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At the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, art seeks a unique language of protest and dissemination

Where the rain is born.

Written by [Vandana Kalra](#) |

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The sea is now calm in Kochi, but for those gazing at the waters from Aspinwall House, the changing tides reflect the curatorial vision of artist Anita Dube, who, within weeks of being announced as curator of the ongoing Kochi -Muziris Biennale (KMB), had affirmed that she would turn the marginalised into the majoritarian. Her showcase, "Possibilities of Non-Alienated Life", is a case in point.

In its first edition in 2012, co-founders and curators of KMB, Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu had turned to the mythical past of Kochi as the port that emerged after Muziris drowned. Dube is allured by its present and attempts to make it more inclusive. Art, for her, was meant to be political and radical. As a member of the short-lived Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association in the late 1980s, she had sought art to be socially and politically conscious, and she does the same as the first female curator of KMB three decades later.

Krishnamachari says that there are several powerful voices at the Biennale this year. If, in one corner, the haunting soundtrack of South African artist William Kentridge's eight-channel video installation *More Sweetly Play the Dance* — with a procession of shadow figures led by a brass band — plays on, in *For, In Your Tongue I Cannot Hide*, Mumbai-based artist Shilpa Gupta shares words of poets who were silenced. Verses are read in English, Russian, Arabic and Hindi, among others.

The language of protest has never really mattered so long as the message sent out was strong. So, the anonymous group of female artists from America, the Guerrilla Girls, got acquainted with some words in Malayalam when their poster against female stereotypes was translated into the local language. When they called out sexism in art, Dube asserted that the Biennale, too, can be a space for insurrection. The proposal comes at a time when the Biennale is investigating allegations of sexual misconduct levelled against Komu, who has stepped down from his managerial positions connected to the event. There are attempts to initiate a discourse. A series of gender sensitisation workshops have been planned and sexual abuse is also being addressed through exhibits. Mexico-based artist Monica Mayer, for instance, has left postcards that question viewers, "What was the first time you were sexually harassed? How did you feel?" The responses are clipped on a clothesline that comprises her installation.

Dube's showcase takes us to the past to lead us to the present. Dalit artist Vinu VV discusses sexist and casteist bigotry. Through his tribute to transgender activist Sweet Maria, who was found dead in 2012, archivist-activist Aryakrishnan ponders if life has changed for the LGBTQ after the recent reading down of Section 377 by the Supreme Court. The viewers are given glimpses into the most radical of feminist art in Europe in the 1960s and '70s through videos playing early performances by Austrian artist Valie Export, a pioneer in feminist art. Paintings of repression faced by women are passed through a faulty photocopier repeatedly by Israel-born artist and psychoanalyst Bracha L Ettinger. The result is abstracted images smudged with ink in blue, violet and red. In this entire narrative, Dube, as she describes herself, is the Pied Piper, "leading people down a road through the soft lens of culture endorsing something that is non-oppressive."