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On Sexual Violence: Indian Artists and Public Engagement

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On Sexual Violence: Indian Artists and Public Engagement

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Introduction

South Asian art has surged in popularity within the contemporary art world in the last twenty years. India's contemporary art scene is as diverse and multi-faceted as its culture. Art historian Ajay J. Sinah eloquently describes, "The validity of contemporary Indian art is sought in the semantic value it gives to the cacophony of hybrid sights and sounds that constitute the spectacle of contemporary India."¹ Despite the vast diversity that exists within Indian contemporary art, one galvanizing event compelled a multitude of artists to respond to the state of gender inequality and sexual violence in India's culture. The Delhi Rape Incident of 2012 provoked a widespread national outcry and Indian citizens responded in mass protest to inspire change against sexual violence. The protests also brought international attention to India wondering how the country would come together in a collective debate concerning sexual violence. Many Indian artists who were inspired to enter the debate utilized their creative abilities to question gender inequality and sexual violence in Indian culture. This thesis analyzes the work of two Indian contemporary artists, Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes, who have leveraged social media and activist methodologies in order to cultivate public engagement and debate concerning sexual violence.

"I Never Ask For It because all I wanted to do was quench my thirst on a hot summer evening. I never ask for it because I have a right to walk these streets, any hour of any day in any garb and never feel a flicker of fear, never have to clamp my arms to my side and walk with my elbows sticking out."²

¹ Ajay J. Sinah, "Contemporary Indian Art: A Question of Method." *Art Journal* 58, no. 3 (October 1, 1999): 32.

² *Blank Noise*, 2012. < <https://www.facebook.com/pages/BLANKNOISE/13112249533>>

-*I Never Ask for It* testimonial February 28th, 2014 [Fig. 1.1]

Blank Noise is an Indian activist art collective that critiques the behaviors and attitudes associated with gender inequality and sexual violence through social media forums and public engagement performances. Increasingly, artists like Blank Noise are engaging in activism as a way to address sexual violence in India. On the hot summer day, when she left her home to purchase a juice with a friend, she wore a red orange dress decorated with embroidered suns, she was not thinking, “I am asking for it.” The testimonial posted by Action Hero Zero Rishita Nandagiri is one of many voluntarily given to the Blank Noise campaign *I Never Ask For It*. Along with her testimonial; Action Hero Zero donated the garment she wore when she was violated. The sexual harassment testimonial, the donation of a garment, and the posters that present the article of clothing and declare, “I Never Ask For It” are steps involved in the Blank Noise campaign that build evidence against victim blame and sexual violence towards women in India and all over the world. The *I Never Ask For It* campaign is one of the many campaigns organized by Blank Noise including: *Step By Step Guide to Unapologetic Walking*; *Talk To Me*; and *Safe City Pledge*.

In December of 2012, New Delhi photographer Chandan Gomes took a photograph of his friend “S” on an empty bus. On the same night, Jyoti Singh Pandey was beaten and gang raped on a private bus.

“16th December, 2012:

A photograph of my dear friend S in a nearly empty bus. We were on our way to a colleague’s flat for a get together. Around the same time, not far from where we were, a 23 year old paramedic student was being brutally

[accessed August, 2014].

assaulted in a nearly empty bus, just like ours.
I will always regret that I made this photo. But this regret will ensure that
I do not get 'accustomed' to the state of affairs – to live in fear, to breed it
further.”³

-Chandan Gomes [Fig. 1.2]

Jyoti Singh Pandey's sexual assault inspired Chandan Gomes and other New Delhi citizens to join in protest against the lack of safety in public spaces and against the pervasiveness of sexual violence in India. Chandan Gomes photographed his experiences of the protest and posted the images to the social media site, Facebook. His images went viral overnight and Gomes realized that these images could inspire others to participate in protests responding to the Delhi Rape Incident. Gomes developed a photo essay of the protests titled, *Unknown Citizen*, and put it on his Facebook page where it generated a public dialogue and increased awareness about sexual violence in India.

Street Harassment and the 'Urban Indian Woman'

Contemporary Indian artists are especially critical of India's city streets, which they argue exist as a site of conflict against the "urban woman". Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes aim to raise public awareness surrounding the dangers women face in the urban environment. "eve-teasing" refers to the spectrum of street harassment in India that spans from verbal assault to fondling women in public spaces and, in more severe cases, can lead to such violent assaults as rape. A recent survey shows that 90 percent of women in New Delhi have experienced some form of sexual harassment or "eve-

³ *The Unknown Citizen*, Chandan Gomes
<https://www.facebook.com/chandan.gomes.7/media_set?set=a.1581608941560.77568.1275803399&type=3> [accessed December, 2014].

teasing”.⁴ The term “teasing” as opposed to harassment trivializes the sexual violence that women are confronted with in their everyday urban Indian environments. The general public typically ignores sexual harassment or “eve-teasing”; these behaviors are so commonplace that individuals deny the seriousness of street harassment. A Blank Noise participant declares, “ I have not met any Indian woman who has not been harassed in some way or the other. Lots of women don’t negotiate public spaces. They stop using buses, they stop using trains, they don’t go out at a certain time, and they don’t go out except if they’re in a group.”⁵ Instead of directly confronting “eve-teasers” women choose to avoid public spaces. Refusing to acknowledge incidents of “eve-teasing” prevents an open discussion concerning street harassment, perpetuates assumptions, and forces women to avoid urban Indian environments.

Urban and public spaces have thus become threatening environments for Indian women due to the prevalence and everyday nature of street harassment. Scholars Sadhna Arya and Shashi Khurana assert, “violence is used to keep women subjugated within family and community. In fact, violence is rationalized through norms defined by society in the name of tradition and religious practices. This rationalization becomes a basis for social sanctions of such violence, thereby normalizing it and making it invisible.”⁶ Urban spaces have become the environments where tradition and modernization clash, where women have become subjected to harassment and

⁴ Rehana Ghadially, *Urban Women in Contemporary India: A Reader*, (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2007), 170.

⁵ *Blank Noise Project*, February 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-VQ0VOiQjc> [accessed, January 9, 2015].

⁶ Margaret Alston, *Women, Political Struggles and Gender Equality in South Asia*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 33.

violence, and they are subsequently forced back into the private sphere. Instead of accepting the lack of safety women feel in public spaces, the work of Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes directly confronts the assumptions and attitudes that lead to street harassment.

Sexual violence is a multi-faceted and complex issue affecting South Asian women as well as women globally. It would be difficult to completely historicize and analyze each of the characteristics that make-up the unique social norms that cause sexual violence in India within this paper's restrictions. It is, however, safe to observe that since India's colonial history, women have functioned as national symbols or bearers of India's cultural identity. Currently, the 'Indian woman's' national identity and her relation to traditional ideals are at odds with modernization and westernization. The ideology of assigning cultural responsibility to women, especially as national identity representatives, exists internationally and more specifically in India. The effects of this hegemonic identity have led to the current state of sexual violence and gender inequality in India today. Feminist scholar Nira Yuval-Davis thoroughly analyzes the broader attitudes and beliefs that surround the ideology of national identity and its effect on women. In her book *Gender and Nation*, Yuval-Davis describes the implications of the "nation-state". She argues that the very ideology behind the "nation" is a totalizing concept that neglects difference for homogenous and controlling identities that are impossible to achieve. The idea of "nation" is itself meaningless and yet the world has

experienced a long history of nationalistic campaigns that have restricted diversity in identity in the name of the “nation”.⁷

As feminist scholar Kumari Jayawardena observes, “Women are seen to be the repository of tradition and their ‘inviolability’ has been a powerful tool of cultural defense against modernization and westernization. Nonetheless, the control of women’s bodies as the symbolic space of the nation has often involved the women’s oppression.”⁸

Nationalism in South Asia has existed since British colonial rule, but with the opening up of India’s economy to the global market, Western influence and modernization has lead to the creation of the “urban Indian woman” a threatening identity against nationalistic standards. Jayawardena analyses sexual violence’s history in South Asia as a result of nationalist concerns in *Embodied Violence: Communalizing Women’s Sexuality in South Asia*. Modernization and westernization are seen as a direct threat to the essence of cultural homogeneity that nationalist campaigns sought for India. In her book, Jayawardena focuses on the method of manipulating violence to control female bodies. “teasing” serves as an example of a force of control that reconfigures women’s experiences and fosters the formation of particular identities. The patriarchal hegemony that exists within India’s social system is a structure of power that prescribes communalism or the advocacy of violence towards women to protect the essence of an “Indian” nation.⁹

⁷ Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation*, (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1997), 21.

⁸ Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis, *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women’s Sexuality in South Asia*, (London; New Jersey: Zed Books, 1996), xv.

⁹ Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis, *Embodied Violence: Communalising*

The intricacies of national identities as they are prescribed to women in conditioning a national cultural identity are analyzed by Jyoti Puri in *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-Colonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality*. Oral narratives from middle and upper class urban Indian women explore how women's bodies, sexualities, and gender identities are regulated through enforced social control by definitions of what is natural, normal, or respectable. Middle and upper class urban women are seen as sites where cultural norms and social respectability are contested.¹⁰ Puri asserts, "cultural beliefs that middle and upper class women embody a changing, modernizing, national cultural identity are frequently offset by concerns that these women are being corrupted by the influences of modernization, and especially, 'westernization'."¹¹ While India's national goal is to become modern and compete in the globalized economy, modernization and westernization are viewed as modes of corruption against the "ideal Indian woman". Puri's oral narratives demonstrate the disciplinary strategies of normalizing social control, but they also show how women challenge these strategies of social control.¹²

National Public Outcry Against Sexual Violence

Since India's struggle for independence from British colonial rule, women have held important roles in the government at all levels of representation. Political leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi, inspired women to engage public life and to participate in the

Women's Sexuality in South Asia, (London; New Jersey: Zed Books, 1996), xvii

¹⁰ Jyoti Puri, *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-Colonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 2.

¹¹ Ibid, 3.

¹² Ibid, 3.

Independence Movement. Due to the successful outcomes of women's participation in the Independence Movement, civic rights for women were included in the Indian Constitution in 1949.¹³ Given women's active role in Indian politics since the Independence Movement, the question remains as to why gender inequality and sexual violence persist within Indian cultural norms.

Three specific incidents of sexual violence, and more specifically, rape have lead to subsequent waves of public outcry and a boost in activist agendas towards the sexual violence's treatment in Indian governmental policies. Indian feminist scholar, Aruna Burte, historicizes the waves of activism against sexual violence and the political changes that have occurred as a result of public outcry in response to specific cases of sexual violence against women. The first occurred on the 26th of March, 1972, where a 16-year-old girl, Mathura, was raped by two police men at a police station.¹⁴ The Supreme Court judgment to exonerate the policemen sparked a nation-wide protest against the decision and many women's forums were formed opposing rape. In response to these efforts, amendments were made to the anti-rape law in 1983.¹⁵ Twenty years later, in 1992, Bhanwari Devi was a state appointed community worker involved in a campaign against child marriage. She and her husband received many threats and experienced physical abuse by village members, on one occasion five villagers attacked and raped Devi. Aruna Burte argued, "Bhanwari Devi's case catalyzed in an increase in registered rape cases, brought to prominence the issue of child

¹³ Aruna Burte in, ed. Margaret Alston, *Women, Political Struggles and Gender Equality in South Asia*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 157.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 158-160.

marriage and led to the raising of the legal age of marriage in Rajasthan.”¹⁶ In December of 2012 Jyoti Singh Pandey was beaten and gang raped on a private bus just outside of New Delhi. Weeks later, injuries sustained from the attack resulted in her death.¹⁷ The incident roused a third wave of national and international coverage in response to the protests generated regarding the lack of safety for women and brought to light the severity of gender violence in India to international awareness. The 2012 gang rape motivated activist campaigns against the state of gender inequality and sexual violence in India.

Cultivating Artistic Dialogues with Social Media

The Delhi Rape Incident and the following national debate concerning sexual violence galvanized many contemporary Indian artists to respond through their work. I chose to analyze the artistic practice of Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes, whose work involved similarities based on history, approach, and content. Both Chandan Gomes and Blank Noise approached sexual violence from an activist methodology. They both focus on inspiring public debate and engagement towards relieving the effects of sexual violence. In her article “Feminist Art and the Political Imagination” philosophy scholar, Amy Mullin’s discusses the artistic practice of inviting imaginative thought amongst participants in order to explore alternatives that can lead to social and political change. I have used Mullin’s article as a framework for analysis of Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes activist art practice.

¹⁶ Aruna Burte in, ed. Margaret Alston, *Women, Political Struggles and Gender Equality in South Asia*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 160-162.

