

Beside the paint

A sprawling new festival of performance art is set to transform the city's studio spaces, museums and streets, says **Jaideep Sen**.



Hat act to follow Dorothea Rust (in pic, with the Schweizer Holz Trio) is a co-curator of *LIVE ART 2011*

Performance art, as a concept, can seem both promising and perplexing. Despite being dominated by performers, the form has historically been excluded from the traditional bounds of performing arts. But the propensity of its propagators to pioneer experimental ventures – integrating video projections, photographic appositions, sculptural artefacts and disparate instances of unclassifiable media into their works – has afforded artists an inestimable horizon of creative ambition.

This fortnight, Dorothea Rust will join over 25 artists from across Southeast Asia, as well as Israel and Germany, at *LIVE ART 2011*, an unprecedented 15-day festival in the city, which will celebrate that very mixed and factious aspect of performance art. Wisely enough, Rust said she plans on travelling light, heading over from Zurich in Switzerland with little more than “a concept and a pair of shoes”. The concept that Rust is bringing along, however, will no doubt bear a weighty impact on *LIVE ART*, which she is a co-curator of, with fellow Swiss performer Monica Klinger and Smitha Cariappa, the festival's chief organiser.

Given her background in contemporary dance, she tended to work “with movement and material in a kinaesthetic way”, offered Rust in an email exchange. “I work in relation to space,” she said. “I feel and measure space with my body.” On this first visit to

the subcontinent, digging into Bangalore's cultural sphere by way of the festival would, in some way, emulate the manner in which she goes about exploring, testing and extending the bounds of her chosen medium.

“When we talk about performance art, we are talking about a definition,” reasoned Rust. “But foremost, this is a practice with human beings behind it.” The form is unparalleled in that “it is influenced by dance, music, visual arts, theatre, literature and non-arts practices like social work, political work, community work and more”, said Rust. “It's a way of thinking,” she added. “Each individual artist's performance-practice presents another theory about performance art.”

The motives driving *LIVE ART* leaned towards the radical, said Cariappa. A dawn-to-dusk segment, for instance, will feature 15 artists piloting performances through the by-lanes that web the vicinity of KH Road, linking the gallery-studio spaces of the art collectives 1, Shanthi Road, BAR1 and Jaaga. “In the process, the ‘floating audience’ – the man on the street – is not a passive viewer,” explained Cariappa, who presented her own performance art project, *Organic Ginger/Natti Sunti* at Gallery Sumukha in August last year. The intent, ultimately, was

to reach out to an “unconventional, non-gallery-going audience”, she said.

The 15-day spread of the event was designed to allow the visiting artists to absorb the city's culture, and be inspired by the various “situations” that they might encounter and observe, said Cariappa. A crucial element of the plan was the designed engagement with the locality's residents by artists unfamiliar

with the city, she explained.

“The performers intend to interact with and involve the spectator to complete their works,” she said, adding, “An event of this scale is bound to have a lot of criticism.”

The choices – of venues, which include the National Gallery of Modern Art and Venkatappa Art Gallery, as

well as of the participating artists – played into the festival's stated theme, of “exploring attitudes in ‘situation’”, said Cariappa.

While drawing together artists who had made meaningful contributions in their own cities, the festival hoped to infuse the idea of a “situation” with “cultural, social and institutional” dimensions, she offered.

In its essence, the performance art form merged “the space of action and the space of the audience”, explained Rust. “There are no limits to use of material, time and space. It can happen in any kind of place – a theatre,

“**The additional word ‘art’ makes all the difference**”



Body of the lamp Bandu Manamperi and (below) I Gede Made Surya Dharma will perform at *LIVEART 2011*

museum, white cube, public space, church, or mountain and the streets – at any time, in any durational length, from a moment to a year or more.” In the broader perspective of both the art form and the festival, it would be essential to contextualise the performances, she said. “A lot is possible: from social activity that involves non-artists and merges with everyday life, to a performance in a gallery space, where one works with [concepts of] transformation”. Above all, the element of immediacy made performance art compelling, she observed. “The audience is not in a consumer attitude,” she said. “It becomes part and witness of the happening of a situation.”

In some way, the entire spectrum of the arts had begun to seem like “neighbourhoods of each other”, said Rust. “I don’t want to draw lines or limits, and thereby fall into the trap of building ideological borders.” The only seeming way of discerning performance art from the performing arts was to consider a work’s context, she added, in terms of “how much risk an artist or performer was willing to take, and importantly, how much control one was looking to exert over an audience, and a space”.

Bringing in established practitioners of the form, such as Ratnabali Kant and Sushil Kumar from Delhi, apart from Harveet Singh Rahal and Vijay Sekhon from Mumbai, and Manas Acharya and Syed Taufik Riyaz from Kolkata as well, the purpose of *LIVEART* was also to firmly implant an Indian presence in the global network of performance art, said Cariappa. Further, the festival will involve student groups

and up-and-coming artists from the city as participants, with an eye on encouraging the idea of performance art education, she said. Rust and Klinger, meanwhile, will be on the lookout for prospective improvisation and collaboration efforts, by hosting workshops and discussions, apart from presenting their work.

