me and for a few seconds, the image of my face filled the screen. Feeling selfconscious, I continued to look into my camera monitor and record. It occurred to me that we were in a staring match: the camera operator recording me and I recording the camera and the image of myself on the screen, both waiting for each other to blink. When the live video feed finally gave way to the advertisements, I climbed up the stairs to talk to the man. His name was Naved, he told me, and his job was to operate this screen and the camera, which he usually did at corporate events, festivals and award shows, where the camera usually recorded the events that were happening on a stage or platform. Initially shy, Naved soon seemed pleased to discuss the unforeseen popularity of what he called the big screen, or the LED screen, and his own role in it. "Mujhe bhi pataa nahi logon ko apne aap ko bade screen pe dekhne me itna excitement kyun ho raha hai," [Even I don't know why people are so excited to see themselves on the big screen] Naved said. But it was a fun job, he told me, and he enjoyed being able to control the camera and tried to zoom in on unexpected candidates such as older visitors, and children, because he found their reactions entertaining. It was the first year that the live screen had been used at KGAF, Naved explained, and it had been the Events General Manager's idea to set it up. I asked if the live recording was a gimmick to draw people to the screen to watch the advertisements, and Naved said no, the original idea had been the live recording and the big screen, and that the used the advertisements only used to disperse the crowd, so that they would return to exhibition space and the shops. He told me that people had paid money to rent the stalls along the exhibition street and that he wanted to make sure that visitors browsed through the things they were selling.



Figure 5.5 Me on the big screen at KGAF2023

Encountering the big screen at the culmination of my fieldwork seemed almost too good to be true – providing yet another example of the *jugalbandi* or visual dialogue between the camera operator, the visitors, and the various cameras and screens they controlled. None of the static installations, which had in previous years been the main draw of the festival, seemed to generate the same level of enthusiastic response from visitors. Naved's concern about the effect that the popularity of his big screen would have on the other exhibitions, and his attempt to control the flow of visitors through the space by turning the projection on and off, signified a larger shift in programming and visitor expectation at the festival.

In 2023, KGAF had returned to its original in-person programming after a gap of two years. It seemed to me that the number of visitors to the festival had drastically increased, and this was confirmed by the uniformed women at the security counters placed at the entrance to the festive street, who remarked that lakhs [hundreds of thousands] of people were coming through the gates each day. The mood of the visitors was joyous and celebratory, with people excited to return to crowded public spaces after the COVID-19 pandemic. The festival organisers, who had struggled with raising sufficient funds in previous years, seemed to be trying to strike a balance between catering to new visitors with interventions such as the big screen, which are rarely used in the artistic, cultural and educational modes of engagement that the festival had previously used.

Structurally, the positioning of the screen at the top of the stairs made the projection more accessible to visitors in the crowded exhibition space. At this height, the screen could be easily seen from a

distance and despite the crowd, unlike the installations and the stalls, which were all situated at ground level, and could only be appreciated at close quarters, forcing visitors to either wait in line for their turn, or to push past other people to get to the front of each installation or stall. In addition to the big screen, the festival organisers had used other social media-friendly interventions such as QR [quick response] codes which linked to special Instagram accounts that had been created for each of the installations. These QR codes were printed on sheets of paper and displayed alongside concept notes of each of the installations and at strategically visible parts of installations.



Figure 5.6 An artist preparing a QR code at KGAF2023



Figure 5.7 An artist placing a QR code alongside his concept note at an installation at KGAF2023



Figure 5.8 An artist positioning a QR code in the middle of his installation at KGAF2023

Naved, the camera operator of the big screen, kept himself entertained by choosing to project the images of people who were watching quietly or were not expecting to be selected, such as the policemen who had wandered over during a break. Each time the projected moved from the advertisements to the live feed, people returned to the section of the exhibition which were covered by the camera, hoping that this time it would be their turn to be featured on the screen. Once, when the camera zoomed in on a young couple, the crowd cheered and whistled.



Figure 5.9 Behind the scenes at the big screen at KGAF2023



Figure 5.10 A young couple on the big screen at KGAF2023

When the camera zoomed in on a particular person, they would often point their camera phones back at the big screen and record the images of themselves that appeared on it. They seemed to do this for a few different of reasons: to participate in the visual dialogue with the camera and the screen, by recording themselves and each other as a way of involving themselves in the festival; to memorialise the moment of being selected in the crowd and appearing on the screen; and out a sense of self-consciousness, holding up a smartphone and looking through its screen in order to having something to do when feeling exposed, like I did when I was being recorded. These interactions lead me to consider the affordances of camera phones and their affective and social potential in the next section of this chapter. I link arguments that I have made in previous chapters, including the terms *jugaad* and *jugalbandi* to concepts developed by other academics studying technology and society. While these discussions inform my arguments, the section focuses on how selfie technologies enable those marginalised by class and gender to occupy space and visibilise themselves.



Figure 5.11 Visitors enjoying the big screen at KGAF2023

As the crowd that was surrounding the big screen dispersed on one occasion, I overheard a young woman say, "Finally *mere khud ko bade screen pe dekhna ka sapna poora ho gaya*" [Finally my dream of seeing myself on the big screen has been realised]. In another instance, I heard a young man told his friends, "*Mazaa aaya* hero *bannaa*" [It was fun to be a film hero], to which they all agreed. From these comments, I understood that the large size of the screen, which resembled the screen in a cinema hall and was symbolic of cinematic fame and celebrityhood, made the interaction especially valuable to the people in the audience. It seemed to me that the excitement about the big screen emerged both from the novelty and strangeness of seeing one's image projected at such a large magnification, and the ability to influence and participate in the projection. A crucial aspect that seemed to pique the interest of the people standing in front of the camera was the presence of other bodies. These people both formed the crowd from which each person hoped to be singled out for being uniquely interesting, and served as the audience who would watch and respond to the performance from the selected person. Continuing with this idea, in the second section of this chapter, I think about the cinematic influences on identity and consider how these relate to performances on social networking platforms.



Figure 5.12 A young visitor at KGAF2023 posing for the big screen

Even as people jostled to get the attention of the camera at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, some avoided it, either out of a sense of disdain for the concept or because of wanting to maintain their privacy. A young man, ducking out of the camera's range, said to his friends, "*Chal main idhar se nikalta hai, kya pataa mere papa dekhe*" [I better get out of here, just in case my father sees this]. In the final section of this chapter, the young man's concern about how images of his face might be broadcast on a public forum and could reveal his location to his father, lead me to a discussion of selfie cultures and negotiations of privacy. I attend to the idea of surveillance that was introduced in Chapter 2 and develop discussions about the saturation of camera technologies and images, drawing from Nishant Shah's discussions about "involuntary" selfies in India (2017), with the development and rollout of the Aadhar Unique Identification programme and the push towards the Digital India initiative of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. Reflecting on my experience during fieldwork and my interactions with different face recognition software, I consider the implications and limitations of the photographed face as a marker of identity and evidence.

### **Smartphone affordances in Mumbai**

The concept of "affordance" has been an influential framework to study how mobile phone technologies interact with human affective experience. First developed in 1979 by psychologist J.J. Gibson who worked in the field of visual perception, the concept was adopted and reworked by academics in the various fields, including technology and usability design (Norman 1988), and technology and social interactions (Gaver 1996, Wellman 2001, Hutchby 2001, Nagy and Neff 2015). Gibson coined the term when thinking about the relationship between living organisms and their environments and used it to argue that the environment is perceived by an organism not just in terms

of object shapes and spatial relationships, but also based on the organism's potential for action in that environment. The term "affordance" captures this potential for action that the environment offers (Gibson 1979, 138-139, Chong and Proctor 2001).

The word was later picked up and popularised by Donald Norman, who adapted the concept for thinking about product design in the influential book Design of Everyday Things (1988) to refer to a product's perceivable action properties. Although this version of the word "affordance" is frequently used as a keyword in technology, communication and media studies, it lacks a clear definition, but remains significant in how it offers a vocabulary to discuss the adaptive, responsive relationship between an individual and a device (Hutchby 2001, Nagy and Neff 2015, McVeigh-Schultz and Baym 2015, Bucher and Helmond 2017). As a solution to this lack of clarity, Nagy and Neff propose the term "imagined affordances" to locate the emergence of affordances "between users' perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers" (2015, 5). They argue that this term challenges the idea of affordances as being static and offers "a concept flexible and robust enough for the complex emerging socio-technical relationships in social life" (2015, 5) that accounts for the various ways in which emotions, imaginations, materiality and power interact. As other academics have picked up the term, they have argued that imagined affordances also account for not only how users approach technology, but also for how machine learning feedback-loop systems shape the ways in which algorithms arrange themselves and generate the system (Bucher 2017).

Similarly, in fields of urban studies, gender studies and politics, the concept has been used to think about what infrastructures "afford" residents or citizens. Lennon et al propose a relational framework of affordances they term the "Affordances Star" with the six nodes of "spaces", "objects", "actions", "scales", "persons" and "times" to help in measuring the multidimensional experiences of green spaces people across age, gender and ethnicity, and to help planners and designers improve "the range of positive affordances experienced by the greatest spectrum of green space users without unduly reducing the positive affordance" to think about how "those engaging in public protest or experiencing housing insecurity make use of the material environment" by adapting or subverting the uses of spaces from their everyday use (Popovski and Young 2022, 1). They suggest that studying the unauthorised or illicit adaptive use of "small things in everyday places" which are usually overlooked, demonstrates how they "constitute potentialities for defiance and resistance" (Popovski and Young 2022,

1). They draw on Sara Ahmed's thesis about "use" (2019), specifically the "queering" of things or spaces, or "how things can be used in ways other than for which they were intended or by those other than for whom they were intended" (Ahmed 2019, 199). Borrowing the term and its history of reappropriation from the LGBTQIA+ movement, Ahmed declares, "Queer uses would be about releasing a potentiality that already resides in things given how they have taken shape. Queer use could be what we are doing when we release that potential" (Ahmed 2019, 200). According to Ahmed, "queerness can be infectious" although she cautions that this also does not always happen (Ahmed 2019, 200).

Many of these ideas reflect arguments that I have made in previous chapters, both in terms of how objects or spaces are designed for their use to be made visible to people, as well as the "queering" or the adaptation or subversion of the affordances of spaces and things. The words jugaad and jugalbandi, that I used to discuss how selfie technologies were adapted to experience the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival and the Ganapati pandals, could be understood as similar adaptive or "queering" strategies by visitors to experience or enjoy spaces in ways in which organisers and designers of the spaces had not anticipated. The Hindi/Punjabi words jugalbandi, or collaboration (in this case visual) and jugaad or informal workaround, also situate these practices in their cultural context of urban India. At the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, I described how visitors who do not have the time, space or a frame of reference to contemplate the art exhibition in the way that the organisers intend, use their smartphones to visually interact with the material structures, colours, lights and shapes of the installations, treating the space as a creative space for co-creation. At the Ganapati utsava pandals, I analysed how the limitations of space and time on devotees is managed or overcome by people using their camera phones as jugaad mirrors to extend their darshan of the murti even after they are forced to turn around in the queue. In other words, while as technological objects, smartphone cameras afford digital photography and online interactivity, they are also imagined (following Nagy and Neff), vernacularised (following McVeigh-Schultz and Baym 2015) and queered (following Ahmed 2019) in the urban Indian context as affective and material affordances to foster collaboration and creativity and alleviate infrastructural challenges. The idea of infectious queering mirrors arguments that I made about algorithms that bring people to places and offer them examples of how to visually interact with these places.

If we consider the affordances of networked devices now in the context of city infrastructure, the challenges are significant: with a population of over 12.7 million and a population density of 21,000

per square kilometre, Mumbai is one of the most densely populated places in the world ("Population Census 2011"). Millions live in informal housing communities, derogatorily referred to as "slums", where, according to a UNICEF assessment, 73.5% households have high residential vulnerability and 67.9% households have high social vulnerability (Deshmukh et al 2023). Many people living in these circumstances are young migrant men, who have left their family homes in various other parts of the country and have made their way to Mumbai to make a living. Many others are families that live together in single rooms, or sometimes in two-room tenements. In these challenging circumstances, when people have little privacy, space or disposable money for personal belongings, mobile phones take on a special role.

Examining representations of mobile phones in popular culture in India, Deepa Reddy describes the mobile phone as a "biographical object" following Janet Hoskins' use the term, or "a thing endowed with the qualities and characteristics of its owner" (Reddy 2015, 480). Reddy points to the way in which mobile phones are marketed as customisable objects, which have the potential for individuation, arguing that this is what drives market success (Reddy 2015, 480). Almost a decade after Reddy's observation, this idea of customisation of the physical properties, that is, the way that the mobile phone looks with different colour options or different backgrounds, fonts and text sizes, or sounds with customisable rings tones or message alert sounds, is supplemented with the customisation afforded by the algorithms of the search engines and on social networking platforms in terms of the data that they present us based on previous browsing behaviour. Today, the characterisation of the mobile phone as a "biographical object" is perhaps even more apt, in how the phone has become imbricated in the user and in everyday activities.