¹⁷ *Archive Delhi Rape Incident*, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/delhi-gangrape-chronology-of-events/article5079321>. [accessed jan 31, 2015]

In addition, Both Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes leverage social media as an art platform to generate diverse engagement and awareness. Social media has been key to the widespread success of many recent feminist activist campaigns in India such as, the “Pink Panty campaign” and the “Kiss of Love” protest.¹⁸ Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes, like many contemporary artists; manipulate the Internet and social media platforms in their art practice. Communications scholar, Iona Literat’s article “The Work of Art in the Age of Mediated Participation: Crowdsourced Art and Collective Creativity” analyzes collective creativity that relies on various levels of artistic and online viewer participation.¹⁹ The work of Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes demonstrates qualities of the “crowdsourced art” trend by using social media as their art platform to build a network of individuals seeking to create social change against sexual violence. More specifically, Blank Noise is a cyberfeminist collective because they build a network and feminist discourse through the use of the Internet. In *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice*, Kristine Blair, Radhika Gajjala, and Christine Tulley provide a useful resource for evaluating the cyberfeminist work of Blank Noise. I have used these resources to analyze Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes social media based practice. Besides their methodological choices, Blank Noise’s and Chandan Gomes’ work are similar in regards to their content. Each artist problematizes the urban environment, “eve-teasing”, and street harassment in India through his or her work. While these similarities exist between the work of Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes, their artistic practices and

¹⁸ *Blank Noise*, 2012. < <https://www.facebook.com/pages/BLANKNOISE/13112249533> > [accessed August, 2014].

¹⁹ Iona Literat. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mediated Participation: Crowdsourced Art and Collective Creativity.” *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012): 2962.

careers are divergent on many levels and subsequently their approach towards such an intensely severe subject matter differs. This thesis will highlight the differences in artistic practices between Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes despite the similarities in history, content, and approach related in their work.

My identity as a privileged white female from the global north may be seen as potentially at odds with global southern feminisms. As Indian feminist Chandra Mohanty argues, there has been a history of western feminist scholars drawing essentializing and limiting claims concerning women from the “third world.”²⁰ As a non-native Indian, I wish to acknowledge that I approach Indian culture from a necessarily limited perspective. I traveled to India in the summer of 2014 to experience and observe Indian culture as well as learn about the Indian contemporary art market. My past experiences while traveling through India admittedly presented only a fraction of the multi-faceted nature of Indian culture. But, as a woman, I empathize with the cross-cultural experience of gender inequality and sexual violence and, as an art historian; I am also committed to exploring and contributing to the global platform dialogue of activist works of Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes.

My interviews with Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes, and my analysis of their work in this paper, attempts to contribute to an understanding of activist artistic methodology and to Indian contemporary art. The goal of this thesis is to analyze works by Indian artists who engage an activist dialogue, but also who utilize art collective

²⁰ Chandra Talpade Mohanty. “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” *Feminist Review*, no. 30 (1988): 61.

approaches in order to create a more inviting collaborative discussion with the general population. Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes build public dialogues as well as a critical analysis of the culture surrounding sexual violence in India. Through the use of activist aesthetics Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes' work goes beyond the limitations of the art market, in order to successfully engage social change in public spaces.

Section I.

Blank Noise: A Call to Action Heroes

Blank Noise is an Indian-based art collective that seeks to create public awareness regarding street harassment and sexual violence. The collective engages a global debate regarding sexual violence through their manipulation of social media platforms. Since sexual violence is a global human rights issue, Blank Noise seeks to reach and relate to a diverse audience. While Blank Noise is based in India, individuals participate from all over the world and engage in a discussion that has the potential to inspire global cultural change through the use of social media as an art platform. Blank Noise uses various strategies, including their social media pages, as an art collective to successfully engage a transnational conversation to effect social change towards sexual violence.

This section will analyze the multi-faceted approach Blank Noise uses to discuss sexual violence and its activist context. I begin by describing the formative stages of Jasmeen Patheja's artistic career and her inspiration for creating Blank Noise. Next, I analyze the Blank Noise "Action Hero's" gender dynamics and whether that identity creates a productive conversation concerning sexual violence and activism. I also analyze Blank Noise's approach, various campaigns, and their work in relation to activist and art activist methodology. Finally, I discuss Blank Noise's goal to create a global debate concerning sexual violence through the use of social media as an art platform. Overall, I will answer the question of whether an art collective, like Blank

Noise, can successfully formulate social change to alleviate sexual violence throughout this chapter.

Jasmeen Patheja is the face and creator of the art collective Blank Noise. She was born in Calcutta and relocated to Bangalore in 1999 to study at Srishti School of Art and Design. Blank Noise began during Patheja's studies for art school at The Srishti School of Art and Design. She studied photography and participated in a yearlong lab that discussed communication for social change and the artist in the role of social transformation. Dr. Gheeta Narayanan, her instructor, constructed the lab to examine the ways artists can facilitate the process of experiential learning. Patheja recalls, "I was always leaning towards feminism. Srishti helped me to express or enabled me to express my feminist concerns."²¹ Through her studies, Patheja was introduced to artists like Marina Abramovic, Suzanne Lacy, and Shelley Sacks, who work with public art, building viewer engagements, performance art, and the politics of the body. Inspiration from these artists led Patheja to consider questions such as: "How do you create engagements? How do you enter uncomfortable places? Can art be co-created and have multiple authors?"²²

Furthermore, Patheja experienced various forms of threat and violence within Bangalore's urbanized environment. These experiences led to the founding of Blank Noise.²³ Patheja formulated Blank Noise by conducting workshops with fellow students and wrote her thesis on "eve-teasing". She was shocked by the general public's

²¹ Jasmeen Patheja, interview by Hannah Kennedy, Bangalore, KA, July 7, 2014.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

indifferent attitudes towards the effects of “eve-teasing”. Responses to Patheja’s concerns towards street harassment included: “it happens everyday”; or “you are making a big deal about it.”²⁴ Patheja refused to tolerate behaviors of denial or to accept “eve-teasing” as a fact of life for women. She utilized the Internet as a low cost, communicative platform to call upon a diverse group of participants for the Blank Noise collective. The Blank Noise blog site became an environment of information exchange and testimonial writing as well as a way to facilitate street-based action. Patheja created Blank Noise in response to attitudes that trivialize “eve-teasing”. Attitudes that view women as provocateurs whose very presence in public spaces could inspire harassment.²⁵

Patheja organized Blank Noise to construct a collective ownership and responsibility concerning sexual violence. From Blank Noise’s perspective, each individual must accept the responsibility to effect change towards sexual violence. A Blank Noise coordinator, Hemangini Gupta observes, “Basically it’s a challenge to the assumption that a certain kind of power equation is ‘alright’ and we have been defiant about confronting this.”²⁶ Patheja argues that spectators, perpetrators, and sexual violence survivors all have a responsibility to relieve sexual violence’s negative

²⁴ Trishima Mitra-Kahn, “Offline Issues Online Lives? The emerging cyberlife of feminist politics in urban India.” In *New South Asian Feminisms: Paradoxes and Possibilities*, ed by Srila Roy (London; New York: Zed Books, 2012), 114.

²⁵ Trishima Mitra-Kahn, “Offline Issues Online Lives? The emerging cyberlife of feminist politics in urban India.” In *New South Asian Feminisms: Paradoxes and Possibilities*, ed by Srila Roy (London; New York: Zed Books, 2012), 114.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 115.

impacts.²⁷ Blank Noise conducts campaigns in their attempt to address constructs of gender inequality that manifest as sexual violence within the street environment of India.

Middle and upper class, urban, Indian women are placed in a position where cultural norms and social respectability are contested.²⁸ In Jyoti Puri's book, "Women, Body, Desire in Postcolonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality", she highlights, "cultural beliefs that middle and upper class women embody a changing, modernizing, national cultural identity are frequently offset by concerns that these women are being corrupted by the influences of modernization, and especially, westernization."²⁹

Patheja's work for Blank Noise falls within the demographic group analyzed in Puri's ethnographic research as a middle/upper-class urban woman with a degree from an elite art school. Blank Noise seeks to break down the gender identities prescribed by nationalistic ideologies and interprets the Indian urban environment as a site where these ideas are contested. While traditional identity cultural models have placed women in the private sphere, at the same time urban spaces signify modernization and women are claiming their right to public representation. As women gain agency in urban environments, sexual violence and street harassment function as a form of social control in an attempt to maintain "Indian" cultural norms.

²⁷ Trishima Mitra-Kahn, "Offline Issues Online Lives? The emerging cyberlife of feminist politics in urban India." In *New South Asian Feminisms: Paradoxes and Possibilities*, ed by Srila Roy (London; New York: Zed Books, 2012), 114.

²⁸ Jyoti Puri, *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-Colonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality*, New York: Routledge, 1999, 2.

²⁹ Ibid, 3.

Blank Noise's Action Hero Identity

The Blank Noise art collective is made up of Action Heroes that include Patheja, individual campaign members, and campaign participants. The Action Hero does not have a fixed definition, they are plural, flexible, and their characteristics are organic and ever changing. Patheja defines the Action Hero as: "a collective definition built by Action Heroes through participation and responding." She adds that being an Action Hero, "involves working through discomfort."³⁰ Action Heroes ensure that Blank Noise continues to exist as an art collective and spread awareness for the cultural norms that cause sexual violence.

Action Heroes participate in every step of the Blank Noise development process including brainstorming for future campaigns. Brainstorming occurs primarily on the Blank Noise blog sites. Action Heroes post questions on the blog site and any person willing to participate in the discussion may provide their input. Blank Noise's core focus relies on teamwork and collective action, which allows Action Heroes to efficiently analyze social constructs of gender inequality in their campaigns. Each Action Hero has their own role and no one member bears a majority of the responsibility within the collective. The contribution that each Action Hero makes to the collective is determined by how they decide to confront their own inhibitions.³¹

The male Action Hero is also important. Patheja emphasizes that, while male Action Heroes have always been involved, Blank Noise must make a continuous effort to include male campaign members. Including male voices within the feminist discourse

³⁰ Jasmeen Patheja, interview by Hannah Kennedy, Bangalore, KA, July 7, 2014.

³¹ Ibid.

is a trend called “pro-feminism”. Scholars Steven Schacht and Doris Ewing note that “human concerns” have traditionally been categorized as “women’s concerns”. Schacht and Ewing argue, “what we are calling for is not just men’s participation in what are often seen as women’s issues, but for men to eventually become equal partners in the building and sharing of a feminist reality.”³² Patheja does not wish to ignore the importance that both men and women share in effecting change against sexual violence and has adopted a pro-feminist philosophy in Blank Noise’s goals.

While the message behind the Action Hero is empowering to individual participants within Blank Noise, I feel that some associations may be problematic based on certain interpretations. The Action Hero name itself recalls the superhero, action figure, or vigilante persona associated with various masculine identities in film, comics and popular culture, particularly in Bollywood films and western culture. In sociology scholar Lara Montesinos Coleman’s article, “Deconstructing Militant Manhood: Masculinities in the Disciplining of (anti-) Globalization Politics”, she portrays a similar masculine identity called the “Anarchist Action Man”. Coleman’s ethnography describes this “Anarchist Action Man” as one who focuses, “on the individual and the clear affinity of direct action with war and its rhetoric, recalls an image that dominates the modern western imagery-that of the epic hero, single-handedly fighting against enemy forces for

³²Steven P. Schacht and Doris W. Ewing, *Feminism with Men: Bridging the Gender Gap*, (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 9.

the triumph of good over evil.”³³ One might associate similar characteristics between the Blank Noise Action Hero and the “Anarchist Action Man”. This anarchic vigilante mentality inherently involves danger and a sense of violent risk that limits those willing to become Action Heroes. An identity based on individual anarchic action may not be the most effective model by which to effect social change towards gender equality and sexual violence.

One important note to make is that while women and men have both made up the Action Hero identity, Blank Noise has always had to make an effort to include the “Action Hero Guy” in the Blank Noise collective. Originally, Blank Noise was made up predominantly of female Action Heroes. The male Action Heroes have their own Blank Noise blog site and Facebook page called Blank Noise Guy. This exemplifies the importance of male participation and representation in the collective. Blank Noise suggest that both men and women are equally responsible for effecting change towards sexual violence. With the case of Blank Noise, a gender binary is not evidenced as evidenced in Coleman’s ethnography. In an interview, Patheja emphasizes the fact that Blank Noise campaigns are neither confrontational nor passive.³⁴ The Action Hero’s goal is to confront themselves and their own actions and to inspire others to do the same. For instance, *The Step by Step Guide to Unapologetic Walking* is a campaign that seeks to change individual methods of avoiding street harassment. Behaviors that

³³ Lara Montesinos Coleman and Serena A. Bassi, “Deconstructing Militant Manhood: Masculinities in the Disciplining of (anti-) Globalization Politics”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*: 13:2 June 2011, 216.

³⁴ Jasmeen Patheja on *Conversations with Namu Kini*, 2014.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVPRlubnobk&feature=youtube_gdata_player
[accessed October 10, 2014].

need to be unlearned include wearing sunglasses to avoid eye contact with a stranger. There is not the same sense of destructive mentality as emphasized by the characteristics of the “Anarchist Action Man”. Rather, the campaigns seek to deconstruct the cultural norms and embedded social norms that lead to the larger issue of sexual violence. Blank Noise’s more nuanced methodology for effecting social change provides an inviting atmosphere that inspires individual action rather than the more violent connotations associated with the “Anarchist Action Man”.

Blank Noise places an emphasis on individual action in keeping with the philosophy associated with the spirit of the Action Hero while Coleman’s “Anarchist Action Man” reproduces the mentality that emphasizes individual action as the sole method of enacting change.³⁵ Coleman describes that the “Anarchist Action Man” behaviors, “Put an emphasis on individual action as the only real agent of change [...] generated the exclusion of voices and of bodies that could not, or would not be fully incorporated into the politics they enacted.”³⁶ Blank Noise’s philosophy does not trust the political system as a method of cultural change. Rather, the collective insists that individual behaviors and cultural ideals must first change in order to create larger social reform. Various Blank Noise campaigns define individual “action” as the best mode for building public awareness and a dialogue concerning sexual violence. For example, the *Safe City Pledge* requests that individuals change a singular everyday action with an aim that these actions will ripple into larger social reform.

