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[EVENT LISTINGS](#)
[ANNOUNCEMENTS](#)
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TAKE – Writing | Issue 19 | July – December 2016

PERFORMING BODIES / THINKING BODIES

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The Phantom Lady interviews Smitha Cariappa about the very successful performance art festival she organized with Bar1 at Bangalore recently: LIVE ART 2011.

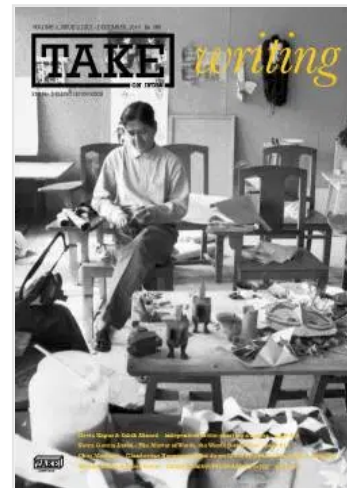


Raghu Wodeyar
Dawn – Dusk
Double Road
Courtesy: Smitha Cariappa

Phantom Lady (PL):
Smitha, the LIVE ART 2011 Bangalore International Performance Festival you organized recently for Bar1 was so ambitious in

scale and thoughtful in conception, I have never seen anything like it. It was part public performances, part workshop and part seminar, with experienced international artists, young artists and students. We spent two weeks together and became a community. I found an unusual intimacy, openness, experimentation and spontaneity with a lot of discussion and analysis. Can you talk

TAKE – WRITING (ISSUE 19)



"TAKE precipitated a longtime dream to connect the stories and knowledge of artists, art historians, critics, curators, gallerists and administrators, without distinction, while evolving a language for art writing that could establish camaraderie between these various wheels that propel the arts forward. It

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to it! It started with my being a part of BAR1, the Bangalore Artist Residency 1. We decided to stop our residency programme in November last year and work on projects. I have been thinking for a while that it was very important to document and archive performance and to encourage students and performance art studies, and the best way was to organize an international platform. You know that Bangalore has also been a city where theatre and performing arts has had a long history but the people here have not really understood performance art.

As an artist organizing the event, I wanted it to be informal and intimate, and my target was the students and upcoming artists. It had to make a change to the approach to performance art in the city. I invited artists who had made a big difference in their own cities, like Dorothea Rust who created the *Dawn to Dusk* performance in Zurich and Tamar Raban who is really responsible for the performance art seen in Israel by creating the Performance Art Platform (PAP) in Tel Aviv. I had met Bandu Manamperi and Janani Cooray at the Theertha Residency in Colombo. Janani who works on critiquing the concept of "Beauty" was so constrained in Colombo, but she was very relaxed and almost giggly here. I think it's very male-dominated in Colombo but she found so many women artists in LIVE ART. I wanted her to meet Mangala because they are so similar in some ways, and finally they did a performance together here.

Dorothea Rust and Monica Klingler curated the Swiss section and invited Markus Goessi and Susann Wintsch, curator and editor of the DVD magazine on contemporary art called TREIBSAND.

the mission to infuse conversation and discourse on the arts into the phantasmagoric shell that the boom had turned art into. TAKE was committed to being a platform for its readers and writers—far apart as they might be physically—to come together in the simultaneity of its pages. I wanted the journal to not just be the end result of the efforts of its contributors, but also be the friend and the mentor that I had sought while starting out—a witness and participant to coffee table discussions, tea stall banter and the wine and cheese of the white cube—in the formal, more accessible mode of a publication."

- Excerpt from the editorial by Bhavna Kakar



I found a book on Ratnabali Kant's work in Suresh Jayaram's place and realized she was doing performance in the mid '80s and felt that her work had not been recognized, so I invited her for the event. She had stopped doing performance in 2005.

PL: I found so many elements

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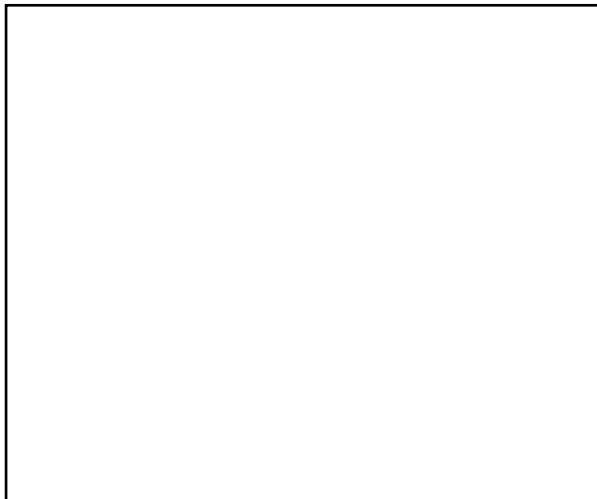
Made Surya, 18 November, 3.00 pm,

NGMA Outdoor. Image Courtesy:
Smitha Cariappa

sculpture in their work, in the
literariness and the direct

feminist statement, and in using traditional cultural material. One of the problems around her work was the lack of context or discourse around it at the time, like the early videos of Rameshwar Broota. They were like lone figures doing something before its time!