Along Camera Gully in the old Fort area of Mumbai, where new and used cameras, smartphones and other electronics are bought, sold and repaired, small shops lining the street display advertisements of plastic camera phone cases, which can be personalised with images of the owner. The idea of printing an image of the self on the cover a phone case might seem like a redundancy when the user of the phone might tire of the printed, permanent image on the back cover and has the option to change the wallpaper on the camera screen regularly. But using the selfie as a digital object that symbolises individualism, autonomy and technological possibility, as an emblem on the "biographical object" of the mobile phone, is particularly fitting. These advertisements also remind us that for most people in Mumbai, the mobile phone is their most valuable possession, and often, their only private space. It affords communication, privacy and access to the wider world, while also functioning as a constant

companion that holds or stores the most intimate knowledge of the self, collected both from messages, notes, passwords or images stored by the individual on the device, as well as from the cookies and information collected from browsing the Internet.



Figure 5.13 An advertisement for personalised mobile covers

These affordances of the mobile phone also threaten social hierarchies, which is why the ownership and use of digital devices and social networking platforms are often controlled on the basis of gender. In an examination of the cultural anxieties expressed over mobile phone usage, Assa Doron discusses the common trope of the "mobile waali" or the woman with the mobile in Bhojpuri songs, depicted to be defying the normative social order by dressing in halter tops and tight jeans, or talking on the mobile phone rather than making chapattis or doing similar domestic chores. Doron argues that mobile phones offer "a window for exploring and experiencing a changing India, including the shifting values and practices related to domesticity, sexuality and morality" (Doron 2017, 359). He writes, "[m]obile' in this context could mean both the potential for mobility—a liberating escape from oppressive social constraints, but also a show of disregard for the 'traditional' values of Indian 'culture' that emphasise chastity and modesty, and women's roles. The word 'mobile' thus refers to both the seductive and threating potential of this technology and its implications, forcing many in India to rethink their sense of time and space, and what is happening this moment, now-the uncertain era of the mobile" (359). Doron's illustration of the ways in which the affordances of mobile phones are perceived as threatening to the social order highlights gendered perceptions related to the ownership and use of mobile phones in India, and his research demonstrates the ways in which women's access to communication devices is controlled by male members of the family. While his discussion is based in the context of the Bhojpuri-speaking North Indian states, where it is believed that social roles are rigidly defined, access to digital objects and the ways in which they are used, continues to be differentiated along gender lines in Mumbai.

As one example of this and keeping in step with the theme of this project, we might consider the complicated affordances of mobile phones for women in terms of access to public space. It is generally considered that women in Mumbai have more safety and access to public space than anywhere else in the country (Phadke, Khan and Ranade 2011, 23). These special freedoms are attributed to the population of the city and the cost of living in it, since women are forced to work outside their homes to be able to support their families. In *Why Loiter*, which examines women's access to public spaces in the city, the authors complicate this commonly held belief:

Look carefully and you will find that the women in the neatly pinned saris also wear equally discreet but nonetheless visible *mangalsutras* that mark them as married (and therefore spoken for). The women on their way to college in tight t-shirts also have their files clasped carefully to their chests in the classic posture of defensiveness. The corporate woman keeps her cell phone close to her, especially when she travels at night. The women in the *ridha* are only allowed their Scootys on the condition that the *ridha* goes with it. The women in the club have jackets tucked under their chairs that they put on the moment they step out of the club.

Mumbai's women too do not have uncontested access to public space. They feel compelled to demonstrate at any given time that they have a legitimate reason to be where they are. Commuting to work, ferrying children to school or going shopping are seen as acceptable reasons for women to access public space. However, being in public space without any apparent reason is not so easy even for the *bindaas* Bombay Girl. It is when women 'get above themselves', that the invisible boundaries become apparent. As every Bombay Girl knows, her freedom is subject to her knowing the 'limits', restrictions that often do not apply in quite the same way to her brothers. (23)

As an act of defiance to these complex negotiations that women are forced to make in order to participate in public space, the authors propose the act of "loitering". Ulka Anjaria, explains, "Literally, loitering is doing nothing; it is carving out space between other acts of importance and/or necessity [...] Loitering is thus distinguished from purposeful or useful activity. It has, from a utilitarian standpoint, negative value" (76). In this way, Phadke, Khan and Ranade argue that loitering is important precisely because it carves out a "space of ambiguity" (Phadke, Khan and Ranade 2011, 171).

Some of the ways in which the affordances of the mobile phone or smartphone<sup>1</sup> have been queered or imagined to make this loitering feel less radical, and to also afford women with the protection and

security that they need when they are exploring or testing the boundaries of these processes of freedom, were highlighted in my interaction with a pair of young women taking selfies outside the Our Lady of Salvation Church in Dadar. Hoping to start a conversation, I approached the women and offered to take photographs of them together on their smartphones. After they had taken a few more selfies, they handed me their phones and asked me to stand further away so that I could capture more of the church wall in the background. At first, I assumed they had been visiting the church, and wanted some quick photographs on their way out. But we spent several minutes taking photographs, trying out different poses, in various locations and with changing backgrounds. While taking the photographs, I noticed the vermillion marks on their foreheads, which implied that they had probably just visited the nearby Siddhivinayak Ganapati temple, and asked what prompted them to take selfies at the church. The women told me that they had liked the boundary wall, which was striking in its black-and-white colour scheme and said that like I had guessed, they had been on a pilgrimage to the Siddhivinayak temple. They said that they were waiting for a few hours until the trains were less crowded, before making the journey to their homes in Thane, a neighbouring city an hour away by train, and that since they had nothing else to do, they were taking pictures. When I asked where they were planning to circulate these images, and if they were active on Facebook or Instagram, the women said that they planned to keep these images private and would return to look at them only on one of their brother's laptops. This interaction highlighted, to me, the complex ways in which smartphones are queered to afford legitimacy and safety to the act of loitering, but also, the limits of these practices, or the negotiations that women make to continue thriving within a patriarchal community.

When I encountered these two women at the church, they were not taking selfies for documentation or to share online, since it seemed that it would not have been considered an appropriate thing for them to do by their wider community, and that their access to digital infrastructures, or social networking platforms and the devices from which to access them, were monitored by male members of their families. Instead, they were engaging in these acts to while away time or "loiter" until the trains were less crowded, creatively collaborating on the streets and with the built heritage of the city. The act of looking busy while being creative and inviting me into their activity was also necessitated by fact that they had to avoid looking suspicious, as young women standing aimlessly on the streets of the city is usually interpreted as an act of soliciting male attention. They had also (perhaps unintentionally) adopted other strategies in their choice of clothes, and the vermillion marks on their forehead that signify caste Hindu identity or a majority identity and mark women as "good" women who respect and maintain the social order. In her analysis of "#azadimarch selfies" from the public protests to the election results in 2013 in Pakistan, Fatima Aziz similarly describes how analysing selfies reveals the complex societal restrictions that are placed on women in South Asia, and how they negotiate them, while also demonstrating their opinions or participation. Aziz notes that while most selfies posted with the tag #azadimarch on Instagram from outdoor locations featured men and were uploaded on Instagram by accounts in male names, indoor selfies that were posted in support of the protest, were uploaded by teenagers and women, whose access to public space is controlled by parents. Family selfies, another category that Aziz indentified, were significant because "[i]nclusion of parents can reduce narcissistic rhetoric against selfies propagated by Pakistani press" (26). Aziz uses Engin Isin's notion of citizenship performance to argue that the #azadimarch selfies in 2014 in Pakistan were a "performative force" that helped Pakistani citizens to perform their civic identity individually, as well as collectively on Instagram, which was used as a site by new social actors, who represented themselves as claimants" (27).

Taking inspiration from Aziz's analysis, we might consider how selfies taken and shared online by women in Mumbai demonstrate the nuances of women's strategies while traversing the city. In Mumbai, where women tend to travel for work or to study, while the smartphone affords family members an avenue for surveillance, to keep track of movement and to stay in touch, it is also queered by women to protect themselves from unwanted male attention while they traverse the city and seek pleasure in it. Using a smartphone as a creative tool while spending time in public is clever because the smartphone affords protection through connectivity, either by phone call or text message, to trusted friends and family, or even the police. Selfies, as acts of creativity, youthfulness and even vanity, while still often a strategy to justify public presence, must also be acknowledged for being acts of radical self-confidence and pleasure. Despite being legitimising strategies in the ways that Phadke, Khan and Ranade describe, women's selfies as "performative forces" (Isin 2012, quoted in Aziz 2017, 25) or networked acts of citizenship that can be easily redistributed, also compound the radical act of taking pleasure in public space, inspiring other women to do the same.

Another example of imagined or queered affordances of selfie practices presents itself in the "couple selfie" or the "group selfie". In Mumbai, at beaches, parks and in other recreational public spaces, I often noticed young couples and groups of friends use the excuse of taking a selfie to justify physical proximity, putting their arms around each other and collaborating over creative decisions. In a city

where public displays of affection are routinely met with threats from vigilantes and the police, a selfie with others, or a "group selfie" necessitates physical proximity, with people having to stand close together to fit in the small frame. In the next section of this chapter, after having laid the ground for thinking about the romantic influences on identity by the screen industries in Mumbai, I consider a few more of these erotic or romantic negotiations.

### Selfie practices as impersonation and exhibition

Much has been written about the cultural influence of national cinema on Indians and the Indian diaspora (Appadurai 1990, Nandy 1998, Ganti 2004, Vasudevan 2010, Punathambekar 2013, Dwyer 2014). Dwyer even claims that the Indian "view of history is purveyed by the cinema, not by books written by academic historians; their attitudes to politics are formed by films, not by the speeches given by politicians" (Dwyer 2010, 381). While this statement might read like an exaggeration, and is certainly not entirely relevant in contemporary India, given the popularity of Narendra Modi and a few television news media personalities, it communicates the significance of cinema in the Indian context, and the imbrication of the industry in nation-building.

Factoring in the impact of global economic and cultural flows after the economic liberalisation policies that India adopted in the 1990s, Purnima Mankekar investigates the "affective regimes" that she argues create the "transnational public cultures" that "mediate the constitution of Indianness and national belonging within India and beyond" (2015, 7). The term "transnational public cultures" is used by Mankekar to encompass films made both for Indian audiences and diasporic communities, as well as Hindi television shows, print advertisements and commodities like Indian groceries (2015). In her work, Mankekar demonstrates how this collective archive of objects and images "constitute India as an archive of affect and temporality" (2015, 7) both for those living in India, and for communities living abroad, specifically, in the San Francisco Bay Area of the United States of America. In the following discussion of her work, I focus on the Indian experience (rather than the diasporic), using the ideas that she develops about performance and impersonation to help cement some of the arguments that I make later in this section.

Key media objects in Mankekar's study emerge from Bollywood: a chapter is dedicated to the film *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (1995), which other scholars similarly locate as a significant catalyst in shifting ideas of contemporary Indianness among the youth (Punathambekar 2013, Dwyer 2014). The film, set across London and Punjab, tells the story of a young couple negotiating their secret

romance while they wait for the girl's father to accept the relationship. Mankekar, in her analysis, argues that the enduring success of the film emerges from its "deterritorialized conception of Indianness" (57) which is not based on territory or spatial definitions, but premised on affect. She writes, "Indianness is not constructed as static or unchanging but instead is portable and flexible [...] Indianness can (and must) adapt to the transnational movements of migrants and capital. When Raj's father sets foot in Punjab, he pauses for a few moments as if to imbibe the very air of his homeland and exclaims, "My country! My land! My Punjab!" Yet, significantly, [...] he defines his Indianness by insisting that, despite his Westernized appearance and the fact that he has lived abroad for so many years, he carries India in his heart wherever he goes" (56).

Mankekar also extends this discussion of Indianness as an affect, situating it in the economic and political shifts in India at the time, arguing that the figure of the NRI or the non-resident Indian "was purposefully created by the Indian state in order to make financial and affective claims on select members of upper-class diasporic elites. At a critical moment in India's postcolonial history, the state aimed to woo NRIs primarily to encourage them to invest in an economy that was teetering on the brink of bankruptcy" (68). This discussion, in the context of my project, offers a history of how cinema and other cultural objects have consistently been used to create a national identity based on affect, in order to encourage citizens to contribute productively to the economy.

In her examination of the aspirations of people living in India, Mankekar argues for the need to problematise the idea of "a stable and unitary identity implicit in the work of a wide range of scholars including Erving Goffman (1959), whose work on the performance of everyday life has been foundational to much theorizing on the social bases of personhood" (189), choosing instead to seek inspiration in the work of Fanon (1967), Bhabha (1994), Roy (1998) Butler (1993) and Garber (1997) to think about how "impersonation" blends into "personation" (2015, 209) through the aspirations and interactions conditioned by transnational neoliberal discourses of mobility and growth. Borrowing from Appadurai, Mankekar writes "aspirations are an affective-temporal formation: drawing sustenance from a disjuncture between how subjects navigate the present and imagine the future, they are generative of specific forms of action and agency; aspirations mediate how subjects form their worlds and inhabit and navigate them" (190).

