

HOW DIFFERENT CURATORIAL APPROACHES SHAPE THE EXPERIENCE AND PERCEPTION OF PERFORMANCE ART

IRENE MÜLLER AND DOROTHEA RUST



curatorial formats. Thus, this article focuses on their common features and differences as well as their specific aspects depending on the site and context.

Kala Samuha Art Marathon was a collateral venue of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale that took place from February 9 to February 11, 2017, at Mill Hall Compound. Based on an open call 100 artists presented their works during three days showing all different genres of art, i.e. painting and drawing, sculpture and installation, photography, video and audio work as well as live performance. In order to manage so many artists in one exhibition space the curator Suresh Kumar decided to use a tight time structure. Each day was divided into six slots of 40 minutes, involving between six and eight artists and their works. Regarding this setting Kumar referred to initiatives by the Venkatappa Art Gallery Forum (VAG) in Bangalore where these art marathons articulated an artistic strategy of successful resistance to keep this art space without commercial boundaries, ensuring that VAG remains a democratic public space for creative activities.

In combining various genres of art, the live performances became just one part of a continuously changing exhibition, surrounded by other art works and visitors strolling around. This setting basically enhanced the quality of time in

In February 2017 the art space of Sristhi Institute for Art, Technology and Design at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale and the Venkatappa Art Gallery in Bangalore became the performance spotlights: both brought together about 130 artists from different regions in India for a lively exchange of up-to-date performative art practices, affecting not only the artists and audiences but also the Swiss-Indio curatorial team.

At the Bangalore event the authors were actively involved as co-curators but in Kochi they were just visitors with any influence in the curatorial decisions. Experiencing the two different roles within the same artistic field provoked a closer look on the way performative practices had been presented in these two

^

Performance by Uma Banerjee, THE LONGEST PERFORMANCE DAY, Bangalore, Photo Courtesy: Priyanka Govil

<

Performance by Uma Banerjee, THE LONGEST PERFORMANCE DAY, Bangalore, Photo Courtesy: Priyanka Govil





Based on an open call 100 artists presented their works during three days showing all different genres of art, i.e. painting and drawing, sculpture and installation, photography, video and audio work as well as live performance.

exhibition slot, thus the experience and perception cannot be separated from the one of the other exhibited artworks.

Three days later the second event, THE LONGEST PERFORMANCE DAY, took place in Bangalore on February 14, 2017. It was organised within the framework of Sambhrama 2017, a three-day festival at Venkatappa Art Gallery (VAG) celebrating its 1st anniversary of the effort of those who have kept this initiative alive. With its setting the event referred to a curatorial format called THE LONGEST DAY which had been established more than ten years ago in Zurich (Switzerland), currently organised by the two authors. This format understands the meaning of a “performance day” quite literary, thus the day of the event presents itself in a tight structure following an hourly rhythm from sunrise to

sunset, meaning in Switzerland a nonstop programme of 16 hours. For Bangalore the authors collaborated with two Indian artists, Smitha Cariappa and Suresh Kumar, who have been actively involved in the VAG protest movement and on whose expertise the artists had been invited. Additionally, the time frame was adapted to an overall time span of ten hours resulting in a time slot of about 20 minutes for each of the 27 artists.

Located on the first floor of the building the exhibition space with FL tubes on the ceiling and no other installations provided a more or less neutral setting in which each artist arranged her / his performance individually. The performances happened in a relay, unannounced one after the other and without thematic arrangement. Based on the agreement between curators and artists, especially on the fixed

the exhibition. Genuinely inherent in live performance, temporality is therefore no surprising factor; but it affected the other artworks too, which not only received a defined and limited presence in space and time but also underwent an active and noticeable movement from back-stage to the exhibition space and back again. Counting down the minutes until the next time slot, setting up and dismantling the exhibition, viewing artworks and performances, discussing with artists and cleaning the space: all these moments were not only openly visible but also influenced the character of the exhibition imparting the impression of a cinematic event.

During these days the audience (and the artists) were emerged in several “moving pictures”, one presenting the live performance as a main act, framed by the “static” artworks, the other manifested itself when the scenery shifted from the exhibition slot to a kind of interlude, in which all the other art works experienced a performative twist.

Due to this curatorial approach the live performances represented just only one voice in a polyphonic chorus that challenged the attention of the audience constantly. In this respect all (actual and future) recollections of each performance will always include its entire

^

Performance by Priyanka Govil, THE LONGEST PERFORMANCE DAY, Bangalore, Photo Courtesy: Suresh Kumar

>

Performance by Khurshed Ahmad, THE LONGEST PERFORMANCE DAY, Bangalore, Photo Courtesy: Priyanka Govil





The attendance of four narrators, Smitha Cariappa and Yash Bhandari from Bangalore as well as the authors, who observed all performances and took notes not only gave an additional boost of concentration to each performance and ensured a more or less heightened attention throughout the day. Their records provided the basis for the next day, the so-called Concluding Day.

sometimes eye-opening moments juxtaposing individual artistic positions of different generations to each other. As the events took place in proximity in time some artists participated in both locations, exposing and testing their performances in two different settings and contexts.