The presence of the likes of Aisyah Binti Baharuddin from Malaysia, Aung Myat Hyat and Ma Ei from Myanmar, Bandu Manamperi and Bulathsinalage Janani Chandima Cooray from Sri Lanka, I Gede Made Surya Dharma from Indonesia, and Tamar Raban from Israel – each of them acclaimed for their polemic inclinations – did add a distinctly inciteful angle to the proceedings, said Rust.

“The human body in relation to society is, at the base, a very political issue,” she said. As a performance artist, she deliberately attempts “to move into the gaps of social rules and codes”, she asserted, to work around established norms and conventions. At all times, the festival would appear to be a fraught exercise, added Rust. “[The nature of] Movement is very precarious,” she said. “We have to make steps, and making steps is taking risk – we can lose balance.”

Klinger pointed out that performance art, in its varying forms, was unavoidably “subversive, and politically and socially engaged, in some way, to some degree”. The form was marked by an “un-sellable, ephemeral nature”, she said. “The fact that it only temporarily gets its deserved attention, and is then forgotten, is also part of this.” The

idea of performance art to her is “art as action, action as art – the moment shared by an artist and an audience active to some degree”. Freeform experiments had, in the course of time, become an informal norm, offered Klinger. “One is not defined by technique anymore in the fine arts,

since at least the middle of the last century,” she said. Performance art remains squarely in an improv mould, she suggested, of being unrehearsed, and “born in the moment itself”. At its origins, as fleshed out in the interventions of the German artist Joseph Beuys, and the morphemic



acts of the Serbian Marina Abramovic over the last quarter of the last century, performance art “was clearly the way for fine art to expand into the world of presence and action”, said Klinger. “It was born as counter movement, protest, anti-materialist and anti-art market. Naturally, it also has a great influence on other art forms, media, graphics, politics and life.”

Unending explorations of artistic expression by artists added to the ever-changing and evanescent nature of the form, said Rust. She suggested that the emergence of cross-disciplinary, genre-defining movements such as the Gutai group in Japan and the Butoh form of movement-based performance in the 1950s, and Fluxus in the 1960s, served to drastically alter perceptions of art practice. “Today, we understand these changes as paradigmatic. But back then, artists just did what they needed to do in the spirit of their time,” she said.

Her own performances were fundamentally “about the *conditio humana*, about our being exposed to gravity and its conditions and impact on our everyday life”, said Rust. Translating that premise implied that her shows were “very direct and physical”, she explained, and often involved carrying material, and lugging and dragging objects, and even people around. She sought to “deal with gravity in a many-layered way”, with the notion of weight turned figurative, said Rust. “To carry something is metaphoric – sorrows, thoughts, concerns,” explained

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the artist. Ensuring that she was frequently speaking to, interacting with – and at times engaging in direct physical contact with – her viewers, to try and involve them in a piece, she strives to open up percepts related to corporeal presence. “Sometimes this situation can become precarious,” she admitted, “sometimes poetic, sometimes plain.”

Things would expectedly change with new projects taking to the web and social media, and with artists performing for audiences on YouTube or Facebook, noted Rust. “The additional word ‘art’ makes all the difference,” she remarked, adding that the key for any form to subsist was really in creating a space that allowed one to reflect upon a core sense of practice. “I see the lines blurred between visual, performance and performing arts,” said Rust. “The question is, whatever we call it – performance art, or live art – what kind of space do we want to create?”

LIVE ART 2011 opens on Fri Nov 11. See Exhibitions in Art.

Ten artists you must check out at the fest

Aisyah Binti Baharuddin



The artist from Pontian district in Johor, Malaysia, went through a practice of painting and installation before turning to performance art. She also co-founded the collective Tindakan Gerak Asuh, which facilitates art workshops in Malaysia.

Aung Myat Htay



The artist from Yangon, Myanmar switched from water-colour painting to performance art around the year 2000, often focusing on the subject of human nature.

Bandu Manamperi



The artist from Sri Lanka has made an imprint among a generation of radically active up-and-coming artists from the country, addressing its social and political landscape.

Bulathsinhelage Janani Chandima Cooray



Another artist from Sri Lanka, Cooray has a background in visual art, and has maintained a long association with the artist collective Theertha.

I Gede Made Surya Dharma



Surya Dharma, an artist from Bali, Indonesia is noted for his performance art works titled “Planting the Military in our Rice Fields”, “Football with Globe” and “Clean Ear and Listen!”.

Ma Ei



Ma Ei, an artist from Myanmar, found mention for her photo-art series “Woman for Sale” in *TIME* magazine, and is given to critiquing male-oriented society.

Markus Gössi



The earlier works of this artist from Basel, Switzerland have dealt with subjects of male-dominated histories.

Sushil Kumar



With a background in philosophy and history, the artist from Delhi describes himself as an “interventionist, educator, instigator, mediator and negotiator”.

Syed Taufik Riaz



Riaz has been noted for his performance works in Shantiniketan.

Tamar Raban



A veteran artist from Tel Aviv, Raban is known for his sculpture, installations and video artworks, apart from his performance art, and was one of the founders of Shelter 209, a group promoting inter-disciplinary art in Israel.

For the detailed schedule, and complete list of participating artists at the festival, visit www.bar1.org/liveart. See Exhibitions in Art.