To demonstrate this, she describes her interactions with call centre employees in New Delhi. Their aspirations of economic success and globality, Mankekar explains, sit alongside rather than replace

"other constructions of agency (such as those shaped by duty and collective well-being) [...] even as they unsettle them and are unsettled by them" (226). Apart from wanting to provide for their immediate families or communities, this mobility also mirrors national shifts. Mankekar writes, "this mobility brought with it an exhilarating sense of being part of India's rise as an economic power on the global stage. As some agents informed us, growth entailed moving from being passive onlookers to feeling that they were participants in a drama much larger than themselves, the drama of India's growth as an economic power" (210).

To fulfil these aspirations, Mankekar describes the various impersonations that these call centre employees have had to make. Since they serve largely American customers, these employees work night shifts, learn to speak with American accents, and are given American names. Following Hardt, Mankekar sees these impersonations as affective labour, which is both corporeal and intellectual: her conversation with a soft skills trainer at the call centre highlights some of these forms of labour, "[s]he explained to us that she taught agents how to groom themselves, use deodorant, enter and leave elevators ("while entering an elevator they should first wait for those inside to come out and then enter—they shouldn't rush in as if they are boarding a Delhi bus"), stand in the hallways ("they should not stand with one foot against the wall"), and, last but not least, how to use Western-style toilets" (203). These affective strategies also extend to the call centre employees' personal lifestyle choices. Mankekar explains how the Western clothes they choose are "sartorial signifiers of globality" and shopping, going to restaurants and pubs are popular leisure activities. "Call center agents perceived new forms of consumption as markers of a cosmopolitan lifestyle, and of being part of a modern generation that was participating in globalization and the glamour they associated with it" (207).

These extracts from Mankekar's work inform and shape my understanding of not just the affective constructions of screen cultures and the influence they have had on the Indian imaginary, but also in thinking about the corporeal and intellectual impersonations that people make while negotiating both global and Indian identities. I present Mankekar's descriptions here to also offer a contrast to the current modes of thinking about Indianness and relationships with the West, which is where I situate my contribution to the study of Indian visual culture. That is, in the context of global networked platforms, but also at a time when India is positioning itself as an equal to other powerful countries, evidenced in the recent G20 summit held in India (Bajpaee 2023), and Modi's pitch for self-reliance with his "Vocal for Local" and "Make in India" slogans, which encourage pride in Indian business and culture. I argue that the affordances of camera phones and social networking platforms have

changed the way we conceptualise aspiration and impersonation and that the specific architectural affordances of platforms afford Indians opportunities to selectively present different experiments or representations of the self to different audiences. While this argument for a complex, multi-faceted identity has been made in fields of gender studies and postcolonialism already as Mankekar demonstrates, situating it in the contemporary context of algorithms and the "dividual" which I examined in Chapter 2, reveals some of the complexities in which various identities are negotiated today.

To approach the ideas, we must first consider recent shifts that have occurred in digital spaces. Western academics, drawing on Goffman's influential dramaturgical theories (1959) have largely theorised social networking platforms as a "public stage" which are used by people to build a "brand me", or to curate a public persona through images and interactions on platforms (Senft 2013, 346). The term "microcelebrity" in this context has come to be used for a set of strategies, such as deleting unflattering images, sharing regular updates and designing a "coherent, branded package" around the self in a way that only artists and entrepreneurs previously did (Senft 2013, 349). "Instafame", similarly, "demonstrates that while microcelebrity is widely practiced, those successful at gaining attention often reproduce conventional status hierarchies of luxury, celebrity and popularity that depend on the ability to emulate the visual iconography of mainstream celebrity culture" (Marwick 2015, p. 139). Going by these influential arguments, especially in discussions of selfies, it is widely accepted that people present the "best versions" of themselves on social networking platforms.

Bernie Hogan, like Mankekar, finds Goffman's influential dramaturgical theories limiting, and argues that using the metaphor of the "exhibition" rather than the "theatrical stage" in the context of social media allows us to make a distinction between the actor and the artifact. He explains, "[t]he actor performs in real time for an audience that monitors the actor. The artifact is the result of a past performance and lives on for others to view on their time" (377). Situating his metaphor of the exhibition in the context of social networking platforms, Hogan writes, "[a]n exhibition site can now be defined as a site (typically online) where people submit reproducible artifacts (read: data). These artifacts are held in storehouses (databases). Curators (algorithms designed by site maintainers) selectively bring artifacts out of storage for particular audiences. The audience in these spaces consists of those who have and those who make use of access to the artifacts. This includes those who respond, those who lurk, and those who acknowledge or are likely to acknowledge" (381). Although "an exhibition is still a form of presentation of self" (377), this approach of thinking of social networking

platform "profiles" as "exhibits" shifts focus from privileging the intention of the selfie-taker (as an example to suit the focus of this thesis) to a more balanced consideration of how the algorithms that arrange or "curate" the data, and the viewer who responds to the image with their own biases or frames of reference, also participate in the circulation of these images.

While Hogan also proposes a "theory of lowest common denominator culture", by which he means the tendency of users to present idealised or normatively acceptable versions of themselves to not offend "hidden audiences who are not the intended recipient of content but will have access to it" (383), changes within the architecture of platforms that have altered these ideas of "collapsed contexts" (boyd 2009) but have still not been widely considered within the academic community. As I explained in Chapter 1, to keep up with rivals Snapchat and TikTok, and to encourage Indian users to take up Instagram after TikTok was banned in India, Instagram borrowed from these platforms to make structural changes to its application. Aesthetically, these various platforms had until that point, encouraged different types of sociality and styles of content: while Instagram privileged perfection, glamour, clean lines, flat lay photography and a Scandinavian-inspired aesthetic (Manovich 2017) and people were encouraged to "follow" celebrities and connections from the real world, TikTok used "principles of mimesis—imitation and replication" and prioritised easily replicable content, like lipsync videos or "dance challenge" content (Zulli and Zulli 2022, 1882).

When Instagram adopted some TikTok functionalities and affordances, as a business growth strategy but also encouraged by geopolitical tensions and Western and Indian concerns about how China might use the data gathered on TikTok, it in effect merged the aesthetics and formats of the two platforms. This was achieved by adding specific features: "disappearing" content to make users feel more comfortable with sharing personal or imperfect images; "close friends" settings that allow people to share content with only a select group of people; and by introducing video filters and lipsync functionalities in their short video, or short-form Reels format, which was also borrowed from TikTok. The changes Instagram implemented afforded more control to users over limiting hidden audiences and therefore removed some of the pressure for users to only share content that would appeal to the lowest common denominator (Hogan 2010), and outdating strategies that users had imagined and implemented, such as the "finsta" (or fake Insta) and "rinsta" (or real Insta) accounts that teenagers made on Instagram, to present different images (and therefore, different versions or key values of themselves) to different groups of people (Cavender 2021).

The two platforms were also designed for different types of sociality: while the "networked publics" of Instagram is based on real-world connections, the "imitation publics" of TikTok (Zulli and Zulli 2022, 1882) is "constituted through the shared ritual of content imitation and replication" (Zulli and Zulli 2022, 1883). In other words, Instagram encouraged you to "follow" "people you may know" to see the content that they published, while content on TikTok would usually be "served" by predictive algorithms from strangers on the Internet based on content that users had engaged with previously. By copying TikTok's "discover" pages that uses "mimetic principles" (Zulli and Zulli 2022, 1883) to "serve" users content based on their browsing history, while also maintaining its older networking algorithms which allow people to share private messages, photos and videos with people they "follow" on Instagram, Instagram now affords both types of sociality. Users can now engage with "close friends" on "stories" and send quick, informal content to a chosen few, they can participate in both watching and creating trending "challenge videos", and they can also labour over perfect images to share publicly on their "grid". In the following paragraphs, I will discuss how in India, this blend of the "mimetic" (Zulli and Zulli 2022, 1883) aesthetic of TikTok and the "brand me" (Senft 2013, 346) aesthetic of Instagram, presents unique affordances for experimentation for identities rooted in national screen cultures, which are rehearsed or "tried on" through performance, imitation or impersonation.

An anecdote from my childhood illustrates how the idea of performance came to be held as an aspiration for young urban Indians. As a child, when travelling through the city in buses and trains, I would often look up at the countless hoardings featuring film stars that lined the streets and would assume that one day I would be on them. I had no special interest in acting or performing, but at that age, I believed I would naturally progress into a glamourous public role. When I recount this story to Mumbaikars of my generation who grew up in the 1990s and the 2000s, I am often met with sheepish smiles and expressions of recognition: it seems that we all secretly held the same belief. Looking back now, I realise that I aspired not to celebrityhood, but to a young, global, independence which I did not see in female figures I encountered in day-to-day life. While the previous generation had been raised with less access to the rest of the world, and clearer definitions of "Indian" and "Western" values, the 1990s brought Western music and film, clothing brands and new forms of leisure (such as restaurants and malls), causing us to renegotiate these binaries of India and the West, as Mankekar describes.

One such new arrival, was that of MTV, which projected a "confident, upwardly mobile dynamism" (Cullity and Younger 2004, 115) and vaulted India "into the post-modern future by subverting the conceptual binary that kept it mired in the traditional or modernist past (Cullity and Younger 2004, 112). This was an urban phenomenon, Cullity and Younger remind us, and was "predicated on a disavowal of the peasants and working-class people who make up 70 percent of the country's population" (Cullity and Younger 2004, 115). At the same time, MTV had a significant impact on urban populations: Cullity and Younger describe how birthday parties for seven-year-olds in Delhi started to include activities like "walk the ramp" and "act like a model" competitions, influenced by the "new Indian woman" of MTV (Cullity and Younger 2004, 108). Similarly, films like Dil Chahta Hai (2001) and Zindagi Milegi Na Dobara (2011) which were urban, young films about male friendship groups travelling in Goa and Spain respectively, changed young people's ideas about recreation, careers and love. Funded by the respective tourism boards, the films had the intended effect and tourist numbers to both these places increased dramatically after the success of the films in India (Kamat 2002, Ramon 2022). To put it differently, these examples demonstrate that while consuming screen cultures influence ideas about being Indian in a changing India, the imitation of them, in affective, embodied ways, like Mankekar describes in her study of call centre employees, become crucial to participating in these changes.

At the big screen at KGAF in 2023, the comments that I overheard about how people enjoyed the feeling of being a "hero" when their faces were projected on the screen and seen by the crowd around them, or of feeling fulfilled after having seen themselves on the "big screen" reflect how, even when people outgrow any real aspirations of fame, the "big screen" is still tantalising. In the absence of the opportunity of the cinematic stage, social networking platforms are adopted as the surrogate through which people play out the fantasies of being protagonists in a story. As an example, we might consider how the *sangeet* (the party on the evening before a wedding) evolved from a small, family function into a grand event at caste Hindu middle and upper caste weddings, and finally into "wedding films" on social networking platforms. In wedding genre Bollywood films like *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (1994), *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (1999), *Meri Yaar Ki Shaadi Hai* (2002) and *Band Baaja Baaraat* (2010) the *sangeet* was often used as an apparatus of exposition. In these films, the existing relationships between the family members was enacted by them for the benefit of the incoming *bahu* or daughter-in-law (the audience surrogate) or the *sangeet* which was already in itself a celebration of one romantic couple, became the catalyst for another romance in the film. With the immense popularity of this genre, Indian wedding *sangeets* evolved into elaborate events in which couples and

families, in Bollywood song-and-dance fashion, performed musical skits for each other (Desai 2021).

Today, with the popularity of social media, another ritual has been added to wedding celebrations: many couples now hire a professional team of choreographers and videographers to craft "trailers", song sequences or "wedding films". These wedding media are recorded in the tone of cinema: with background music, choreography and plot progressions. The couples perform common tropes of romantic songs at sites like forts and beaches, and the films include documentary-style interviews with family members, friends and the couple. In the films, the brides usually look happy, another significant departure from previous depictions of Indian brides, and the couples are usually depicted as agentic, desiring equals, without using symbolic imagery that was popular in previous forms of wedding memorialisation (Pinney 1997, 132).

These films and videos are made across a range of production values or budgets and are distributed online after the wedding, on platforms and specially created wedding websites and sometimes even screened at the *sangeet* for the wedding guests. It is important to note also that Hindi film actors and celebrities too make similar wedding videos, and probably inspire others to do so, but while these types of performances are made possible across budgets because of the availability of camera equipment and professional services, or the video recording and editing functions on smartphones, they are all crucially premised on the networked affordances of online publication. The videos afford couples a chance not only fulfil their aspirations of a Bollywood-style romance, that is, a chance to impersonate the characters from the films that modelled contemporary relationships for them, but also a chance to impersonate the actors, through the process of filming the video, publishing it online and receiving feedback.

