



Original research

Embodying Queerness: Visual curation and the making of queer space at the “Dialogues” queer film festival, Kolkata

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Abstract

“Dialogues”, the LGBTQ film and video festival, considered India's oldest queer film festival, has been held annually in Kolkata during the winter months since 2007. Beyond examining the festival's role in fostering community sentiment through collective film viewing, the article critically studies the visual logistics of its curation in recent years. Through a close reading of the festival's curatorial initiative, the work engages with installations, artworks, posters, cut-outs and banners adorning the festival site, thereby mapping their contribution to asserting queer visibility. Echoing Michael Warner's notion of “counterpublic” and N. Bourriaud's “relational aesthetics”, the work aims to understand the queer film festival site as a space for dissent and spatial recognition, while examining the role of installations stationed at the festival site and their potential for registering queer visibility and for making dissent and solidarity. Acknowledging past scholarly discourses that have seen queer film festival space through the lens of cultural activism and community formation, this work examines the festival's curatorial approach while assessing the role of installations, artworks and posters in constructing queer public space. Through a close reading of these visual formations centred on the festival site, the research demonstrates how the spatial and visual organisation contributes effectively to the making of a queer public sphere. Methodologically, the research relies heavily on personal visits and interpretative analysis of artworks and the curated space, while referring to existing theoretical frameworks to substantiate the readings and arguments. Using these approaches, the research seeks to understand the role of installations, artworks, and other visual formations in making Dialogues an active spatial and cultural space through which queer presence is produced, visualised, registered, and negotiated in the city of Kolkata.

Keywords: Queer film festival, curation, installations, public space, dissent.

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1. Introduction

With the maturing of LGBTQIA+ activism in India, queer-themed events such as art exhibitions, film festivals, literary meets, and several cultural workshops are on the rise, not only registering a palpable presence of the queer community but also ensuring the “right to cultural participation” for queer individuals, who often feel deprived, with their entitlements and liberties curbed due to social taboos and heightened cases of censorship. Kolkata, with an illustrious legacy of public film viewing and festivals, is recognised for hosting one of India’s oldest queer-themed festivals, “Dialogues” LGBTQIA+ film and video festival, initiated in 2007. Over the years, from being a humble event with the generous support of people, NGOs, and trusts, the festival has evolved into a visual spectacle, enhanced by artworks and public installations adorning the festival site. As these sites become significant spaces of mass congregation, attracting people from diverse backgrounds, the placement of artworks within these events helps not only to create awareness and sensitise the public on queer rights and expression but also to ensure and affirm visibility, securing inclusivity within public spaces. Beside film festivals like Dialogues, which exclusively focuses on screening queer-themed films, another film festival called Kolkata People’s Film Festival (KPFF) also encourages conversation on the rights of sexual minorities, migration, citizenship, ecological violence, surveillance, and other pressing issues of the contemporary times, through a powerful set of curated films shown during the scheduled dates of the festival. Considering the intention of KPFF, in representing, speaking for, and advocating the rights of diverse minorities, the festival draws a considerable number of viewers from diverse backgrounds and intersections. The screening of queer-themed films as well as artworks within such heterogeneous and cross-sectional audiences helps generate consciousness and empathy within the public about the rights and struggles of sexual minorities in India.

In recent years, the curatorial aspect of the Dialogues film festival has demonstrated the unprecedented potential of film festival spaces to represent queer culture while providing an exclusive space for queer creative expression to flourish. As LGBTQIA+ activism has matured, many of India’s major metropolises have begun to host community screenings of queer-themed films, with the aim of bringing people from the community together through the shared experience of film viewing. Among popular queer film festivals such as the Bangalore Queer Film Festival and the Kashish Mumbai International Queer Film Festival, Dialogues is one of the oldest running film festivals in India, held in Kolkata with support from NGOs such as The Pratyay Gender Trust and Saphho for Equality, in collaboration with Goethe Institut, Kolkata. Unlike other film festivals, the exclusivity of queer film festivals stems from the fact that such events offer a platform for upholding queer creative expression and serve as an active space for queer communication and solidarity. The article “Queer Creative Indian City: Queer film festivals, precarious cultural work and community making in Kolkata” by Rohit K. Dasgupta and Kaustav Bakshi cites a statement by one of the attendees who says, “Festivals like Siddharth and Dialogues suddenly provided the space where we could meet with other members of the community and be ourselves, while also enjoying a gay film openly” (Dasgupta and Bakshi, 2023).

