

Varsha Nair

No Dead Lines in Live Art

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The email reminding me of the end of June deadline for this essay arrived in my inbox as I was checking mail in Isfahan, Iran. Miles away, delving in this very different part of the world that in many ways is so much the same – this internet shop, the buzz on the street, chiming mobile phones and a conversation earlier about rising living costs with the taxi driver – it feels strange to recall NRLA, even to dwell on my *being* in my ‘other’ open-to-all-possibilities environment of Bangkok. I am still in the process of finding a *way of being* in this complex and challenging setting – one that is strict and yet extremely hospitable and welcoming, closed and yet one that allows for unexpected discoveries.

This is my second visit to Iran and I think, at least I tell myself that things are starting to become clearer, that I am beginning to understand. In a way I feel at home, historical ties between Persia and India, the land of my ancestors (who in all likelihood originally came from the Persian Plains), were strong and evidence of this is still very much part of our culture. I hear Farsi and pick up on words that are shared by our tongues, but I am a stranger to the present reality of the place, different aspects of which I am experiencing bit by bit and from day to day. Like attending a literary reading meeting earlier held by a dynamic group of women writers who gather weekly to share their unpublished, perhaps never to be published stories and poems, to speak about the real and the imagined, and an array of life situations – from society’s constraints, to love deceptions and relationships, from their achievements and longings, to the big and small happenings in their lives

Amongst all that awaits me when I return to Bangkok one thing is clear – the mind, which is already excessively active, is bound to go into overdrive. There’s much to feel and even more to take in; experiences hit our bodies so much faster than they could ever hit our minds.

This morning, donning a chador for the first time (required wear for women entering certain religious and official spaces), I entered a mosque and struggled to photograph with a manual camera, being mindful of not letting the chador slip to the floor as I fumbled with the settings. In the end, an artist I have befriended and who accompanied me gripped the fabric under my chin making sure the trailing five meters had a safe anchor on my head, and thus, in unison, we slowly proceeded to photograph and traverse the space. The images of the

domed ceiling are memorialized in the film negatives but this says little about all that is experienced in the process of capturing them. ‘To make art we must feel free’, she said as we returned the chadors at the entrance and left the mosque. ‘But how can I when each morning I must think of this?’, she pointed to her long shirt/coat and a scarf wrapped around her head which is beginning to show fresh hair growth that is a week old. Since revealing hair in public is an issue she had shaved it off and when stopped on the street and questioned, told the police she had a bad case of ‘microbes’ that were crawling all over her scalp. She is determined to repeat this act again and again, also as a form of protest, turning the imagined case of lice infestation into a chronic condition to deal with her unremitting desire to feel liberated.

Chances that she, the writers I have come to know, and many other artists like them who, given their strict and limiting environment, might one day be able to present their stories in an open public forum in their own environment are, for the time being, remote. Their methods of expression are perhaps not the groundbreaking and cutting edge stuff artists in other parts of the globe are engaged in. But raising difficult questions about life and being, by putting themselves on the line and starting to define their experiences they open up the possibility of sharing, exploring, and presenting different visions and thought processes. I am overwhelmed and excited by these private acts of accentuation and of self empowerment – writing, reading, reciting, and shaving, and their carefully negotiated public engagement – in the writers’ meeting room or answering to and challenging the authorities guised with an innocent smile if required; the questioning is alive and decidedly kicking.

The presentation by one of the women in the writers’ meeting room brings to mind Sekou Sundiata’s poignant performance *Blessing The Boats* (NRLA 2006), in which he relates his experience of dealing with illness and facing a life and death situation, amongst other concerns, as he sought medical treatment. Far from the atmospherically lit presentation spaces of Tramway, in this stark neon-bright room in Isfahan yet another evocatively told personal story starts to speak of situations that affect people’s daily lives, aspects of which many of us can relate to. Putting aside cultural underpinnings and boundaries of location, even the banner of art, here, the risk taking,

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Both: *point 33, distilled* (2006)



Photos: Karla Sachse



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in-between places (2004), photo: V Nair.

breaking with tradition to challenge established notions, and finding different ways to *hear* and *be heard* where methods employed go beyond the norm, is similar to what I have encountered at NRLA, experiencing things as a participant presenting at the festival and in the expressions of fellow artists coming from different parts of the globe.

