



# Impossible Gods

## IN BETWEEN: NOTES FROM NEPAL

For designer Sophie Krier her first encounter with Nepal was an experience where simple turned out impossible and impossible turned out simple. Heavily involved in the Dutch-Nepalese fine arts exchange programme, **IN BETWEEN**, her notes on the project reveal not only lessons in the importance of trying, openness and involvement, but also question how much space we can all truly grant each other.

Text and images, except where stated otherwise, by Sophie Krier

### LOOK AROUND YOU... WHAT DO YOU SEE?

Strange surroundings have something magical about them: they demand our full attention and they make our adaptation process tangible by the minute. Strangeness has the capacity to move us outside of our safe selves, thus letting us explore new ways of relating to the world. Between 15 February and 18 March 2008, Nepal did exactly this to a group of 20 students and seven tutors from the Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. For the students and teachers involved from the Nepalese side, our overwhelming and reactive presence clearly unleashed a similar kind of bewilderment...

What qualities does a creative mind need to not merely function within the art or design field, but to first and foremost challenge it? Curiosity, sensitivity, alertness, initiative and perseverance would be my personal top five. I have been trying to find ways to train these with my students at designLAB since I became head of this department in 2005. Experiencing a completely new culture from the inside through work and friendship, as happened during this five-week multi-disciplinary exchange, has proven to be a unique way to train these attitudes for all those involved.

The exchange is an initiative of Erna Anema, who has worked regularly with local crafts in Nepal over the past 30 years. The initial focus of the journey thus revolved around the meaning of craftsmanship from the perspectives of Nepalese and Dutch society. To me, at its core, craftsmanship is about attention and exercise. In Simone Weil's (1909 – 1943) words: 'to give attention to something has got nothing to do with will power. It is a matter of expectancy, a matter of letting the world appeal to you, of looking around open-mindedly. (...) Good education is a long lasting practice in attention'. Towards the end of the exchange, it was clear to me that this adventure encompassed much more than craftsmanship alone: not only did the one-to-one collaborations (meant to intensify and personalise the exchange process) demand great care to succeed, but also the process got compromised daily by either health issues or a largely dysfunctional infrastructure, as well as unforeseen petrol and electricity constraints.

Visual notes from Nepal, including facing page, middle right, a Vermeer-like Nepalese kitchen in a bronze workshop





**INCREDIBLY CLOSE AND YET SO FAR AWAY**

Above, from left to right:  
Scouts rehearsing the national song

Wood workshop, Patan Industrial estate

Below, from left to right:  
Maoist demonstration: image by Arthur

Wired, form study by Anne

15 February 2008. At the airport a man in a uniform, standing in the middle of the street, is completely engrossed in a magazine. He looks up the moment the shutter of my camera clicks open. First contact.

On the way to the hotel, which will be our base camp for the next four weeks (and indeed turned out to be a paradise for the lucky few, thanks to a private electricity generator that allowed lights to stay on when you wanted them to), the road is dusty and crowded with traffic of all kinds: sturdy pedestrians, reckless tuk-tuk drivers, fragile bikers, 'sponsored by India' school buses, a quiet cow or proudly decorated trucks. We cross the Bagmati river, which according to legend sprouted from the laughter of gods. Running for 27km through the valley, the river, which is still blue on all maps, is nowadays pitch black with rotting garbage.

As I write, Nepal is undergoing changes the consequences of which are hard for me to predict. One of the oldest religious monarchies, in part because of its geographically isolated position, Nepal has produced news item after news item in the last decade: 'Royal massacre, Crown Prince Dipendra held responsible' (June 2001); 'Uprising against King Mahendra, parliament reinstalled' (May 2006); 'Maoist rebels enter transitional government' (January 2007); 'Forced abduction of King Gyanendra after election victory of the Maoist party' (April 2008). The list reads like a thriller. Today Nepal seems a little lost in transition, anticipating the 'capitalistic Maoism' envisioned by the Maoist leaders and without a head of state it seems, since Premier Koirala resigned in June. However, a week in Nepalese politics is as long as anywhere else, so the situation remains fluid.

Besides its political rollercoaster history, Nepal is rated one of the poorest countries in the world, with an average life expectancy of 63 years and poignant environmental issues at stake. What were we to do, once confronted with such a reality?