During its early years, Dialogues was largely held at exclusive cultural venues such as the Goethe Institut and Max Mueller Bhavan in Kolkata. Located on Park Street, the heart of the city, the dedicated venue perhaps made the festival less visible to the general public, given the

institute's cultural affiliation and its appeal to a more exclusive audience. Over time, the film festival moved beyond its initial spatial specificity and shifted to more accessible, popular venues such as Basusree Cinema (2019, 2024) and Indira Cinema (2022), both in the southern part of Kolkata. This significant step of situating the festival in single-screen halls is highly relevant to the social and cultural aspects of public film viewing in Kolkata. With the advent of the multiplex revolution in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Kolkata witnessed a radical decline in single-screen halls, with some struggling to survive by screening B-grade and low-budget films. Under such conditions, these decaying, sparsely visited spaces have often been transformed into potential sites for queer cruising, as they offer a sense of anonymity and a safe place to articulate desire. Though Basusree and Indira continue to draw a considerable number of film viewers, their cultural significance has faded over the years due to the rapid shift in the logistics of film viewing. In such circumstances, curating Dialogues, the queer film festival, at these sites has helped transform these neglected cultural spaces into active spaces of queer visibility, reconfiguring the heteronormative aspects of film viewing¹ and public spaces.

2. Methodology

In 2017, Dialogues moved away from its dedicated venue, Maxmueller, to a popular single-screen cinema hall called Basusree, located in the southern part of the city. What appears significant in the curatorial aspect of the film festival is the vivid inclusion of artworks and installations, made possible through the participation of artist Sumantra Mukherjee and his team, who reconfigured the film festival space into an active site for exhibition and art-making. As a regular attendee of the festival, I find the 2019 and 2024 editions of the event particularly notable for their vivid incorporation of artists and artworks, transforming the festival site into an immersive space for sensory experience. Since this work examines the curatorial aspect of the film festival through artworks and site-specific installations, it focuses exclusively on the 2019 and 2024 editions of Dialogues, studying the role of the displayed artworks and curatorial strategies in reconfiguring the cinema hall site into an active queer public space. The paper relies heavily on site observations and interpretative analysis of the installed artworks while mapping the logistics of the transfiguration of the public site and the spectatorial engagement of film viewing. Though the mentioned sites were visited personally, the images discussed and reproduced in the article were contributed by the artist who curated the festival space.

In the study of queer film festival space in India, two articles appear particularly important to cite. Rohit K. Dasgupta and Kaustav Bakshi, in the article "Queer Creative Indian City: Queer Film Festivals, Precarious Cultural Work and Community Making in Kolkata", see queer film festivals in Kolkata, especially Dialogues, as active sites of cultural activism that reconfigure established aspects of film viewing while fostering queer community, visibility and public engagement. By focusing on the making of the festival, in respect to organisers, volunteers, institutional affiliations, financial measures and public engagement, the work presents the festival

¹ By the statement "heteronormative film viewing" I intend to refer to the act of watching films as well the representational politics within filmic scripts which are both dominated by narratives of heterosexual companionship and heterosexual romance. Over the years both in popular culture and in public memory, the act of watching films in public hall is perceived as a scope for making heterosexual romantic intimacy, with cinema halls screening films which majorly deals with heteronormative romantic stories as their primary narrative.

as a form of cultural activism, community engagement and political visibility. Another significant work in this regard is Navaneetha Mokkil's 2018 article, "Queer Encounters: Film Festivals and the Sensual Circuits of European Cinema in India". Instead of simply reading queer film festival space as an active site for queer representation and community making, the author sees these spaces as sensory and affective sites, where collective film viewing unsettles normative notions of identity, sexuality and community. While acknowledging the contributions of these two articles in conceptualising queer film festival space, this study offers a micro-level analysis of the two editions of Dialogues film festival. The study foregrounds the festival's curatorial investments and maps how the artworks at the festival site not only reconfigure the spatial and public character of the space but also the modes of interaction, spectators' engagement and the embodied experience of film viewing. As a visual artist, I am particularly interested in examining how the visual assemblages offer not only a sensory experience but also shape public engagement, community formation and registers of queer visibility. In the mentioned scholarship, arguments on visibility, activism and community building in the context of queer film festival space have largely been seen through the lens of participation and spectatorship, while focusing less on the curatorial and visual reading of the film festival site. In this regard, this paper offers an opportunity to re-read the film festival space based on the logistics of the design of the festival site and how it contributes to and determines the experience of queer film viewing and film festival space.

