

Swan Song of the Pareto Optimalists

by Josef K. Strosche

We met Sachin Srivat while touring Goa. He approached us during intermission of a reading by the Portuguese-language author Victor Appadoo in Margao, offering to buy Elise a second Pinot. Only then did he learn that I was Hugo Garcia Mohr. Elise accepted his offer, and upon his return he told me he was an admirer of my books and led us to believe that he too was a writer. The next day we met him for lunch, where he added that he painted as well.

“So which is it?” I asked. He wore a navy blue pinstripe suit without a tie, revealing a patch of graying chest hair behind the crisp shirt. The previous evening's attire was the same but in dark gray. His skin was burnt sienna, which might have been what made him look younger than me, perhaps in his early sixties. He was bald and spoke an English that revealed a privileged Indian education. I wouldn't have taken him for an artist. He was quite thin and smoked yellow cigarettes while we ate prawn curry.

“I belong to an obscure sect of pan-Asian artists that once referred to themselves as the Pareto Optimalists, a sort of fraternity of renaissance men. In the early eighties we boasted members from seventeen different nations. I was a founding father.”

I'd never heard of them, but the legend went that Srivat shared a mutual friend with Salman Rushdie which catapulted the failed novelist (he'd sold a few thousand copies of his first published work but lost his agent when he failed to produce a second) into a relationship with a Korean sculptor. The Korean was supposedly the toast of New York for a few years, fueled by yuppie dollars, and interested in lending his fame to a circle of like-minded artists. The addition of a second Indian, this one a poet, precipitated the birth of the Pareto Optimalists, whose credo was “Solidarity of Media,” a quasi-Marxist celebration of inclusivity in all of the arts. Their ranks

were comprised of Asians exclusively and touted an unabashed counterweight to the perceived superiority of Western art. By the mid-nineties they'd disbanded, mostly due to the lack of any genuine critical attention and lackluster results in raising various forms to new heights (among them Hindi- and Mongolian-language opera and the oral sagas of the indigenous tribes of Burma).

"Each of us was committed to the cause: proud Asians dedicated to the equal promotion and success of the lesser known art forms. Where we failed was in our interpretation of the goal. Some wanted critical acclaim in the West, some in the East only. Others wanted to bring art and along with it class consciousness to the continent's poor and working class. A few wanted commercial success, to accomplish what the West had failed to accomplish and replace pop culture with high art. I was one of the ones drawn to the concept because of its implications for the Gesamtkunstwerk."

"The Gesamtkunstwerk," I repeated, almost to myself.

"Oh yes. Surely as a German-speaking author you are aware of the artistic significance of the Gesamtkunstwerk."

"The Holy Grail of the art world. A fool's errand of the nineteenth century."

"Yes but not of the twenty-first," he corrected.

I didn't hide my skepticism. Srivat marched forward on his sales pitch, claiming that a grand undertaking the likes of which the world had never seen was currently underway. It would be historic, he claimed, would redefine art for a new era to come.

"You will have never seen anything like it. Tell me you'll come by the atelier before you leave. Elise," he said and grabbed my wife's hand, "the paintings alone will leave you speechless."

It was an old warehouse on the outskirts of the city, located next to a defunct cigarette factory. The energy inside of the building took my breath away, as much as I hated to admit it, no doubt due to the fact that we'd seen only a few cars parked outside. Inside were at least two hundred people, a nimety of what appeared to be costume designers and stage attendants. A closer examination, made possible by an old woman who showed us in but spoke no English,

revealed much more. Painters worked side-by-side but in apparent mental isolation, creating massive murals in the wildest colors. A tiny man wearing not one article of clothing stood on scaffolding, smoking a long pipe while adding detail to an enormous sculpture of a lion. In one hallway we heard various forms of singing emerging from behind the lines of closed doors on either side.

We traversed two floors, each of which displayed the same sort of frenzy as well as a potent mix of food spices and hashish smoke, before coming to a type of makeshift stage on the third level. It was quite dark, the only light coming from ten or so robed figures holding candles and chanting. From the shadows, as if he'd planned it that way (I'm quite sure he did in fact, as he knew we Austrians would be on time), Sachin Srivat emerged wearing his customary costume. He hugged both of us, as if we were old friends, and started in on Elise without hesitation:

“You must contribute at least one painting.” Her rough English and a bit of embarrassment held her up.

“Contribute to what?” I asked. “What exactly are we seeing here?”

“You are witnessing what I refer to as the incubation of Bu, the greatest work of art the world has ever seen. Or will ever see, once it's complete and on display,” he added with a wink.

“Bu?”

