

Art, City and Care: Shanu Lahiri's Public Art and the Making of a People's City

Chandrima Mitra*

Submitted: 27.02.2026

Revised: 26.05.2026

Accepted: 31.05.2026

Abstract: *Shanu Lahiri, a pioneering visionary modernist artist, writer and social activist, played a significant role in shaping the Indian art landscape. With an unyielding spirit, her ventures as a public artist forged a path that inspired generations to come and redefined the boundaries of art and identity. Shanu considered the beautification of her city not just as ornamentation but as a civic responsibility, as an ethical resistance against prevalent political violence, urban decay and by engaging commoners, school children and neighbourhood communities through her artistic endeavours, her public murals on the ordinary street walls of her beloved Kolkata dismantled elitist hierarchies of art. By rejecting the exclusivity of galleries, she brought art to the streets and her collective artistic engagement with common people, unwavering support to marginal artists, positioned art as accessible, participatory, and socially meaningful. Her public art practice combines feminist politics, civic responsibility, and community engagement, challenging both urban neglect towards society and the elitism of institutional art. My research aims to highlight how her artwork becomes a tool for social repair, counters cultural exclusion through inclusive and participatory creativity, and functions as a feminist act of asserting the right to imagine and remake the city.*

Key Words: Public, Community, Art, Mural, City, Kolkata.

*Ph.D. Scholar, Dept. of History, University of Kalyani, Nadia, W.B.
e-mail: chandrimamitra20@gmail.com

Introduction: City, Public Art and Democracy

Studies of modern Indian cities have long examined the transformation of urban space under colonial planning, postcolonial development, and neoliberal restructuring. These processes have produced cities marked by sharp inequalities, political tensions, and aesthetic fragmentation, where everyday urban life is shaped as much by neglect and contestation as by aspirations of order and progress. In this context, the visual surface of the city—its walls, streets, and neighbourhood spaces—emerges as a crucial site where power, culture, and civic imagination are negotiated.

In an increasingly homogenised world where cities risk resembling one another, the cultivation of a distinct community identity through visual culture acquires heightened significance. Public art can counter urban sameness, reinforcing a sense of place and collective identity. Public art, in this sense, reflects its place and historical moment; it functions as a spatial marker embedded in collective habitation.¹ While scholarship has often privileged architecture, monuments, and state-sponsored commissions, less attention has been paid to community-based practices that intervene persistently within lived environments. Public art relocates aesthetic production from enclosed institutions into common space, broadening access and reducing dependence on museum-going, even as it is sometimes criticised for lacking “quality.” Yet art in public settings can engage both institutional traditions and urgent social questions, operating through diverse, sometimes resistant or collective methodologies.² In doing so, it unsettles elitist conceptions of art and reframes the city as a participatory, affective space shaped by shared care.

Debates around culture further illuminate this shift. Traditional elitist definitions often describe art as autonomous, exceptional, and detached from everyday life, whereas a more expansive understanding recognizes culture as contextual, dynamic, and capable of generating minority meanings in relation to identity and diversity.³ This article examines Shanu Lahiri’s public art practice as a form of civic and feminist engagement that redefined the relationship between art, city, and people in Kolkata. Besides, her movement from gallery spaces to urban walls challenged artistic elitism and repositioned art as a shared social responsibility. It further explores how her participatory methods—working with schoolchildren, neighbourhood communities, and marginal practitioners—reshaped ideas of authorship, access, and public engagement. Rather than relying on overtly humanist imagery, Lahiri’s practice foregrounded inclusion and collaboration as ethical acts, offering a process-based humanism rooted in care. By situating her murals within the lived urban environment, this study argues that Lahiri claimed the city as a democratic cultural commons and articulated a distinctly feminist mode of public art. Through this lens, the article highlights her contribution to reimagining urban space not as a site of control or spectacle, but as one shaped through everyday creativity, participation, and collective belonging.

