

Critic Note

"It is easy to gather a crowd in India what really matters is what one does with them" - Diane Torr

At one level, there is the agency of the curatorial project, however there is an intangible limit to this agency. Somehow the energy that invigorates experimental curation simultaneously undermines the curatorial agency. "Experimental", because it plays with the urge to define, consciously making an effort to loosen the structure, making room for the curation to take its own form, and perhaps develop a critique on the intentionality of the original curatorial idea. The structure of programming of KHOJ workshops and residencies, have over the years upheld the curatorial practice of programming with a definite agenda; while structuring the program loosely enough to ensure a free space of operation for the participating artists.

The 2006 Performance art residency was curated with the intention to bring together various practices within "Performance" and "live art" and create a potpourri of talents, aiming to re-energise and redefine the concept and practice of "Performance" in India. Nalini Ramani, Rumanna Hussain, Sharmila Samant, Pushpamala, Monali Meher and Anita Dube have been recurrent names when one talks about "performance art in India" there is a need to discover new talent, renew energies.

The objectives of the residency demanded a substantial involvement on the part of the Indian artists, and engaging them with international artists coming from different understandings of Performance. To be able to pursue this direction, the residency was expanded to include seven artists; four international: Diane Torr (Glasgow/NYC), Paulo Nazareth (Brazil), WuYe (Shanghai), Oreet Ashery (London), all belonging to cultures which have a strong tradition in Performance Art. The three Indian artists in the residency were; Anusha Lall (New Delhi), Sonia Khurana (New Delhi) and Sushil Kumar (Delhi). Each artist came from diverse trajectories, and each through their practice worked towards opening up newer spaces within the dominant trends of "Performance".

Mapping the Artists

Diane Torr is a performance artist, writer, director and educator who developed her career in New York over a period of 25 years. In the past three years, she has taken up residence in Glasgow, where she was invited to teach an interdisciplinary course at Glasgow School of Art, and to work with the company Mischief-La Bas, Glasgow, in a new devised production, Painful Creatures. In teaching her gender transformation workshops, Diane has worked extensively in the gay and trans communities in New York, and Glasgow. Over the years she has evolved into a global drag king ambassador.

Sonia Khurana, is a Delhi based artist whose work occupies the intangible cross disciplinary space between video and performance. Over the years she has emerged to be one of faces contemporary cutting edge work in video. A video artist whose practice has always been focused on her body, this was her entry into the performance residency. Sonia's works are increasingly informed by the encounters with her own class, gender and sexual identities.

Oreet Ashery is a London based artist. Her work encompasses live art, video, sound and photography and has shown internationally in various contexts. Oreet is interested in the slippage between art and life and further mutations of current art practices. Her work uses politics of the body in relation to culture and location. She works across a range of media including digital video and image manipulation as well as live art, writing and Internet-based projects. Ashery's work deals with identity, and more specifically, the relationship between personal politics and social politics where the two merge, contradict and intersect.

Paulo Nazareth based in the town of Melo in Brazil, carries the fire of Latin American Performance Art. A radical new generation performance artist, Paulo is the new generation Brazilian performance artist, working and redefining a style first mastered by Danniell Saraiva.. His body of work is an ironic commentary on schizophrenia of lower middle class existence in Brazil. Using a calculated impromptu approach, Paulo uses re- contextualised gestures as his principle medium.

As a dancer who has trained in, and has been performing Bharatnatyam, Anusha Lall has had complex dialogue with the orthodoxies that control the discipline. She has also trained in contemporary European dance, once again negotiating with the classical orthodoxies embedded in it. Anusha's journey into Performance has been through these negotiations with the disciplinary orthodoxies within various realms of the Performing Arts. Over the last few years Anusha has moved on experiment with new media performance art trying to carve out a space of "greater artistic freedom".

Sushil Kumar's has been a long running radical voice in the realm of Performance Art in Delhi. Taking inspiration from absurdist philosophy, Sushil takes great delight in nonsense, at the same time successfully playing in the realms of our histories and memories. Claiming a subaltern position within the mainstream artist circle, Sushil Kumar lives his ideology performing in the "theater of the absurd".