**'FINALLY THEY ARE REPAIRING THE ROAD!'**

Liesbeth and Pukar, one of the 20 student duos, chose to fill all the holes of one street in Kathmandu with tailor-made tiles. Pukar's life-size mappings of the holes immediately drew joyful comments from surrounding shopkeepers and inhabitants: 'At last somebody is doing something about them!' A note about the brickworks where the tiles were baked: the black wood used for the ovens comes from nearby cremations - because no one else wants to use it. Cremations here, see children rushing into the water after the bodies have been burnt, searching for valuable belongings such as pennies...What these anecdotes show is how everything in Nepal ultimately finds its way to somebody else before becoming waste and income and waste again...

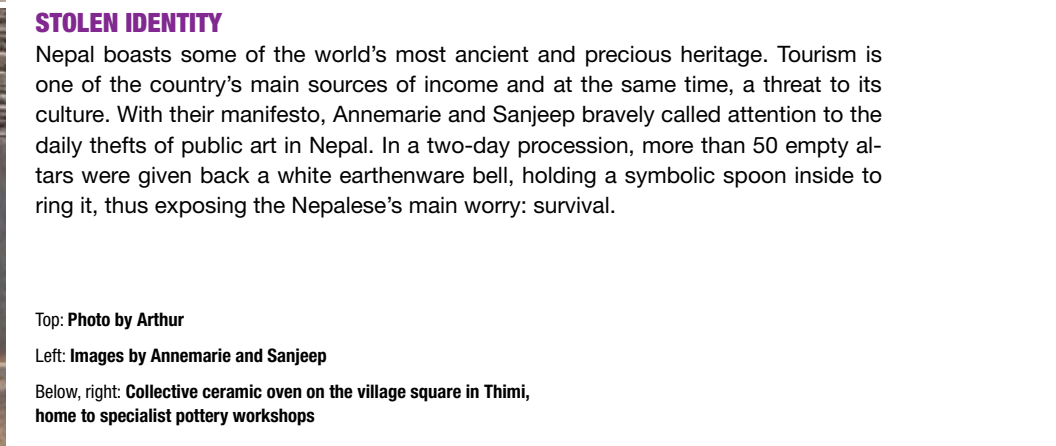
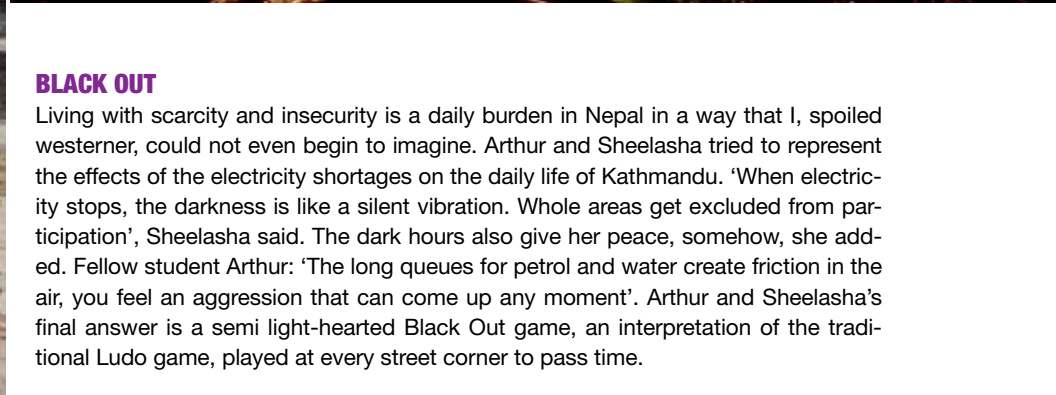
Fixing the street, images by Liesbeth and Pukar

Children with buckets, photos by Sanjeev and Edgar

**ME, YOU, IT ME**

Edgar and Sanjeev wanted to re-invent discarded objects. 'The effort should be visible. (...) It should be about turning fixing into a skill'. During a try-out on Durbar Square, a drunken man in the crowd told Sanjeev: 'When I do this I don't get any respect. But you two are handsome and young...' Sharareh explains: 'Fixing is something for the poor: the rich who can afford new objects don't bother doing it'. Fixing objects as a way to come loose of caste hierarchy...





### NOTHING IS EVERYTHING

A personal fascination during my stay has been the traditional 'pati', still to be found in Bahktapur, along roads and to a lesser extent in Kathmandu itself. Pati's are traditional resting places for travellers on foot. They have a roof supported by pillars and no furniture, apart from an occasional straw mat or altar. The social construction of this public space is what struck me most: owners can decide to give part of their ground floor to the street, in exchange for which the neighbourhood maintains the pati. The beautiful thing about them is that they are not meant for anything in particular, and therefore they are used for almost everything, from taking a nap to chatting to sewing to haircutting. They are places of possibilities, places of possible idleness, a concept I have started to grow fond of...