As a regular attendee of these festival sites, the study adopts a subjective and interpretative methodology for reading artworks and curatorial positions, while acknowledging that the meaning of an artwork is not limited to the artist's own interpretation or to the visual object itself. The analysis of artworks relies heavily on the personal encounter with the festival site, including subjective responses to spatial arrangements, readings of the meanings generated, and their implied social relations to visitors. The reading combines close visual analysis with relevant theoretical frameworks. Elements such as spatial arrangements, visual imagery, spectatorship, and the relationship of artworks to audiences are studied interpretatively and then supported by relevant theoretical frameworks that mark the authenticity of the work within existing scholarly discourse rather than a purely personal interpretation. In the process, the research does not claim a single, fixed meaning of the artwork but situates the subject as open to interpretation and differing readings. This methodology appears more appropriate for reading installations and public art, where meaning relies more on the symbiotic relationship between the artwork, the reader, and the context in which it is experienced.

3. The curated space of "Dialogues" and the construction of queer visibility

For *Dialogues*, it is not just the screening of films or the act of community building through collective film viewing, but the visual spectacle of the film festival, determined through posters, pamphlets, paintings, cut-outs and installations, serves to register the palpable presence of the community through queer cultural activity. The design of the film festival space, especially in recent years such as 2019 and 2024, has made it a potential exhibitory ground for artworks that strive to make significant commentaries on queer life and experiences. With the shift in venue, from Maxmueller to Basusree cinema hall, the curatorial and spatial logistics also changed, resulting in the dynamic reconfiguration of the event. In 2019, artist Sumantra Mukherjee, along with his team, curated the cinema hall site with gigantic posters, installations, cut-outs and

makeshift structures, thus transforming the conventionality of the cinema hall space into an active space of dissent and queer resistance. The spatial design of Basusree cinema hall opens to a long corridor/lane leading towards the entrance of the auditorium, which was transformed into an active exhibitory site, with artworks installed on the walls, windows, staircases and ceilings. Given that "censorship" served as a driving theme of Dialogues 2019, the artworks, installations and makeshift structures at the site very poignantly raised the issue of surveillance on queer lives. The corridor drew towards a dark area, with sentences flashing in neon colours saying "Now we record your silence". The screening of the films, as well as the curated space of the cinema hall, with artworks stationed throughout, challenged the heteronormative history of spectatorial experiences generally associated with film viewing.

The 2019 film festival poster (Fig 1), circulated across the city's walls, offered a strong commentary on queer visibility and resistance while highlighting the contestation over queer visibility within public space. The image of the promotional poster became iconic, prompting strong observations on surveillance and its deep impact on queer rights and visibility. The 2019 poster depicted a yellow-painted vulture with its head replaced by a CCTV camera, preying over the skeletal remains of a body. Traditionally associated with ideas of death, decay and vigilance, the figure of the vulture, juxtaposed with a camera head, may be read as an allegorical representation of surveillance, enforced by institutions, state powers and societal norms over queer lives. Rather than the conventional notion of CCTV cameras as tools for ensuring security and safeguard, in this work the camera serves as a metaphor for digital surveillance and the public gaze, which not only regulate queer lives but also determine the legitimacy of queer visibility within the public domain. The skeletal body beneath the bird's claws may be read as a symbolic representation of queer bodies, subjected to violence, criminalisation and severe forms of assault, perpetuated by the very act of surveillance. Created after the historic verdict decriminalising homosexuality, the poster was a brutal reminder that queer lives continue to exist at the threshold of vulnerability, given the oppressive social conditions that govern queer existence even after judicial and legal reforms. The potential of the image lies in its engagement with the contradiction surrounding the notion of queer visibility. While acknowledging the reformative potential of visibility and the palpable presence of queer sexuality within the public domain, it is important to recognise that such visibility can also render queer bodies vulnerable to surveillance, scrutiny, and violence². Under such conditions, visibility of queer lives might introduce new forms of control and surveillance, marking the very idea of visibility as a conflicting phenomenon. This conflict echoes Michael Foucault's understanding of surveillance, where he argues that surveillance often stimulates individuals to internalise the gaze of authority, leading to the exercise of control through everyday habit, alertness, and self-policing. What is even more interesting is the placement of the poster on public walls, already depicting pictures of other big-budget