Wu Ye is one of the new names coming out of Shanghai's performance art circle. Wu works outside the deeply "political" expressions of Performance Art in China. Earning his bread as a graphic designer, he struggles as an upcoming but understated Performance artist. He uses his body and the medium of video primarily to express his heterosexual anxieties. His expressions are "still" and poetic.

The Artists in Residence

It has been a challenge to map seven artists, with such diverse approaches to artistic practice, and each possessed of a strong personality. In this period of six weeks, they exchanged ideas, collaborated in workshops and explored the city. Three city based artists helped, there were visits to the qwali evening at the Nizamuddin darga, Sufi nights at the Lodhi Gardens, and various such rich cultural explosions that exemplify the late winter culture-scape of Delhi.

In a six-week international residency, it is important to introduce a system, which ensures that the artists coming from different backgrounds find a working chemistry, and get a feel of each other's practice, from the point of view of the in-house programming, it was also important to impart a feel of the various strands of Performance Art as they have taken shape in India.

In the introductory meeting a consensus was generated that each of the participating artists would lead workshops at a pace the group felt comfortable with. The workshops were essentially done in the

mode of the workshop coordinator doing pre-deciding improvisation based exercises, which were either team base or individual, and helped the participants to grasp each other's artistic flavors. The first three weeks witnessed one workshop each lead by Diane Torr, Anousha Lall, and Oreet Ashery. Beyond that point the workshops became redundant, having served their purpose as stimulator's facilitating the initial exchange of ideas and personality clues.

By the third week of the residency, the resident artists had already begun to work on their concepts/ideas around the work they would be doing in the residency, and how they would be structuring the display on the open studio day.

Wu Ye and Paulo had been busy walking around the city and video documenting, primarily concentrating on people and public spaces. By the end of the second week Wu had decided that his work would be centered on his video experience of people and the city, for Wu this residency was his first venture outside China and he was looking forward to articulate his feeling of being present in this strange city (with which he was increasingly falling in love with), and yet not really belonging. At that juncture Wu had decided against doing an actual performance, and wanted to primarily present a video work using his body as a metaphor.

Sonia has been a leading video artist, who has increasingly used her body as a site for articulating metaphors. Being a part of a Performance art residency generated a desire to use her body as a live medium. Humour and self have always been an intricate inspiration for Sonia. Sonia had not been able to come to KHOJ and participate in all the meetings and discussions, which had generated various degrees of unhappiness among the other participating artists. Sonia wanted to play on this and work around the theme of presence and absence. Sonia was pursuing another idea, that of playing a bag lady outside an up market place, getting a friend to video-document the performance and play the footage on the open day.

Anusha wanted to carry forward her experimentation combining performance and new media. By the second week, among all the participants Anusha, had the most clearly formulated notion about the display she wanted to put up. She had already shot a rendition of the Japanese "dance of womb" (by Lee Swee Keong, an Malaysia based artist) and was deciding a display strategy wherein the recording of the dance would be sound edited to traditional Sufi music and reflect-projected on the ceiling. Instead of performing in the traditional sense, Anusha takes great delight in creating sites wherein the audience is made to perform (and in that sense her work has begun to occupy the transient space between live and space art). Anusha wanted to design her space in a manner that that the image of the audience would be caught by a camera and transferred on to a screen and transferred on a screen (via a DVD projector) and each person entering the space would get to see the images of the people visiting the space before, thus being (suddenly) being made aware that he/she would be viewed by the next person entering thereby imposing the performative onto the audience. She also wanted to capture and simultaneously project the audience as she/he was leaving the room creating an illusion that that the person is entering the room just at the point when she/he is actually leaving.

Diane had decided to carry forward work of being the drag king ambassador she however let the pedagogic in her take over and, was experiencing concern as to how language divide coming between the artists in residence and a sustained intellectual interchange/exchange, borrowing an idea from Oreet, Diane decided to get a table tennis board, and develop a non-hierarchical version of ping-pong, thereby making the table tennis board as a site for meeting and exchange. In continuation with

her role as a drag king ambassador, Diane had begun conducting Drag king workshops in the National school of Drama. For the open studio day Diane wanted to choreograph a "chain dance", involving the people from the neighborhood of KHOJ (Khirkee village and extension) whom she wanted to train over a fifteen-day workshop.