My first journey to the NRLA led me to engage in a set of actions even before I got there. With little prior knowledge of the festival I arrived to participate in the 2004 event with a great deal of curiosity, and the inevitable questions of a first-timer – would it be the environment for me? This is a big and a well-known festival, will I be able to meet its demands, be able to *perform*? I soon realized that the NRLA presented the kind of platform I had been looking for, one that does not fully define things but is open to possibilities and the potentiality of artistic experimentation. That I could, literally, think on my feet and follow a path of my own making, as I did in 2006 with rolls of packing tape (*point 33 distilled*), arrive in the space with a sketch of an idea and take the risk of diving into the deep end, and finding a rhythm of strokes to get to the other side without even defining or resolving what the other side could be.

When Nikki Milican first invited me, my immediate response had been ‘Yes, thank you, how exciting!’ It was in the following weeks when I started to consider the logistics and how I would actually present *in-between places*, which started out as an installation, in the form of a durational performance/installation, that the challenge that lay ahead struck me. Firstly, how to transport the components of the piece that is made up of multiple cardboard boxes each with the same photograph of my family home from Baroda (India) pasted inside, a total of 1,200 that when flattened fit into six rather large shipping cartons altogether weighing I know not what. Clearly most of this *baggage*, including that of the mind – *the how..., what if..., what about...*, in terms of realizing the

*point 33, distilled* (2006). Photo: Karla Sachse

work, had to be considered and, having done so, was best left behind.

Thus, preparing to journey to Glasgow started a process – both a mental and physical one that included paring down my packing to the minimum, weighing stuff bit by bit, and determining the number of boxes I could carry (120 precisely) as check-in baggage. And, packing and moving the two cumbersome shipping cartons, which contained the 120 boxes, around at home and then at the airports I navigated, the performance had begun even before I arrived at the Arches, which subsequently became an apt place to talk of my sense of dislocation, displacement and the ephemeral nature of things; aspects of which I have been addressing in my practice. One of the significant outcomes of this presentation was the move to draw what was essentially a ‘static’ piece and start to animate the space and how this, what I call *the act of living the moments of installing*, further started to echo my spate of moves in a short space of time and having to go through the process of installing a home again and again.

The following year, in 2005, I was invited to present *in-between places* at the NRLA Midland, Perth, where in a railway warehouse, the place an acute reminder of transport and transience, I proceeded to unpack, pack, move, and draw with tape, referencing the nomadic flow of location, dislocation, and relocation. It was also in Perth that Nikki Milican expressed a wish to include a larger participation of artists from Asia and this resulted in us bringing together *Mapping the Body: body dialectics by women artists from Asia*. The group included eleven women artists, Asians and non-Asians, all engaged in multidisciplinary practices including performance. Works were presented by Beauty Suit Team (Thailand/France/Australia), Bubu & Yoshiko Shimada (Japan), Hsu Su-Chen (Taiwan), Judy Freya Sibayan (Philippines), Liliane Zumkemi (Switzerland/Thailand), Nilofar Akmut (Pakistan), Tejal Shah (India), and me (India/Thailand). There was also a forum which Bina Sarkar Elias, editor of

the Mumbai-based *Gallerie* magazine, chaired.

The introduction text in that year’s NRLA catalogue states, ‘the inclusion of work by women artists from Asia is an especially welcome development’, and this is also true for the artists in the group. In terms of introducing their own work, experiencing the diversity of presentations at the NRLA, and not only meeting artists coming from different parts of the globe but also getting to know their colleagues from the region, it was crucial to be part of this development in relation to adding to the plural perspectives engendered at and by the NRLA.