Whereas in Kochi the setting merged all the artworks, including the live performances, in each time slot to one “Gesamtkunstwerk” at a time. The event in Bangalore was more streamlined. Due to the unimpeded relay and with the focus only on time-based actions, so to speak live performances, the different artistic approaches as well as their singularities received undivided attention. Thus it allowed the audience to focus upon the way how the performers worked with time and space, creating moments

of participation and separation respectively as well as developing iconic images or shifting spatial situations. Furthermore, the LONGEST PERFORMANCE DAY expanded its curatorial approach to the field of reflection and feedback. The attendance of four narrators, Smitha Cariappa and Yash Bhandari from Bangalore as well as the authors, who observed all performances and took notes not only gave an additional boost of concentration to each performance and ensured a more or less heightened attention throughout the day. Their records provided the basis for the next day, the so-called Concluding Day. As a gathering of artists, curators, narrators and interested parties this meeting facilitated the recollection of the performances as well as a direct feedback for the artists given in form of an “outside view”. This “echo

temporal structure, the character of the event was very much shaped by the performers. The ten hours showed a wide range of artistic approaches including conceptually oriented performances as well as strategies dealing with presence (of the body in time and space) and simple and unpretentious action, specific materials and / or participation. By working with language, by the means of voice, text and lecture, some performers emphasised a politically motivated need to articulate their issues. Other performances referred to topics of Indian politics in a more symbolic or metaphorical way. In addition, several performances featured ritualistic aspects or actions based on specific societal, cultural or religious rituals which underlines not only an understanding of performance as a moment of transformation and

transmission but also stresses the importance of religious traditions, spirituality and its ceremonies which (still) have an impact on the Indian daily life and on contemporary (performance) art.

On the one hand the curatorial format of each event shaped the nature of the performances as much as the cultural context they had been situated in: the art marathon as part of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, an international and prestigious art event, and THE LONGEST PERFORMANCE DAY in Bangalore within a more political framework, an initiative for a public art space organised by the local art community. On the other hand both programmes included experienced performers as well as newcomers, many of them were under 35 years old. They offered refreshing and

^
Performance by Mohan Kumar, Kochi Art Marathon, Photo Courtesy: Suresh Kumar

>
Performance by Paramesh Jolad, THE LONGEST PERFORMANCE DAY, Bangalore, photo Courtesy: Priyanka Govil





space” was shaped by articulated observations and questions, different views and – most importantly – the respect for each voice. Based on the re-narrations of specific performances the discussion opened up to more general issues, e.g. the distinction between performative and theatrical practices, the importance of understanding specific political references, cultural and gender codes as well as (art) traditions.

In respect to these experiences we summarize that performative strategies, be it on a curatorial and reflective level or as an artistic practice, can provide a worthwhile tool for cultural exchange. Contemplating about performance includes both: the theoretical concept of performativity and witnessing or developing live performances. Performance art

always creates a multi-layered field in which impacts and subjective experiences, changing roles and individual viewpoints are intertwined. Distinct performative settings such as the ones discussed in this article contribute to new exhibition models as well as to enhance an intensified and moderated reflection on artistic practices. Moreover, performance art can be understood as a method of appropriating and sharing spaces of cultural differences in an effective way, taking place in real time and in an almost one-to-one-mapping. In view of cultural exchange or so-called transcultural projects performative practices bring about an awareness of the manifold relations of all parties involved, of misunderstandings and differences, unexpected potential and common concerns. They give rise to a complex but nevertheless intriguing

space, where live art, individual and cultural issues can surface and can be articulated in revealing and often challenging ways, certainly influencing curatorial teams and artists likewise.

Links to the websites of the projects / art spaces mentioned in the article:

Kala Samuha, Srishti Institute @ Kochi: <https://www.facebook.com/srishtioutpost/>

Venkatappa Art Gallery, Bangalore: <http://vagforum.in>

THE LONGEST DAY, Zurich (CH): <http://thelongestday.wordpress.com>.

^

Performance by Chitra EG, THE LONGEST PERFORMANCE DAY, Bangalore, Photo Courtesy: Priyanka Govil

>

Performance by Anupam Saikia, THE LONGEST PERFORMANCE DAY, Bangalore, Photo Courtesy: Priyanka Govil