Following this example, these types of "user-generated" content that are published on social networking platforms too must be considered an equally significant element of "transnational public cultures" (Mankekar 2015, 7) in a contemporary formulation of the concept. An example of a networked object which perhaps has a similar influence on young Indians as *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (1995) did in its time, is the song by YouTuber Dhinchak Pooja (dhinchak meaning flashy, in Bollywood onomatopoeic slang) titled "Selfie *maine le li aaj*" [I took a selfie today]. Published in 2017, the song, with a repetitive chorus line and a music video featuring a montage of her selfies in public places in New Delhi, wearing sunglasses, posing with her friends and standing through a

sunroof from a white Audi car, went "viral" and today has 51 million views on YouTube. Even as it drew ridicule from elite urban Indians, the song framed the selfie as an object of leisure and aspiration, especially as Dhinchak Pooja appeared to have no contacts in the music industry and seemed to have made her success purely through such low-cost videos uploaded on YouTube, and fundamentally changed how people thought about celebrityhood, and the possible ways in which to become one. Dhinchak Pooja's success also demonstrates the significance of platforms in reducing the distance between the centre and the margins, or between Mumbai (where films are produced) and the rest of the country.



Figure 1.14 A screenshot of Dhinchak Pooja's music video "Selfie maine le li aaj" on YouTube

As Soma Basu investigates in the "crying genre" of content on Instagram, many Indian users, or "artists", as they refer to themselves, now achieve fame by lip-syncing to clips from popular cinema (Basu 2023). The selfie, in this case, along with the lip-sync and networking functionalities of social networking platforms, affords users the opportunity to be an actor in front of a camera and performing for audiences, without the need for the larger infrastructural framework of Bollywood or other cinema industries. In Basu's study of celebrities who have emerged on Instagram (and previously TikTok), these "artists" use cinematic tropes such as that "of a pining or jilted lover or a devoted son, and cry to 'affectuate' a bond with the viewers as an attempt to build their personal brands" (Basu 2023, 3). These types of performances, that is, 60 second, lip-synced video set to audio from scenes in popular films, are made in remote parts of the country, and have the potential to rocket people to fame: Basu offers the example of Sagar Goswami, who started his TikTok account in 2017 at the age of 16 from

the village of Koderma in Jharkhand, and is now managed by a talent company and performs "at various cultural programs, product launch parties and political rallies" (Basu 2023, 1).

While discussing the potential for fame that these technologies afford, I do not wish to imply that selfie cultures emerge only from a hope or dream of achieving fame online. In Chapter 2, I described how a young group of women told me that they planned to take several photographs, but only upload a few to Instagram. While this might be a strategy, in the "microcelebrity" mode, of curating a perfect online presence, to me it also highlights the significance of the affective, embodied act of being the subject of a photograph. On platforms, the "gamification" of selfie practices, afforded by lip-syncing technologies and cute animal filters that users can try out on their selfies, allow this experimentation to continue endlessly. Since platform algorithms also encourage and reward constant engagement, the more images or video a user uploads, the more feedback they receive in terms of "likes" and "comments" and emoji "reactions", encouraging them to participate within the parameters of the commercial platforms.

The phrase "*mai apni favourite hoon*" [I am my own favourite [topic/subject/person]], popularised by Kareena Kapoor Khan in the role of Geet in the Hindi film *Jab We Met* (2007), has emerged a meme on the Internet to exemplify this unapologetic engagement with the self, and is commonly used as a response when platform users are criticised for their "vanity" or "self-obsession". As a tag on social networking platforms, the phrase is used in conjunction with tags like "#selflove" and ideas about prioritising the self, and in this way, the phrase re-contextualises selfie photography as a discovery of the "authentic" self, as a demonstration of self-reliance and the confidence of the urban Indian woman.



Figure 1.15 A still from the film Jab We Met, which has become a meme on the internet *"Mai apni favourite hoon"* [I am my own favourite [topic/subject/person]]



Figure 1.16 An Instagram post by a travel blogger @solo\_escapist captioned with the phrase from the film, and discussed in the context of prioritising the self



Figure 1.17 An image posted on Instagram by Kareena Kapoor Khan wearing a sari, captioned "main apni favourite hoon... Happy Valentine's Day"

While the examples so far have demonstrated the influence of cinema on the content created by users on networked platforms, the film industry too in its representation of selfie practices, has demonstrated the participatory potential of selfies and used the selfie as a symbol in various ways. In the song "Selfie *le le re*" [take a selfie] from the Salman Khan-starrer Hindi film *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* (2015), the central event of the film, in which the protagonist Bajrangi, a devotee of Hanuman, discovers a lost child, is set in a public procession celebrating the Hindu festival of Hanuman Jayanti

in Haryana. Following this discovery, it emerges that the child is Muslim and from Pakistan, and Bajrangi risks his life to return her to her family.

The film, which released in the same year as Modi's selfie-themed publicity campaigns, must be recognised for contributing to the popular formulation of the selfie as a symbol of national pride, Hindu devotion and public celebration. In the song, the selfie that Bajrangi takes with the other devotees in the procession is used to situate him as an active participant in the community, and to communicate his generosity and friendliness. At the same time, in its treatment of India-Pakistan relations through a lens of shared humanity, the film as an "experiment in imagination" (Siddiqa 2015) also negotiates complex contemporary Indian politics through its casting of Salman Khan (who is Muslim by birth) as both a person whose humanitarian values supersede any cultural normative values that discriminate against Muslims or Pakistanis, and as an ardent devotee of Hanuman. The choice of Hanuman as a deity is significant because in right-wing Hindutva politics, often animated by the Babri Masjid-Ram Mandir controversy in Ayodhya, the divine monkey Hanuman, who represents a powerful, protective force that has promised eternal servitude to Ram, has been adopted as a symbol of political aggression. The selfie at a devotional procession, in this context, emerges as a symbol of this imagined new India, that has cosmopolitanism and liberal values while it celebrates traditional Hindu festivals.

*Bajrangi Bhaijaan* became one of the highest grossing films ever in India (Surendhar 2018) and the chorus line of the song "*chal beta selfie le le re*" [come kid, take a selfie] continues to be played as an "entry song" at events Khan attends, including the reality show Bigg Boss (a remake of Big Brother), which he hosts. In these publicity events, the song becomes a play on words, both reminding audiences of the popular character of the ordinary Hanuman devotee that Salman Khan played in the hit film, and of the celebrity persona with whom people are compelled to take a selfie.



Figure 5.18 A screenshot of the song Selfie Le le Re uploaded by the distributor T Series on YouTube

Returning to the spaces under consideration in the previous chapters, we might consider how selfie cultures in these contexts, relate to the discussion about affordances and the different types of sociality afforded by platforms. In Chapter 1, MacDougall's descriptions of images taken for the purpose of matchmaking, which used objects like telephones and motorbikes not to indicate the subject's possessions of them, but instead to convey the subject's aspirations (2006) and Appadurai's discussion of the significance of the clothing and backdrops in postcolonial photographs, which he argues allow postcolonial subjects to rehearse their new identities (1997, 6), offer antecedents to contemporary selfie practices, both in terms of how backgrounds and props are used to make claims about photographic subjects, and to think about the metaphoric value of clothing and backdrops.

In the contemporary architecture of social networking platforms, the combination of mimetic algorithms and the "brand me" aesthetic of Instagram together present these spaces, that is, the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, the Ganapati *utsava* and select selfie points (like the CSMT viewing gallery and the original Love Mumbai selfie point at Bandra Reclamation) as prime locations for selfies. In Chapter 2, I discussed how the selfie, as a networked object, is brought to the festival by the algorithms of social networking platforms, which show users where the popular places in the city are, the times of year that they are activated by networked photography, and urging them to visit the festivals and to participate in the same digital behaviours, thus feeding back into the loop. The mimetic algorithms of platforms make these places "safe spaces" for rehearsing various aspects of identity, since both the physical act of taking the selfie, and the "type" of selfie circulated on platforms taken at these places have now become normalised. While a woman taking a selfie on a street on a

regular day might be commented on by passers-by, in these places, it is actively encouraged. Online, the place identity becomes a justification or a strategy through which to explore and present other aspects of the self. These selfie practices also enable people to give personal meanings to the places and to turn them into familiar places (Koliska and Roberts, 6).

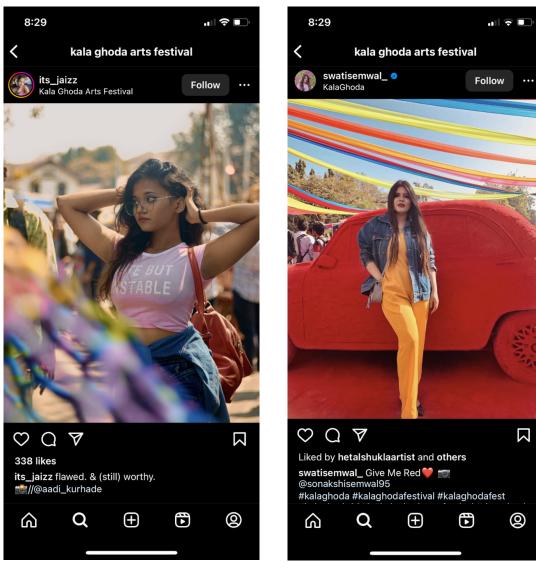


Figure 5.19 An Instagram post by @its\_jaizz Figure 5.20 An Instagram post by @swatisemwal\_

It is also important to recognise that selfie practices are encouraged not just for aspects of selfexpression, but for political and economic profit. Like the affective construction of the NRI which was created to strategically involve diasporic communities in rebuilding the Indian economy in the way that Mankekar describes, these spaces in their "theatre without a spectactor" aspect that I discussed in Chapter 4, interpellate the resident of the city to construct the affective category of the Mumbaikar, who through the act of impersonation or taking selfies, becomes the person that serves the motives of the organisers, that is, the category that encompasses central and local government, organisers of the festivals, advertisers and other stakeholders who serve to profit from these spaces, including private builders. The financial models of platforms, which are offered free of cost to users, similarly capitalise on users' interaction and profit from the collection and sale of users' data and behaviour.

These events and spaces, however, become the chosen locations because of their cultural significance and how they have been, at various times, central to the cultural constructions of the city. Crucially, they represent Mumbai in its different avatars, as an evolving, multi-dimensional city, and afford residents opportunities to present themselves as muti-dimensional, with Indian and Western values and with temporal connections to and awareness of the future and the past, and spatial connections to their global, national, city-based, hyper-local identities. These temporalities and spatialities are often coded in the "vibe" of the places, that is, in the decor elements, the colours, the lights, the way people dress and pose, but also through editing functionalities of social networking platforms, which allow users to "tag" other users and locations, include "stickers', time stamps and text-based captions.

The image below, while not a selfie, demonstrates the presence of the photographer and the other person who is tagged in the image through such editing strategies. The heart "stickers" add a layer of meaning which could be variously interpreted as communicating a city and place-based identity, togetherness with the person tagged, and an appreciation for the selfie point and the background of the cityscape. Shared as a "story" on Instagram, the image which will disappear in 24 hours also communicates temporal information: in its aesthetic of immediacy, captured in the slightly messy framing of the installation with the people in the high visibility vests in the foreground, and in the specific "story" format through which it is shared, the image communicates the photographer's present location.



Figure 5.21 An Instagram story by @aganza112

To include these coded social interactions, internet jargon too has evolved, with terms like "soft launch" of a romantic couple, derived from the launch of products in the market. When soft launching a relationship, people share images that indicate the presence of another person, without revealing their face, on social networking platforms. A person might, for instance, share an image of themselves at a romantic restaurant, with the hope that viewers will ask about the identity of the photographer. Two cups of coffee or two pairs of feet photographed together are another common "soft launch" trope. A selfie of the couple shared on a Feed implies that the relationship is sealed and is ready for permanent display to a public audience. Many of these strategies are deployed to let other suitors down gently but also to test waters with relatives and family members who might be on the social networking platforms. Again, popular spaces and times of year for photography like the Ganapati *utsava* and KGAF are strategically used to share such information through what is often presented as casual, networked photography.

In this way, visiting these spaces and taking selfies and images of the self and with groups of people also allow people to have an array of images that can be strategically deployed to communicate various messages across different contexts. In thinking about how to define the selfie, Shipley suggests that is "an experience of the self at the center that is frozen for easy detachability and recontextualization" Shipley (2015, 405). This idea of detachability and recontextualisation mirrors Hogan's conceptualisation of social networking platforms as exhibition spaces in which the artifact is relayed by a curator to the viewer, who views it from their own subjective position. Again, the editing functions of platforms play a curatorial role in enabling these recontextualisations.

In Figure 5.22, of Pankit Sheth from Chapter 3 and his friend taking a Ganapati murti for *visarjan* in the boot of a car, the text overlaid on the image "since kindergarten" communicates their long friendship, but the affective subtext of the image also relays their place-based identities, telling viewers that they have been neighbours or lived in the same locality together, and shared this annual place-based ritual for decades.