² Queer visibility occupies a position of dilemma, considering both the power it offers and hostility it attracts. From the 2012 attack on Balbir Krishan and his artworks, to the recent incident where members of *Porshi* queer cafe in Kolkata were attacked and harassed in the public, reveal the vulnerable and hostile conditioning around queer visibility, irrespective of the recent legal reformations on queer sexuality. On one hand queer visibility guarantees recognition, rights and freedom while on the other side it also exposes the queer bodies, to violence, hostility and surveillance. By looking at the long trajectory of violence around queer presence, it won't be wrong to assume that queer visibility in India continues to negotiate between acceptance and vulnerability.

commercial films. Instead of circulating within the festival circuit, the posters were pasted all over the city on walls, buildings, and public urinals, transforming the urban landscape as a potential site for queer visibility while registering the cultural footprints of the queer community in the city of Kolkata. Against the established economies of viewership within the gallery space, the images displayed at public sites help draw an unregulated number of viewers, who are made to encounter the visuals, thus reaching a much larger audience. The positioning of these images within everyday public sites resonates with the very idea of activism³, which aims to reach a much larger public while sensitising the masses through the act of collective and shared viewership. Very interestingly, instead of fully covering the underlying poster of a popular film, the artist consciously decided to keep the underlying posters visible, while integrating some of the text of the posters with the visual mascot of the festival pasted above. Taking into account the relevance of the act of assimilation and reclamation in queer resistance, the promotional image of the film festival pasted over the existing film poster is a powerful reminder of the aesthetics of intervention and the politics of reconfiguration, which appears to be a significant aspect of queer resistance. Through such innovative approaches, the festival extends beyond its designated screening space, marking streets and public sites as potential platforms to initiate dialogues on rights, desire, and sexuality.



Figure 1: Promotional posters of *Dialogues* 2019. (Left) The image on the left depicts the iconic mascot of the festival of the year 2019, being superimposed over posters of other films. Image Courtesy: Sumantra Mukherjee

³ The word “activism” became popular and gained currency in the late 1990s, through activist groups associated to the Zapatista movement and by Chicano artists in the United States. The word appears to be an interesting blend of two distinct words “art” and “activism” referring to artistic practices which strive towards bringing social, political and reformative changes. The word has been extensively used, appropriated and applied in the article titled “From Silence to Canvas: The Role of Activism in Transforming Gender and Sexuality Norms” by Ashitha Mary Christopher, published in the year 2024.

Considering the thematic impulse of the curatorial aspect of Dialogues 2019, Sumantra Mukherjee and his team of artists adorned Basusree cinema with a large immersive installation featuring paintings, sculpture, banners, and graffiti (Fig. 2), which critiqued the very act of surveillance over queer lives while borrowing the visual aesthetics of dissent and protest culture. On entering the cinema hall, a large banner unfurls that reads “our everything surveilled and sold”. Accompanied by an expressive satirical drawing, the banner further reads “....our locations, our desires, our comfort, our solitude, our bodies, our pride”, helping to forge a communal feeling through the repeated use of the word “our”. Opposite this stands another work that states “data mera beta”, juxtaposed with an image that echoes an iconic scene from popular Indian cinema, playing well to the politics of resistance through reclamation. The statement “data mera beta” refers to the very concern of digital surveillance and algorithmic control, which appears to be a tormenting reality against the right to privacy regarding queer existence.

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the 14th edition of the film festival shifted to a virtual format from its conventional physical format, continuing until 2021 in response to the norms and constraints on social gatherings during the pandemic years. In 2024, the 18th edition of the film festival returned to its previous location, Basusree, with a vivid curatorial approach, transforming the cinema hall structure into an open public space and celebrating and registering the palpable presence of the queer community through impressive installations, gigantic cutouts and colourful illustrations, prompting every urban commuter to stop and contemplate the visual extravaganza. The installations, paintings and cutouts adorning every corner of the building not only transformed the architectural space of the cinema hall through queer visibility and political aspirations but also reconfigured the normative aspect of film viewing.