The City as Aesthetic: Art as a Civic Service and Politics of Space

Shanu Lahiri (1928–2013) occupies a significant yet under-examined place in the history of post-Independence Indian modernism. Born into the culturally influential Mazumdar family

of Calcutta, she trained at the Government College of Art & Craft before studying art history and painting in Paris at the École du Louvre and the Académie Julian. She always got inspiration from her elder brother, prominent artist Nirode Mazumdar, who taught her many things about art and inspired her.⁴ After returning to India, she joined Rabindra Bharati University, eventually serving as Dean of the Faculty of Visual Arts, where she shaped generations of students while advancing critical engagement with modernist practice. Alongside her studio and classroom, Shanu played a vital role in shaping Kolkata's public art practices. Accounts by Dr. Annu Jalaia and artist Nobina Gupta reminisced about her profound affection for living beings – animals, trees, and the intersection between human and non-human reflects a humanistic and ecological orientation through her work. Her liberal attitude towards materials and surfaces – considering wall, paper, or found objects as potential canvas—signals an ethical intelligence grounded in openness and care.⁵

Though public art is often conflated with street art and graffiti, it is considered a distinct category. While street art is typically unfunded, graffiti is associated with territorial, public art is commissioned for public consumption by governmental or institutional bodies.⁶ Artists, within this public continuum, may be commissioned, self-initiated, or unsanctioned, yet each brings a distinctive interpretation to the site and community. In doing so, they can act as civic agents, challenging assumptions and expanding the collective imagination.⁷ Shanu navigated how art, as an institutional system, can become detached from social responsibility and radical experimentation.⁸ Rather than treating Kolkata as a backdrop, she repositioned it as an active canvas, linking beautification with civic responsibility. She believed that Kolkata has a unique community ethos, it's fundamentally a community-based city, where people live, celebrate and coexist collectively. She attracted neighbourhood residents, including marginal groups, to participate in her mural-making projects and related initiatives, for beautifying the city and to raise funds for children in need. The process of public art, combining institutional support with community engagement, challenged the elitist definition of art and reconfigured the politics of space while extending the modernist practices beyond the gallery and transforming urban surface into the sites of care, participation and democratic cultural exchange.

Kolkata as Commitment

Art has long functioned as a political instrument—advocating human rights, amplifying marginalised voices, promoting diversity, and foregrounding urgent concerns such as war, pandemics, environmental degradation, and the excesses of capitalism.⁹ The cultural life of Calcutta was deeply shaped by political engagement; even those intellectuals who later defended “non-political” art had earlier participated in anti-fascist movements.¹⁰ Within such a milieu, public art emerges as a vital medium for mobilization, inclusivity, and social uplift, often generating cultural, social, and even economic value. It distinguishes public history, reflects collective identity, humanises the built environment, and remains freely accessible, mediating between past, present, and future.¹¹ Modern art has historically vacillated between progress and rupture, synthesising aesthetic progression with avant-garde experimentation.¹² Yet as institutional authorities multiplied, art increasingly entered a marketplace of validation.

Critics have argued that elite art institutions often operate as mechanisms of exclusion, distinguishing art from everyday culture and reinforcing hyper-institutionalisation.¹³ Lahiri resisted this hierarchical drift. She understood that when art enters lived space, it alters the character of that place; a work embedded in daily life resonates differently from an exhibition confined within walls.¹⁴ For her, art is rooted in its site carried creative energy into the flow of ordinary experience.



Fig 1. Shanu Lahiri painting a mural in Rwanda. Source-Wikipedia

Although Shanu Lahiri and her family were never directly engaged with party politics,¹⁵ she was profoundly affected by communal unrest and the aggressive proliferation of political slogans across Kolkata's walls. The violence embedded in such messages on city walls, the prevalent visual culture disturbed her, particularly its impact on children growing up amid confrontation and division.¹⁶ Rather than countering aggression with protest alone, she sought to soften the city through art—overlaying hostility with colour, joy, and shared creativity.

In this sense, her practice aligns with the idea of activist art, which weaves a double-edged tapestry, in which diffusion and defusion entwine. Diffusion preaches social movement messages through engaging emotion, while defusion neutralises opposing views, reduces polarisation and creates space for democracy to breathe. Artists' voices echo, a gentle yet significant voice, diffusing ideas, shaping society's narratives, and nurturing democratic ideals.¹⁷ Her murals carried gentle yet transformative interventions, reshaping urban perception without spectacle.