³⁵ Lara Montesinos Coleman and Serena A. Bassi, “Deconstructing Militant Manhood: Masculinities in the Disciplining of (anti-)Globalization Politics”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*: 13:2 June 2011, 216.

³⁶ Ibid, 219.

Individual action as a method of activism has a long history in India that began with Gandhian protest philosophy during the Independence Movement and has continued throughout the emergence of feminist activism in India. In the quest for gender equality, Gandhi distrusted the effectiveness of governmental change and instead sought to inspire activism through individual agency. His methods articulated the need to change dominant attitudes towards women. As a formative leader in the Indian Independence Movement, Gandhi viewed women's liberation as a necessary component in India's political emancipation.³⁷ The very history of Indian independence was built on individual action. Scholar Veena R. Howard notes, "Gandhi sought to address the issues of women not through legislation, but by directly confronting men for their attitudes toward women and speaking with women about their health, segregation, and issues of modesty."³⁸ While legislative support for gender equality is important, cultural norms can undermine intentions to build political gender equality. Several decades after Gandhi's death, Blank Noise Action Heroes continue to critique the cultural norms that inhibit gender equality and lead to sexual violence. Since feminist campaigns in India began in the 1920s, activist groups have emphasized the need for individual action and have distrusted the effectiveness of governmental change. Activists, Sadhna Arya and Shashi Khurana have found that despite legislative changes in gender equality issues such as property rights etc., women's choices are still influenced by male dominated structures and ideologies that operate at a cultural level.

³⁷ Veena R. Howard, "Rethinking Gandhi's Celibacy: Ascetic Power and Women's Empowerment." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 1 (March 1, 2013), 132.

³⁸ Ibid, 139.

For this reason, feminist activists, “view with suspicion the value of law reform as the sole strategy for women’s emancipation.”³⁹ Despite significant progress in existing law reform, women’s choices are still controlled by cultural norms that prevent them from experiencing true emancipation from patriarchal systems. Patheja’s focus on individual action coincides with the values of other Indian feminist activist groups that circumvent legislative change for gender equality. Cultural change must also occur in order to experience true gender equality.

Activist Artist Methodology

Blank Noise’s mission is intrinsically entrenched in activist theory, given their collectivist and public engagement based approach to sexual violence. In Amy Mullin’s article “Feminist Art and the Political Imagination”, she argues that feminist activist works of art that stimulate imaginative critique have the ability to, “stimulate widespread critical interrogation of potentially oppressive practices and ideologies.”⁴⁰ Artworks have the potential to facilitate the imaginative exploration of moral and political ideas.⁴¹ Mullin asserts that successful activist artworks “stimulate debate [...] the audience responds to works whose subjects are presented as complex, and subject to multiple points of view.”⁴² Mullin also suggests that activist artists must attempt to make their work easily available in public spaces where diverse populations can access their work.⁴³ In order

³⁹ Rehana Ghadially, *Urban Women in Contemporary India: A Reader* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2007), 54.

⁴⁰ Amy Mullin, “Feminist Art and the Political Imagination,” *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (October 1, 2003), 209.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 197.

⁴² *Ibid*, 201.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 206.

for activist work to be successful, it must encourage audience discussion in a public forum where diverse audience members can participate in the dialogue. Blank Noise's campaigns directly coincide with Amy Mullin's open-ended and imaginative activist methodology. Blank Noise ensures that they facilitate open-ended discussions in order to explore the multi-faceted issue of sexual violence through their engagement with public, urban spaces including social media platforms.

The Blank Noise campaign, the *Step By Step Guide to Unapologetic Walking* (known as the Action Hero pledge) functions as the Action Hero's manifesto [Fig. 2.1]. The guide's formative stages began by conducting public street interactions including the practice of idle standing, which functioned as a brainstorming method. Action Heroes stood idly in the Streets of Bangalore in order to become fully present in their surroundings and publicly occupy their urban environment. The Action Hero's experiences during the street interactions differed greatly in regards to their associations with the street. "Being idle," or occupying the street allowed them to become more familiar with their surroundings.⁴⁴ The Action Heroes built the guide based on their behaviors, observations, and responses towards the street while "being idle".

The *Step By Step Guide to Unapologetic Waking* was created through questions concerning, "What is citizenship itself? How can we arrive at being citizens? How can there be an Action Hero citizen?" It is based on actions that claim/re-claim one's city with an unapologetic attitude. The guide encourages individuals to learn to live without

⁴⁴ Jasmeen Patheja on *Conversations with Namu Kini*, 2014.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVPRIubnobk&feature=youtube_gdata_player
[accessed October 10, 2014].

fear in public spaces and to regain agency within their city. Patheja articulates, “Fear is often camouflaged or concealed by ‘appropriate behavior’.”⁴⁵ *The Step By Step Guide* lists “appropriate” behaviors that need to be unlearned in one’s daily interactions with the public environment. The guide is a conversation with oneself, a ritualistic performance, and a self-confrontation. Patheja describes, “It challenges one to unlearn fear and move away from a space of fear to a place of trust.”⁴⁶ The steps exemplify learned decisions that any person can relate to having performed in their past in order to feel safe including; looking at the ground, wearing sunglasses, or holding your cell phone. Each Action Hero performs the *Step By Step Guide to Unapologetic Walking* and experiences fear and reluctance in association with their environment, but eventually this fear turns to trust. The actions listed in the guide encompass the Blank Noise Actions Hero spirit and mission.

The *Step By Step Guide to Unapologetic Walking* emboldens a community to move towards a collective ownership concerning sexual violence prevention and awareness. Anyone can become an Action Hero by following this guide and anyone can participate in relieving the fear of sexual violence. Through the actions listed in Blank Noise’s guide, the Action Hero becomes an active agent for change within their city. The steps employ the body as a site of resistance against social constructs that instill fear amongst individuals and engender apathy.

⁴⁵ Trishima Mitra-Kahn, “Offline Issues Online Lives? The emerging cyberlife of feminist politics in urban India.” In *New South Asian Feminisms: Paradoxes and Possibilities*, ed by Srila Roy (London; New York: Zed Books, 2012), 116.

⁴⁶ Jasmeen Patheja, interview by Hannah Kennedy, Bangalore, KA, July 7, 2014.

Another campaign, *I Never Ask For It*, involves collecting clothing articles that sexual violence survivors wore during their violation. Images of these garments are posted online, as well as publicly displayed in installations, and paraded in the streets. A sexual assault survivor participates by giving away the garment with the attitude that they do not deserve sexual harassment. Once the clothing item is given away, it loses the negative connotations associated with the incident, and it is absorbed within the larger art campaign. *I Never Ask For It* is an ongoing campaign that is currently under development. Patheja hopes to build a traveling exhibition that will display the garments nationally and internationally. The *I Never Ask for It* campaign moves beyond simply collecting clothing by breaking down notions of blame. The Blank Noise blog cultivates discussions regarding “asking for it” to build a broad understanding and address the cultural background regarding victim blame.⁴⁷

Action Heroes parade racks of clothing to disband notions of “Asking for It” [Fig. 2.2]. The campaign shines a light on environments of blame while challenging excuses on the perpetrator’s behalf. The images posted on Blank Noise’s blog site provide evidence that provocative clothing does not play a factor in sexual assault [Image Fig. 2.3]. The clothing items collected include jeans, t-shirts, dresses, shawls, and burkas. Ranging from casual to modest, all of these articles show that a woman does not seek out violation when getting ready for her day. This campaign also highlights an individual’s attempt to bypass the male gaze by changing their demeanor and appearance. Patheja states, *I Never Ask For It*, “interrogates attire’s semiotic function

⁴⁷ Jasmeen Patheja, interview by Hannah Kennedy, Bangalore, KA, July 7, 2014.

and implicitly plays on how middle class women internalize or negotiate the demands of sexual purity in conjunction with self-expression.”⁴⁸ The campaign maintains both a physical presence (recurring installations) and an online presence (blog posts and Facebook page). Various garments prove that the way a person is dressed is never a viable justification for sexual assault.

Blank Noise’s most recent campaign, *Talk to Me*, took place in Bangalore’s “Rapist Lane”, an area commonly associated with sexual violations women experience walking along the street [Fig. 2.4]. The campaign began as a workshop that Blank Noise facilitated at Srishti School of Art and Design. Workshop participants mapped locations in Bangalore that they viewed as unsafe or spaces where they had experienced harassment. Several participants labeled a particular street in Bangalore as the “Rapist Lane”. This particular street’s dangerous characteristics included a lack of streetlights, lack of commercial activity leading to less foot traffic, and empty busses parked along the street. Many men congregated in this area to sneak a drink and the space became identified as a harassment zone.⁴⁹

The *Talk to Me* campaign is based on the idea that one must step away from a defensive approach to arrive at a trust-based relationship with an environment.⁵⁰

Patheja explains, “It was really about unclenching fists, unlearning fear, and being

⁴⁸ Trishima Mitra-Kahn, “Offline Issues Online Lives? The emerging cyberlife of feminist politics in urban India.” In *New South Asian Feminisms: Paradoxes and Possibilities*, ed by Srila Roy (London; New York: Zed Books, 2012), 115-116.

⁴⁹ Jasmeen Patheja on *Conversations with Namu Kini*, 2014.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVPRIubnobk&feature=youtube_gdata_player
[accessed October 10, 2014].

⁵⁰ Jasmeen Patheja, interview by Hannah Kennedy, Bangalore, KA, July 7, 2014.

willing to engage in a conversation with a stranger. Conversation requires vulnerability, requires openness, and requires a level of collaboration.”⁵¹ *Talk to Me* participants were required to engage in a conversation for one hour in order to move beyond initial feelings of discomfort while engaging in a dialogue with a stranger. Tables line the street and two strangers (an Action Hero and an audience volunteer) forge a relationship of equal space while engaging in a conversation that revolves around anything but sexual violence. Participants are invited through posts on the Blank Noise blog and Facebook pages [Fig. 2.5]. The conversation lasts for one hour, an amount of time that forces the conversation to delve into deep conversation topics including family, religion, or school. It is important for both members to go beyond initial questions customary when meeting a new person. Both members of the conversation are strangers and an hour of in-depth conversation forges a bond between the participants.

The Action Hero may facilitate the conversation, but they are not the interviewer, both individuals participate equally within the discussion. This distinction prevents unequal power relations from growing within the intervention. The Action Hero and participant conversation forges a connection stemming from an equal territory of unfamiliarity and vulnerability. The practice seeks to rid the fear and uneasiness associated with engaging in a conversation with a stranger as well as those associated with unfamiliar environments. *Talk to Me* shows that connections can be made with the unfamiliar once one releases their inhibitions. The campaign seeks to rid a public space

⁵¹ *Jasmeen Patheja on Conversations with Namu Kini*, 2014.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVPRlubnobk&feature=youtube_gdata_player
[accessed October 10, 2014].

from connotations with sexual violence. The street and public engagement relieves fear and creates awareness at the source. Both participants begin from a place of vulnerability, but are willing to arrive at a connection. At the end of the conversation the Action Hero gives a red flower to their partner.

Another of Blank Noise's most recent campaigns is the *Safe City Pledge* [Fig. 2.6]. The inspiration for this campaign stemmed from the Delhi Rape incident in December of 2012. Patheja's immediate concern was that perceptions of blame were sure to follow such a horrific rape. She was worried that the incident would spark heated debate for a short time and eventually die out.⁵² Patheja wished to turn the focus away from blame towards a more productive conversation about sexual violence. Blank Noise's campaign maintains debates around sexual violence and refuses to allow them to fade from the public consciousness. Blank Noise chose to focus on moving beyond a blame-centric conversation and instead inspired others to take ownership concerning sexual violence. Patheja explains, "Our message from the start has been that this is everybody's issue".⁵³ The *Safe City Pledge* proclaimed that every person has the ability to effect change.

This campaign focuses on collective ownership, action, and responsibility towards sexual violence. Workshops are stationed in public spaces to encourage passersby to make their own *Safe City Pledge*. The pledges are posted on Blank

⁵² Jasmeen Patheja on *Conversations with Namu Kini*, 2014. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVPRlubnobk&feature=youtube_gdata_player [accessed October 10, 2014].

⁵³ Jasmeen Patheja on *Conversations with Namu Kini*, 2014. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVPRlubnobk&feature=youtube_gdata_player [accessed October 10, 2014].

Noise's blog site as well as their Facebook page. Publicly displaying these messages on the Internet allows for a wide lens of publicity for the *Safe City Pledge*. Participants from various backgrounds have taken their pledge ranging from gynecologists, news reporters, rickshaw drivers, to the everyday shopper. This campaign deconstructs the magnitude of sexual violence in Indian culture into minute actions and sexual violence's pervasive nature is reduced to the level of everyday actions. When each person takes the effort to change their perceptions and actions at the micro level these actions can ripple into macro level social change.