Figure 5.22 An Instagram story by @pankit\_sheth



Figure 5.24 An Instagram story by @pankit\_sheth

In Figure 5.24, Pankit's re-sharing of the selfie that his friend had posted to wish him on his birthday, is both an acknowledgement of the gesture of the birthday greeting, and a way of communicating to other "followers" on the platform both the information about the birthday, and that the friendship shared between the two. While this is common practice on social networking platforms, the layers of text present further interesting information for the viewer. The original image was taken in 2018, we are told by the "date sticker" on the bottom left of the image. Two years on, in this image posted in 2020 after Covid-19 pandemic restrictions which caused organisers to cancel large *visarjan* processions, the text "Desperately waiting to do this with you again" that Pankit's friend has overlaid on the image not only communicates his longing to spend time with his friend or to attend a *visarjan* together, but also his wish for the pandemic to end and for social distancing measures to be lifted. Pankit's overlaid text "Ouch" effectively summarises his agreement with the sentiment and his pain at the missed opportunities due to the pandemic restrictions.

Like the previous example, complex etiquette has also evolved around the ways in which selfies are taken and circulated online, of which the most creative queering strategies emerge in the dating world. Flirting is often taken from dating applications such as Hinge, Tinder and Bumble which afford only a direct one-on-one chat, to Instagram where an elaborate vocabulary for more subtle flirting strategies has developed. "Thirst traps" or sexually enticing selfies or images of the self, are often shared through a complex strategy by which the selfie-taker creates a "close friends" group on Instagram, but only adds the person they are romantically or erotically interested in, to this group. With this strategy, the recipient might suspect, but will never be entirely sure if the image is solely intended for them, and the sender avoids the embarrassment of rejection to both parties, since the recipient can simply choose to ignore the image. This strategy also prevents any "hidden audiences" (Hogan 2010, 383) including employers and family from accidently chancing upon the image. Casual places with mirrors, like gyms, are popular settings for such images, but equally, events in the annual cultural calendar of the city, such as the Ganapati *utsava* or the KGAF, where people usually take selfies and photographs, can be used to obscure the intention of the sender.

On dating platforms, where romantic and erotic connections increasingly tend to be first made, selfies serve as evidence of a well-rounded personality or lifestyle while also demonstrating physical traits such as skin colour, height, attractiveness and age which are traditionally used to "arrange" marriages. On these platforms, where in addition to metrics such as religion, caste, educational background and salary, people looking for intellectual and lifestyle compatibility demonstrate their aspirations, worldliness, interest in culture or friendship groups by including selfies and images of dining out, travelling, in a group of friends, or on adventure activities.

A reflection of when selfies are considered "out-of-place" (Nunes 2017, 109) reveals some of the issues that emerge when the unwritten decorum of selfie practices (Frosh 2015) are challenged. In a series of tweets in 2015, the Hindi film actor Amitabh Bachchan, who offers weekly *darshan* and the opportunity for photographs and selfies to fans outside his house, communicated his displeasure when confronted by people taking selfies as the funeral of a friend, framing it as a lack of respect for the solemn event. On Twitter, now X, people responded in agreement, describing funeral selfies as immature, ignorant and a "disturbing habit", and by sharing images of other funeral selfies that they had encountered.



Figure 5.25 Bachchan's tweets on Twitter/X

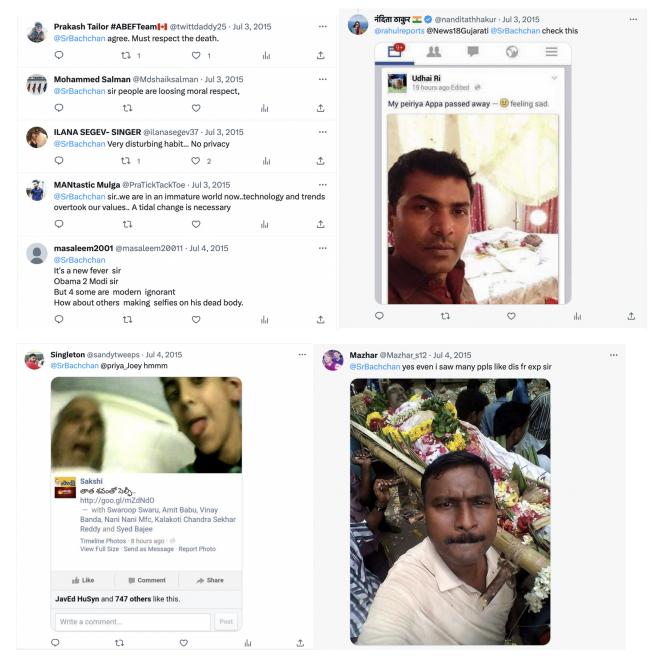


Figure 5.26 Responses to Bachchan on Twitter/X

In literature about the "funeral selfie", it has been argued that while these selfies might appear "outof-place", the images must be understood to be conforming to the "platform vernacular" of social networking platforms, or "the unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics" which emerge through "design, appropriation, and use [...] in interactions between platforms and users" (Gibbs et al 2015, 257). Bachchan's argument that selfie photography demonstrates a lack of respect for the moment, however, and the hundreds of tweets that he received in response, suggests that there is a consensus about how selfie continues to be associated with frivolity or self-absorption, and the incongruence of using the genre as a memorial practice in places of solemnity. At the same time, the number of users who responded in support of Bachchan but shared other similar images that they had encountered which they seemingly found unacceptable, demonstrates how images made in the "platform vernacular" as affective parasocial performances for social networking platforms (Meese et al 2015, 1819), once re-curated, can serve as examples of distasteful self-centredness. I explore this idea of selfies as objects that can often be taken out of context and shared in different affective networks to communicate different messages in more detail in the next section of this chapter, looking also at how editing and manipulation tools complicate this issue further.

A similar, although more light-hearted paradox plays out in the next example. In an image shared on the Instagram account @signboard\_wala (an imitation of the Instagram account @dudewithsign) the person holding the signboard uses the same register of visual communication as the people he is criticising at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival. As an "in-place" selfie, we might argue, this image demonstrates that the "platform vernacular" developed in the hybrid space of KGAF and Instagram, is almost inescapable. The hypocrisy of the image is picked up by the user @artistic\_ashudm in their comment "Bhai tu bhi photoshoot ke liye hi gaya hai na" [brother didn't you also go there for a photoshoot?].



Figure 5.27 An Instagram post by @signboard\_wala

### Technology and surveillance

The previous example highlights how camera technologies have become imbricated in various incongruous activities, and how, despite the irony of criticising selfie cultures by taking a photo of the self for Instagram, the message on the placard still resonated with many. On my first field trip to Mumbai in January 2020, I made a similar observation of the ways in which face recording and recognition technologies had become commonplace in various settings. I attended three major events: a wedding, a civil rights protest and the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival. Each of these events, despite the difference in tenor and mood, were dominated by camera technologies. The wedding was a large one, with hundreds of guests and several functions over three days in a hotel in Mumbai. Wedding guests were asked to use a hashtag created by the couple for images and videos recorded and uploaded on social networking platforms. A team of photographers and videographers, who were present at every function, took "candid" photographs of the couple and guests, made people pose for a list of planned photographs and sat guests down during quieter moments for short interviews. A few months after the wedding, I received a message from the bride, letting me know that the wedding photography team had created a website, and that there was a surprise waiting for me on it. On the website, I was instructed to use the camera on my phone to take a selfie, so that the face-detection software on the website could comb through all the images from the wedding and identify the ones with my face, and then email these photographs to me.

The civil rights gathering in Nagpada, organised as a peaceful protest to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), which threatened the citizenship rights of the Muslim community in India, was organised on a quiet side road and attended only by women. At the entrance to the protest site, called "Mumbai Bagh" in solidarity and continuity with the first protest site of its kind at Shaheeh Bagh in New Delhi, hand painted posters made by protestors thanked the police for their support. At the other end of the road, an informal playschool was set up for children whose mothers sat at the protest. Supporters at the site recorded video and took photographs of the protest songs, posters and protestors, sharing them on social networking platforms alongside times of day at which the numbers typically dwindled, inviting more supporters to join, to relieve protestors and give them time to complete their household chores. A small makeshift police outpost, comprising a van and a wooden table, guarded the entrance to the protest site. Seated at the table, a female police officer asked me to dictate my name and address, which she proceeded to write down in a notebook. Standing next to her, a male police officer in plainclothes recorded my face with a small handheld video recorder as I entered the protest site.

At the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, as I described in Chapter 2, there were cameras everywhere. The police, concerned that the CAA protests might spill over into the arts festival, set up a tight, menacing presence at either end of the festive street, making visitors walk through body scanners and scanning their bags as they entered. On the exhibition street, CCTV cameras swivelled above the crowds and policemen with rifles stood guard along the perimeter. Almost every visitor had a smartphone and many recorded photographs of themselves, the crowds, the installations and the decor. Vloggers with handheld cameras and microphones recorded footage to upload on Instagram and YouTube. I myself recorded hundreds of people photographing themselves, each other and the artwork.

At each of these events, face recording technologies were used in different ways and for different purposes. At the wedding, the face recognition technology used by the photographers relieved the family from the tedious task of having to sift through the photographs to distribute them to their guests. At the Mumbai Bagh protest site, photography and video recording became a means of surveillance to dissuade and intimidate protestors for the police, and as an awareness-raising tool for protestors. At the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, photography devices allowed visitors to engage in visual collaboration, as I discussed in Chapter 2, and the CCTV cameras and scanners served as surveillance devices that regulated behaviour within the crowded exhibition space and made visitors feel safe.

I knew that to be able to attend any of these events, I would have to consent to my face being photographed. As a compromise to be able to attend these physical gatherings, I was making myself vulnerable by allowing images of my body and face to circulate in various digital networks, permitting possible links to be made between my activities, behaviours and intentions, that could affect my freedom of movement and ability to conduct research. At the same time, I too took advantage of the saturation of cameras, and recorded people moving through the art festival, attending the protest and enjoying the wedding. Both the act of taking the photographs, selfies and group selfies on my camera phone, and the act of sharing the digital images on social networks, were gestures to demonstrate my political allegiances, my friendships and my cultural interests. At each of the spaces, my smartphone camera allowed me to be more involved in the activities. At the protest, I used the camera as a form of sousveillance, to record my own activity in the event that I as detained, and to demonstrate my solidarity with the protestors on social networking platforms. At the wedding, I documented the celebration of the bride and groom and used my camera to entertain myself. At the art festival, the camera enabled me to interact with the installations in the way that several artists intended and to document the exhibition space. On Instagram and on the Photos folder of my phone,

the selfies and images became a visual diary of my time and evidence of my participation in my home city, which I could revisit after I had returned to the UK.

At the Mumbai Bagh protest, I approached the police tentatively, having read news articles of protesters being arrested and remanded in police custody for attending the gathering, but my courage was bolstered when I saw the notebook and the rudimentary camera - surely, I reassured myself, the police could not have enough manpower to digitise the handwritten notes, and the video footage, recorded at dusk, would be too dark and grainy to be processed by whatever Artificial Intelligence software the police and government might use. Using my knowledge of technology to assess the potential of the recording devices, and my rudimentary knowledge of factors such as the chain of communication, funding and technological literacy of police and government authorities, as well as motivation to prosecute dissent, I concluded that the police cameras and CCTVs were most likely intended to make people feel intimidated and to make them self-regulate their behaviour, rather than to record, enumerate, categorise or identify for the sake of prosecution. At the same time, I selfcensored, making decisions about the risks I was willing to take, but also decided that the recording of my face did not pose an immediate threat to me, and that I was willing to take a calculated risk in order to offer my solidarity to the protesters at Mumbai Bagh. Still, at the immigration counter at the airport, as I left the city a month later, I remembered that journalists and researchers were being prevented from leaving the country, and I waited nervously as the immigration officer carefully peered at my passport and biometric permit and scanned my face with his webcam.

At the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, I was in the opposite role, as the person conducting the video recording. My experience at Mumbai Bagh, and the preparations I had made while applying for ethics approval at the University, had created a heightened awareness of issues of privacy and consent. As I explained in my ethics application before I started conducting fieldwork, there was a tacit understanding that entering the exhibition space at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival would make the visitor vulnerable to photography. I argued that I could freely record others as they would most likely be recording me. I was reminded by faculty that despite this logic, I might be violating a person's privacy simply by recording their presence at the festival, which they might not want disclosed. Despite this careful consideration by both the committee and me, and even after receiving ethical approval, at the KGAF I felt a distinct unease at recording intimate moments people had with themselves and others while they believed they were invisible in the crowd. My dilemma was heightened by my knowledge that these moments would make the best footage in a film, connecting

with viewers and offering moments of unexpected humour. Taking verbal or written permission from each person I recorded in the crowd would be near impossible, and so I made peace with the situation by making myself and my recording equipment as visible as I could, setting up my camera on a tripod and making eye contact with people I recorded, in order to recognise and respond to any discomfort or requests for privacy that I might encounter.