Historically, The Calcutta Group's 1942 manifesto had already called for a "contemporary realism," a humanist approach in art, rejecting both *Bengal School* nationalist view on art and epic-historical themes in favour of ordinary people as worthy subjects. Drawing upon Chandidas's assertion, *The only truth was Man, and nothing was greater than Man*.¹⁸ Lahiri inherited this humanist impulse but redirected it spatially. She believed that the defining feature of public art lies in its relationship with the public, in which audiences function not merely as viewers but also as collaborators and contributors in social practice.¹⁹ Her inclusivity reflected this conviction: art was not to be confined within institutional bias but opened to shared authorship. Unlike many modernists who foregrounded distress or calamities, sorrows to portray, Lahiri preferred images of cheerfulness, vitality, and collective warmth—painting the city's charm rather than its trauma.²⁰



Fig 2. Lahiri painting on the wall of a slum near Sreebhumii, Source -The Telegraph

Her practice materialised these convictions. In 1984, through her 'Love Calcutta Project', she mobilised students from *La Martiniere*, Calcutta, to transform a politically marked public wall, paying them Rs. 50 per day to reimagine it through colour and form. Political jargon was gradually replaced by visual imagination, inviting curiosity and community appreciation. Earlier, in 1966, she founded the organisation *Bhavna*, an initiative to clean around Lake Town police station and nearby markets. Her belief was simple: if she began, the younger generation would follow such noble initiative, learning to care for their own city²¹, so she undertook four mural projects.

She collaborated with *Asha Niketan*, supported by French funding, working with mentally unstable children and painted walls near Sealdah station.²² Her most ambitious creation was a 324-foot mural along Justice Chandra Madhav Mukherjee Road, created with students

from Rabindra Bharati University and Visva-Bharati University. Her approach was non-impositional; influenced by her experiences in Africa, she prioritised children's self-expression over artistic direction.²³ She extended this ethos to Berhampur Jail, engaging 250 orphaned children in creative practice.²⁴ Besides this she continued her artistic ventures; some examples of her remarkable works were *Jadu Babu's Bazaar* in the Bhowanipore area, the fish market at *Seerbhumi*, Fort William, and other areas in north and south. During the event *Rabindra Darshan*, commemorating Tagore's 150th anniversary, children from Nagarjuna High School, Safrani Memorial High School, and Desire Society—including patients of HIV, differently abled participants—covered walls with houses, flags, and imaginative motifs. Even a local drunk was invited to contribute, underscoring her conviction that creativity belongs to all.²⁵ Shanu had a belief that art was never meant to be privatised; it belonged to the collective commons and required visibility and sharing to attain meaning.²⁶ Through these sustained interventions, she reconfigured public space as participatory terrain—demonstrating that art, when diffused gently into daily life, can nurture democratic sensibilities and civic belonging.



Durga Iconography: Ritual, Modernism and Public Image

Shanu Lahiri's engagement with Durga iconography for *Bakulbagan Sarbojonin Durgatsav committee*, elucidates a crucial segment in her public art practice. Bakulbagan, renowned for its pompous, visually ambitious celebration, can be considered as a site where revered artists like Lahiri and Meera Mukherjee immersed themselves in Bengal's most expansive public ritual practice.

Fig 3 . Durga, (Sketch) Shanu Lahiri, Source-ALAL O DULAL

They collaborated with hereditary *Pratima-shilpis* (idol-makers), which unsettled the hierarchies between the academically trained artists and the artisan, while they were privileged to gain experience from clay artists, which enriched their artistic experience. As has been observed, in this process, the imagination of the trained artist met the occupational skill of artisans, which also produced a new division separating conceptual authorship from manual execution, thus, reinforcing a modern hierarchy.²⁷

Fig 4. Shanu Lahiri creating Durga Pratima at Bakulbagan, Source- DAG



The stakes of such experiments were high. Durga Puja is not merely a spectacle but also considered as a devotional practice in which the Goddess is revered simultaneously as mother and daughter. It was a major concern about how far modern artists could be adequately equipped to create an image for worship while maintaining their autonomy, and whether the reinterpretations would satisfy the broader public.

