

Being Together Apart on Route 201

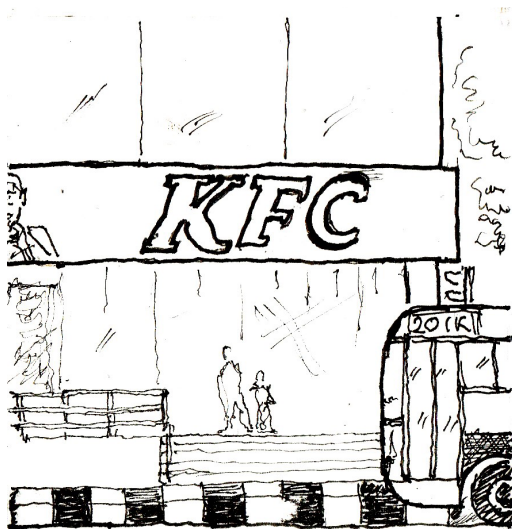
Rukmini Swaminathan



BMC 201 route

This article is based on the *201 Bus Project*, a research project I started in 2020, with support of the India Foundation for the Arts (IFA), Bengaluru. Having experienced the first lockdown of the pandemic, the project became an outlet for me to reconnect with the city of Bengaluru and its everydayness by mapping one particular bus route through the medium of sound. It resulted in the creation of a sound map, album and a set of illustrations that reflected the dialectical relationship between the personal/private vis-à-vis the shared/public. This essay will describe the details of the project in the context of how cities are always in flux - adapting and evolving. Using sound to record the moments between the individual and collective, the 201 Bus Project navigates between existing publics and those that are yet to arrive. The recordings have been used to create a sound map and album which archive the city in its everyday form. Furthermore, the interactive map demonstrates the opportunities to foster new publics through shared experiences of travelling on the city bus.

During the first lockdown in 2020, the lack of movement left me yearning for a sense of city life, which I associated with the route of Bengaluru Metropolitan Transportation Corporation's (BMT) bus No.201. The 201 bus travels on roads passing through the east and south of Bengaluru. My first journeys on the bus began with the purpose of going to flute class in South Bengaluru early in the morning. I would fall asleep to the sound of old trees swaying in the distance and wake up every once in a while, as people flowed in and out of the bus. For many commuters like me, the buses initiated their journey of familiarising themselves with the city.



K.F.C. BUS STOP

Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) junction, Indiranagar

In the book 'Emancipated Spectator', the author explores the phrase 'being together apart' (Rancière, 2009) using a poem by Mallarmé that describes a man's encounter with a mysterious woman. The subject, present in the same space as the woman, preserves the moment by not acting further on it. He leaves without being seen or having seen her, creating a rupture in their togetherness. In 'being together apart', Rancière (2009) elaborates on the creation of a community at a primary level; connected through their senses such as sounds, rhythm and their reaction to space. However, the paradoxical nature of 'being together apart' creates a dissonance and redistribution of the senses which gives scope to look at things anew in terms of building a new form of community (Rancière, 2009). The phrase acts as the keystone of the project informing the context and process of its creation. The tensions between togetherness and solitude can be experienced in the setting of the bus and in the larger context of the pandemic. In each, our journey is unique, yet there is familiarity and a common understanding of the circumstances.



Bengaluru Development Authority (BDA) Complex, Koramangala

Started in 1940 under the Mysore government, the Bengaluru Transport Company operated in a small capacity connecting major parts of the city such as Malleshwaram, Cantonment, Majestic and Ulsoor (Petlee, 2016). In the mid-20th century the organisation was nationalised and took the name Bengaluru Transport Services which later became Bengaluru Metropolitan Transportation Corporation in 1997. Since then, the BMTC buses have been a part of the socio-cultural fabric of Bengaluru with an average of 35 lakh commuters per day. These numbers decreased drastically to less than 10 lakhs per day after the first lockdown in 2020 (The Hindu, 2020). The 201 Bus Project started as a way of preserving

the present in real time, a way to not only counteract a personal fear of losing a daily habit, but also to take cognisance of the changes that the COVID-19 pandemic had enforced on the city and its citizens.