Sushil, keeping up to his radical absurdist stream of thought, refused to plan meticulously in detail, even by the third week "I will do anything" was his standard reply to any body asking him as to what work he wanted to execute. However if one spent more time with him one would get to know that he had an anarchic act coming up. Sushil had decided to perform as a temple shoe keeper, collect the shoes of everyone who came in as an audience on the open day, and then eventually to suddenly up turn the shoe rack, and generate a chaos leaving the standard art viewing audience crawling and hunting through a disarrayed piles of shoes trying to retrieve their lost ones. Sushil wanted to execute three such radical interventions, however the rest two he was yet to develop.

For Paulo visiting Delhi and India was a rare experience, he had never been outside Brazil before, and he could sense that this cultural exposure would have a significant impact on how he viewed intervention. In his work for the open day, Paulo wanted to create a room for himself, constructing a utopia where he would live and work. Right at the onset Paulo was clear about the specificities, he wanted to construct his utopia with. In an attempt to communicate his own lived ambiance, Paulo desired to construct his space with some lime paint, a hammock, a radio and certain items of daily use. Within that space Paulo wanted to build in a narrative sealing up the rooms window with ply board, Paulo wanted to structure his performance around using a rudimentary cutting tool...and through the evening of the open day breaking the ply sealing open.

Oreet wanted to carry forward her long running engagement with the Jewish masculine identity(s). Her research and interaction with Shuddha from Raqs media-collective, informed her about Jews in India, including the mentioning of Sarmad the Saint. Oreet had decided to base her performance around her journey as she hoped to explore and discover more about this fleeting community its legends, its saintly hero, and the questions around their identities. As is characteristic about Oreet's approach to work one could sense that it would be very methodically worked out with a great attention to research and would be located within the realms of cultural identity and cultural anxieties.

As the third week drew to a close it soon became apparent that a new work mode was emerging, a mode more focused into giving shape to what the mind had abstractly conceived in the preceding weeks. However even within the work mode there were differences in approach and how the artists showed their various approaches between process and finish.

The kind of display Anusha wanted to execute ensured that she was neck deep in her pre production mode right from the word go. A lot of what she wanted to execute was outside her domain of technical expertise. Naturally her work began with researching expertise and technology, on the other hand she idea was also trying to devise means to solve the most nagging technological problem in her construction...the projection illusion of the audience leaving as they were entering. Eventually she had to leave the idea and concentrated completely on getting the project in place.

Paulo's approach was more process oriented and he spent his days devising strategies for newer kinds of interventions. Paulo started writing a pamphlet through which he wished to express his meeting with India. For Paulo India was this land that was so different yet so close to his country. Among the foreign artists, it was only Paulo who treated India with so much familiarity quickly realizing

the overtness of the differences in language and food habits. Of course there was also the historical accident of Columbus discovering the Americas in his quest to find an alternative sea route to the fabled India. Paulo wanted the pamphlet to be printed in Portuguese, Hindi and English. Soon the text was finalized, and the process of translating and designing the pamphlet began.

Oreet by then was neck deep in research on Jewish communities in India. She discovered a colonial period synagogue, and visited it. Faced with conservative apprehensions about a middle-aged woman touring India alone made Oreet feel like an outsider in a cultural space she had anticipated being an automatic insider. So I visited the synagogue with her, disguised as a Jew and performing the role of her husband. While performing my wife Oreet soaked in the easy acceptance. As the week passed Oreet began to find more material on Sarmad. Evenings were spent going through the Urdu narratives aided by Anusha and Sushil. Oreet also discovered Sarmad's tomb and was pleasantly surprised to find it is still visited by many worshipers. By then she had also started being very clear as to how she would stage her performance.