Various pledges include, "I pledge that I will not be a silent spectator whenever sexual violence is committed because silence is sinful." A rickshaw driver pledges, "all women passengers will feel safe in my auto." Another declares, "As a gynecologist, I pledge to remove moral judgments from the patient's decision over her body." The pledge of a reporter proclaims, "when I report or anchor, I promise to remember that there are no victims of sexual violence, just super heroes who need to be heard."⁵⁴ Each of these pledges maintained individual action as development towards greater social change. The campaign's goal is for each pledge to change the public environment that women inhabit and create safe public spaces. It is also important to note that while these pledges primarily take place within cities of India, they can take place anywhere in the world. For example, individuals have made pledges from the United Kingdom and Australia [Fig. 2.7 and 2.8]. Sexual violence is a global human rights issue and the *Safe City Pledge* can be implemented anywhere to effect change against sexual violence.

⁵⁴ *Safe City Pledge*, Blank Noise, 2012. < <https://www.facebook.com/SafeCityPledge> > [accessed August, 2014].

Anyone can participate in the *Safe City Pledge*. The pledges are posted online and anyone can make their own pledge. A workshop is not necessary to facilitate this campaign.

Blank Noise's Cyberfeminist Practice

Blank Noise started their art collective as a physical workshop in 2003, but soon utilized the Internet to build a public space to create a conversation around sexual violence, gain input from a diverse group of participants all over the world, and gain inspiration from a research base of participant testimonials. Besides Blank Noise, many feminist campaigns located in India are largely based online. The Internet provides a space for women's political actions and a platform to negotiate and reimagine gender relations and discourses on womanhood. Srila Roy notes, "Internet functions as an instrument for women to circumvent, critique, and subvert the cultural 'scripts' they are subject to and subjected by."⁵⁵ Blank Noise utilizes the Internet as a tool in much the same way as a platform to discuss the culture that surrounds sexual violence.

The web functioned as a tool to help Blank Noise define the issue surrounding sexual violence allowing anyone around the world to enter the debate. Patheja asserts, "collective defining is what Blank Noise is all about, that collective space which is not just one voice, its plural and there are arguments and collectively coming to an answer

⁵⁵ Trishima Mitra-Kahn, "Offline Issues Online Lives? The emerging cyberlife of feminist politics in urban India." In *New South Asian Feminisms: Paradoxes and Possibilities*, ed by Srila Roy (London; New York: Zed Books, 2012), 108.

to the issue.”⁵⁶ Blank Noise has hosted several blog-a-thons where individuals were welcomed to discuss their sexual violence experiences. Social media provides an inspirational mode of artistic production where, “artists today are surrendering a portion of their creative will to the whims of the crowd, making their practices significantly more social.”⁵⁷ The social interactions between Blank Noise and its Internet Action Heroes on the social media pages also became part of the art practice. Scholar, Iona Literat termed “crowdsourced art” in her article “The Work of Art in the Age of Mediated Participation: Crowdsourced Art and Collective Creativity”. She examines viewer’s participatory role in Internet art collective’s practice.⁵⁸ Similarly, Patheja expresses, “If people didn’t respond, then there wouldn’t be a conversation about the entire range of behaviors that could contrive of sexual violence. We’ve been built by people’s responses.”⁵⁹ Blank Noise’s success relies entirely on blog reader participation.

Through the use of social media, Blank Noise has not only created an art activist platform, but also a cyberfeminist public forum. Cyberfeminist theorist, Nancy K. Baym, observes, “public space of the online may feel safer for women than the inner circles of personal relationships, suggests that at their best, cyberfeminist spaces are emotionally

⁵⁶ Jasmeen Patheja on *Conversations with Namu Kini*, 2014.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVPRIubnobk&feature=youtube_gdata_player [accessed October 10, 2014].

⁵⁷ An Xiao, “Always Social: Right Now (2010-), Part Three, Hyperallergic, June 18, 2010. <http://hyperallergic.com/6648/social-media-art-pt-3/>, [accessed on November 19, 2014]

⁵⁸ Iona Literat, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mediated Participation: Crowdsourced Art and Collective Creativity”, *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012), 2962.

⁵⁹ Jasmeen Patheja, interview by Hannah Kennedy, Bangalore, KA, July 7, 2014.

safe.”⁶⁰ Blank Noise has created a public environment in which people can anonymously share their sexual violence testimonials. This communal sharing creates a space that involves learning, healing, debate, and activist engagement.

An Xiao, a writer for the blog Hyperallergic, notes that social media art broadens access to the art world that is not barred by one's proximity to art capitals like New York, or in this case, Bangalore.⁶¹ The Internet provides a more equalized art viewing space in that it is a tool that disseminates images and information exchange to billions of people and extends beyond the gallery's limited location. The Blank Noise campaigns do not occur in an art gallery setting. In order to create a public discussion, the campaigns must take place outside of the art market, and in this case in public environments including social media.

Blank Noise bridges the gap between physical and digital worlds in a unique way. While their performative interventions critique sexual harassment to subvert the male dominant urban public space, their campaign's developmental stages begin with the digital space.⁶² An Xiao notes that social media provides the tools to extend art practices beyond physical and digital restrictions. Social Media allows art to weave seamlessly between the offline and the online world when Internet debates provide

⁶⁰ Nancy K. Baym, "Toward Understanding The Liberatory potential of Elective Affinities Online." In *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice: Communities, Pedagogies, and Social Action*, ed by Kristine Blaire, Radhika Gajjala, and Christine Tulley. (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2009), 130.

⁶¹ An Xiao "Always Social: Right Now (2010-), Part Three, Hyperallergic, June 18, 2010. <http://hyperallergic.com/6648/social-media-art-pt-3/>, [accessed on November 19, 2014]

⁶² Trishima Mitra-Kahn, "Offline Issues Online Lives? The emerging cyberlife of feminist politics in urban India." In *New South Asian Feminisms: Paradoxes and Possibilities*, ed by Srila Roy (London; New York: Zed Books, 2012), 119.

inspiration for physical campaigns.⁶³ Cyberfeminist practices, like Blank Noise, are essential because the practices are also utilized in the physical world. Byam argues, “The most effective cyberfeminist practices will be those that both enable women and girls to develop cumulative voices that speak their experience and ensure that those voices are heard in all of many contexts in which internet users live their everyday lives.”⁶⁴ The interactions on Blank Noise’s social media art platforms take place in the online world. These interactions transcended into the offline world when online participant’s ideas are manipulated and transferred into the physical campaigns that take place in urban environments. The Internet’s everyday quality facilitates an information exchange through participation in a collective witnessing of public harassment in order to break the silence towards a violation that is culturally trivialized.⁶⁵

On the other hand, one must question a democratic discourse’s validity when anonymous participants are present. In relation to recent events of social media discourse such as Gamergate and cyber bullying, anonymity allows participants to voice their opinions without the social restrictions sometimes imposed by face-to-face interactions. As mentioned in *Urban Women in Contemporary India*, cyber violence is

⁶³ An Xiao, “Always Social: Right Now (2010-), Part Three, Hyperallergic, June 18, 2010. <http://hyperallergic.com/6648/social-media-art-pt-3/>, [accessed on November 19, 2014]

⁶⁴ Nancy K. Baym, “Toward Understanding The Liberatory potential of Elective Affinities Online.” In *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice: Communities, Pedagogies, and Social Action*, ed by Kristine Blaire, Radhika Gajjala, and Christine Tulley. (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2009), 130.

⁶⁵ Trishima Mitra-Kahn, “Offline Issues Online Lives? The emerging cyberlife of feminist politics in urban India.” In *New South Asian Feminisms: Paradoxes and Possibilities*, ed by Srila Roy (London; New York: Zed Books, 2012), 119-120.

becoming an issue of growing importance where women experience anonymous insults, sexual harassments, and slander.⁶⁶ The Internet is an open and free environment which presents spaces for all to participate, but can become a battleground without rules and complete freedom that can create an unproductive and possibly harmful interaction. In a digital world without rules, can debates be truly democratic? According to Patheja, Blank Noise's main intention was to create the discussion on sexual violence. Patheja admits to having dealt with threats and stalkers in the past, but Blank Noise has taken preventative measures by not publically posting the locations of their campaigns.⁶⁷ One must acknowledge the violent behaviors that exist on the Internet and have the potential to turn a democratic environment into an unwelcome public space. However, in India, where sexual violence is a commonly ignored issue, purely talking about sexual violence and creating visibility presents a productive building block for effecting change.

The Internet's democratic quality comes under further question in regards to access. From a western perspective it is hard to imagine anyone without access to the Internet. Yet, In India, Anikar Hasseloff and Rehana Ghadially conclude, "the use of the Internet was distributed unevenly between males and females, showing a strong gender divide in the upper and middle class of urban India."⁶⁸ Furthermore, there is a

⁶⁶ Rehana Ghadially, *Urban Women in Contemporary India: A Reader* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2007), 88.

⁶⁷ Jasmeen Patheja, interview by Hannah Kennedy, Bangalore, KA, July 7, 2014. Campaign locations are only disclosed through private messaging. Legal measures have also been put in place in order to prevent these instances from taking place.

⁶⁸ Rehana Ghadially, *Urban Women in Contemporary India: A Reader* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2007), 282.

large population in India, especially in less urban areas, who do not have Internet access and who cannot participate in Blank Noise's discussion on sexual violence. More active participants include the urban, middle and upper classes that have readily available Internet access, but as suggested above, women are less likely to have access. In addition, linguistic limitations also restrict access because English is the primary language of the Internet as well as a majority of the writing present on Blank Noise's social media sites. Some of the comments are written in Hindi or Kanada but English holds a dominant presence. Thus a lack of English prevents those who are not well versed in the language from participating in Blank Noise's platform. While Blank Noise's successes have the potential to effect all, it is important to consider those who are left out of the equation. The Internet is the new public arena and Blank Noise ensures that sexual violence will not be a silenced issue on the digital platform.

Blank Noise exhibits a non-confrontational introspective approach to engaging a public dialogue surrounding sexual violence. The collective's interventions request a meditative personal critique from their participants and the public at large. Each campaign returns the proverbial "male gaze" and demands, "What can you do to bring an end to this inequality." Blank Noise utilizes the Internet to draw the conversation beyond the local street and to the national and international level. Various social media sites function as a public art platform through which Action Heroes participate in the debate surrounding sexual violence. In addition, as globalization has brought a greater international awareness of and engagement with contemporary Indian art, for example, I

appreciate how I have been able to take part in the transnational conversation and that people in other parts of the world also have the agency to participate with Blank Noise's campaign. Social change must occur in public environments and in turn Blank Noise's campaigns must take place on equal representation platforms. Blank noise blurs the gap between the Internet and the street, because both public environments inform each other and effect social change through a truly public engagement.

Sexual violence is a global issue. While Blank Noise's campaigns may focus on national and or local concerns, the focus can easily shift to a transnational conversation. Although my paper analyzes the cultural implications of the "Indian female" identity in relation to the Blank Noise collective's artistic goals, one must understand the broader social background regarding sexual violence in India in order to fully comprehend the artistic inspiration behind Blank Noise. The individual interventions including *The Step-by-Step Guide to Unapologetic Walking*, *I never Ask for It*, *Talk to Me*, and the *Safe City Pledge* all draw inspiration from broader feminist activist campaigns. In doing so, Blank Noise engages an activist dialogue, but utilizes art collective approaches that allow for a more inviting collaborative discussion with the general population. Blank Noise provides the foundation for a public conversation and introspective analysis of the culture surrounding sexual violence. Through the use of activist and collective aesthetics, Blank Noise steps outside of the art market in order to successfully engage a diverse discussion to effect social change in public spaces.

Section II.

Chandan Gomes: *The Unknown Citizen*

Chandan Gomes is a photographer and philosophy student working in New Delhi, India.

His photo essay, *Unknown Citizen*, opens with the following dedication:

To Jyoti, to Nilofar, to Aasiya, to Manorama
To you, to him, to her, to us
To empathy, to compassion, to liberty
To a brave new country!
Let us not forget, let us not rest in peace.⁶⁹

The work in his *Unknown Citizen* photo essay followed Gomes' experiences as an activist during the protests to a horrific rape that occurred in New Delhi in December 2012.⁷⁰ *Unknown Citizen* grew organically after Gomes posted images on Facebook as a way to express his feelings regarding the experience of participating in the protests. Unknown individuals immediately responded to his images wishing to participate and learn more about the protests. Since the photo essay was originally published on Facebook, all of the comments and inquiries in response to Gomes' photographs are publically available.⁷¹ It is my intention to analyze the interactions between the artist and participants available on Chandan Gomes' Facebook page. Throughout the Facebook comments and exchanges, the photo essay evolved from purely experiential

⁶⁹ *The Unknown Citizen*, Chandan Gomes
<https://www.facebook.com/chandan.gomes.7/media_set?set=a.1581608941560.77568.1275803399&type=3> [accessed December, 2014].

⁷⁰ The rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey that occurred in New Delhi in December of 2012, is commonly referred to as the Delhi Rape Incident.

⁷¹ Chandan Gomes, Interview by Hannah Kennedy, New Delhi, India, June 20, 2014.

documentation into Gomes' way of engaging a diverse audience and attempting to create increased awareness of sexual violence.