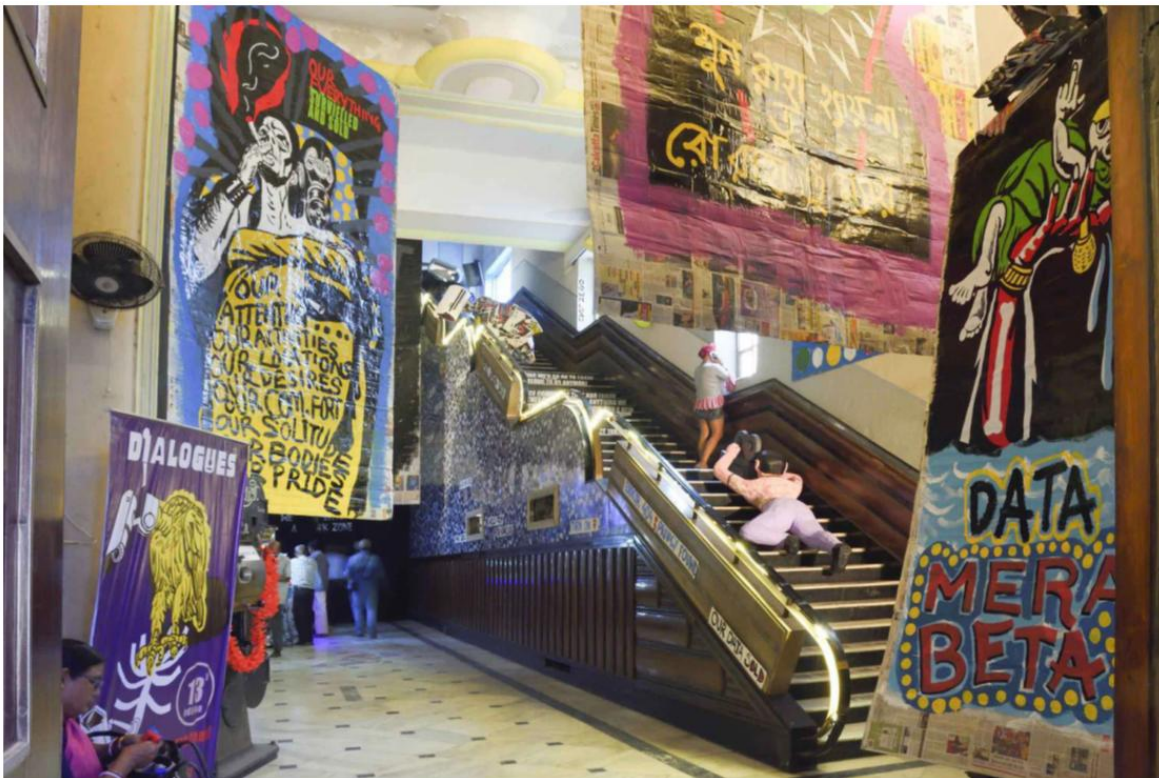


Figure 2: Curated space of Basusree, *Dialogues*, 2019. Image Courtesy- Sumantra Mukherjee

Under everyday circumstances, cinemas are designed to draw visitors directly into the auditorium for film viewing and to have spectators leave with the closure of the screening. Here, through the aid of installations and artworks, the space outside the screen was transformed into an immersive visual experience, making it impossible to ignore. The photographs of visitors posing with the artworks and installations turned the curation not merely into a space for visual contemplation, but into an active site of interaction and memory-making, while reconfiguring the building as a site for shared public reality. Instead of merely screening queer-themed films, the festival, through these visual assemblages, reconfigured the space as a site for articulating and celebrating queer existence. This echoes the very notion of Michael Warner's counterpublic, in which he states that marginalised communities often create alternative spaces that challenge dominant heteronormative expectations and conditioning. Warner's theory offers an opportunity to see *Dialogues* not just as a space for film viewing, but as an active cultural site where the idea of the alternative is produced through spectatorship and social interactions. Rather than remaining marginal, *Dialogues* can be read as a counterpublic, as it offers an opportunity where discourses are built around queer experiences. The shift of *Dialogues* from Maxmueller to Basusree can be understood through a Warnerian perspective on counterpublic. The very act of relocation allows the counterpublic to engage with the mainstream, against the limited spatial constituency. In this way, the festival has claimed its position within the dominant discourse while retaining its queer specificity and political charge. Hence, the curatorial approach of *Dialogues* at Basusree can be seen as a counterpublic intervening in the mainstream public discourse. The installations and artworks helped materialise this counterpublic by transforming a normative public space into an active site for gathering, queer exchanges, dialogues, and community-making.

