



sā Ladakh: Art, Nature and Community in High Altitudes.

Words by Allison Harman



Ladakh is a place where collision rests and resides, breeding its own form of existence, culture, and environment.

Physically connecting with the environment is largely what drew co-founder and artist Raki Nikahetiya to create in this terrain. Upon his first visit, Nikahetiya felt a spiritual connection to Leh. There, the mountains are commanding and require its community and visitors to admit their presence constantly, with necks tilting back to take in their abundance, performing a reversed form of bowing, a gesture to the way the mountains breathe.

Nikahetiya's experience of creating an immersive land art experience with co-founders Tenzin Jamyang and Sagardeep Singh quickly became centered around the questions: How might land art help us better understand landscape? How might these creative ways of engaging with nature enrich our connection, and further, our respect for our environment? The concept of the festival had first been driven by Nikahetiya's desire to organize and work with land artists. However, Jamyang's background in mountaineering exposed the group to the realities and effects of climate change on

At an elevation of 3,600 meters, Leh is a city in the Ladakh region of Northern India where its mountains edge with the Great Himalayan Range. The height and positioning of the Himalayas create a rain shadow across the Tibetan Plateau, where Ladakh is located, causing the area surrounding Leh to have seldom exposure to precipitation. As a result, the region is arid and its high desert ecosystem is fragile, a contrast to the extreme stature and amassed weather of the Himalayas. The coexistence of these mountain chains is proof of a greater dialogue occurring within nature. One range surmounts its presence and the other exists as its foil. Environment, in its physical or conceptual form, can be at once firmly defiant and highly malleable.

Ladakh is defined by its drastically contested physical and political borders. Divided between Pakistan, India, and China, and at the convergence of the Ladakh Range and the Greater Himalayas, Ladakh is a place where collision rests and resides, breeding its own form of existence, culture, and environment.

With its first edition taking place in August of 2023, this intersection in the heights of India is also ground for the immersive land art group exhibition, *sā Ladakh*, where origins and frameworks of boundary and environment are reflected, broken down, and reimagined through a series of installations. Deriving from the local word for soil, as an acknowledgment of its significance yet dire shortage in Leh, *sā Ladakh* is an immersive land art festival that explores the possibilities of landscape and our connection to it.



Bayul by Tsering Gurmet Kungyam (*sā Ladakh Edition One*, 2023)

high altitude regions like Ladakh. While further exploring the community of Leh and understanding the innate awareness of the environment that the locals carry, the festival grew to be a platform for addressing the climate crisis as well. Accordingly, land art became a medium for topics of community, culture, and climate to converge.

The three co-founders consider their initiative to be rooted in the idea of “climate optimism,” an approach within the climate crisis that focuses on engaging the next generation. In their belief, environmental progress begins with reinstalling a direct and personal connection to the land in all people, especially youth. Nikahetiya recounts early childhood memories of his times in nature which were instrumental in strengthening his love and respect for his surroundings. In engaging the youth of Ladakh with the physical experience of the festival and its related community programming and workshops, Nikahetiya hopes to offer similar opportunities for young people to develop bonds with nature, and then move through life

with a deeper appreciation for the land and its limited resources. With a focus on local arts education, the support and programming from the Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation has been essential in reinforcing the relationship between the Ladakhi youth and their land. Outside of Ladakh, global collaborations with organizations such as Local Futures, The European Union, and a handful of European countries have established a sense of community beyond Ladakh, where the themes and aims of the festival can participate in a larger conversation.

The physicality of *sā Ladakh* as an immersive land art festival asks people to connect with the environment at stake, while also considering their connection with the land they come from, if not local to the region. The trail system within the Disko Valley Bike Park guides visitors on a 1-2 hour hike through the mountainside, where the high desert landscape serves as a canvas for the artists' installations. However picturesque now, the site for the festival had not always been well kept or respected.

When founded by locals Tenzin Jamphel, Skalden Urgyan, and Gyatso Tundup in 2018, the Disko Valley Bike Park was reconstructed from what was once a youth partying location to a space for the local and larger mountain biking community to engage with and enjoy as a recreational landscape. Jamphel and his team decided to restore the mountainside to a truer version of itself and instill the importance of a bond with the land, something that was lost in its previous iteration. The youth of Leh, once detached from a deeper understanding and relationship to the mountains that painted their adolescence, are now exposed to an entirely new way of engaging with their terrain. The Disko Valley Bike Park has brought a new sense of community to Leh, later to be expanded in the form of the festival.

In the previous edition of the festival, which took place in August of 2023, the mountainscape was transformed into various focal points of different pieces, all using recycled materials or materials natural to Leh. The process of exploring the resources of the region and how to reuse already existing materials was a way for artists and visitors to examine what is achievable, in their own art, as a practice at the festival, and as a concept for spaces beyond. With these natural limitations, the artists of the first edition had to reconsider their installations and the way in which they would realize the vision of their art. Some pieces in the first iteration of the festival included Anshu Singh's River of Sweat, a brilliant collection of discarded and recycled sarees that were stretched across the rockscape of the mountainside, Sagardeep Singh's Echoes of the Coral Brain, a delicately placed stone maze connecting people to the fragility of the land, and Tsering Gurmet Kungyam's Bayul, a fragmented body of mirrors reflecting the resources at stake. Each piece asked its own question of the environment and each curiously explored its own answer. Together, the installations presented visitors with a string of research, considerations, and a layered examination of the land.

Environmental progress begins with reinstilling a direct and personal connection to the land in all people, especially youth.

The theme for edition two, which will take place June 1st through 10th of 2024, is "The Future of Immersive Land Art / Immersive Land Art and the Future" asking the question, "how can we create art which is immersive and thought-provoking but doesn't negatively impact the environment and its inhabitants in times of uncertainty and a globally changing climate?" Ahead of June, and while considering the environmental impacts posed by the event itself, Nikahetiya is working with other festivals around India to collect their scrap materials and find ways to sustainably repurpose them. Nikahetiya describes his experience of organizing land art as an opportunity for people to collaborate and work together in a constant dialogue, with each other, and with the mountains, too. A fluidity of both positive and negative feedback allows artists and community members an opportunity to work through climate issues honestly.

Where landscape and the realities of our depleting environment meet, sã Ladakh pushes artists to confront and engage with the land as a material of the art piece itself. Malleable by nature, land art can adapt to a powerful landscape, even in one of the highest places in the world. Alternatively and concurrently, the mountains are what physically and conceptually become the art. They ground the ideas that the artists are exploring in their pieces, ones that have been adjusted to accommodate the limits of the environment. Leh and sã Ladakh uniquely mirror what it is like to live in a time and place of limited resources. In these mountains, immersive land art is the intersection, and further, the dialogue, for community, culture, and climate. A reflection of the unique physical and political setting it exists in, sã Ladakh, too, is an experience of convergence.



Plastic Kicker by Tundup Gyatso (sã Ladakh Edition One, 2023)