Most contemporary camera technologies are far less visible or concerned about consensual recording than I was. To account for the proliferation of visual recording devices in society, the conceptual approach to photography has expanded from the art historical understanding of it as a framed artifact or a historical record, to factor in a wider network of production and perception, which shape the understanding of both humans and machines (Zylinska 2020). Academics have posited several terms to analyse this visual regime: "undigital photography" (Kelion 2013), "seeing machines" (Paglen in Zylinska 2017), "nonhuman photography" (Zylinska 2017). Each of these concepts grapple with the imaging process, machinic vision, human agency, and assemblages of humans and technology. It is within this context that Nishant Shah examines the work that the selfie does in what he terms "new biometric technosociality in emerging networks of Digital India" (2017, 180). He argues that "[w]e need to stop thinking of the selfies as merely agential choices that the subject makes in order to express themselves" and instead as "an illustration of how digital technologies are constantly producing ways of enumerating, counting, identifying, tagging, and managing the self through processes of quantification." From this perspective, Shah explains that the selfie is a shift from the remembering or informational self, conceived through narrative histories and writing, to the "self-in-storage" generated by an amalgamation of Big Data and Big Analytics, which "produce human data for nonhuman readers" (181-182). Offering examples of ways in which the "forced selfie" taken by the State for the Aadhaar identity card, in which images of people's faces are linked to unique identification numbers which in turn are linked to bank accounts and driving licences, can be biometrically connected to other "voluntary selfies" in the digital ecosystem, by entities such as by insurance companies, private health providers and authoritarian governmental regimes, Shah demonstrates the need to understand selfies as critical digital objects that "become ways by which the future of the self is being prescribed, one share at a time" (190).

Shah's argument about the selfie extracts it from the frame within which I have been discussing it so far, as an object primarily defined by autonomy, in which the subject of the image is in control of its creation and distribution, closer to the understanding of how the selfie can easily be decontextualised

that I arrived at when discussing the "funeral selfies" and "out-of-place" selfies in the previous section of this chapter. In Shah's formulation, the selfie becomes a digital object which can be used to survey, monitor and control behaviour. His argument is significant in how it anticipates issues that will potentially develop as we move towards a society in which face recognition technology becomes more imbricated in human life and experience and alerts us to the ways in which these technologies might be used for malicious purposes, control, surveillance and profit by entities outside of the self.

To add to Shah's various examples of potential ways in which images of the face might be used without permission, I consider a contemporary example. In May 2023, amidst months-long protests by top Indian wrestlers demanding investigations into the allegations of sexual assault against the wrestling federation chief, Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, a selfie of the wrestlers Vinesh and Sangeeta Phogat which discredited their fight for justice was circulated on social networking platforms. The sisters had been marching along with other Indian women wrestlers to the new Parliament building on the day that it was being inaugurated by Narendra Modi in New Delhi, when they were detained by the police. In the selfie that was circulated after their detention, the wrestlers and the police appear to be seated in the bus and smiling, suggesting that the wrestlers are not serious about the protest. As it turned out, the original selfie which had been taken by the wrestlers to document their detention, had been morphed and the serious expressions on the faces of the wrestlers contorted into smiles by computer software (Sarathe 2023). The Olympic medalist wrestler Bajrang Punia shared the original selfie alongside the morphed image, on Twitter, claiming that the "IT cell people are spreading this false picture" ("IT Cell Spreading..." 2023). This example highlights how ideas about the evidentiary value of the selfie or the author of the selfie, need to be reevaluated as technologies evolve. As digital objects, "voluntary" selfies that travel through social networking platforms, are susceptible to being picked up, altered and re-shared, while the associations of the selfie genre as immediate, conspiratorial, "see me showing you me" (Frosh 2015) can be utilised to attribute the authority of the images, and the associated messages that they communicate, to persons in the image.



Figure 5.28 Sangeeta and Vinesh Phogat in police detention. The original image (above) and the manipulated image (below)

With developments of generative adversarial networks, or the machine learning frameworks which are used to make face swapping or deepfake videos, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the human eye and even sophisticated face recognition systems to detect "faked" or altered images and videos (Korshunov and Marcel 2018), and concerns are rising about the ways in which they can be used, from being weaponised against women in acts of revenge porn, to spreading misinformation about important historical and political events (Sample 2020). The issue raised by Shah in the context of the Aadhaar, of how "involuntary" selfies can mix with "voluntary" selfies, is further complicated by this development which makes the boundaries between these two categories fuzzy.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I changed tactics, from looking at specific selfie cultures, like I had in the previous chapters, to thinking more broadly about the cultural influences on selfies and on the affordances of

devices in the context of urban India. The discussion of the big screen at the beginning of the chapter highlighted elements that I returned to in subsequent sections, but also served as an example of the ways in which visual technologies have been imagined or queered to afford alleviation from infrastructural challenges: at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, the interactive big screen, positioned at a considerable height above the exhibition street, offered visitors respite from the crowded arena in which they had to elbow others out of the way to way to look at installations.

Applying this idea of infrastructural affordance to other situations, I argued that since public recreation is strongly coded in terms of class, caste, religion and gender in Mumbai, that is, urban infrastructures are denied on discriminatory sociocultural grounds, selfies, as activities signifying modernity and autonomy, are queered to justify "loitering" in public, by filling "empty" time with "productive" time and reclaiming public space through a joyful, creative activity. Although my discussion in this chapter focused on women's negotiations and use of networked photography, these arguments could also be adapted to consider strategies developed by other marginalised communities.

In my discussions of cinematic influences on selfie cultures, I argued against criticisms of selfies as evidence of narcissism or self-obsession, thinking instead about contemporary ideas of Indian identity, and ways in which young urban Indians negotiate Indian and Western values and local and global identities. The confidence communicated in the various selfies presented in this chapter, for example, reflect also the national confidence that India projects, internally and globally. I also demonstrated some of the complex ways in which selfies are circulated on social networking platforms to highlight how the architectures of the platforms afford certain types of sociality and how these have been queered by users, to strategically present information about themselves to different audiences.

In the final section of this chapter, I discussed the issues India is likely to face given the rise of authoritarian politics in India and the pace at which digital technologies are developing. The discussion of the use of facial recognition software for surveillance and tracking in this chapter, draws attention to the unrecognised potential of technology in concentrating power and taking autonomy away from individuals. At the same time, the compromises, navigations and evasions that I described from my fieldwork call attention to the human involvement in processes involved in the recording of faces. I argued that these human actors, for the moment at least, exert some level of their own

subjective influence on collection methods and in the application of the technologies. Following this, I discussed some of the strategies that I used to ethically and safely work around surveillance systems while conducting fieldwork.

In the next chapter, I continue with some examples of my data collection methods, this time focusing on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. I conclude my discussion about selfies by summarising the ways in which I have "reframed" debates around the concept. Since this project has been situated in the present, looking towards the future, I also discuss some of the topics that emerged that have either been beyond the scope of this thesis, or that are likely to develop into interesting research areas in the coming years.

# Chapter 6 Conclusion

On a balmy evening at Marine Drive, I encountered a pair of couples taking selfies together. When I asked if I could take a photo of them taking their selfies, they began to ask me about my research, the real-world applications of it, and me how I planned to stay abroad after I had finished. You should have gone to Canada, they concluded, and studied digital marketing. What I heard in these comments was not a dismissal of my work, but a genuine concern about my future prospects. The anxiety that these couples felt on my behalf, and their horror in what they saw as a wasted opportunity to have a stable career abroad, reflects widely held concerns about life in Mumbai. Even as India positioned itself as "the voice of the Global South" (Bajpaee 2023) at the G20 summit hosted in India in 2023, negotiating with the developed world for the equitable distribution of resources on behalf of the rest of the world, the future of Mumbai is uncertain: it is predicted to be the amongst the most populated cities in the world (by the Global Cities Institute), and to be at increased risk of regular flooding and other extreme climate events due to this urbanisation (Ranger et al 2011). Culturally and financially, the opportunities that the city presents are tempered by the infrastructural challenges of overcrowding: air pollution, increased road traffic and soaring prices being some of them. While these challenges are likely to increase with rising sea levels and unpredictable climate events and warrant a much longer discussion, this thesis has examined some of the ways in which digital mobile cultures affor and are imagined or queered by residents of the city to afford negotiations in and of it.



Figure 6.1: A group selfie on Marine Drive, with the hazy city skyline in the background

Positioning my research at a time when India and Mumbai negotiate their "post-postcolonial identity" (Buchanan et al 2021), I observed several cultural and political tensions through the lens of networked photography. Two momentous events altered the regular pace and the future trajectory of the city during my research period: the first was the Covid-19 pandemic and the second, the Shiv Sena winning the state election, and subsequently splintering into factions.

The disintegration of the Shiv Sena is significant in how it highlights the tension between the Maharashtra State and its capital Mumbai and the vast gap between the two in terms of needs and expectations of voting publics. While a larger discussion of this issue has been beyond the scope of this thesis, Uddhav Thackeray and his son Aditya Thackeray's aspirations to turn Mumbai into a "world-class city" with recreational amenities and digital infrastructures to rival other cities of the world, and failure to negotiate their power with the rest of the State and with the Central Government and the BJP, highlight not just political tensions between political parties, but also tensions between how ideas about "culture" are politicised for the popular vote, and the implications that these have on residents: on one hand, the Thackerays seem to believe in winning the popular vote by improving the infrastructure of the city and encouraging bourgeois Western ideas of leisure (such as pedestrianising the Kala Ghoda art precinct on weekends), while the BJP and the Shiv Sena members from rural Maharashtra harness values of Indian tradition and culture, which are usually based on the selective resurrection of mythological and historical figures and Hindu religious festivals. Visually, I described in previous chapters of how this struggle plays out in the motifs of festival decor and the scale of their celebration, and the public art that is commissioned and built in Mumbai, including representations of Balasaheb Thackeray, Narendra Modi and the pre-colonial Maratha leader Shivaji, which dominate the landscape.

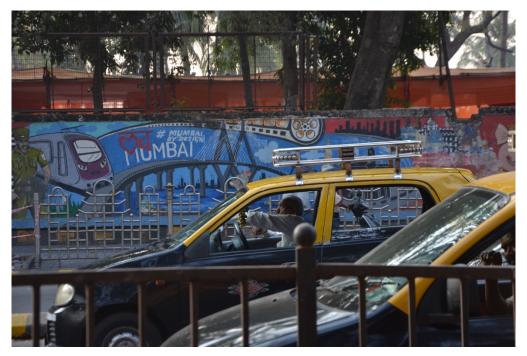


Figure 6.2 A graffiti mural along a wall in Mumbai, depicting the "Love Mumbai sign alongside the Bandra-Worli SeaLink and the Mumbai Metro. In the foreground, are taxis stuck in a traffic jam.

The pandemic exacerbated and highlighted the impact of the polarisation of the media, the cost-ofliving crisis, the effect of the road traffic and air pollution on mental and respiratory health, the lack of medical infrastructure and the mental health crisis in Mumbai, and deeply affected the way in which people think about the city and their local and national identity as Mumbaikars. Since the spaces under discussion in this project, that is, the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival and the Ganapati *utsava*, were celebrated in greater numbers and with even more enthusiasm than in previous years, this also leads us to think about how these festivals are celebrations of culturally dominant and economically privileged sections of society, while the issues of those of the margins remain invisible on digital networks and in the media, and the limits perhaps, of studying activity on social networking platforms in the Indian context.

In Mumbai and New Delhi, the crisis of migrant workers, who were stranded with no source of income or accommodation but also had no way of returning to their villages, highlighted how the infrastructures of these cities rely heavily on workers who are offered no security in return. Although the pandemic was an unanticipated event, the scale of the forced mass internal migration and the apathy and violence with which vulnerable migrant populations were treated in breach of human rights, labour laws and the Indian Constitution, caused large-scale social, psychological, and emotional trauma (Kumar and Choudhary 2021). In the face of government inaction, residents used

social networking platforms to organise the distribution of resources and help. Bollywood celebrities, already familiar with branding themselves through humanitarian causes and charity (Nayar 2015) built a "profile" by publicising their role in organising food and transport for people travelling from urban to rural areas: the Hindi film actor Sonu Sood in recognition of his effectiveness in both harnessing and distributing resources and generating support online, was conferred the SDG Special Humanitarian Action Award by the United Nations Development Programme for his contribution during the pandemic (Bose 2020).