Wu Ye too by then had begun to be to walk round town with his video camera and locate the spaces he would be using in his work. Sonia was enacting her "bag lady" outside PVR Saket as she was fine tuning strategies of executing her display strategies. Diane conducted drag queen workshops in the National school of Drama; she had also put up posters in the neighborhood of Khirkee advertising the dance workshop leading up to the performance. The posters generated a lot of excitement it offered the exotic opportunity to attend a dance workshop conducted by a white lady culturally it also offered the possibility to step into the "other". Very soon the workshops started, very few people actually showed up, and the workshop threatened not to take off. It is at point Diane decided to change her strategy, and work only with children. Using the inroads made in to the community through KHOJ's community outreach program, the workshop was re-formulated to work with kids valuable days were lost and Diane needed to speed up her training mode. Sushil spend this time developing two more ideas and trying to source a temple shoe rack for him. Uncharacteristically Sushil wanted to do something involving a heavy use of technology and was trying to generate a self-awareness as to how he wanted to execute his concept.

The Open Studio Day

The open studio day was scheduled for Saturday March 25, 2006. Positioned as the show case climax for the residency program, KHOJ's open studio day has over the years become a much-awaited event in the city's culturescape. The performance art residency's open day even more so as there has been in a lot of latent interest in the concept and practice of Performance Art in India without there being adequate opportunities to engage with cutting edge Performance art. By the time the open day approached there was already a significant shift in the intentionality behind the Performance residency.

Initially conceived as a residency which would rejuvenate the practice of "Live"- "Body" Art in India, by the time of the Open day, KHOJ had re adjusted it aims and was looking at the Open Studio Day as an event through which one would attempt to explore prevalent notions of Performance Art encapsulating the shift from pure body art to utilizing mediatic interventions to create a platform for audience interactions within the peripherals of 'body communications'. This shift was primarily because of the encounters with the resident artists, who were by and large at a point wherein they were dissatisfied/concerned with the manner in which Performance art as a discipline was being formulated and were committed to re engage with it in a completely different manner.

The following are the list of list of Performances lined up for the Open Day:

OREET ASHERY -Imagining Sarmad

ANUSHA LALL-Homes 4 the Absent + Blind Date

SUSHIL KUMAR-Lesson 1... Lesson 2... Human Chain

DIANE TORR - TTT Adventure + Pass Along + Almost Hidden

WUYE -My Religion

SONIA KHURANA- "Don't Touch me when I start to feel safe" + Volga + Bag Lady

PAULO NAZARETH- Pure Water for Secular Men / Agua Potael Para Homeng Profands / Saada Paani Dharmnipreksh Admiyon Ke Liye + What Do i Make With India / O Que Faco Con A India / Main India Se Kya Karta Hoon + What India Made Do With Me / O Que A India Faz Comigo / India Mere Se Kya Karta Hai

A lot of initial conceptualizations were modified substantially, where as certain new ideas had taken roots. Sushil Kumar had developed two more ideas, Lesson 1, which mimicked a punishment given to lower castes and students in India, which involved crouching in the "chicken posture" and hopping a distance, crouched in that posture. He also developed the idea for a "Human Chain", which involved the artist sitting nude on a chair with his boots on his lap, there was a chair positioned in front of the artist which stood as an invite for any member of the audience to come and sit on it and establish visual contact with Sushil. There were two video cameras attached to two television monitors facing diagonally outwards into the audience. Sushil and the person seated in front of him held hands and looked into each others eyes, each time one of them blinked, the chain was declared broken and the person had to get up and make way for another member of the audience to come, sit and take the chain forward.

The open day evening began with Paulo enacting his performance "Pure Water for Secular Men / Agua Potael Para Homeng Profands / Saada Paani Dharmnipreksh Admiyon Ke Liye" the performance involved Paulo walking down the narrow lanes of Khirkee with a wooden water container tied to his chest and armed with some glasses he walked around distributing clean drinking water free to people. As usual Paulo evoked a strange sight, and baffled his audience with his play of contexts. As Paulo finished his walk and returned to the KHOJ building, Sushil began his Lesson 1, from outside the Sai Baba Mandir, through the lane leading up to KHOJ. Sushil attracted a huge crowd as he took up the physically exhausting task mimicking and parodying the demeaning punishment. Sushil's first performance smoothly flowed into the next one (Lesson 2), as he entered the building of the KHOJ studios, he asked the members of the audience to remove their shoes, and putting them on the shoe rack borrowed from a temple. Before people could realize what was happening, Sushil had upturned the rack and sent the shoes tumbling down in chaos.