This discussion will analyze Chandan Gomes' approach as an artist who raises awareness of sexual violence. I will start with a description of the developmental stages of Chandan Gomes' artistic career and explore the inspiration behind his photo essay *Unknown Citizen*. Following this, I will analyze Gomes' manipulation of social media as a platform to foster debate and social awareness concerning sexual violence. I will examine Gomes' methodology and analyze his work in relation to other activist artist methodologies. In addition, I will discuss Gomes' use of protest as a method for creating social change in the context of his photo essay. Finally, Gomes approaches his practice as a photographer with an awareness of the dichotomy between observer and participant. I will attempt to explain why he prefers to distance himself from his photojournalistic identity.⁷² Overall, my inquiry will help to answer the question of how an activist documentary photographer can successfully effect social change in relation to sexual violence.

Gomes is a philosophy student at St. Stephan's College and photographer in New Delhi. Originally interested in becoming a writer, his decision to study philosophy has enabled him to reflect deeply on his art practice. Throughout his life, Gomes has practiced photography as a hobby and won several awards after entering his work in photography contests. He eventually found that he had a great talent as a photographer that he could pursue professionally. As he came to photography through writing, he felt

⁷² Chandan Gomes, Interview by Hannah Kennedy, New Delhi, India, June 20, 2014.

that some of the same principals applied to his artistic practice and that his studies in philosophy aid his understanding of the arts.⁷³

Gomes titled his photo-essay *Unknown Citizen* for a variety of reasons. The name derives from the rape victim's anonymous identity, as the Delhi Rape Incident victim's name was not given when the incident was originally reported.⁷⁴ According to law, one cannot divulge a sexual assault victim's identity in order to prevent the victim's honor from being tarnished by the incident. In addition, the theme of anonymity is inspired by the taboo treatment of sexual harassment towards women in India. A blind eye is turned towards sexual harassment due to feelings such as blame, guilt, and shame placed upon survivors of sexual violation. For these reasons, many women are unable to voice their own violation testimonials based on the fear of becoming an outcast.

The "unknown" also refers to the Gomes' experiences during the protest. Protestors gathered in mass solidarity over their concerns towards safety and sexual violence in India. Gomes stated, "To identify one face was impossible so that one large group became one face. That was my reading of the movement." [Fig. 3.1]⁷⁵ This image perfectly illustrates Gomes' theme for *Unknown Citizen*. The figures in the scene are obscured by the darkness of the night. Street lamps illuminate protestors marching down the street. The protestor's faces are highlighted by candlelight amongst the darkness. Only a few faces are distinguishable within the crowd. Each candlelit face

⁷³ Chandan Gomes, Interview by Hannah Kennedy, New Delhi, India, June 20, 2014.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

morphs into what Gomes saw as a singular entity in the mass protest movement. Related to this, most of the people Gomes interacted with on the Internet were anonymous, the Internet allowed viewers to request information on the protests anonymously. Gomes also created a platform for an anonymous and extended debate discussing sexual violence.

The work in the *Unknown Citizen* photo essay largely deviates from Gomes' traditional art practice. Gomes primarily defines himself as a documentary photographer. Through the evolution of his art practice, he has transitioned to more personal photo essay projects discussing themes of the home, found objects, and his own habitat. He explains, "I was more interested in subjects that were very local and closer to home and my immediate habitat, or dealt with certain emotions that I have always tried to explore or been inquisitive about in my practice."⁷⁶ Overall, Gomes' work is rooted in childhood longings and how he negotiates with those memories. He sees photography as a means to query and understand "lifelong questions" that have yet to be answered. Photography, as medium, functions for him as a tool towards something greater, to come to an understanding of something larger.⁷⁷

Inspired by what he saw as one of the biggest protest movements that New Delhi had ever experienced, Gomes considers his photographs in *Unknown Citizen* to have evolved first as a means of protest and only later as a photo-essay. According to Gomes, the uniqueness of this protest was in part its sense of urgency and immediacy. The activist movement did not have leaders to mobilize participants, individuals were

⁷⁶ Chandan Gomes, Interview by Hannah Kennedy, New Delhi, India, June 20, 2014.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

shocked by the incident and came to a communal realization of the need to build agency amongst the city's citizens. The passionate decision to organize after the Delhi Rape Incident led to 35,000 protesters occupying Rajpath and Janpath right up to the official residence and workplace of the Indian Prime Minister.⁷⁸

Gomes, like many others, initially sought out the protests in order to contend with his own feelings of anger, guilt, and helplessness. He became an active protestor with his camera; the decision to take pictures during the protest at that point was very simple. He did not intend for this work to become part of his ongoing artistic practice. He posted the images on Facebook to spread as much awareness concerning the issue as possible, and to share his personal experiences as a protestor. The immediate response from Facebook viewers sparked *Unknown Citizen's* continuation [Fig. 3.2]. Many people responded to the images and wanted more information about joining the protests. Gomes explains, "If you go to my Facebook profile you can see the amount of 'shares' and you can see how quickly people are connecting."⁷⁹ Gomes consciously uses his Facebook album as a platform for this photo essay.

According to Gomes, the images were produced, "to get as many people involved in the protests, arouse sentiments and make people emotional and get them into it."⁸⁰ In keeping with his goals, *Unknown Citizen's* visual aesthetics are considered

⁷⁸ Rajpath and Janpath are two of the most important streets in India. Rajpath, translated to King's Way, is the ceremonial boulevard in New Delhi, India. Janpath, translated to People's Path, crosses Rajpath and is one of the main roads in New Delhi.

Chandan Gomes, Interview by Hannah Kennedy, New Delhi, India, June 20, 2014.

⁷⁹ Chandan Gomes, Interview by Hannah Kennedy, New Delhi, India, June 20, 2014.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

very strategically. He chose to take high contrast, grainy, black and white images because he didn't want to have to spend too much time editing [Fig. 3.3]. Gomes' image exemplifies his aesthetic choices in that it is so high contrast that the landscape and sky are completely lost and become a bright white background. Against the white background, the ring of black figures standing in protest becomes the focal point of the image. Individual protestor's faces are almost indistinguishable due to the graininess of the image. It was more important for Gomes to upload as many pictures as possible than to spend time creating high quality images.

Gomes has made no attempt to have this body of work exhibited or published. Only once the work went "viral" through Facebook did individuals approach him about exhibitions or publications. He saw this work as "organically growing" through viewer participation. Since this was the first body of his work that has been widely seen by the greater public before being seen in galleries frequented primarily by the art community, its success depended greatly on the general public's response. However, despite the large amount of positive response after the album became highly visible through the Internet, the album met with some viewer objections. One example was from Ashok Mathur:

What wrong did that cop do who is lying in a critical state in the hospital? He was on his duty [...] If rapists need to be hanged then what do we do to all those hard core criminals and murderers and other anti social elements. I have all the respect for people protesting at India gate but if they would channelize their energies introspecting the basics of our social and political evils.⁸¹

⁸¹ *The Unknown Citizen*, Chandan Gomes

Another Facebook user posted a positive comment, “please keep me updated about any peaceful protests. i will try to join after work. i'm sending my number to you in your fb inbox.”⁸² Many people contacted Gomes because they disagreed with the comments he posted in association with the album or the protest movement. Gomes appreciated all levels of reader response and discussion, “It was not merely about the photographs it was something bigger than that. We were trying to negotiate out ideas.”⁸³ Positive response was evidenced through comments that requested more information about the protests, about participating in future protests, as well as those wanting to learn more about sexual violence. Individuals shared Gomes’ images, used the work as their profile images, and at times, copied the entire album. Viewer response and interaction with Gomes’ photo essay lead to the progression of this body of work. The interactions with the Facebook album also functioned as a site for an art experience outside the traditional gallery setting. Gomes wanted to circumvent the art market by posting the images on Facebook before sharing the body of work with his colleagues or exhibiting the work in a gallery.

Gomes is also working to compile a public photographic archive for the protests related to the rape incident through an open call for images. He wants to create a public

<https://www.facebook.com/chandan.gomes.7/media_set?set=a.1581608941560.77568.1275803399&type=3> [accessed December, 2014].

⁸² *The Unknown Citizen*, Chandan Gomes

<https://www.facebook.com/chandan.gomes.7/media_set?set=a.1581608941560.77568.1275803399&type=3> [accessed December, 2014].

⁸³ Chandan Gomes, Interview by Hannah Kennedy, New Delhi, India, June 20, 2014.

memorial that individuals from all over the world would be able to access. Most importantly he is searching for images captured by other protest participants. While many photojournalists were present at the protests and photographed what might be considered archetypal images, he felt as though these images did not capture the raw spirit of the protests to regain agency within their city, or to question themselves and authority. It is important to note that the open call does not have aesthetic qualifications. Gomes' selection process is very minimal: images are only removed if there are multiples of the same incident or event. He wishes to include many images in the archive despite what he might consider to be their aesthetic qualities.⁸⁴ This effort equalizes all images and allows any protest participant to include their memories in the archive. His goal was to create "A political community that actively participates to choose and create its own cultural memory, past and present" surrounding this pivotal moment in the history of New Delhi.⁸⁵ A devoted effort is necessary to collect, archive, and share these images for fear that they will be lost along with their memory.

Activist and Social Media Practices

Chandan Gomes hoped that his photographs would inspire as many people as possible to participate, "to get as many people involved in the protests, arouse sentiments and make people emotional and get them into it."⁸⁶ The images presented in Gomes' photo essay inspire viewers to participate in the Delhi Rape protests, a movement of activism that has caused the nation to question the gender inequality that exists within Indian

⁸⁴ Chandan Gomes, Interview by Hannah Kennedy, New Delhi, India, June 20, 2014.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

culture. Gomes attempts to become apart of the growing work for awareness of sexual violence through his photo essay. Ironically, despite the fact that the photos were of a protest movement about an incident of violence against a woman, the imagery presented in his photos provides evidence of the violence that occurred during the protest movement itself. In a *Gali Magazine* article Gomes narrated the events pictured in his images:

Tear gas shells were fired and water cannons were employed to disperse us, to scare us. Many were heartlessly beaten. Our only fault was that we stood in solidarity with the 23 year old paramedic who was brutally gang raped and left to die [...]“I too would have been beaten up if it was not for the camera in my hand. As you can see we have covered our faces and are running away from tear gas shells. Many young men and women got injured. But we did not give up, we kept coming back.”⁸⁷ [Fig. 3.4]

This passage accompanied an image highlighting violence and police brutality that shocked Gomes throughout the protest movement. In this image a protest participant struggles, yelling with balled fists against two policemen. The viewer does not know the cause of this altercation or what the protestor is saying. The violence illustrated In Gomes’ text and images are thought-provoking; it inspires debate, as well as action.

In the previous section, I utilized the ethnography conducted by Lara Montesinos Coleman “Deconstructing Militant Manhood: Masculinities in the Disciplining of (anti) Globalization Politics” to analyze the Blank Noise Action Hero identity. Chandan Gomes’ photo essay relies on participation from viewers as well and he relies on imagery and text associated with the Delhi Rape protest movement to inspire activist participation and discussion. Coleman describes the “Anarchist Action Man” as one who focuses, “on

⁸⁷ Gomes, Chandan, “Unknown Citizen”, *Gali Magazine*, February 16, 2013, <http://www.galli.in/tag/chandan-gomes> [accessed on June 19, 2014].

the individual and the clear affinity of direct action [...] that of the epic hero [...] fighting against enemy forces for the triumph of good over evil.”⁸⁸ Gomes’ images evoke similar characteristics in relation to Coleman’s “Anarchist Action Man”:

I too took to the streets, like many young women and men of this city, in a bid to get rid of our collective helplessness. We wanted to reclaim a city that we had lost to our apathy and indifference [...] We pledged not to remain silent; we pledged to reclaim our lives, our freedom. We pledged to raise our voice against all forms of sexual violence.⁸⁹

This quote exemplifies Gomes’ emphasis on individual action through participation in protests as a method to affect the status quo or social order. Coleman’s ‘Anarchist Action Man’ also reproduces a mentality that emphasizes individual action as the sole method to enact change.⁹⁰ As a result of the “Anarchist Action Man” behaviors Coleman notes, “at two sites of (anti-) globalization praxis, certain masculine performances structured groups’ main modes of political engagement and generated the exclusion of voices and of bodies that could not, or would not be fully incorporated into the politics they enacted.”⁹¹ The imagery portrayed in Gomes’ *Unknown Citizen* is one that inspires anger, protest, and the spirit of action as the best mode for building social change against attitudes relating to sexual violence [Fig. 3.5]. This photograph portrays the signs used by protest participants. The black lettering stands out against the bright light

⁸⁸ Coleman, Lara Montesinos and Serena A. Bassi, “Deconstructing Militant Manhood: Masculinities in the Disciplining of (anti-)Globalization Politics”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*: 13:2 June 2011, 216.

⁸⁹ Chandan Gomes, “Unknown Citizen”, *Gali Magazine*, February 16, 2013, <http://www.galli.in/tag/chandan-gomes> [accessed on June 19, 2014].