Beyond the depicted subjects, what appears significant in the installation is its massive dimensions, which not only made it visually immersive but also produced a political statement on queer visibility. Through its sheer scale, bold approach and brightly lit colours, the installation intervened in the everyday perceptibility of the space, making visitors stop and gaze. Under normative conditioning, where queer lives are ignored, devalued and forced to remain obscured, the installation sought to occupy the space unapologetically. Here, visibility is not formulated through mere representation, but also through scale, spatial significance and its potential to encourage public interaction. Against the very character of gallery and museum display, which favours a physical gap between viewers and the artwork, the artworks installed at the festival challenge this conventional logistics of display by mitigating the gap between artwork and spectatorship. Here, visitors not only see the artworks but also pose beside them, converse in front of them, making the artworks an inseparable part of their presence and spectatorship. This logistics of display and viewership echoes what Nicolas Bourriaud describes as "relational aesthetics" in understanding installation art, as a practice which encourages spatial and relational engagement, against the distant mode of art display and viewership.



Figure 3: Visitors conversing and taking selfies in the lobby of the cinema hall, adorned by large installations, *Dialogues*, Basusree, 2019. Image Courtesy: Sumantra Mukherjee

In *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), Bourriaud argues that contemporary art often focuses on human interaction and spectatorship, prioritising immersive experiences and interactive logistics in which the artist, artworks, the spatial formation of the display, and readership interact simultaneously. Rather than being perceived merely as objects of visual contemplation, the installations and cutouts invite viewers to move, interact, and express their relationship to queer histories, identities, and experiences. In *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud argues that contemporary art offers alternative spaces of encounter within existing social structures. In the context of *Dialogues* at Basusree, the installations helped to create a space for queer sociability. Hence, the significance of the artworks lies not only in their aesthetic properties but also in their potential to initiate interactions and community formation. In 2019, it was not just the exterior space of the screening halls that was adorned by installations and cutouts, but the artworks also penetrated inside the cinema halls, reconfiguring the very experience of film viewing (Fig 4). The interior of the auditorium was adorned with huge posters, alongside makeshift human-like models with CCTV-like heads, installed in a few of the audience seats. The dress circle was made to look like a protest site, with cutouts of people holding postcards, resembling the visuality and political charge of protest marches. Read through Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics, the installations and artworks situated inside the cinema halls reconfigured the normative perception of screening halls, from a site of passive spectatorship to an active space for collective encounter and political assemblage. The linear and one-sided interaction between the screen and the spectator was disrupted by the presence of cutouts resembling a human crowd. Through the vivid presence of the artworks, installations, and cutouts, the auditorium transformed into a symbolic social interstice, where marginal voices, non-normative identities, and dissenting opinions were encouraged to thrive against the rigid rules and official control. This transformation of cinema halls' space through the aid of installations strongly aligns with Bourriaud's proposition of

contemporary artworks functioning as a social interstice - a temporal space where alternative interactions are encouraged against authoritative restrictions.