SC: Usually stars are invited for these events but I didn't want to invite the regulars, except Sushil Kumar (who tells me that he has been doing performance since the 1980s as well). I also wanted the invited participants to interact and stay for all the fifteen days of the event to give back to the students and young artists. This way the crowd doesn't get dispersed after the performance and the conversation keeps going. The invited artists can also get into the culture of the place. In most international festivals the local artists just come for a day and perform and don't involve themselves in the whole festival.



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PL: I thought you had structured the event very well. The first two days there were artist talks, the third day was the *Dawn to Dusk* performances all over the busy roads between the artist spaces Bar1, 1Shanthiroad and Jaaga, and some inside them. You were dressed like a sergeant major in army fatigues with a LIVE ART 2011 umbrella, leading the people to the various spots. And there were actions taking place on the flyover, under the flyover and medians, walking across the roads and pavements in the traffic. It was great fun. The art student Deepak's performance on the

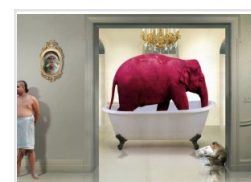
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so intrigued that no one objected to the confusion. And then there



was the intensive two-day workshop after that by Dorothea Rust and Monica Klingler, where each one's work was analysed and critiqued, followed by loosening up exercises.

SC: The idea was to have the 15 November event first and then the workshop, because seeing documentation is not experiential. The invited live art performances were for five days after the workshop. Being an artist myself I wanted to give everyone freedom to choose their time and space, so sometimes the schedule was very loose!



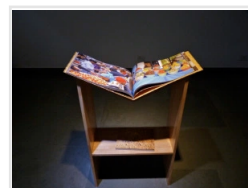
Dorothea Rust, 20 November, 5.00 pm, Venkatappa Art Gallery, Indoor. Image Courtesy: Smitha Cariappa

Basically I'm an introvert. I can't be with people all the time. At the same time the Festival was a free go. Especially, the 15 November

Dawn to Dusk

7 am to 7pm almost non-stop performances was very interesting. The whole day was in the open, on the public roads in the centre of Bangalore. I felt very comfortable leading people to the sites, with the public crowding around. Being an introvert you are suppressing yourself, but when the event happens you break away all those walls and you create a sacred or structured space, and another persona comes out. Something you would like to develop over a period of time re-surfaces. Being an artist and organizer is difficult because as an artist you need a lot of freedom, a bare minimum of restrictions, while as an organizer you need to be more structured. In this I was being more of an artist yet giving it a definite structure, rehearsed in my mind as I would do for my own performance. In many ways LIVE ART 2011 is my conceptualized durational performance lasting for over nine months.

PL: The next five days of invited performances in the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) and Venkatappa Art Gallery were



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indoor space like the white cube of the Venkatappa Gallery. Vijay Shekhon and Manas Acharya actually worked with the figure of K.Venkatappa and his collection there. Many artists improvised or did several actions, doing collaborations towards the end with other artists or students. The whole thing ended with two evenings of talks. And there were lots of parties throughout!

SC: It was almost so certain and predictable that most artists prefer to perform in the evening as they would anticipate a large crowd. Venkatappa Gallery has a raw quality in its landscape, the very opposite of NGMA, and to have a museum crowd strolling in without knowing what they are to see is interesting for performance art.

At the NGMA, I was expecting more artists to present their work. In fact when I introduced the space to them I took them from the car park and backyard and much later approached the water body and café space. Yet it fell into the more predictable site of NGMA near the water body. I found Janani's approach interesting as she laid out the braids she used for her work on the café tables. I also liked the way Sahej Rahel used the all round space of the NGMA venue, disappearing and re-appearing and working at the favourite spot near the water body under the tree with charcoal. Monica's idea of choosing the back yard of Venkatappa Gallery, a rough space was so perfect in contrast to her sophisticated flamingo-like movements. The confinement of the indoor space at Venkatappa served well for video projections and vocal dialogues for the performers. I had given artists complete freedom in their work. Tamar Raban's actions in the Archeological Museum courtyard matched very well with the pigeon birdfeed and words spoken to melt/ drown in the traffic noise as she performed with the "horn" in her pocket, followed by very subtle and almost hypnotic gestures with the thread in her mouth and between her fingers.



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PL: The prelude to LIVE ART 2011 was the workshop you organized with Pascal Grau in 2009 in Bangalore with the Chitra Kala Parishad students.