Another thing I learnt to appreciate is spicy food; somehow, the spiciness felt like a good counterweight to the heat and smog. Momos were my favourite (vegetarian) lunch: steamed cabbage, lots of ginger and carrots, all packed neatly in a bag of dough. Daal Bhaat (lentils, rice, vegetable curries, chutney) is by far the favourite food of most Nepalese. They eat it daily, sometimes twice a day, preferably with their hands. Meat is a totally different thing: it lies, terrifyingly identifiable, skinned, bloody or smoked on street vendors' tables. Buffalo horns (I had never seen them from this close before) adorn houses or are thrown together casually in swarming waste heaps on a street corner.

Below, left: Photo by Anne

Middle, from left to right: Sleeping dogs are an unnatural sight during the day; they lay everywhere, immobile, sun struck. Series by Arthur.

### BLACK OUT

Living with scarcity and insecurity is a daily burden in Nepal in a way that I, spoiled westerner, could not even begin to imagine. Arthur and Sheelasha tried to represent the effects of the electricity shortages on the daily life of Kathmandu. 'When electricity stops, the darkness is like a silent vibration. Whole areas get excluded from participation', Sheelasha said. The dark hours also give her peace, somehow, she added. Fellow student Arthur: 'The long queues for petrol and water create friction in the air, you feel an aggression that can come up any moment'. Arthur and Sheelasha's final answer is a semi light-hearted Black Out game, an interpretation of the traditional Ludo game, played at every street corner to pass time.

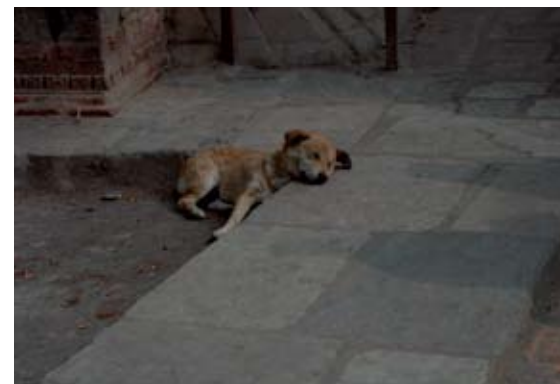
### STOLEN IDENTITY

Nepal boasts some of the world's most ancient and precious heritage. Tourism is one of the country's main sources of income and at the same time, a threat to its culture. With their manifesto, Annemarie and Sanjeep bravely called attention to the daily thefts of public art in Nepal. In a two-day procession, more than 50 empty altars were given back a white earthenware bell, holding a symbolic spoon inside to ring it, thus exposing the Nepalese's main worry: survival.

Top: Photo by Arthur

Left: Images by Annemarie and Sanjeep

Below, right: Collective ceramic oven on the village square in Thimi, home to specialist pottery workshops







**DISSOLVING BOUNDARIES?**

One of the wonderful things about an exchange is that it's a two-way thing; you can apply what you learnt one way to the way back. For the work period in September 2008, the particular qualities and interests of the five selected KUart students (shaping material, playing music, performing, building social networks, analysing situations, improvising in space) are the starting points of the projects to be developed. This way, their personal talents will get space to manifest themselves, make sense, grow and be shared. Ideas have already started emerging by email... Sanjeev for instance wants to try to dissolve social boundaries between him and us, while Pukar will work on family values connected to table etiquette. It's incredibly exciting to know we will be reunited, in a completely different setting, ready to share yet another joint venture into the unknown.



**MOVING MOUNTAINS**

Above, from left to right: Eva watching a potter straight in the eyes while he makes one of her 'courage' vases.

This man looked at me like this for at least 20 minutes, without saying a word, before I dared to take this picture. His look remained unchanged after. We didn't exchange a word.

Bottom, right: Photo by Maartje and Bikash

Bhaktapur, March 2008. I'm watching four girls standing on a heap of gravel. Two of them have large baskets tied to their foreheads. A third girl transfers the gravel to the baskets, while a fourth helps pull the shovel up in the air by pulling firmly on a string; a beautiful and harsh image of cooperation.