⁹⁰ Lara Montesinos Coleman and Serena A. Bassi, “Deconstructing Militant Manhood: Masculinities in the Disciplining of (anti-)Globalization Politics”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*: 13:2 June 2011, 216.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 219.

that glows from behind the posters. The dark contrast of the windowpane serves as a frame and further emphasizes the subject of the image. The posters proclaim commanding messages such as, “Raise your voice against sexual violence” and “She is no more...But her struggle must awaken everyone to act”. The “she” in the poster on the left refers to the woman who died as a result of the Delhi Rape Incident. The urging message of the poster is emphasized by an image of a black hand print with a screaming woman’s face plastered at the center of the palm. Both posters provide evidence for the goals of the Delhi Rape protest movement, but they also urge the viewers of Gomes photo essay to speak out against sexual violence and join the movement. Gomes posted this image as a message to his viewers to inspire them to join the debate as well. His goal is further emphasized by the caption of the image, “The evolution of the movement-from death penalty for the rapist to questioning the idea of capital punishment and prodding people to challenge the notion of patriarchy.”⁹² This caption highlights the discussions that are building as a result of the protest movement. Gomes is questioning the very notions of patriarchy as well and providing a space of debate on his Facebook page by posting an image of the protest posters. The posters pose the question to Gomes’ viewers, “How will you raise your voice against sexual assault”. While some may critique Gomes’ work for relying heavily on violent imagery that prevents certain bodies from participating in the protests, I argue that the *Unknown Citizen* plays a vital role in increasing awareness for the state of sexual violence as a

⁹² *The Unknown Citizen*, Chandan Gomes
<https://www.facebook.com/chandan.gomes.7/media_set?set=a.1581608941560.77568.1275803399&type=3> [accessed December, 2014].

global human rights issue, inspires national and international debate concerning sexual violence, and commemorates an event in Indian history that galvanized citizen activism and should not be forgotten.

My discussion in regards to Amy Mullin's article "Feminist Art and the Political Imagination" is also relevant to Chandan Gomes activist art methodologies. Gomes' social media page provides the space for imaginative debate as suggested by Mullin. Gomes posts inspire the desire for change. By posting the images on Facebook, he provides a forum for discussing such changes. Mullin asserts, "What we need, if we are to understand what it is to combine politics, activism, and art, is an enriched conception of the imagination. The imagination involves our capacity to think in detailed ways about states of affairs with which we are not immediately acquainted."⁹³ Chandan Gomes' photo essay and social media page allow for the imaginative interactions described by Mullin's article simply by placing the images on Facebook, where comments to the images have the potential to stir public debate. In comparison, Blank Noise poses direct questions to their participants on their blog site. Gomes does not provide direct questions or comments to stimulate debate, he relies and the imagery of his photographs to arouse viewer participation in the protest movement and online discussion [Fig. 3.6]. This image is captioned with the message, "reclaim your days, reclaim your nights."⁹⁴ The image portrays several dark figures walking along the street

⁹³ Amy Mullin, "Feminist Art and the Political Imagination." *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (October 1, 2003): 196.

⁹⁴ *The Unknown Citizen*, Chandan Gomes
<https://www.facebook.com/chandan.gomes.7/media_set?set=a.1581608941560.77568.1275803399&type=3> [accessed December, 2014].

at night beneath the glow of streetlamps. It is difficult to identify the gender of the figures, but they seem to be an even mix of males and females or their gender is meant to be ambiguous. The image along with its caption inspires the viewer to occupy their urban environment despite the dangers and despite the time of day. In response to the Delhi Rape Incident, many questioned the lack of safety within New Delhi. Instead of inspiring fear, Gomes' image inspires agency. This message is similar to those proclaimed in many of Blank Noise campaigns, one that motivates participants to reclaim their right to occupy the public environment. This image is meant to inspire viewer action or question fears and assumptions that limit a person's interactions with a public space. His images, as Gomes' stated earlier, are primarily meant to inspire action in others to participate in the protest movement. Gomes sees direct protest participation as the best method for inspiring social change against sexual violence in India. His social media page provides viewers with a forum for discussion as well as access to information regarding participation in the protest movement in New Delhi.

Amy Mullin posed certain criteria for activist art:

Activist artists seek, through their art, to engage their audience on multiple levels. Their work is exploratory, simultaneously emotional, cognitive, and sensuous, and is therefore not as likely to lead the audience to an alternative or knee-jerk political response as would a message, slogan, or item of propaganda.⁹⁵

Based on these stated terms, Gomes' photo essay engages the audience through Mullin's "multiple levels" of interaction. In order to engage a debate with as many audience members as possible, one must utilize multiple methods, as not all audience

⁹⁵ Amy Mullin, "Feminist Art and the Political Imagination." *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (October 1, 2003): 200.

members will respond to a single message. Gomes' social media page presents a multi-faceted forum for debate on sexual violence through the use of social media, Gomes' narrative throughout the essay, and his photographs. The options for participation with Gomes' work rely on social media dialogue and participation in protest. Gomes focuses on providing an open forum for engagement to expand the audience of those who are willing to engage in social activism and work towards social justice.

Chandan Gomes utilized Facebook after his first protest so that he could quickly post images he had taken during those day's events. The images simply functioned as evidence for his memories and his feelings towards the protest movement; they were available to any potential viewers. Facebook provided an outlet for Gomes to voice his feelings and thoughts towards the activism that took place in New Delhi. Overnight, viewers were moved by Gomes' images and were inspired to enter the conversation against sexual violence. After the extensive viewer feedback, Gomes realized that Facebook functioned as a platform that might create a conversation concerning sexual violence and protest in New Delhi. Gomes did not originally intend for his work to have social influence. It merely functioned as an outlet for the tumultuous emotions he felt while protesting during a pivotal moment in New Delhi's history.⁹⁶

Indeed there has been a trend of artists globally utilizing social media in much the same way as Gomes. Social media can provide an inspirational mode of artistic production where, "artists today are surrendering a portion of their creative will to the

⁹⁶Chandan Gomes, Interview by Hannah Kennedy, New Delhi, India, June 20, 2014.

whims of the crowd, making their practices significantly more social.”⁹⁷ The social interactions between Gomes and his viewers on his Facebook page subsequently became part of his art practice. Viewer participation and the popularity of the images functioned as what Iona Literat has termed “crowdsourced art.”⁹⁸ After receiving positive response through Facebook “likes, comments, and shares” Gomes decided to turn his experiences at the protests and his images into a more substantial art project through his photo essay, *Unknown Citizen*.

Gomes stated in this interview that he wanted this body of work to grow organically. He was not seeking to have it exhibited in galleries or museums and the primary function of the photo essay was to create visibility and conversations around the subject of sexual violence.⁹⁹ Facebook functioned as his initial method for outreach. While *Unknown Citizen* has since been exhibited in gallery spaces such as Apeejay Media Gallery after the gallery heard about his work through word of mouth, Facebook functioned as the original “gallery space” for Gomes’s photo essay.¹⁰⁰ As mentioned earlier in regards to the art collective *Blank Noise*’s social media work, An Xiao, writing for the blog Hyperallergic, noted that social media art opens up access to the art world that is not barred by one’s proximity to art capitals like New York, or in this case New

⁹⁷ Xiao, An, “Always Social: Right Now (2010-), Part Three, Hyperallergic, June 18, 2010. <http://hyperallergic.com/6648/social-media-art-pt-3/>, [accessed on November 19, 2014]

⁹⁸ Literat, Iona, “The Work of Art in the Age of mediated Participation: Crowdsourced Art and Collective Creativity”. *International Journal of Communication*, (2012), 2963.

⁹⁹ Chandan Gomes, Interview by Hannah Kennedy, New Delhi, India, June 20, 2014.

¹⁰⁰ *The Unknown Citizen*, Chandan Gomes

<https://www.facebook.com/chandan.gomes.7/media_set?set=a.1581608941560.77568.1275803399&type=3> [accessed December, 2014].

Delhi.¹⁰¹ The Internet provides a more equalizing art viewing space in that it is a tool that disseminates images to many people and extends beyond the gallery space's physical location. The art market (the galleries that have featured Gomes' photo essay) responded to Gomes imagery based on the popularity garnered through its public consumption over the Internet.

The Internet also became a public space where anyone could comment or share Gomes' images. These interactions served to foster further conversations discussing sexual violence. His images also inspired others to become physically involved in the protests in New Delhi. In this case, experiences in the digital world effected actions in the physical world. An Xiao noted that social media provides the tools to extend art practices beyond restrictions of the physical and the digital. Social media allows art to weave seamlessly between the offline and the online world.¹⁰² The interactions on Gomes' social media art platform took place in the online world. These interactions transitioned into the offline world when viewers became participants in the New Delhi protests. The Internet became a more democratizing space than galleries as a wide variety of viewers were able to interact with Gomes directly through his Facebook album. This proves even more important as the art world in India is a relatively restricted place and the general public is not often welcome in gallery spaces.

Given the subject matter and goals in Gomes' photo essay, one could posit that *Unknown Citizen* is a cyberfeminist project. Baym argues, "The most effective

¹⁰¹ Xiao, An, "Always Social: Right Now (2010-), Part Three, Hyperallergic, June 18, 2010. <http://hyperallergic.com/6648/social-media-art-pt-3/>, [accessed on November 19, 2014].

¹⁰² Ibid.

cyberfeminist practices will be those that both enable women and girls to develop cumulative voices that speak their experience and ensure that those voices are heard in all of many contexts in which Internet users live their everyday lives.”¹⁰³ In the previous paragraph, I argued that manipulation of social media allows Gomes’ audience to bridge the gap between the digital and the physical world. Given this information, there is a possibility that Gomes’ may have similar cyberfeminist leanings, though he does not identify as a feminist. On the other hand, Srila Roy observes, “ (the) Internet functions as an instrument for women to circumvent, critique, and subvert the cultural ‘scripts’ they are subject to and subjected by.”¹⁰⁴ Gomes’ work critiques issues concerning sexual violence in relation to the Delhi Rape Incident. Comments circulated on Gomes’ Facebook page relate to the protest movement and Indian politics. Facebook user Hirakesh Roy’s comment provides an example of discussion generated on Gomes’ page, “ As I have come to believe, we in India under estimate the brutality that the state has in the politicians and bureaucrats unleash on the citizens of this country. Teargassing, water jetting, lathi charging kids. At best I call this a sin.”¹⁰⁵ Gomes’ photo essay provides a space for the audience to critique through the discussion of protest and activism as a point of departure.

¹⁰³ Nancy K. Baym, “Toward Understanding The Liberatory potential of Elective Affinities Online.” In *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice: Communities, Pedagogies, and Social Action*, ed by Kristine Blaire, Radhika Gajjala, and Christine Tulley. (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2009), 130.

¹⁰⁴ Trishima Mitra-Kahn, “Offline Issues Online Lives? The emerging cyberlife of feminist politics in urban India.” In *New South Asian Feminisms: Paradoxes and Possibilities*, ed by Srila Roy (London; New York: Zed Books, 2012), 108.

¹⁰⁵ *The Unknown Citizen*, Chandan Gomes
<https://www.facebook.com/chandan.gomes.7/media_set?set=a.1581608941560.77568.1275803399&type=3> [accessed December, 2014].

In my previous section on *Blank Noise*, I mentioned the growing pervasiveness of cyber violence towards women on the Internet. The Internet is an open and free realm that presents democratic spaces for all to participate, but can become a battleground without rules some dialogues and can even cause participants to feel threatened. According to Gomes, his primary intention was to open up discussion on sexual violence. This is not to suggest that undemocratic and harmfully negative interactions have occurred on Gomes' Facebook page, but one must acknowledge the potential for this, given the existence of violent behaviors on the Internet in general. In India where sexual violence is a too often ignored issue, purely creating visibility and talking about sexual violence and presents a productive building block for effecting change. In addition, similar limitations are present in Chandan Gomes' work such as a lack of access to the Internet in India prevents many potential viewers from interacting with his work. The language used in Gomes' photo essay and the interactions in the "comments" section are also predominantly in English, although some of the comments are written in Sanskrit or Hindi. English is the primary language used and those who are not well versed in English or have non-English speaking perspectives are essentially excluded from Gomes' platform and cannot participate in his discussion.

While the act of protest is valiant and a historical moment for the people of New Delhi, it is highly unlikely that these protests will have a lasting impact. As I write this thesis it is two years since the Delhi Rape Incident and protest efforts have dwindled. On the other hand, as with all protest movements, efforts to create social change have yet to cease. Gomes' photo essay and public archive seek to create a lasting memory of

the Delhi Rape Incident and the ensuing protests inspire continuing efforts against sexual violence. The protest movement in response to the Delhi Rape Incident led to national critique and debate regarding gender inequality as well as efforts in governmental policy reform. One could argue, that Chandan Gomes' photo essay inspired many to contribute to the debate concerning sexual violence as well as the lasting efforts to effect larger social change concerning sexual violence through his social media platform and focus on the subject matter of the Delhi Rape protest movement in his photo essay *The Unknown Citizen*.

Perspective of the "Common Man"

Chandan Gomes has identified himself as a protester rather than a photographer in his photo essay. He proclaims, "This essay is an account from the perspective of a common man [...] These photographs give you an insider's perspective-I'm not documenting this movement as a photo-journalist/documentary photographer, but as a protester."¹⁰⁶ Throughout the interview he distances himself from the role of a photojournalist. In the interview, he noted, that images in *Unknown Citizen* were not taken with the perspective of a photographer:

Most of the journalists or photographs that were produced by a magazine were very similar and again they were very interested of the violence that erupted from the movement. They were interested in the police beating protesters, tear gas shells being fired, but they failed to capture the spirit of the movement which was rooted in the will of the people to change and to take the ownership of the city into their own hands, to question

¹⁰⁶ Gomes, Chandan, "Unknown Citizen", *Gali Magazine*, February 16, 2013, <http://www.galli.in/tag/chandan-gomes> [accessed on June 19, 2014].

themselves, and question authority. The reason we wanted to create this archive was to create a public memory, to celebrate this movement.¹⁰⁷

According to Gomes, the photos taken by participants in the protests were more genuine images than those taken by photojournalists.¹⁰⁸ He felt that photographs taken by protest participants captured the essence and true spirit of the protest; that the mission to take a more aestheticized image, like a photojournalist's, did not distract them from being fully engaged in the protest.