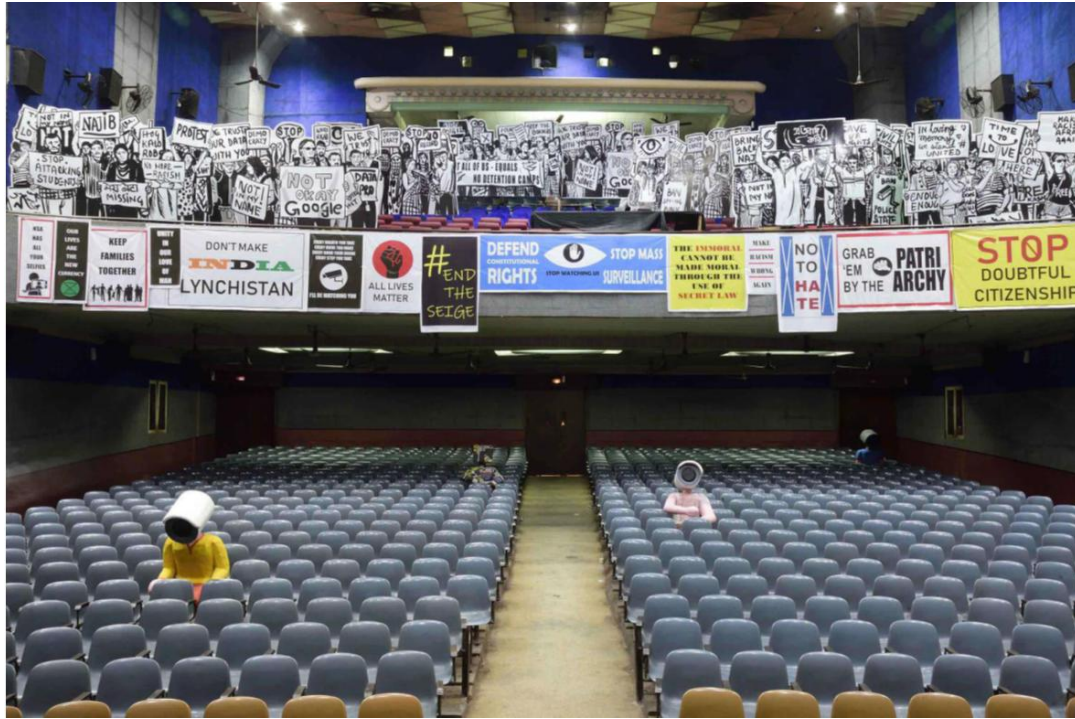


Figure 4: Inside space of the auditorium, adorned by large installations, *Dialogues*, Basusree, 2019. Image Courtesy: Sumantra Mukherjee

Apart from the spatial significance and readership of the artworks, the content and the visual vocabulary adopted by the artists in curating the festival space are also worth discussing. In 2024, one corner of the lobby exhibited large cut-outs of seated men, adorned with a garland of shoes. The image appears to be a satirical representation of heteronormative masculine prowess, critiquing the very hierarchical authority that they inherit and exercise over sexual minorities. The staircase leading to the first floor showcased multiple cut-outs of human figures holding candles, evoking the visual register of protest marches. Executed in bold black lines, the figures appear to be illuminated by the brightly lit candles. The repeated use of candles can be read as a powerful representation of hope, resistance and struggle. The installation appears to be reminiscent of violence, exclusion and assaults perpetrated against the queer community, whereas the figures holding candles, as they descend the stairs, represent hope, resilience and dissent, making the work oscillate between memory, grief and resistance. The artwork and installation borrow the visual vocabulary of public and popular visual culture by accommodating written placards that communicate directly to the viewers, rather than relying on symbolic means. Through both its content and visual vocabulary, the installation relates poignantly to the concept of onsite demonstrations, inviting emotional identification from the viewers rather than detached visual readership. The installations and artworks displayed at the festival site in both 2019 and 2024 are not merely an adornment of the festival space but are essentially political, as they turn visitors into participants and the public space into a site of queer belonging, community formation and memory-making.

4. Conclusion

Over the years, Dialogues, through its curatorial logistics, has evolved from a queer-themed film festival into a vibrant site of art-making and visual spectacle that encourages queer visibility, community-building and solidarity. Rather than functioning as mere visual adornment, the artworks installed at the festival site serve as a symbolic visual affirmation of queer presence within the public space, constituting the very act of reclamation, considered a powerful gesture of queer resistance. The gigantic installations, through their visual presence, not only transform the normative visibility of the festival site but also reconfigure the established notion of film viewing by igniting conversations and dialogues beyond the screening hall. Through the aid of the installed posters, cut-outs and artworks, conversations around queer sexuality are directed into small alleys, balconies, staircases and other architectural nuances, reconfiguring the cinema hall site as a potential space for queer visibility and identity formation.

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