'hami bichma tussen ons' is the title given to the films which Maartje and Bikash presented at the Nepal Art Council in the collective final exhibition. In the films, Maartje and Bikash set out to explore and pinpoint the similarities and differences between them through images. A fragment:

'A group of Nepali women are doing their daily wash. Their gestures, the colourful arrangement of buckets, the chaotic traffic nearby... Everything seems shaped by habit – everything but one detail: a red haired girl tries to do the wash as efficiently as her colleagues but only succeeds in getting her skirt wet and her laundry messy'.

By trying to frame ways in which lapses in rhythm, behaviour and gender either create separations or enable a possible 'in between' language, this project made me think about a delicate aspect of cultural exchange programs, namely: how close can we and should we be, really? And how much space can we truly grant each other? If Nepal taught me one unforgettable lesson it would be this: now is the time to try. To be involved. To make space for encounters. To be open to the unforeseeable way things can happen.



Top: Carin's 1.81m handkerchief; the difference in height between Carin and Mrs Tsomu, the maker, was interpreted by the latter with coloured stripes. Image by Carin.

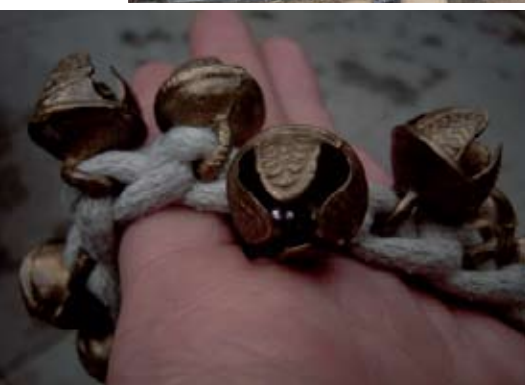
Middle, left: For her project *Joining Borders*, Roos gathered all the women of Sidipur together to weave 300 matt bricks, connected together in a soft wall.

Middle, right: I never saw two kids do their homework more seriously than these two, looking over the world

Above: Carrying things on foot is a tradition enforced by the steep landscape and few roads in rural areas. In the city, people carry anything too: pink clouds, beds, plates of wood. The strap around the head is their secret.

Left: National feast: kids get to block the street and ask passersby for money. I spent 300 rupies, a fortune, (appr €3) in one hour.





**SEVEN BEAUTIFUL NEPALESE WAYS TO APPROACH THINGS**

Top, from left to right:  
Vacant petrol station after kerosene supplies are cut by India (because of unpaid bills).

'Temple' for the underground goddess.

Middle, from left to right:  
Craftsmen working on their doorstep in Patan.

A billboard proclaims to be the city's new horizon.

Above, from left to right:  
Sharareh's ankle-bells reveal the passion of Nepalese dance: the more she practices the traditional steps, the more the metals leaves will open up to let out the bell.

17 Buddha's from Kathmandu valley gather on Durbar Square, Patan for an annual feast, photo by Monica.

An 'intimate moment' with the gods?

Look at a problem from the perspective of collectivity; think about what everyone, together, can do about it. Forget your individuality. Be friendly, always. Don't talk too soon. Be patient, even when you have to wait 24 hours in line for two litres of petrol. Combine your belief with practical thinking. A slide for the gods can also divert thunder. Didn't you know that traffic islands are temples for the Underground Goddess? Celebrate as much and as often as possible. There can never be enough festivity days in one year. Wear the brightest colours, preferably red. Slightly shake your head from left to right, as if to say 'mmm maybe' when you really mean 'yes, OK'. Shake more if your yes is really strong. Don't go for what's possible: it's too complicated. Instead, go for the impossible; you never know: it might turn out great, if the gods are favourable. Try is the best! #

**IN BETWEEN** has been the first exchange programme in the field of fine arts between The Netherlands and Nepal. The project was conducted by the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in collaboration with Kathmandu University, Centre of Art and Design under the guidance of Erna Anema, Sujan Chitrakar, Tejesh Man Shakya, Gopal Das Shrestha, Sophie Krier, Manon van Kouswijk, Aaf van Essen, Matthias Keller, Joost Post and Ellert Haitjema.

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[www.sophiekrier.com](http://www.sophiekrier.com), [www.rietveldacademie.nl](http://www.rietveldacademie.nl), [www.ku.edu.np/fineart](http://www.ku.edu.np/fineart)  
For current news about the situation in Nepal, visit [www.nepal.nl/nieuws](http://www.nepal.nl/nieuws)



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