The media coverage of actor Sushant Singh Rajput's death by suicide in Mumbai in 2020, revealed the mental health crisis in the country, the irresponsible reporting practices of the Indian news media, the polarisation of politics (Bose 2020) and the demonisation of "modern" urban youth lifestyles and elite (that is, English speaking) economic migrants. Analysing the discussion of Rajput's death on Twitter, researchers affiliated with Microsoft found that BJP politicians were more likely to incorrectly refer to Rajput's death as "murder", blame his romantic partner Rhea Chakraborty for his death and accuse her of drug peddling, and call for the resignation of the then Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray, while Indian National Congress politicians like used hashtags "#ArnabTheNewsProstitute" to call attention to the scandalous reporting style of Arnab Goswami, editor-in-chief and presenter at Republic TV, and his relentless pursual of this topic (Akbar et al 2020). Global reports have suggested that the Indian "media circus" around Rajput's death was deliberately designed by those sympathetic to the BJP to distract from the failings in effectively managing the pandemic, the contraction of the economy and military tensions at the disputed border with China (Pandey 2020).

The pandemic also had implications on the way in which this project evolved, both in terms of the methods that I used, and the outcomes since I was studying a contemporary cultural trend. I discuss some of the digital "remote" research methods here, both to acknowledge the effects that they have had on the project, and in the hope that they will provide useful for future studies and research projects.

When I started this project, I had planned to be based at the University in the UK, and to return to Mumbai for fieldwork during each festive period (in February for KGAF and in September for the Ganapati utsava) each year, as well as for any political elections. When the Covid-19 pandemic struck in March 2020, I had been in the UK for six months, and had to make the decision to either return to

India or to stay in the UK. Either way, travelling as easily between the two countries as I had originally planned, seemed impossible. Eventually, given the uncertainty of the situation in Mumbai, I decided to stay in the UK, where I hoped the pandemic restrictions would ease more rapidly. Many of the ways in which I understood the selfie cultures that I was discovering at the time, came from this experience. Like many others during this time, living in the UK during the pandemic also gave me a new perspective and experiences that I had until then been shielded from: itinerant living, being a migrant and a person of colour in a foreign country. These situations made me more sensitive to the questions of identity and representation that I was considering in this thesis, and some of my insights developed from these first-hand affective experiences.

From the UK, I was able to continue fieldwork research, since all socialising in Mumbai had moved online. Interviewing people on Zoom, FaceTime and WhatsApp was easier than anticipated and even though I was abroad, I felt as far away from everyone else as they felt from each other. Stuck in their homes, people were more willing to speak over video call and to contemplate their experiences and given how everyone was spending their free time online, I had a wide range of activity to observe. Doing digital interviews created both opportunities and restrictions: I was able to organise interviews with senior members of Ganapati *mandals* whom I would not have been able to meet online in any other year, but at the same time, any engagement with politicians or civil servants in the city was impossible as they were busy trying to manage the pandemic and enforce lockdowns.

Personally, talking about selfies often felt superfluous and insensitive given the magnitude of the death and loss of the pandemic, and the uncertainty and lack of safety that people were feeling. My interviews and discussions, therefore, often revolved around the idea of community, celebration, devotion and artistic expression rather than specific selfie practices, which I would only delve into if it felt comfortable for the interviewee. This approach to ethnographic interviews as a "dialogue" or a "co-creation of a narrative" (Hoskins 1998, 1) would have impacted not only the way in which I have analysed examples from the field, but also the ways in which interviewees and I together thought about and discussed issues.

Another specific outcome of the pandemic was the online celebration of the Ganapati *utsava* in 2021 and 2022 and the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival in 2022. This was the first time that physical celebrations of either of the festivals had been cancelled since they had started in 1885 and in 1999 respectively. Although it was a challenge to adapt to changes as they were decided and announced, by conducting

my research at this historic moment, I was able to observe how the festivals adapted to the pandemic with live video broadcasts, workshops, *darshan* events and messages from celebrities. My "insider" knowledge of Mumbai proved particularly useful in discovering content on the Internet and sifting through material and choosing areas of focus. I used my pre-existing knowledge of the festivals and the political situation in Mumbai to make sense of developments as they rapidly evolved, I implicitly knew which newspapers and online sources to read and to trust, and I already "followed" several sources on social networking platforms. As a result, instead of trying to develop methods of data collection, I sometimes had to work in reverse, recognising and reflecting on the informal strategies that I had used to reach a piece of information or a conclusion. In this way, my specific experience of growing up in the city, and all the biases that I hold, have impacted this project.

Another advantage of being from Mumbai, was that I could harness my already-existing networks of friends, family, school and university acquaintances when looking for interviewees or contacts. Maintaining regular, friendly conversations in the "platform vernacular" of social networking platforms helped keep in touch with people while gathering updates and information, and on occasion, I was able to quickly crowdsource information from people living in the city who followed me on Instagram, as described in Chapters 1 and 4. Making new contacts who would help with data collection was difficult during this time, when people were concerned about the safety of themselves and those around them, and it was only because so many people that became sources, informants or interlocuters in this project were already aware of my intentions and trusted me, that they were willing to remember to send me information, images or links to online newspaper articles or to recommend me to other interviewees.

When I returned to Mumbai for fieldwork in 2022, skills that I had developed while training in documentary filmmaking, such as starting a conversation with an approachable topic and using a multilingual opening to allow people to proceed in the language of their choice, came in handy when recruiting participants at the three sites. I found that people had developed a familiarity with digital technologies during the pandemic, and one could often find people recording visuals on their DSLR cameras and smartphones for social networking platforms and ascertain their levels of professionalism by studying their equipment. Vloggers, for example, could often be identified by their handheld grips and microphone attachments on their DSLR cameras. Because I used a tripod to balance my camera, I found that people often took me more seriously, because it looked like an expensive piece of equipment, made me look more professional, or technically proficient. People also

seemed more familiar with the idea of being on camera, and I rarely encountered anybody who was camera-shy or concerned about how the footage would be used. The camera also served as a strategy to legitimise my identity as a researcher in several instances. I was often treated as a member of the press, and when people saw my camera, tripod and audio recording equipment, they were usually more willing to spend time with me, or to make special allowances that would allow me to record the spaces I was observing. I was often asked to share the material on Instagram in return and reminded to use the appropriate "tag" to help others find it.

### Contributions

While I used selfies as a lens through which to examine cultural and political shifts in the city, I also interrogated the idea of the selfie in Mumbai. The word "reframed" in the title of this thesis calls attention to this shift in the approach to the selfie, from dismissing it a symptom of vanity or as a silly youthful trend, to thinking about it within the context of shifting digital practices. I looked at how the selfie permeates fields of public art, Hindu devotion and urban placemaking, how it contours around local needs and practices and how it is strategically used by various agents to further commercial and political agendas. The word "reframed" also recognises how I have plotted my contributions alongside global academic engagement with the selfie while situating my arguments within the context of urban India, factoring in the current political environment and cultural specificities. I considered how the density of population of the city and the overwhelming crowds at KGAF and the Ganapati utsava generate selfie practices out of necessity, to focus attention and create a personalised experience, to defer the contemplation of an art object or a deity to a later moment, or to share images with those physically unable to visit. I demonstrated how the selfie continues and extends traditional Hindu modes of interaction between the devotee and the deity in the context of the Ganapati utsava, and how this ocular mode has been extended to the political sphere, in an attempt to deify local elected representatives and control physical space in the city, using the rhetoric of local pride and under the guise of "beautification" and development. At the same time, in my discussion of algorithms and the rising popularity of the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, I demonstrated how while these practices are limiting in terms of "commercialising" art and art spaces, they also make otherwise elite spaces more inviting to young people, who engage with artworks not in an academic or conceptual mode, but instead through a visual dialogue, by photographing objects and inserting their bodies and those of others into the exhibition. In reframing the idea of the selfie, I also looked at which faces dominate the landscape of the city and what these faces and other selfie interventions signify. Looking at the architecture of the social networking platforms, I examined how geopolitical tensions, profit-driven

motives, and developments in material technologies and user interface design influence selfie practices, ideas of leisure and community. Examining the cultural and cinematic influences on identity and on self-presentation online, I argued that microcelebrity practices and strategies of selective sharing of images afforded by platforms, enable users to experiment with presenting multiple aspects of their identity to different audiences. In my final "reframing" of the idea of the selfie, I considered how the prevalence of facial recognition technologies and video editing software have shifted the way we must think about the selfie, from seeing it as an object of autonomy to recognising its limitations as a digital object which is open to manipulation, and recognising ways in which biometric data is likely to be monitored in coming years.

#### **Future lines of questioning**

This thesis has also been in part about how futures are imagined, and led to several ideas that could make interesting topics for future research:

The Hindu Ganapati *utsava* was chosen as one of the sites of study because of how significant it is in the public cultural calendar of the city, and based on the current political relevance of Hindu visual culture, given how the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) borrows imagery and strategies from devotional entertainment content to legitimise its power with the voting public, both through spectacular advertisements and public events (Rajagopal 2008, Brosius 2002) as well as with constant reminders through daily communication of Hindutva ideology on social networking platforms (Baishya 2015). Studying other public religious festivals which are equally vibrant, such as Moharram and Eid, Dussehra (which is particularly significant as a site of the annual Shiv Sena rally) and Christmas, will further reveal conclusions about the politicisation of religion and culture, contemporary negotiations of city-based and cultural identities, and visual practices on social networking platforms. While on the topic of platforms, it is also worth noting that while this project largely considered the Ganapati *murti* as a physical object, there has been much creative digital engagement with entire pantheon of Hindu gods, for example, the "Gods Taking Selfies" Tumblr account, which uses computer graphics to depict several gods and characters from Mughal miniature paintings in acts of taking selfies.

As personality politics rules over India and history and mythology are reimagined for strategic political messaging, the potential of Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality in animating dead political and cultural figures and historical and mythological characters, presents a distinct opportunity. The Amma Museum in Chennai, built as a mausoleum for Jayalalithaa, the former Chief

Minister of Tamil Nadu and discussed in Chapter 4, offers an example of how other political figures might be memorialised in the future, and the use of interactive strategies, AI chatbots and selfie activations in doing this. Future research could investigate these spaces as they emerge and develop and track the ways in which these spaces are received by the public.

Less morbidly, as digital literacy improves with government programmes like the digital payments system UPI, hybrid technologies might take on a more prominent role in both government services and in artistic, creative or entertainment fields. The code-enabled installation made by artist Christian Lölkes discussed in Chapter 2, highlights the challenges of designing technological or mobile application-based interventions in urban India, and the need for intuitive design rather than written instructions, especially in as linguistically diverse and fast-paced an environment. Given how software engineering is a massive economy in India, further examination of user interface, user experience and web and mobile app design methods, from a humanities perspective, will provide crucial insights about how technology industries are both shaping and being shaped by the specificities of the Indian context.

In addition to cinema and screen cultures, genre-based digital content, such as real estate Instagrammers, food and travel vloggers, finance vloggers and comedians, offer fascinating glimpses into evolving urban Indian cultural influences. Fashion content and influencers are especially prominent on social networking platforms, and the global luxury fashion industry seems to have set its sights on Mumbai. In 2023, the annual Dior fashion show was held at the Gateway of India and the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre was opened in the same year, with global celebrities like Gigi Hadid and Zendaya, dressed in Indian designer sarees, in attendance. At the same time, unapologetic celebrities like Uorfi Javed, who started her career in television but received mass attention for her risqué dressing sense on Instagram, are pushing ideas of representation and boundaries of clothing for women. While these developments might build confidence among young women, among wider discussions about the effect of social media use on body image and eating disorders among women (Dane and Bhatia 2023), images of idealised bodies on social networking platforms pose the risk of adding to complicated expectations of beauty standards for Indian women.

While many of the discussions in this thesis could apply to other urban parts of the country, digital cultures in rural India are expanding in rapid and unexpected ways. In the last decade, software developers and digital entrepreneurs have identified the economic growth potential of rural markets

and are developing tools using audio and video media to serve parts of the country where literacy remains unevenly distributed in sectors like farming and healthcare (Okolo et al 2021). For example, the voice application Avaaj Otalo [voice stoop], an interactive voice application for small-scale farmers in Gujarat, India, has emerged as a forum for discussions about agricultural practices (Patel et al 2010). The documentation of these evolving spaces will likely reveal unique engagements with audio and video affordances.

Another significant digital development worth examining, is the growth of the service industry that deals in the dissemination of disinformation and false and misleading content on social media (Campbell-Smith and Bradshaw 2020) and the increase in cyber troops or "government, military or political party teams committed to manipulating public opinion over social media" (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017) in India. It has been observed that between 2017 and 2019, political propaganda on social media grew significantly and "political parties are now working with a wider-range of actors including private firms, volunteer networks, and social media influencers to shape public opinion over social media. At the same time, more sophisticated and innovative tools are being used to target, tailor, and refine messaging strategies including data analytics, targeted advertisements, and automation on platforms such as WhatsApp" (Campbell-Smith and Bradshaw 2020, 1). Social media offer "low barriers to entry, availability of resources, and low levels of regulation on networks" (Campbell-Smith and Bradshaw 2020, 2) which make Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp convenient platforms for spreading propaganda and disinformation and India is particularly vulnerable to cyber troops and disinformation because of its "enormous population comprising a variety of castes, religions and languages, with varying levels of digital literacy" (Campbell-Smith and Bradshaw 2020, 2). While I discussed some of the issues around doctored or edited images that are circulated on Whatsapp to spread disinformation in Chapter 5, changes in the strategies and framing of civic engagement, especially media targeting youth groups, present interesting analysis opportunities.