Kudremukh Iron Ore Company (KIOCL), Koramangala

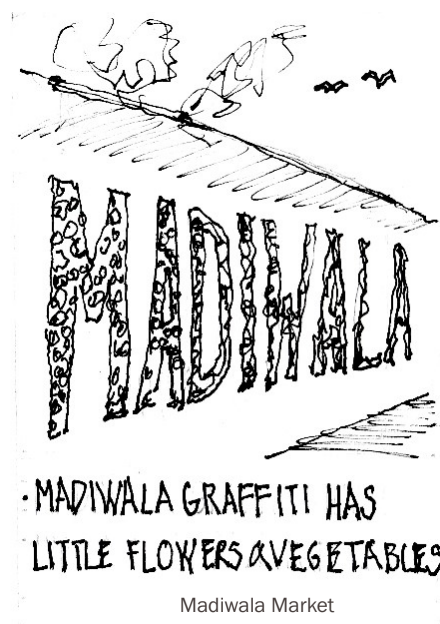
Between October 2020 and June 2021, I recorded eight 201 bus journeys using my phone. Given that the frequency of these buses was less, it was difficult to find a variety of 201 buses. However, the recordings provide glimpses of the journeys, stops and spaces along the route such as the Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) stop in Indiranagar, Kudremukh Iron Ore Company at Koramangala, Madiwala market, Silk Board and Banashankari bus depot. While travelling on the bus, I journaled my observations about the scenes outside and the interactions inside the bus. The journal became a source of inspiration to create a collection of booklets that narrate the multiplicity of stories that emerged from the 201 bus journeys.

The illustrations in the booklets are drawn from the vantage point of an individual's observations from the bus window. Through the window, we witness the constant flow of people and places. The fluidity resonates with the pulse of a cityscape that thrives on action juxtaposed against the stillness imposed by the pandemic. Designed in a concertina fashion to reflect the motion and fluidity, all the booklets begin with the front facade of the bus, then include landmarks and anecdotes from my travels and experiences.

To accompany the visual narratives of the 201 bus journeys, I developed a sound album. ([Click here to listen to the album](#)), to capture the auditory aspect of travelling on the busy streets of a throbbing metropolis.

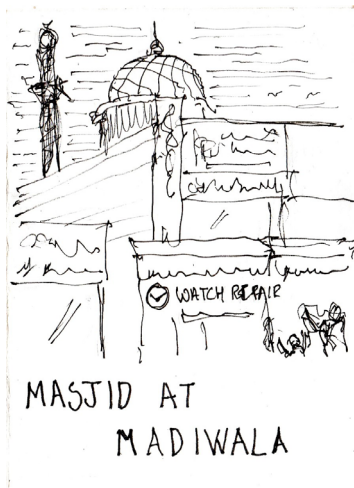
Comprising 15 tracks, the album is choreographed to reflect the commonalities of bus journeys. It begins with waiting for the bus, the sound of the engine, doors opening and closing, the creaking windows and alarming honks of the bus horn. Towards the middle, the album shifts to human sounds that breathe life to it - the voice of the conductor. Across the bus journeys, I heard conductors saying, 'ticket, ticket!' in different ways, using a variety of tones. Sometimes, you would get to know a little more about the conductor through his customised ringtones and choice of music that played on his phone. The album tracks do not aim to be musical compositions but instead are snippets of sounds recorded as they emanate in and outside the bus, thus archiving the sounds of the journey in real time.

I further explored repetition and uniqueness of sounds as a reflection of singular and shared narratives of bus journeys with an interactive audiovisual map. The map invites the user to join my 201 bus experience and layer it with their own. By choosing their own start and end points of the journey, different parts of the audio is played as the bus commences, creating a different combination of sounds to simulate the uniqueness of every journey. The interactive map acts as the final step of 'being together apart' and creates a new public that connects the home (private) and the world (shared) through layered mediums. [The interactive map can be found in the link here.](#)



Madiwala Market

The sound map was created as an ode to the BMTc buses because of its integral role in shaping the daily commuter's imagination of Bengaluru, but I realised it would be inaccessible to daily commuters. Most digital archives and information portals face such issues and yet, the use of mobile phones has increased our participation in the creation and consumption of media, forming a dialectical situation where the



Masjid, Madiwala

public shapes us, and we in turn shape the public. While recording the bus journeys for the project, I also grappled with questions of ownership. Is it okay to record a journey in a bus, a shared space filled with many individuals? To what extent can an individual make private claims to the city's public spaces even though the latter are meant for the city's publics?

The BMTC No.201 bus embodies the meaning of a 'public space' when it is in movement. The transient aspect of the bus journey negates the concept of private ownership during the daily commute carrying a sense of ordinariness along with people moving in and out of the bus. In the book 'An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris', the author documents the everyday non-essential happenings at one particular café (Perec, 2010). In its afterword, the book suggests that the observations were an act of preservation as if Perec knew what he associated with the everyday would vanish someday. The 201 Bus Project began as a personal practice of preserving the everyday. Today, it stands as an archive of a moment of everydayness that reflects the subjective-collective identity of a city dealing with uncertain times, where people and spaces relearn to adapt with one another.



Silk Board



... REACHED

BANASHANKARI

Banashankari Depot

Notes: All the illustrations in this article were done by Bengaluru-based architect Arun Swaminathan. The IFA 201 Bus Project can be viewed at <http://bus201project.herokuapp.com/>.

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