Gomes is aware of the role of the observer in his work. During the protests he prefers to think of himself as an active participant, becoming an observer only in the moment of taking a photograph. Overall, in his artistic (or photographic) practice Gomes' goal is to be fully aware of the role he wishes to play, his role as a photographer functions as the common link throughout his body of work as the role of the photographer allows him to hone his craft and take a desired image. Gomes argues, "Other than that, I do not give more importance to the photographer beyond that rule."¹⁰⁹ Gomes approaches his practice through the mindset of a performer aware of the roles he must actively engage. The photographer takes over for a fraction of time in order to capture the evidence of his performance.¹¹⁰ Gomes attempts to quell the role of the photographer in his work.

Chandan Gomes is actively suppressing his role as a photojournalist for a variety of reasons. One reason lies in the role and goals of a photojournalist. Journalism

¹⁰⁷ Chandan Gomes "Unknown Citizen", *Gali Magazine*, February 16, 2013, <http://www.galli.in/tag/chandan-gomes> [accessed on June 19, 2014].

¹⁰⁸ Chandan Gomes, Interview by Hannah Kennedy, New Delhi, India, June 20, 2014.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Chandan Gomes, Interview by Hannah Kennedy, New Delhi, India, June 20, 2014.

Professor, Stuart Allen, defines the photojournalist identity in *The Violence of the Image* as, “A commitment to revealing the agonies of human suffering to distant publics is of paramount importance. The imperative to bear witness on behalf of those otherwise effectively silenced seldom proves to be the easy, straightforward course of action, but it is the vital one that the professional takes pride in choosing.”¹¹¹ The arguably noble task of the photojournalist is to spread public awareness towards atrocities around the world and inspire social justice. Given Gomes project with the public archive, it would seem that he has placed himself in opposition to the photojournalist identity. The role of the photojournalist creates a level of hierarchy between the subjects of the image and the photographer. Gomes’ public archive bolsters the “citizen-journalist” by placing the agency for providing his or her own interpretation of the protest within its participants. The philosophy of the photojournalist, by contrast, assumes a dominant position and that the subjects of the image do not have the agency to voice their own stories. Photography Professor Fred Ritchen mentions in his book *Bending the Frame*, “Digital-image capture is being used to subvert and transform power balances in the producer/viewer/subject triad, and to examine issues in ways that were previously impossible to accomplish, using a combination of sources – imagery of people holding cameras is only one of them.”¹¹² Gomes distances himself from this hierarchy by emphasizing his participation in the movement. The images created by the citizen-journalist give greater authenticity to Gomes’ photo essay and participant identity.

¹¹¹ Liam Kennedy and Caitlin Patrick. *The Violence of the Image: Photography and International Conflict*, (New York, Ny, I.B Tauris and Co Ltd, 2014): 187.

¹¹² Fred Ritchen. *Bending the Frame: Photojournalism, Documentary, and the Citizen*. (San Francisco, CA: Aperture, 2013): 58

Authenticity in the role of the photojournalist is mentioned several times by Fred Ritchin as he analyzes the new “citizen journalist” and the advent of the Internet and social media’s effect on photojournalism. Ritchin argues, “At least the work of these non-professionals – making awkward, raw, and frequently intimate imagery – is often perceived as more authentic.”¹¹³ Chandan Gomes attempts this same aesthetic in his photo essay. Throughout our interview he emphasized the photograph’s raw and grainy nature and his minimal editing process. Gomes also distances himself from photojournalists who are seeking out iconic images at the protests. Ritchin observes regarding the amateur, “rather than advocating for a publication’s worldview, the amateur may be explicitly advocating for his or her own.”¹¹⁴ This idea is supported by Gomes’ view that a photojournalist is looking for iconic images to seek notoriety and approval from publications. Another point of debate is whether publications, in their need to become more consumer oriented, are showing images that readers want to see rather than images they should see.¹¹⁵ Thus the role of the editor and the publication has the ability to influence the information that is broadcast to the greater population, which at times leads to a censorship of information in the act of being consumer oriented. Gomes insists that his project was meant to express the pure experience of the protests. He was careful not to take these types of “iconic” images that typify the work of a photojournalist. Throughout his interview, he advocated for the voice of the protestor/photographer over the photojournalist.

¹¹³ Fred Ritchin. *Bending the Frame: Photojournalism, Documentary, and the Citizen*. (San Francisco, CA: Aperture, 2013): 14

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 14.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 20.

Another aspect of the participant/observer dichotomy is laid out in a memory Richtin has of an undergraduate documentary class, “on September 11 – all of them felt that the events of the day were so overwhelming and so awful that to photograph would have been to take advantage of the horror, and would serve to distance themselves; they wanted to be present, to feel what they were witnessing.”¹¹⁶ This same concept is present in Gomes’ interpretation of his participation in the protests in actively wishing to be fully present in this monumental historic moment in the history of the city of New Delhi. He wanted to record these events and create an awareness of the changes he saw happening. In order to do so, he felt he needed to suppress his identity as the observer in order to fully participate as a protestor. His resultant photo essay provides evidence for his role as a protester.

The Delhi Rape Incident in December of 2012 and the protest movement that the event inspired sparked a global dialogue surrounding sexual violence. Chandan Gomes inserted himself within this dialogue through social media and his *Unknown Citizen* photo essay. With social media Gomes hoped to create wide spread public concern for sexual violence and encouraged others to participate in the protests occurring in New Delhi. This paper analyzed Gomes’ use of social media as an art platform. Gomes attempted to create a public memory and bolster the identity and agency of the “citizen journalist” by assembling a public archive. He chose to take on the identity of the “citizen journalist” in order for his photo essay to maintain a sense of authenticity. The *Unknown Citizen* photo essay and social media platform successfully inspired viewers to join the

¹¹⁶ Fred Ritchin. *Bending the Frame: Photojournalism, Documentary, and the Citizen*. (San Francisco, CA: Aperture, 2013): 98.

Delhi Rape protests and bring awareness towards sexual violence and provided a platform for participant dialogue concerning sexual violence. Chandan Gomes' *Unknown Citizen* captured an inspiring moment of citizen agency and the response to the Delhi Rape Incident and serve as a lasting reminder of the goal to effect greater social change against sexual violence as a global human rights issue.

Conclusion

Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes are certainly not the first Indian artists to have discussed sexual violence in their work, nor was the Delhi Rape Incident the first instance of sexual violence that instigated a response from Indian artists on a large scale. For example, Indian artists including Nalini Malani and Nilima Shiekh contended with sexual violence in their work in response to communal conflict and the partition of India and Pakistan.¹¹⁷ I feel that the Delhi Rape Incident caused more Indian Contemporary artists to question the state of sexual violence culture in their country and consider these questions in their work. It is possible that this trend could be short lived in the grand scheme of Indian Contemporary art, and yet the work produced exemplifies a community of artists using their creative abilities to build critical dialogues surrounding a pivotal and tumultuous moment in India's contemporary history. The work of Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes exemplify a trend of Indian contemporary artists whose work was influenced by the 2012 Delhi Rape incident. Due to the limitations of this paper, it is impossible to consider all of the artists reacting to the state of sexual violence in India. I have chosen Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes to illustrate an artistic methodology for critiquing the sexual violence culture in India and around the globe.

Throughout this paper I have analyzed Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes' practice in order to investigate the artistic methodological approach towards such a

¹¹⁷ Ambika Rajgopal, <http://artradarjournal.com/2014/03/21/artist-nalini-malani-talks-myth-metaphor-and-women-interview/> and http://www.theartstrust.com/Magazine_article.aspx?articleid=363

complex topic as sexual violence. I began my investigation by outlining the multifaceted history and context of sexual violence in Indian culture. Next, I analyzed Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes' multi-faceted approach towards the subject of sexual violence, as well as the formative stages in their artistic careers, and the inspirational framework behind their respective projects. Both Gomes and Blank Noise chose to approach their projects from an activist lens utilizing social media and activist based methodologies. Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes' activist and social media centered practices shines a light upon effective strategies for artists that approach human rights based issues as well as the challenges involved in their approach. I considered the participant identities such as the Action Hero in relation to Blank Noise and the protest participants involved with Gomes' *Unknown Citizen*. These identities presented possible limitations in relation to Coleman's "Anarchist Action Man" that risked alienating potential viewers. Upon further analysis, I argue that despite the similarities that exist between Blank Noise and Gomes participant identities, the artists side step an association with Coleman's "Action Man" by providing a digital platform to raise awareness and build dialogues concerning sexual violence. Next, I utilized Mullin's article to analyze both Blank Noise and Gomes' activist based methodology to argue that activist artists must concern themselves with engaging the public environment and diverse audiences to facilitate an open-ended dialogue. Both Gomes and Blank Noise engage the physical public space as well as a digital public space through the use of social media. I highlight how social media allows Gomes and Blank Noise to expand their goals of engaging a public discourse and building awareness against sexual violence. Through the use of social media Blank

Noise and Gomes are able to further diversify and expand viewer participation to a potentially international level. On the other hand, I brought up the limiting factors involved in relying on the digital sphere to expand participation due to the fact that access to the Internet is not universal. Despite these limitations Blank Noise and Gomes place their art practice outside of the art market by prioritizing public engagement through activating physical and digital communities to build awareness and social change against sexual violence.

The very nature of protest movements involves a spirit of intensity that cannot last and requires a transition into the day-to-day activist agendas such as hosting campaigns for political change. The Delhi Rape Incident occurred in 2012 and the protest movement has dwindled significantly. It will be interesting to see how Blank Noise and Gomes' practice concerning sexual violence will develop in the coming years. Chandan Gomes considers his photo essay, *Unknown Citizen*, as an "organically growing" project that he hopes to expand. Currently, he wishes to re-contextualize *Unknown Citizen* using interviews he conducted with the subjects of his images. He plans to combine oral narratives of protest participants with his photos in a book that he hopes to make available digitally.¹¹⁸ Regarding Blank Noise, Jasmeen Patheja sees sexual violence as "deeply universal". She hopes to invite participation amongst individuals globally and perform Blank Noise campaigns in different countries.¹¹⁹

In conclusion, the work of Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes utilize social media

¹¹⁸ Chandan Gomes, Interview by Hannah Kennedy, New Delhi, India, June 20, 2014.

¹¹⁹ Jasmeen Patheja, interview by Hannah Kennedy, Bangalore, KA, July 7, 2014.

as a platform for a public conversation and provide an introspective analysis of the culture concerning sexual violence. These artists use the Internet as a tool to build a network, draw inspiration from participant dialogues, and influence public consciousness as well as the physical environment through protests and street performances. As sexual violence does not occur in a vacuum, nor can change occur within the limited space of a gallery, their artistic engagement occurs on the street. Through their use of activist aesthetics Blank Noise and Chandan Gomes work outside of the traditional art market in order to successfully instigate the most inclusive and diverse discussion towards social change in public spaces.

Illustrations



Figure 1.1: Blank Noise, *I Never Ask For It*, February 28th, 2014, I Never Ask For It Facebook page.



Figure 1.2: Chandan Gomes, *Unknown Citizen*, December 18, 2012.

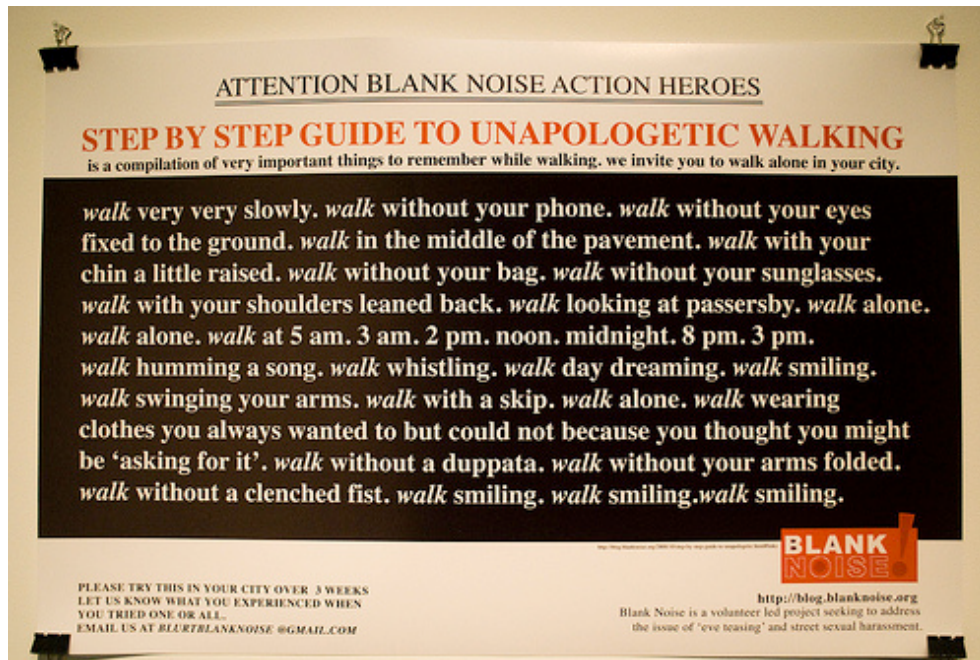


Figure 2.1: Blank Noise, *Step By Step Guide to Unapologetic Walking*, October 13, 2008, Blank Noise Blog.