For example, in 2023, when Piyush Goyal, the Minister of Commerce and Industry, held a press conference with 50 YouTubers ("Piyush Goyal holds interaction" 2023), the Press Trust of India agency report which was carried by several news publications the following day, stated that "YouTubers expressed keenness to roll out content on their channels about government programmes and policies to educate their audience and also work as fact checkers countering misinformation" ("Piyush Goyal holds interaction" 2023). These videos which were published on YouTube, included interviews with Union ministers including the Home Minister and Minister of External Affairs,

Leader of the House, Minister of State for Electronics and Information Technology of India, Minister of Women and Child Development and Minister of Minority Affairs and were described to have been "co-produced with MyGov" (a government agency) which was changed to "in collaboration with MyGov" after questions were raised about whether the videos were sponsored by the government (Kaur 2023). The jargon, presentation styles and content or types of questions that are discussed in these videos, are likely to present insights into contemporary hegemonic ideas about India.

Apart from digital cultures, infrastructural changes in cities in India are likely to evolve to accommodate growing populations, changing also, ideas of recreation, leisure, and art. Already, as the roads, flyovers and bridges are intricately constructed over one another to accommodate the growing numbers of cars and private vehicles in Mumbai, the spaces under these elevated roads are emerging as "parks" and recreational zones. At the same time, higher floors of residential buildings are becoming exposed to the gaze of travellers who now whiz past their windows, or more likely, inch by in bumper-to-bumper traffic. The local government and artists groups seem to have identified the potential of these newly visibilised spaces and are using the grey concrete walls of these buildings as massive canvasses for street art. Unlike hoardings and billboards which are rented out for short periods of time to advertisers, these walls, for the time being at least, are being conceived as permanent exhibitions, and at times as community projects for locals and residents (Vatsala 2016). Since newer, aspirational residential and office buildings are made with materials such as glass, older concrete structures which were designed for mill workers at the Parel cotton mills and are home to working class communities, might become sites for new genres of street art in the coming decades. While there is potential for aesthetic trends or innovations to emerge from this, there appears to be no cohesive contemporary art movement in the city yet, and artworks usually either depict popular cultural or political figures, or plants, animals and natural landscapes which usually convey a moral message. Future research could track not just how these physical spaces evolve, but also how ideas of placemaking, belonging, privacy, recreation and representation change with them.



Figure 6.3 A mural along the Western Express Highway in Jogeshwari, with depictions of Chhatrapati Shivaji, the Gateway of India, Balasaheb Thackeray, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule and Balgangadhar Tilak and a cricket batsman



Figure 6.4 A depiction of a chimpanzee taking a selfie, painted on a pillar under the Tulpule flyover on Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Road in Matunga. Hailed as "Mumbai's first garden under a flyover" (Vatsala 2016) the blue tiles on the ground are designed to resemble the Narmada river, which flows from Madhya Pradesh to Gujarat and in Hinduism is believed to have emerged from the body of Shiva.

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### **Image sources:**

Figure 2.3 The original Kala Ghoda statue, in its location at Fort Retrieved from <u>https://memumbai.com/kalaghoda/</u>

Figure 2.4 The original Kala Ghoda statue, relocated to the Veermata Jijabai Bhonsale Udyan Retrieved from

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dr.\_Bhau\_Daji\_Lad\_Museum\_JEG1857.jpg

Figure 2.5 The 'Spirit of Kala Ghoda' statue facing the David Sassoon Library Retrieved from <u>https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The\_Spirit\_of\_Kala\_Ghoda\_-</u> <u>statue in the Kala Ghoda arts district in Mumbai</u>, India.jpg

Figure 3.2 Ganapati fighting the Covid-19 virus in 2020 Retrieved from <u>https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/corona-warriors-to-eco-friendly-doctors-artists-make-theme-based-idols-of-lord-ganesha/corona-warrior-ganesha/slideshow/77689234.cms?from=mdr</u>

Figure 3.3 Ganapati fighting the Covid-19 virus in 2020 Retrieved from <u>https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/corona-warriors-to-eco-friendly-doctors-artists-make-theme-based-idols-of-lord-ganesha/corona-warrior-ganesha/slideshow/77689234.cms?from=mdr</u> Figure 3.4 Ganapati fighting the Covid-19 virus in 2020

Retrieved from <u>https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/corona-warriors-to-eco-friendly-doctors-artists-make-theme-based-idols-of-lord-ganesha/corona-warrior-ganesha/slideshow/77689234.cms?from=mdr</u>

Figure 3.6 A family selfie murti

Retrieved from <u>https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/even-the-gods-cant-resist-the-selfie-trend-sarvajanik-pandals-in-mumbai-have-lord-ganesh-taking-a-selfie-245183.html</u>

Figure 3.7 A family selfie *murti* Retrieved from <u>https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/even-the-gods-cant-resist-the-selfie-trend-</u> sarvajanik-pandals-in-mumbai-have-lord-ganesh-taking-a-selfie-245183.html

Figure 3.9 A Selfie with Daughter Ganapati *murti* Retrieved from <u>https://photogallery.indiatimes.com/news/events/lord-ganesha-in-different-hues/ganesh-idol-made-of-mysore-pak/articleshow/49012846.cms</u>

Figure 3.10 A selfie stick Ganapati *murti* Retrieved from <u>http://allaboutlordganesh.blogspot.com/2015/09/selfie-trend.html</u>

Figure 4.21 "Mee Dadarkar" [I am from Dadar] in January 2020 Retrieved from <u>https://mumbai-eyed.blogspot.com/2018/10/me-dadarkar.html</u>

Figure 4.25 Bollywood stars taking a selfie with Modi in the centre in 2019 Retrieved from <u>https://www.indiatoday.in/movies/celebrities/story/pm-narendra-modi-and-young-bollywood-star-in-selfie-of-the-year-see-pic-1428046-2019-01-10</u>

Figure 4.26 Political hoardings in Mumbai

Retrieved from <u>https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/mumbai-over-60-of-hoardings-</u> <u>defacing-public-places-put-up-by-politicians/articleshow/71914118.cms</u>

4.27 A satirical hoarding celebrating the birthday of Max the dog

Retrieved from <u>https://homegrown.co.in/homegrown-explore/in-kalyan-political-hoardings-are-mocked-with-a-dogs-birthday</u>

Figure 4.31 A selfie at the fifth death anniversary of Balasaheb Thackeray, photo by Pratik Chorge Retrieved from <u>https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/people-takes-selfie-as-they-come-to-pay-respect-on-the-news-photo/876162794</u>

Figure 4.32 Massive cutouts along the Western Express Highway in January 2023, photo by Atul Kamble

Retrieved from <u>https://www.mid-day.com/mumbai/mumbai-news/article/rumours-fly-thick-and-fast-ahead-of-pm-modis-mumbai-visit-today-23266159</u>

Figure 5. 28 Sangeeta and Vinesh Phogat in police detention. The original image (above) and the manipulated image (below)

Retrieved from https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-65757400

# Appendices

**Appendix 1:** Video observation at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival 2020 **YouTube link:** <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=maF0At9WCvg</u>

**Appendix 2:** Video observation at the Ganapati utsava **YouTube link:** <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4U4f4Dvc3xc</u>

**Appendix 3:** Video observation at the CSMT viewing gallery **YouTube link:** <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJjVRd74VJw</u>

Appendix 4: Table of selfie	points in Mumbai
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No.	Name	Location	Name at installation, if any
1	Mee Dadarkar	On Kelkar road, near Dadar Kabutar Khana	-
2	Prabhadevi	On Old Cadell Road, near Wimpy Wine and opposite Prabhadevi Police Chowki	MLA Sada Sarvankar
3	<3 Mahim	On SV road, facing St Michael's Church and next to Mahim Traffic Chowki "Love Mahim" on Google Maps	MLA Sada Sarvankar
4	Lv Mumbai	Bandra Reclamation under the flyover that joins Western Express Highway to Bandra SV Road	Made by Hitesh Malaviya "Rocky", exhibited at KGAF, put in permanent location by Aaditya Thackeray and Humans of Bombay
5	Love India	Near L&T flyover in Powai, in front of Powai lake and near a FOB "Selfie Point Love My India" on Google Maps	Initiative by Mohd Arif (Naseem) Khan, Developed by MSLB MHADA, Designed by SA Designers, Ketan Chheda
6	Love Ghatkopar	Next to Shri Vardhman Sthanakwasi Jain Sangh in front of Jashwantrai Mehta Garden, "Love Ghatkopar Selfie Point" on Google Maps	Creativity by Pravin Chheda, supported by Narendra Bardre (Deputy Municipal Commissioner Z-VI) and Sudhanshu Dwivedi (Asst Commissioner N Ward) Designed by SA Designers, Ketan Chheda, Real Plot Signs Bhavin J Sheth

			1
7	I Love Kalina	At intersection between CST Road and Air India Road (opposite Geeta Vihar restaurant)	-
8	#Chembur	Narayan Laxman Lad AKA Ladmaster Chowk, at Diamond Garden, on Sion-Trombay Road, VN Purav Marg	Initiative by Heritage Goup, Supported by MLA Prakash Phaterpekar, Aritist Rouble Nagi
9	Mumbai selfie point	Juhu, on Vaikunthlal Mehta Marg, "Mumbai Selfie Point" on Google Maps	Ameet Satam (MLA)
10	I Love Lokhandwala	On Runwal Elegante building wall, under Mogara Nallah"I Love Lokhandwala" on Google Maps	-
11	I Love Dharavi	Mother Teresa Road, Matunga Labour Camp	Vishnu R Gaikwad (Municipal Councillor)
12	Shivaji Park selfie point	In Veer Baji Prabhu Udyan (Chaityabhoomi garden) "Shivaji Park Point" on Google Maps	Sada Sarvankar (MLA), Team Pankaj Chavan
13	I Love Jogeshwari	On highway, close to the railway station and Ismail Yusuf College	Uddhav and Aaditya Thackeray, artist Ravindra Dattaram Vaykar
14	Aapla Dahisar	Under railway bridge on Chhatrapati Shivaji Road, "Dahisar selfie point" on Google Maps	Jagdish Oza, Gopal Shetty, Manishatai Shetty, Sandhya Nandedkar
15	Borivali	On Dattapada Road, from Borivali station (E) to highway, "I Love Borivali" #selfiepoint on Google Maps	Designed by Vivek Bhosle Architect, Ashawari Patil (Corporator), Esspee Square, Concept by Gopal Shetty, Vinod Tawde (MLA)
16	Lv Kandivali	Balasaheb Devras Chowk, At intersection between New Link Road and Boraspada Road, near a few gardens and a sports centre, "Love Kandivali" on Google Maps	MLA Dipak Bala Tawade
17	Lv Malad	Kanchpada, Mamletdarwadi Main Road, Navy Nagar bus stop, "Love Malad" on Google Maps	MLA Pandurang Pawar, Contractor JP Enterprises
18	I <3 Goregaon		MLA Dipak Thakur, Designer Kiran Chopra

19	#Orlem	On Marve Road, opposite Our Lady of Lourdes Church	Cabinet Minister Maharashtra Aslam Shaikh
20	Ever Shine	On Evershine Nagar Road, next to Ryan International School, at a dead end in front of a residential building	Jaya Satnam Singh Tiwana, municipal councillor
21	I Love Aarey	At turning from Service Road to Aarey Road near RTO Chowkie at Pillar 16 on Western Express Highway under Aarey Flyover	-
22	Lv Vile Parle	On Nehru Road, very residential area, "Love Vileparle" on Google Maps, close to the railway station and Sathaye College	-
23	<3 Santacruz	Under Milan Flyover bridge, "Love Santacruz" on Google Maps	Hetal Gala (Ashish Shelar, Poonam Mahajan)
24	I <3 Bandra	Bandra Bandstand near Galaxy Apartments	Rahul Kanal I<3umbai Foundation, Aaditya Thackeray, MCGM
25	#Haji Ali	On traffic island between Bhulabhai Desai Marg, Lala Lajpatrai Marg and Tardeo Road, opposite Heera Panna and Haji Ali Dargah, next to Dabbawalla Statue, close to Lala Lajpatrai College	Rouble Nagi artist MCGM D ward
26	I <3 Byculla	Abdul Hamid Ansaari Chowk, Opposite Khada Parsi under Byculla Bridge, "Love Byculla Selfie Point" on Google Maps, close to some schools	-
27	Love Earth	Juhu Versova Link Road	Rohan Rathod Municipal Councillor
28	Love Girgaon	Charni Road, opposite Opera House	-
29	Lower Parel	Under Senapati flyover at Ganpatrao Kadam Marg	Aaditya Thackeray

Appendix 5: Video observation of the big screen at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival 2023 YouTube link: <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RY9vFZJqBo</u>