Janani Cooray, 19 November, 11.30 pm, NGMA Cafe.
Image Courtesy: Smitha Cariappa

SC: In 2007 on my Swiss residency I got to know Pascal Grau and I was part of her video performance where I had to play my maternal and paternal

grandmother's roles and only with gestures! I found that Pascal had been Marina Abramovic's student and also her assistant. There was this myth that had been created around Marina. I was very impressed by Marina's book on the student body, which was about her workshops and exercises with students and that's how this whole discourse started. Pascal was interested in doing her tableau vivant project in Bangalore, which she had done earlier in Bolivia and Myanmar. So she was here at Bar1 for twenty days and created a work after an old Mysore painting, *Girija Kalyana* with Chitra Kala Parishad students. It was a sort of collaboration where I was the artistic director. This was performed in the Government Arts and Science College library in October 2009.

Since I am untrained in Performance art myself, part of the idea of having the Live Art Festival was to also have artists who have been academically trained in Performance art exercises to conduct a workshop for students. Pascal's approach with the students was quite different from Dorothea and Monica's approach, because their background is from contemporary dance. In 2009 Pascal had worked for five days with the students with Performance art exercises to tone and prepare their bodies to maintain stillness for thirty minutes for her production, which is

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second day more about loosening up and letting go, very playful.

PL: Why is there such a surge of interest in performance art in Asian countries? Made Surya was telling me that they have a group in Bali. Suresh Kumar Gopalreddy says that he tells his students to do performance so that they don't have to depend on gallery shows and selling, and can keep on making art. He says he has stopped doing sculpture because he doesn't know what to do with his works, and concentrates on performance. In contrast, according to Monica when she started in the 1980s in Europe, performance was big and there were museum shows and artists got paid well to perform. While now there is a lack of interest institutionally and it's basically small artist groups who meet.

SC: There are interesting things happening in Myanmar too where Moe Satt is the artistic director of a group called *Beyond Pressure* in Yangon (Rangoon) and the two Myanmar artists who came, Aung Myatt and Ma Ei are from there.

However, some statements made about getting into performance art may sound too light, in most cases. It is necessary to understand 'body aesthetics' and then the quality of material and expense involved. It is a mistake to believe performance art does not have a market! In Bangalore people started doing it as a public event. It was about creating the observer and the observed. In the Bangalore Habba of 2003, a public city festival, some of us did some performances. Though sometimes things are done too casually here and I'm very doubtful about it. We got a chance to see some work in the Mysore Khoj in 2002 where there was this performance artist Michael Tuffery from New Zealand. And we have these alternate spaces like Bar1 or 1Shanthiroad which have young artists and students helping out by which they meet artists and learn. These spaces become open classrooms, open to artists to develop skills in art events and art administration in a practical way.

PL: The beginnings of performance art in America was in the 1960s and '70s at the time of the Vietnam war protests, the civil rights movement, the Women's Movement and Flower Power. You can see the politics deeply embedded in the Kashmiri artist Sushil Kumar's work, which is sharp and violent – as when he wore that

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Myanmar. Performance art in Sri Lanka has come out of the troubled situation there, Bandu's act of breaking a thousand eggs with his hands and then putting his head inside a sewer drain, was powerful.



Tamar Raban, 21 November, 11.30 am, Venkatappa Art Gallery, Outdoor. Image Courtesy: Smitha Cariappa

SC: Tamar Raban invited me to Israel for the ZAZ Festival in 2010 and I did a performance called *Body Line*. I lie at the entrance and exit of a

busy bus station, so I'm obstructing the flow of passers by at the evening peak hour. Those who are curious come and stand around me. There are bags of flour near me and a sign saying in English and Hebrew 'Sieve the flour on the body' so the flour is sieved over me. I lay for one and a half hours in stillness. Soldiers were passing by and I could smell their boots. The circle around me which was five feet away came closer and closer. Some people were very gentle while one person threw a whole bag of flour on me violently. An orthodox Jew who was standing nearby kept shouting that I was Satan! My passiveness was very irritating to people. So sometimes passiveness can be very aggressive! Just like silence can be noise.

PL: Well, Gandhi used passiveness as a political tool very well! We had an interesting discussion about Marina Abramovic's retrospective at the MOMA New York. The Europeans made faces and said they were no longer interested in her, and her performances now are not convincing. There was this controversy about her students replaying her old performances in the show, with plastic bones used instead of real ones. But I found the notion of a 'retrospective' of performances and of the copy and the bad copy interesting, so did the Swiss curator Susann Wintsch. It's like reproductions of paintings circulating.

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may be done in the mind. Even if one uses video projections, something is picked up and improvised. The performer has to be sensitive to the vibes from the audience, at the same time you shouldn't get carried away and overdo things.

The Phantom Lady

December 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Phantom Lady emerged like a tornado in 1997 and has kept the art world enthralled with her adventures. A small town girl, she is quite at home in the metropolis and keeps a close eye on all the goings on, swooping down now and then to bring some order into the chaos.

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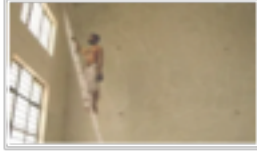


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