“The oldest word in the Proto-Indo-European language. It meant ‘be’ and is the essence of our creation here. Elise,” he went on, “I did some hunting around on you. My dear, you possess a gift, particularly with the oils. Again, you must contribute. Make it anything you want. Spend the day here. Talk to my painters. But talk to the singers as well, to the dancers and the actors and the poets and the sculptors. And then come back and talk to the painters again. Let yourself be inspired. Your instincts will show you the way.”

“And do I have a deadline?” she asked, playing his game.

“Soon,” he replied. “It's coming together, but there are logistical details yet to be defined. Take some time, but don't wait too long, my dear.”

“And where will we be able to see it all on display?” I asked.

“I'll have to let you know when the time comes. Listen, my friends, I'm afraid today is a very busy day. I have an appointment I'm already late for. But there is someone you have to meet. Samantha.” He hollered at a boy no older than seventeen, whose bare chest was painted in red and yellow markings, and spoke to him in what I guessed was Hindi. “He'll show you the way. You must meet Samantha while you're here, if for no other reason than for Elise's inspiration. Enjoy her.”

We found Samantha Timmerman-Bowes in what looked like a dressing room in disarray, drinking green tea and listening to headphones. Introductions revealed that she was an American, a teacher of creative writing and English at a college in the Midwest, and had joined Sachin Srivat's troupe four months earlier. She looked like she couldn't have been out of school for more than a few years. Her hair was a wild mess of reddish-brown curls and she had very faint freckles. I noticed a tattoo of the letter Q on her ankle and wondered what it might have meant to her. When I asked if she'd be contributing written work to the effort she huffed and smirked at me in positively rude fashion. “You know,” I told her, “Srivat didn't even ask me to contribute a piece. Only a painting from Elise.”

That's when she told us that her contribution would exceed all others.

“It will be centuries before they grasp his genius,” she claimed.

She went on to lament her alleged futility back home, the fruitlessness of her career. We heard that she'd fallen into a severe depression the previous year, resulting from what she at first couldn't identify. Later she discovered that it was her profession, the impotence she felt as a mere teacher of art.

“So I began to write,” she told us. “At least, I tried to write. But what I wrote was meaningless, spiritless. It wasn't even mine. It was the same thing my students wrote, the same product I was teaching them to produce every day, which was after all the same worthless trash I myself was taught to write years before. The manufacturing of it all, like on a conveyer belt. It made me sick. I was suicidal. I saw a therapist who told me to see a psychiatrist, who prescribed me pills. I never took the pills. Instead I decided one day I'd either take all of the pills at once or I'd do something spontaneous, one last-ditch effort to save myself. I came to Mumbai. That's where I met Sachin. If that isn't fate, I don't know what is.”

Then she told us that her role in the work was to be sacrificed on an altar at its climax.

“So acting is your calling,” I ventured.

“No,” she said. “I really will be sacrificed.”

Elise asked me to clarify, thinking she'd misunderstood, but there was no miscommunication. Samantha countered our moral objections by extolling the virtues of human sacrifice—particularly of unmarried women—throughout the ages, citing the Aztecs half a dozen times and exhibiting a rather profound historical understanding of the phenomenon. She claimed that there could be no higher contribution to art than the giving of one's life for it. I concluded she was crazy and couldn't be taken seriously.

“This is the Gesamtkunstwerk,” she parroted. “Do you even understand what he's brought together here? *Bu* will exhibit every graphic art known to man. It will feature a quartet of Tuvan throat singers and an entire opera with pieces in one hundred and six different languages, including fourteen Inuit dialects. Every form of world dance, from the tip of the southern Andes to Siberia, will be performed. It is something the world has never seen before.”

“And you'll be killed,” I interrupted. “How many other young women will supposedly lose their lives? Some magical number, I suppose? Thirteen surely?”

I'd managed to anger her. "Just one: me. There can only be one. I'll be pierced through the heart, at the height of the display, and serve as the crescendo. I shouldn't expect that you could grasp that significance. I know your work: garden variety refuse of the West. Go on deluding yourself about your greatness. Maybe you'll get your Nobel. You can shove it up your old wrinkly ass when you do. In two hundred years they won't remember who you or Nobel were. Sachin's Gesamtkunstwerk will survive."

I let Elise plead with her for another half hour before dragging her out. I told her not to worry and said the girl was crazy, that Srivat was actually a genius in that he'd found someone so passionate that she was in fact insane and could play his part to a tee. The only problem would be getting her to leave him alone once it was all over with.

