

IS DHAKA READY FOR LIVE ART?



Yuzuru Maeda (Japan) fuses volunteers into a single moving organism.

PHOTO: MOHAIMINUL HUQ KHAN

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If you were anywhere around the Faculty of Fine Arts, DU and the Suhrawardy Udyan from 12 pm and 3 pm last Saturday, February 2, you might have seen a tall woman of Caucasian origin, covered head to toe in fake bright green grass, pushing a rickety-looking lawnmower down the main street. A collapsible measuring scale stretched out from between her legs and unfolded behind her as she made her way through traffic and chaotic sidewalks. The woman, German artist Dagmar I. Glausnitzen-smith, had started out inside the Charukala premises. She had cut out the plastic wrapping of the lawnmower with a scissor attached to

her costume and pushed the lawnmower through the parking lot before shooting off into the traffic. The act could be thought of as a metaphor for the way we continue to rely on machines despite the damage done to the environment. Or the fact that there is simply not enough grass left to mow, thereby highlighting the mower as obsolete and the body of grass as no longer a part of nature.

The performance, for lack of a better word, was part of the Dhaka Live Art Biennale (D'LAB) 2019 taking place around the Dhaka University campus from January 21 to February 14 organised by the Back ART Foundation. The non-profit organisation started their journey in 2013 with the goal of bridging native and contemporary culture in Bangladesh—of “bringing [it] back” into present day conversation, hence the name. It's also a reference to the way the group's founders would carry their art equipment in their backpacks in their university days: a reminder of how art can be both personal and inclusive, mobile yet rooted in history. The point was to provide a platform where a local and contemporary art scene can thrive and demonstrate how art can express, inform, and engage with the issues of the world. Back ART organises Native MYTH, an artist residency programme in rural areas, Urban HOURS, a public project that explores the effects of urbanisation through art, and other workshops with students and adults; but their biggest event seems to be the Live Art Biennale, hosting over a hundred local and international artists from 24 countries around the world.

Back ART defines live art as action-



Dimple B. Shah (India) presents a rendition of Akka Mahadevi's poetry.



based or performative art conducted in front of an audience that seeks to set off discussions. In general terms, it is different from 'looking' at art on canvas or a sculpture, which requires more patience, more scrutiny, and often some knowledge of art history on the part of the viewer. “Do I know enough about the painter, about this school of art?” we find ourselves asking while at an exhibition. Live art, by virtue of being more interactive, pushes us more effectively to think about the concept behind the artwork, if only to wonder why we're participating in such a wild activity. There are also elements of surprise involved for both the artist and the audience. Anything in the environment, from the audience's response to a failed prop to the interruption of a stray dog, can impact the act. As a result, the performance—which is an umbrella term for the artist's preparation, her interaction with the audience, the struggles faced over the activity and finally the act itself—can take any turn. As a means of catalysing thought, such an unpredictable artform can be pretty effective.

D'LAB's theme for this year was set to “Performing Tradition and Text”, a second installation of the project since 2017. The three words describe perfectly the intent behind the event. Both texts and traditions, the latter including religious, secular, rural and folk rituals, serve as remnants of native culture in any given place. A text impacts its audience, on the one hand, by influencing their thoughts and beliefs, shaping their myths and their popular culture. But the text or the myth itself also evolves as it travels through time and space, absorbing the history, the culture, the generations of readers that it interacts with along the way. By transforming into a myth or a ritual, a text therefore becomes a part of history. To visit it in its traditional setting—watching a Jatra performance or a shaapshiri khela, for instance, or watching a farmer plow a field—is to merely witness the tradition as an audience or a bystander. But the Live Art Biennale this year sought to 'perform' such rituals through live art, meaning that the present-day realities of the participants travelled with them as they revisited the traditional rituals. The result was a contemporary rendition of native culture—open to interpretation by the audience as much as by the artists—and an exploration of what it means for such rituals to exist in the world today.

Continued to page 11