The artists in *Mapping the Body* generally place themselves away from the centre, with many challenging the established frameworks of art making and showing in their individual environments where there is little interest to research into, let alone support unconventional art practices. The meetings that do take place, and some annually such as Asiatopia (Thailand <http://www.asiatopia.org/>) and Future of Imagination (Singapore <http://www.foi.sg/>), are initiated and led by artists. However, limited, or at times no funding and organizational support understandably make it difficult for them to fully open up to include the kind of diversity that the NRLA is able to draw together and offer to artists and the public. But many artists, especially so in this part of the world, are not ones to wait to be presented with the ‘right conditions’ and time deemed to be appropriate by others, ‘conditions’ which, in some cases, have a slim chance of materializing. Amid the uncertainties created by the ongoing adverse political situation in Burma, artists there continue to organize performance events periodically despite the strict censorship imposed by the Junta. In early 2007, performance artist Lin Htet started to organize ‘The Festival of Contemporary Theatre and Performance Art’ which was eventually held in Rangoon in March 2008 (<http://www.theatreofthedisturbed.org/>). Originally planned for November 2007, the Festival, a mix of workshops, seminars and performance presentations by local and international participants had to be postponed because of the ‘Saffron Revolution’ (in September 2007), and the authority’s subsequent tightening of censorship and clamping down on freedom of expression and movement, including refusing to grant entry visas to some of the participants coming from abroad.

Despite limited exposure, interest in live art practice is growing steadily, a welcome development for many artists including me. The recently staged first ever performance/live art festival in Delhi, India, Khoj Live (organized by KHOJ International Artists’ Association and held over six days in March 2008), brought together thirty-three artists coming from different backgrounds and managed to create and capture the buzz. Much to the organizers’

surprise, Khoj Live (*khaj* is Hindi for *quest* or *search*) saw a record number of people attending the festival, held each night at a different venue around the city. What is interesting is the involvement of three established commercial galleries, considered to be amongst the ‘who’s who’ of Delhi’s art spaces. Until recently these galleries would have been reluctant to support the experimental, *the non commercial* in art, let alone the unfettered energy unleashed by artists working on the Live side of art. As Khairuddin Hori, an artist who was the resident critic at the event states,

‘As an artist, curator and witness to several other, better-established Southeast Asian performance art festivals, the Khoj experience left me ‘wired’! I dare say that Khoj LIVE 08 is a promise and premise from which performance art, although without a strong contemporary history in India, is about to change its face.’ (‘Wired From Delhi’, http://khojworkshop.org/book/wired_from_delhi)

Knowledge and direct experience of performance art isn’t exactly widespread in this part of the world, and the term ‘Live Art’ is still mostly unfamiliar. My own relatively recent (in 1996) instinctive step into the field was led by my desire to explore further and innovate by blurring the boundaries of the different media – drawing, video, installation, performance – that I was already working in. Similarly, a number of artists in the region, including the ones who presented at *Mapping the Body*, have been or are starting to work in ways that defy definitions in seeking new languages to present their ideas.

One thing the live art gatherings that I have so far been part of share – the first Performance Conference Bangkok (held in December 1997, <http://www.asa.de/conferences/index.htm>), the NRLA and Khoj Live – is a generative force that is unpredictable and challenging, where both to present work and experience that of other artists means to open up to unexpected, thought-provoking and at times highly immersive encounters.

If I were to think of making a home in this *space/place* occupied by art it would be in the midst of that which artists offer at these and similar events, in the *live*. Not one to rest, this would be a home that is always in transition where the containers, instead of getting unpacked, gain more and more and start to swell with the experience of things. Located in the movement of a constantly shifting and evolving life’s scenario, a home in-between, where many a notion is continually being put to the test.

Then again, not tied to any fixed lines and limits of time and location this can be met anytime, anyplace, in any part of the world.

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Varsha Nair presented *in-between places* at the NRLA 2004, returning in 2006 with *point 33, distilled*. She also participated that year in the discussion *Mapping the Body*. Nair with Lena Eriksson, performed *LOOC: Line Out of Control* at the NRLA 2010.