

ART IS NOT WHAT YOU SEE, BUT WHAT YOU MAKE OTHERS SEE. - Edgar Degas

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PERFORMANCE AS ART

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Is performance art an 'emerging trend'? Why are so many artists turning to it as a medium of expression? **Georgina Maddox** investigates.

AT the Kochi Biennale it was Nikhil Chopra who captivated audiences with his transformation to Le Pierre Noire (The Black Pearl)—a Colonial trader and impresario, while at the India Art Fair in New Delhi it was Priyanka Choudhury, from Gallery Maskara, who caught people's attention as she mimicked the Lemon Butterfly, a beautiful but dreaded predator that destroys citrus plants.

During the three-day fair Choudhury, with her hands behind her back munched on citrus plants allowing the overspill to dribble down her white garment forming a spontaneous pattern. By the end of the fair she was drenched in the green juice and the plants were bare. The intention was to contemplate the darker side of beauty, the act of invasion and its geopolitical ramifications.

"The tiny caterpillar that devours these plants and then turns into a gorgeous butterfly is a metaphor for the kind of invasion and conquest we see across the world," says Choudhury, who also got people to write down words on bits of paper through free association to her performance. "I think people got the general gist of what I was driving at," said the artist.

While curious onlookers, who had probably lesser exposure to performance were forced to ask, "Is this art?" there were others who judged it by comparing it to the artists pensive forays into performance rather than dismissing it

For many 'Performance Art' remains in the realm of the 'unexplained and fanciful' a bit like the Emperors New Clothes. But for others it appears to be emerging as a popular medium of expression: Whether it is the involvement of live performers or the photograph/video that documents it, there is something visceral, immediate and exciting about collapsing boundaries and pushing the notion of art.

While the 1990s saw a handful of very dedicated performance artists like Inder Salim, Sonia Khurana and even before that Rummana Hussain, the 2000s have virtually exploded with many expressions of performance among numerous artists whether they operate dually as painters, sculptors, photographers and video artist or if they are dedicated to being primarily performance artists.

"Performance or gestural art has gained acceptance over the years and I think that is why a lot of artists are now able to turn to it as a form of expression," says Pooja Sood director of KHOJ, the artist residency and Khoj Live. KHOJ hosted some of the earliest performance based art, including Subodh Gupta's defining performance video 'Pure' (2000) where he partook in a ritual cleansing with cow dung.

"It is a positive step, but with a lot of artists turning performers there are naturally degrees of good and bad performances; some are more convincing and successful than others. Time will sift out those who are less committed to the form than others. It's not just about the gesture but what it leaves you with," says Sood.

Internationally the move towards performance is being viewed with favour as well. "Today's Indian artists are taking risks of combining genres and defying disciplinary boundaries," says Eleanor Cunningham a writer and art aficionado for the Culture Trip.

In Kolkata seasoned and emerging artists, from India and internationally, came together to celebrate the International Performance Festival (KIPAF) that took to the streets and made. Project 560 is an artistic quest initiated by India Foundation for the Arts, to recode the city of Bangalore through performances.

Individual galleries are also hosting a number of performance-based artworks like sculptor and performance artist Anindita Dutta whose solo premiers in April at Latitude 28 and NIV Artist Centre that showcased a Performance Mini Festival with young artists from Kashmir, essaying their angst about the floods. Currently NIV has an ongoing International Arts festival that features performance art as well.

For Dutta the move toward performance was a very gradual one and arguably occurred before the hype around performance began. "I do not make a distinction between my sculpture or my performance, for me both are equally important and one feeds off the other," says Dutta.

From her early work, Brick Coffin where Anarkali-like she allowed herself to be covered by bricks (1999) to more recent works like Limited II, where she covers her head with a wooden fruit crate and is rendered her faceless and trapped by it, Dutta has moved to complex performances.

With an emphasis on a primeval material like clay, she included props like clothes, a bicycle, human forms that are all covered in clay. For her solo she has collaborated with other actors as well as performed herself. "Most of my works are about coming to terms with the fact that our life is not permanent. My work thrives on conflict, desire, pain and social issues," says Dutta.

While Dutta is all about stripping to the primeval, for Manmeet Devgun, who was one of the important artists featured at KIPAF, it is more about dressing up than dressing down.

Through high camp and glossy make-up she plays with the notion of femininity and the whole 'gender act'. During KIPAF, Devgun explored the notion of women and 'pleasure'. Dressed with silver eye shadow and a golden stole, Devgun invited people to read out aloud, shocking and interesting confessions about pleasure.

Read out in part Bengali part English the work created an abstraction of sorts and a certain level of curiosity. "The intention to read it out in the street was to share it with general public



Priyanka Choudhury's performance



A still from Sonia Khurana's video



Manmeet Devgun during one of her performance

as well, other than the art audience,” says Devgun.

Murali Cheerth is known for his psychedelic urban canvases, however he has been using performance as a medium of expression since 1986-87, when he was in Kerala. “I was part of a street theatre group in Kerala and I was working on Haiku poems and breath exercises...I wanted to explore performance as a discipline that was different from what was being practiced in the West,” says Cheerth who held a workshop at the KIPAF where he encouraged the performers to become aware of the power and energy of their breath. He also held workshops with children and has worked with large groups of people—almost 3,000 people, with the concept of breath and energy. “I try to involve my body, time and space—these are recurring themes in my work,” says Cheerth.

Looking critically at performance art, it essentially evolved as a form of protest against market forces and to create non-collectable art. Some of the defining performances have been by noted sculptor and performance artist Joseph Beuys of the Fluxes Movement and others like Rebecca Horn and Marina Abramovic. Over the years however, the market has subsumed performance and its documentation through photography and video-work and some of the edge of the initial performances that were not market motivated did rub off.

There is however ways of being inventive and challenging even within the market system as some artists have proven.

Sonia Khurana for instance stepped into performance art in the late nineties, when there was neither access nor exposure to performance art in India, except in theatre and dance. “It was for multiple reasons that I started to move towards working with time based media and performance art in the mid nineties; I was beginning to think about duration, about more democratic praxis, about corporeality, and the immediate presence of bodily action, and about resolving the struggle between body and language through performance. In terms of following genres, I tend to resist being type-caste and continue to sit on the edge of several things, working conceptually, often in the performative mode, and with moving image.” says Khurana. “It is a relief that performance art is beginning to gain more ‘acceptance’ in art world in India, however, its understanding remains on a surface level, and its inclusion rather perfunctory; for instance, for most part, performance art is still seen as something that can fashionably ‘flesh out’ the opening event of an exhibition.

The popular purchase and attraction of performance art in the current art scene in India primarily remains centered around the presenting of a theatrically produced idea and/or an extravagant persona. In the absence of support structures, and given that galleries etc are self-funded, there is pressure on performance art, which is intrinsically largely ephemeral, to produce ‘residue’ that can be commodified. On the other hand, not being co-opted into a commodity system can well be seen as a privilege of performance art. In every case, in terms of building a critical discourse around performance art, we are still very nascent stages and have a long way to go.” says Khurana.

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