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# Elusive definitions

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NOV 02 -  
The search for the exact definition of art is one that has consumed people for many centuries. And to express the concept in clear, stark words is an even bigger challenge. That elusive meaning and the way people internalise and interpret art in their own personal capacities was the theme of German artist Roswitha Steinkopf's recent exhibition at the Patan Museum, organised by the Kathmandu Contemporary Arts Centre.



Art is... aimed to capture the diversity in people's answers when confronted with the same question, i.e, "What is art?" In filling the blanks with their own thoughts, participants gave a range of answers, all scribbled on sheets of Nepali hand made paper, which were then compiled and lined up on the walls of the museum.

What is interesting about Steinkopf's concept, besides the varied answers given, are the photographs that accompany the text, where people have been captured holding up their respective papers. The combined effect of the words and the visual backdrops in which the photos have been taken make for an intriguing juxtaposition. We see people from many different walks of life, from students, to armed guards, Buddhist nuns and many others as part of Steinkopf's collage.

Some of the definitions:

"What we see is art"

"Happiness and satisfaction"

"Art is a medium to express onself"

"My purpose in meeting all these people and asking them the same question—as opposed to just Googling for quotes—was to have a one-on-one interaction with them, to get an idea of where they were coming from and how their answers reflected their individual circumstances," Steinkopf explains. For this particular collection, she met almost 350 people from various places across Nepal.

This isn't Steinkopf's first such initiative; she has been doing this since 2001 starting in Italy. She has held similar interactive projects in many other countries, including the US, China, Russia and South Korea. The present installment is her 7th such exhibition so far.

When asked whether the answers she collected in Nepal were different from those she found in other countries, Steinkopf shares, "The Nepalese, I found, are very much rooted in cultural pride, and their answers were inclined that way. People were more cynical in other countries." She points at some of the text from the New York project, which range from "Art is lost in today's culture", "Art is business" to the cutting "Art is expensive".

Which is her favorite so far? "Art is communication," she says, an answer she found in South Korea. "It's very apt," Steinkopf says. "You might not always understand a particular piece of art, but you can communicate on some level or the other with its aesthetics."

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For artist Sanjeev Maharjan, who was present at the exhibition, Steinkopf's concept is inspired. "What I love about the idea is that she has made it so accessible," he says. "That elitist boundary around art has been broken, because she's given everyone a chance to say what they think, and given importance to their opinions."

Steinkopf is determined to continue Art is.. as far as possible, and take the question to as many people from different cultural backgrounds over the world as she can.

Today is the last day of the exhibition. The opening hours are from 10am to 5pm.

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