Even though experimentation was welcomed, the image had to remain legible within the ritual framework. Eventually, despite their stylistic distinction, the idols were immersed, like all other idols and conclude the festival, which underscores the necessity for artistic experimentation to remain accountable to ritual and collective belief.²⁸ Shanu's active participation in *Bakulbagan Sarbojonin Durgatsav* can thus be exemplified as a form of public art, converged, destabilising rigid classification between elite art and popular religious artisanal practice without serving ties to collective belief. In this sense, *Bakulbagan* functioned as a negotiated public sphere where modernist aesthetics encountered lived religiosity. The collaborative process did not simply introduce innovation into tradition; it exposed the layered economies of labour, devotion, and authorship embedded within idol production. By entering this domain, Lahiri positioned herself within a continuum of ritual practice rather than outside it. Her intervention neither dismissed the sacred nor reduced it to spectacle; instead, it expanded the possibilities of visual

language within a devotional framework. Her approach respected the sanctity of the icon while subtly extending its formal vocabulary, allowing innovation to emerge from within rather than against tradition. The cyclical immersion of the idol underscored the temporal nature of both ritual and public art, where significance lies in collective enactment and shared experience rather than permanence. Through *Bakulbagan*, Lahiri demonstrated that modern art could inhabit ritual space without displacing it, negotiating continuity and change within a shared cultural ethos.

The City as Feminist Space: Reclaiming the Street

In her interviews and memoirs, Shanu consistently credited her mother's unwavering support as central to her artistic practices. She recollected that a home immersed in creative activity enabled her courage to confront institutional barriers.²⁹ As one of the earliest women students at the Government College of Art and Craft, she persisted despite discrimination within the art arena shaped by male dominance. Prominent artists' groups, such as *The Calcutta Group* (1943), *The Progressive Painters' Association* (1944), etc., were founded and dominated by male artists, leaving the women artists overshadowed and marginalised.



Fig 5. Mural created by Shanu Lahiri for Philips on Justice Chandra Madhav Lane, Calcutta, 1985,
Source-Shanu Lahiri Archive

That's why Shanu, along with Meera Mukherjee, Santosh Rahtogi, Karuna Saha and Shyamasree Basu, responded against this impartiality by forming a women-led collective, named *The Group*, as an act of institutional reclamation.

She claimed her space extended beyond institutional practice to the city. Feminist urban theorists argue that cities offering access to labour and cultural practices are framed through gendered assumptions. Geographer Kim states, "Gender roles are fossilised into the concrete appearance of space... The overall layout of cities reflects a patriarchal capitalist society's expectations of what activities take place where, when, and by whom." He further argues that planning models often presume a typical citizen whose mobility, labour experience and public presence align with male experiences, thereby rendering women peripheral and limiting their spatial agency. The omission of women from visibility significantly weakens the vitality of urban life itself.³⁰

Within this framework, Shanu's interventions in public art practice can be understood as feminist spatial practice. As Pollock suggests, femininity is not only represented but spatially lived as discursive positionality.³¹ her reminiscence of resisting rigid societal norms and her mother's advice to create her own society³² resonates with Ardener's observation that societies establish culturally determined boundaries, segmenting social life into spheres separated by invisible but concrete constraints. By occupying the space, she unsettled the historic alignment of masculinity with the city and femininity with interior confinement.³³

Fragile Legacies: Public Art and Institutional Neglect

Our capacity to evaluate art, according to Bell Hooks, is often distorted by a visual between positive and negative imagery, which significantly narrows our ability to apprehend how the artwork can be observed, experienced and perceived. Such a politics of the visual is particularly restrictive in the context of public art, where aesthetic, civic and ethical registers intersect.³⁴ Shanu received numerous governmental and institutional accolades during her lifetime, but a more substantive tribute would lie in the efforts to preserve and continue her vision for a participatory and beautified cityscape. Public art, as *Antoney* discusses, doesn't depend on art galleries or intellectual conventional framing; it must endure physically and temporally within open environments.³⁵