Then we met Anders Berg. We were trying to leave, making a halfhearted attempt to find Srivat and say our farewell before moving on to Sri Lanka, and were stopped by a man speaking Danish on a mobile. He placed a hand on my chest and motioned for us to wait. Behind him were a few offices that looked like they might have been the home base of the production's director, but Srivat was nowhere to be seen. Finally Berg ended his call and introduced himself in German. He invited us into one of the offices, telling us Srivat hoped we would wait for his return.

"I suppose I can't say for sure if she's crazy," he said in response to Elise's questions, "but I can confirm that she told you the truth."

"So what's your role?" I asked him. He had dark hair and might have been fifty, with large brown eyes I could tell he liked aiming at people, perhaps in an attempt to intimidate or persuade them. "Are you the executioner?"

He laughed. "No. I am a producer. I'm responsible for bringing Sachin's work to the world."

"The world's first big production snuff film. How prestigious. What do the rest of the Pareto Optimalists have to say about the turn in that direction?"

“Herr Mohr, I would never take you of all people for a prude. You must know this is no snuff film. It is anything but pornography, and Sachin is the Pareto Optimalists these days, if there even is such a thing anymore.”

“So no sex then?”

“Oh yes, there is sex.”

“Acted sex.”

“No, no. It's real sex. I don't want to give too much away, but it's a tribal ritual from East Africa, a reproductive act that by its very nature must be public.”

Elise let him have it, all of the pent-up disgust and disbelief finally able to come forth in her native language. I thought she might smack him. We made to leave, but Berg pleaded with us to stay and wait for Srivat.

“It is her choice, I can assure you,” he said. “Whether you like it or not.”

“I'll take solace in the fact that you'll never be able to pull it off legally. I don't suppose you're willing to go in for a prison sentence in a place like India all for the sake of art, anyway.”

“It won't come to that,” he assured us. “That's one reason Sachin brought me in. We're close to finding the necessary location after a long search. Well, we have it narrowed down to four candidates. Sachin will make the ultimate decision.”

“I can only imagine what country would play host to your crime, but I hope you get what you deserve,” Elise told him. “Good luck showing your face back in Europe. If you pull it off, that is. No one is going to show such a thing on television, I don't care who you are back there.”

“And they won't have to,” he said and smiled. “It'll be streamed free of charge for all the world to see. Just a few clicks.”

We left and never saw Sachin Srivat or any other members of the Pareto Optimalists again. Elise insisted we go to the police, but I wouldn't allow it. I told myself they weren't serious. I told myself they'd never get all of the moving pieces together and actually get it done. Besides, it was her life and her right to do with it as she

pleased. We spent three days in Sri Lanka and returned to Vienna.

I thought I'd forget about it, but after a few weeks I couldn't resist the urge to check out the website. It had been updated hours before, heralding much of what Srivat advertised to us personally and dangling the unknown climax in front of the viewer's eyes, stating only that it would be the most remarkable artistic act in centuries. Upon reading that I felt honored that he'd entrusted the secret information with me, a fellow artist. The feeling nauseated me and prompted me to look up Samantha Timmerman-Bowes. I found her in no time and phoned her office. A secretary answered and told me she was unavailable, nothing more. A week later I went down the list of faculty members registered as her colleagues until I found someone, a young man her age, who was willing to speak to me. I told him who I was and that I was worried about her. He asked me why. I nearly burst out laughing when I heard myself telling him in my accented English that she'd confided in me that she was preparing to sacrifice herself as part of an elaborate snuff film produced by a band of psychotic artists hell-bent on making up for decades of abject failure. He didn't believe me.

"Look, Mr. Garcia Mohr," he said. Everyone, especially Americans, thinks my surname is hyphenated. "I don't know who you spoke to, but Samantha is out in Humboldt County, in California. Her parents have a cabin there. She's just taking some time. I doubt she would have gone to India. She hates traveling overseas."

I opted to dose myself with the lie she'd told him, administering it to my mind several times a day until I'd all but forgotten about Samantha Timmerman-Bowes. As for the Pareto Optimalists, their blog remained active for about eight months, even revealing their chosen venue (some sultanate in the Pacific, if I recall). Then they stopped updating it one day. After another month the site wouldn't even come up anymore. Srivat's whereabouts were anyone's guess, and a search for Anders Berg turned up some work on a reality show in Poland. I did find on a seedy website, however, a few videos that were posted and almost immediately unposted around the time the

blog went dead. No clue as to what they'd shown, but they referenced *Bu* and Srivat. I chose not to share that fact with Elise, instead theorizing that the American girl was not crazy but rather the smartest one of them all, having taken Srivat for everything he had and gone to California, knowing that her prospective murderer wouldn't dare show his face on U.S. soil to track her down. Maybe she'd even find it in herself to write a story or two, I thought.