Figure 2.2: Blank Noise, *I Never Ask For It*, February 21, 2010, Blank Noise Blog.

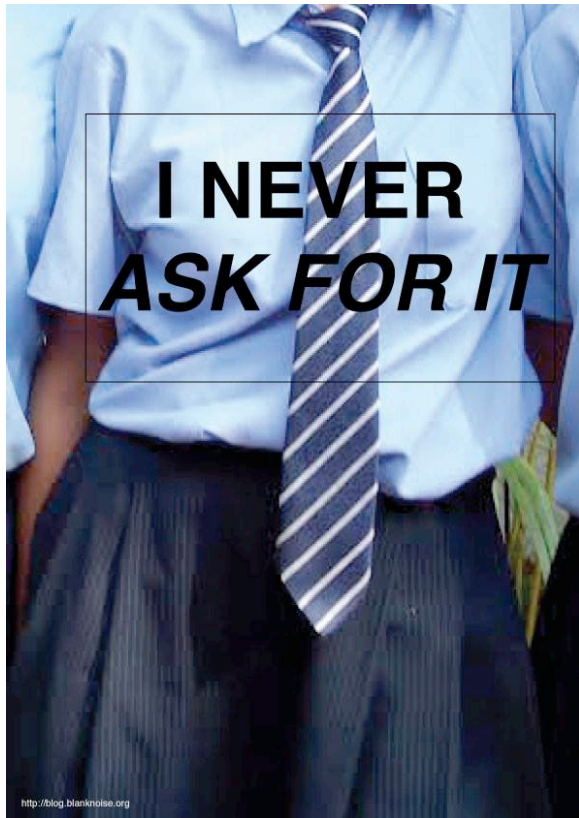


Figure 2.3: Blank Noise, *I Never Ask For It*, February 24, 2014, Blank Noise Blog.



Figure 2.4: Blank Noise, *Talk To Me*, July 1, 2013, Blank Noise Blog.



Safe City Pledge

September 25, 2013 · 🌐

"I pledge to unlearn fear. biases. unclench my fist" - ActionHero

[#safecitypledge](#)

<http://blog.blanknoise.org/2013/07/talk-to-me.html>

Event: [#TalkToME](#)

Date: October 26

City/Towns- Tell us if you would like to take charge of making it happen where you live. email us at blurtblanknoise@gmail.com



BLANK NOISE: Talk To Me:

Figure 2.5: Blank Noise, *Talk to Me*, September 25, 2013, Safe City Pledge Facebook page.



Figure 2.6: Blank Noise, *Safe City Pledge*, March 26, 2013, Blank Noise Blog.



Figure 2.7: Blank Noise, *Safe City Pledge*, March 15, 2013, Safe City Pledge Facebook page.



Figure 2.8: Blank Noise, *Safe City Pledge*, January 1, 2013, Safe City Pledge Facebook page.



Chandan Gomes

Figure 3.1: Chandan Gomes, *Unknown Citizen*, December 30, 2012.

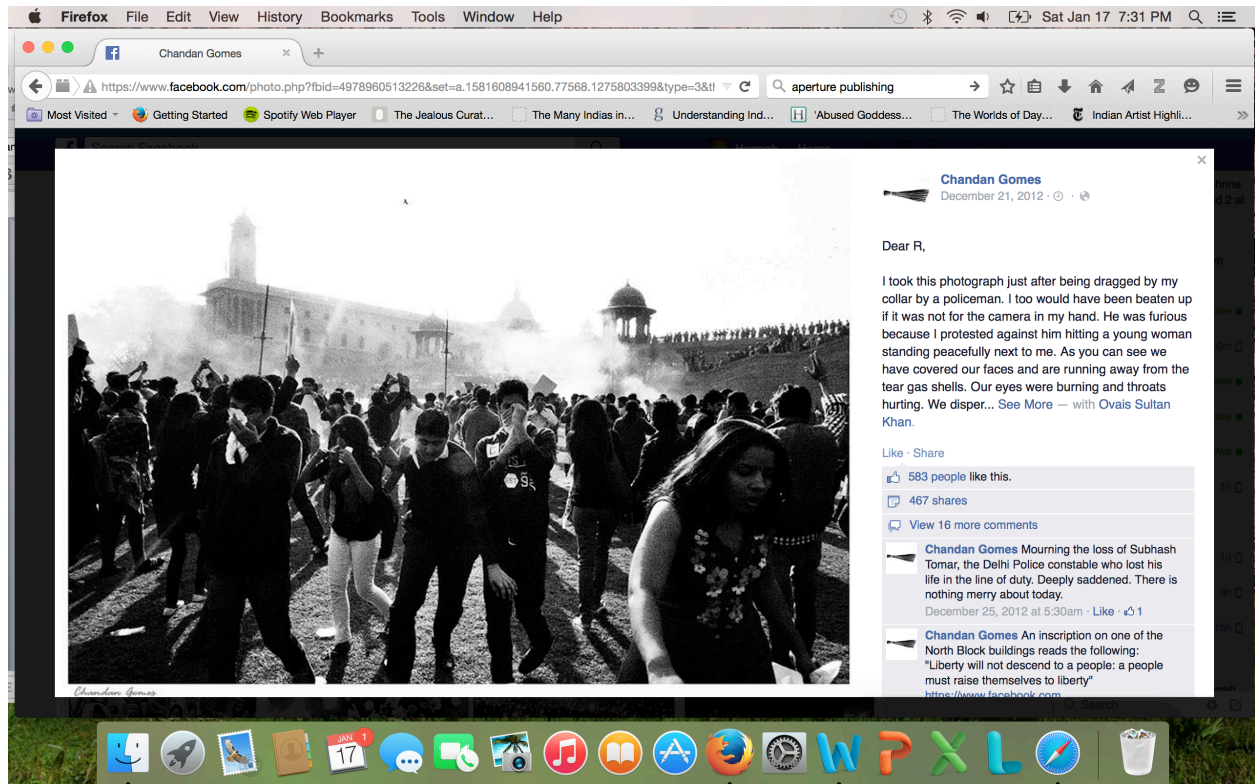
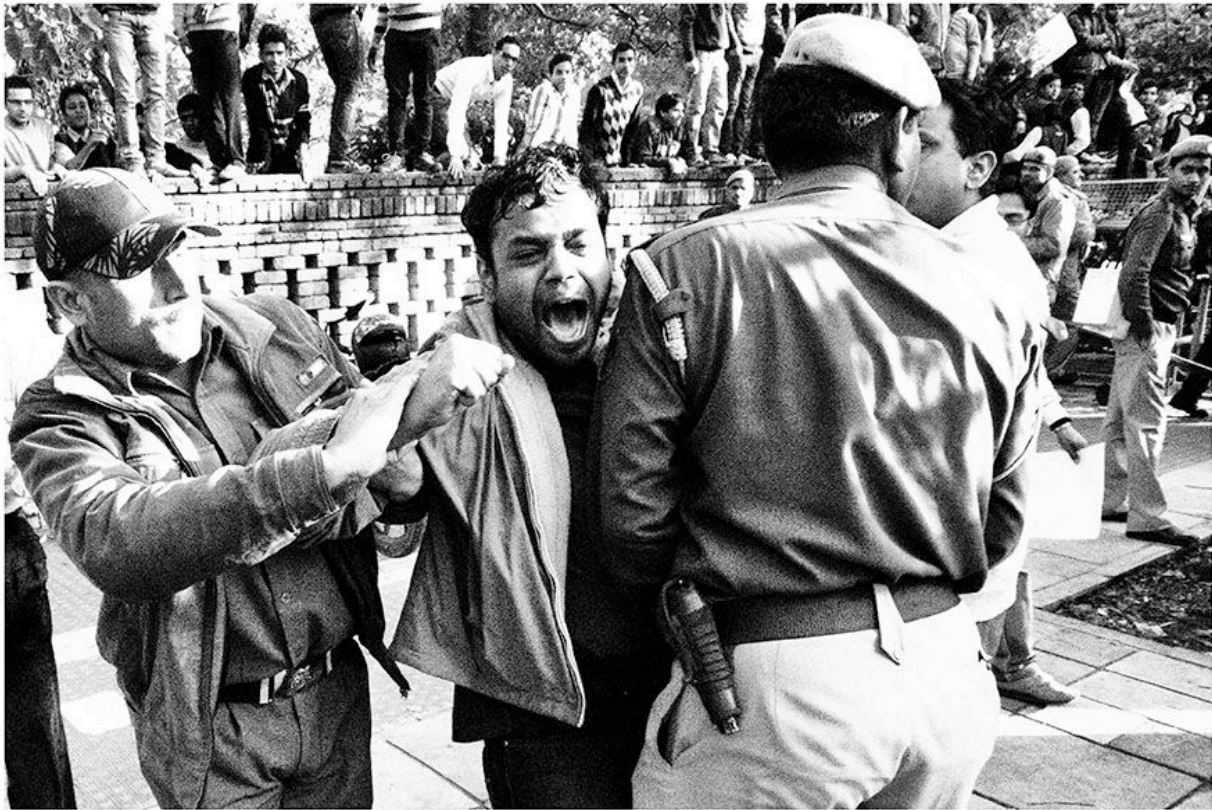


Figure 3.2: Chandan Gomes, *Unknown Citizen*, December 21, 2012. (Screen Shot)



Figure 3.3: Chandan Gomes, *Unknown Citizen*, January 7, 2013.



Chandan Gomes

Figure 3.4: Chandan Gomes, *Unknown Citizen*, February 10, 2013.



Chandan Gomes

Figure 3.5: Chandan Gomes, *Unknown Citizen*, January 9, 2013.

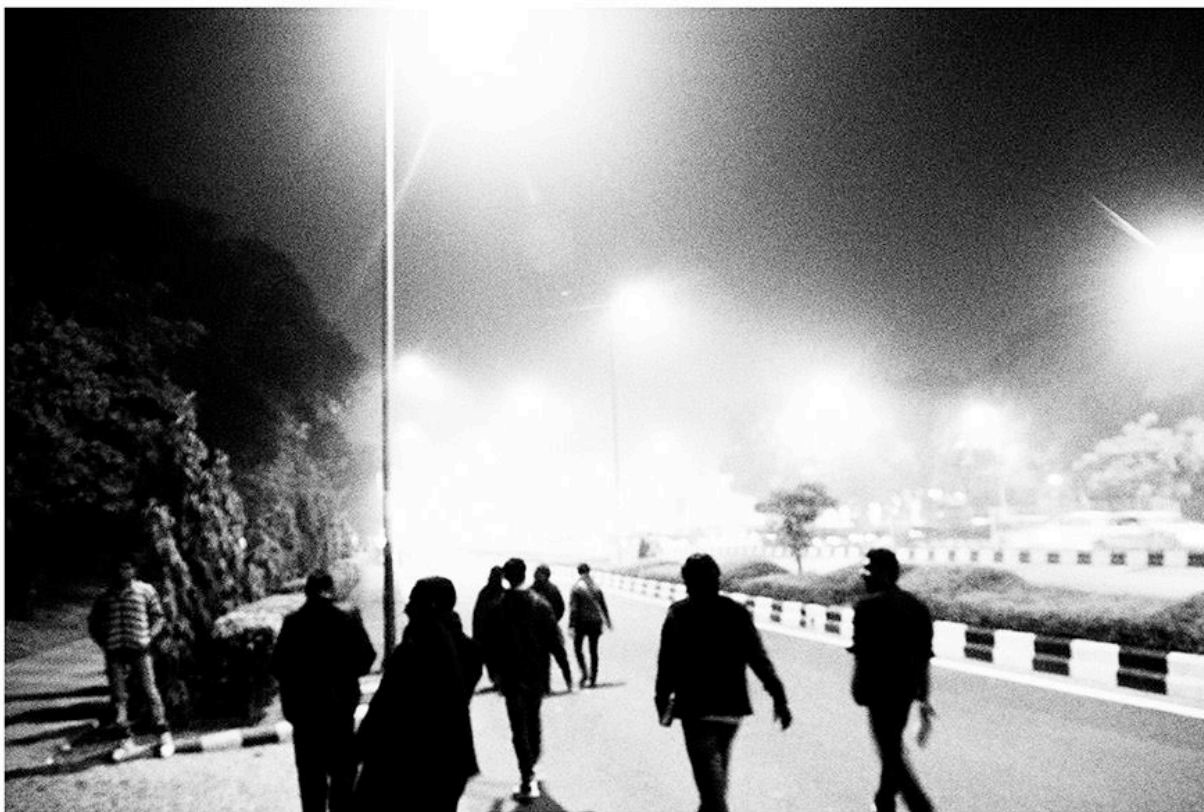


Figure 3.6: Chandan Gomes, *Unknown Citizen*, January 14, 2013.

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