The fate of public art is significantly tied to shifting political regimes and administrative priorities; new authorities may neglect, defund or dismantle works as per their convenience.³⁶ The most emblematic instance of such negligence is the disappearance of *Parama* overnight, Lahiri's thirty-foot fibreglass sculpture installed in 1987 near Science City, Kolkata, in 2014 supervising agents and officials later admitted that the incident occurred under the instructions of a higher authority, and the workers were unable to recognise the installation as a significant piece of artwork, with no directive to preserve the structure intact.³⁷



Fig 6. *Parama*, Source- *The Telegraph*

The incident sparked a controversy among the citizens, It revealed a troubling indifference toward modern public art, even as the sculpture had become embedded in public memory, to such an extent that the surrounding crossing bore its name. Tapati Guha Thakurta rued in grief, “She gave a lot to the city but the city was not kind in preserving her work”.³⁸ In Kolkata , the absence of a coherent public art policy, and its limited archival preservation and systematic care – is an important issue noted by artist-curator Nobina Gupta.³⁹ Not only that, consequently, several of Shanu’s murals, once integral to neighbourhood walls, were gradually erased through whitewashing or infrastructural redevelopment.

Shanu had envisioned a mural-filled city wall that would inspire and cultivate a sense of civic responsibility among younger generations, considering Kolkata as a people’s city shaped by and for its people.⁴⁰ Though her aspiration remained partially fulfilled, recent small-scale initiatives – such as one community-driven open art project in areas like Hiland Park, Kolkata- gives a ray of hope regarding a tentative re-emergence of participatory public art.⁴¹ Her legacy thus not only illuminates the transformative potential of democratic public art but also the structural precarity that continues to endanger its survival.

Conclusion: Shanu Lahiri and the Politics of Care

Shanu Lahiri emerged as an influential figure in the art world. Influence denotes a subtle and effortless process of transformation through collective participation, rather than contesting the status quo through oppositional politics. Feminist public art reshapes cities by being present and engaging. This approach propagates the idea that true agency lies not in protesting the

world, but in actively being part of ongoing creative ventures.⁴² The making of public art is inherently collaborative.



*Fig 7. A road roller, Shanu Lahiri painted with children, 1988,
Source-Shanu Lahiri Archive*

It requires artists to share their creative processes, engage in dialogue, and negotiate with diverse stakeholders. Such collaboration enables artworks to resonate across communities, fostering shared ownership and civic affiliation. By bringing artistic thinking, aesthetic problem-solving, and imaginative methodologies to the built environment, public art introduces modes of engagement distinct from other professional disciplines.⁴³ Lahiri's interventions exemplified this expanded role of the artist—not merely as image-maker, but as civic catalyst—redefining the politics of space through democratic, cultural practice.

Shanu described artistic aspiration as a fever; she never wished to care, explaining an enduring devotion to colour, collaboration and the making of shared environments.⁴⁴ In her words, an artist's journey is often precipitated by a sense of discomfort or dissatisfaction, which catalyses creative expression. From the dot of uncertainty, they compose an exclamation of art and innovation, echoing their essence, reflecting their experiences, thoughts and beliefs. Their existence is inextricably related to their creative output, serving as a testament to their unique perspective, a legacy that transcends time and through this, they achieve immortality, as their essence is preserved and conveyed to future generations.⁴⁵ Dealing with the structures that significantly omit and marginalise women artists, Lahiri navigated criticism, limited institutional support and structural exclusion; still, she consistently crossed the invisible fences that regulate access to cultural authority. Throughout her life, she opposed elitist definitions of art and advanced participatory practice rooted in the idea of cultural democracy infused with access, inclusion and shared belonging. Her legacy lies not only in the artworks she created but in the civic ethos she embodied, an art embedded in the lived city and sustained through shared responsibility.

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