By this time an unprecedented number of people had gathered inside KHOJ, and the gates had to shut for the purpose of crowd control slowly the rest of the Performances got under way. Diane Torr's TTT Adventure, was designed entirely an audience interactive performance involving a as a Table Tennis board which was kept for the members of the audience to come and play a new version of the game which involved people running around the table and playing a non hierarchical no win no loss

version of ping pong. Her "Pass Along" along was the showcasing of the dance workshop conducted with the children from the neighbourhood of Khirkee, this was staged just outside the KHOJ gate and involved the children dancing to a song of their choice. The dance had been evolved through a collaborative process, wherein each participant had evolved a set of steps and taught them to the rest of the group.

Paulo's "What Do I Make With India / O Que Faco Con A India / Main India Se Kya Karta Hoon + What India Made Do With Me / O Que A India Faz Comigo / India Mere Se Kya Karta Hai" was setup in one of the upstairs studio spaces, and was a fantasy recreation of his visit to India living, working meeting and experiencing. It was the most open-ended of all the performances; anyone could come in and interact with Paulo as he enacted "living" inside his installation sleeping on the hammock, craving away the sealed window, or just adjusting the things around. Wu Ye's piece for the evening was primarily a video. "My Religion" showed the artist dressed in an white (monkish) flowing garment, standing in various spaces in the city, suddenly Wu would disappear from the frame as if he was never present. It was an extremely poetic take on presence absence and identity. Later into the evening he did a naked performance inspired by his experience at the Khirkee Masjid, however the performance did not really hold because the strain of being tied to ropes and suspended in space was too much physical strain.

Oreet's "Imagining Sarmad" was a two show performance based on the stories of Sarmad the Saint and his lover, a young Hindu man called Habichand. The performance was an adaptation of the story told in eight letters written by Sarmad to his imaginary sister. In the performance the artist lay in the middle of the space on a box and "embody" the story through drawing, clothes and other props, whilst eight people from the audience are sat around me and read the eight letters. The performance was very strong in its narrative and formal engagement, both the shows left the audience spellbound. Sonia's "Don't touch me when I start to feel safe" was staged in a partitioned room and also involved a video camera with a projector. Sonia sat behind one partition and as people entered her space, they could see her through the projection, she could be seen sitting engaged with herself, and periodically coming out carrying a paper in hand, the paper was an invitation for members of to come join her in her room for a glass of wine and some light chat. For Sonia it has a significant performance, the first time she crossed the divide and actually performed live. The Bag Lady video played in a small television screen in a passage outside Sonia's studio space.

Anusha's installation was so big in scale that it could not be accommodated inside the KHOJ building. Luckily her studio was right next-door and big enough to accommodate the structure necessary to execute the installation. One entered through a narrow circular space, and came across 15-inch monitors, showing all the residency artists doing a performance piece inside the constructed space. Then one would step into a big domed enclosure, where dance of womb Lee Swee Keong "dance of the womb" was reflected off a water container and projected on the dome. In front one could see a blue projection screen, and as one approached the exit door one could see a projection of their image projected on to the screen. It was a highly poetic construction of space primarily using video imagery, even if one notes that Anusha was not able to execute initial conception.

Dian's performance "Almost Hidden" was a subtle exploration of voyeurism, and the liminal erotic. The artist recreated the experience of the forbidden glance where a secret intimacy is publicly revealed, generates a fantasy in you that continues long after the car has passed over the flyover, and occupies your imagination as you travel along the highway.

Late into the evening the programming drew to a close, leaving us dazzled by all the crowd all the new articulations of Performance and for me it was a reminder of how much theory had to progress if one had to critically engage with such range of artistic practices.

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