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What does it mean to hug the earth when it is covered in dust and the detritus of a dried-up pond? What does it mean to sit together for hours in an open space, free to talk or look around or even leave, and yet be compelled to stare into one's phone? Why do we still need lawnmowers when green is so sparse in the city?

TRAVELLING TRADITIONS

Twenty-eight artists from around the USA, Asia and Europe are performing at the festival this year. While the performances on February 6 included local Bengali attractions like *banornaach* (monkey dance), *shaaphkhela* (snake charming), puppet-making workshops and other traditional magic tricks, the previous days

whereas today we try so hard to make a collective world. Based on this myth, I was trying to express how suffocated I feel with the fuss of contemporary life. I have also recently experienced an earthquake in Nepal. That kind of tragedy changes your views on life, when you struggle to breathe and access the basic things in life. All of these elements were present in my performance. There was mythology, there was Nepalese culture. How we celebrate festivals, how we pray. I also wanted to engage with the audience, and so tying them with the fabric was my way of creating a *bhoto*—a vest—for them. I had also wanted to become one with the Bengali soil by rolling around in it, but I found that it was rough and resistant to my rhythm. That was an interesting



PHOTO: MD. RAHAT KABIR

Keepa Maskey (Nepal) discusses the influence of Bhoto Jatra in her performance.

included displays that incorporated traditions and experiences brought over by foreign artists. At the bottom of the dried-up pond in Charukala, Nepalese artist Keepa Maskey began by cleaning the ground as a show of respect. Then she wrote down her thoughts on scraps of paper—an unplanned decision taken to calm herself down. She started stitching and playing with threads, and tied a piece of Nepalese textile fabric around the gathered circle of onlookers. She took sips of yogurt from a cup made of mud. She rested her head on the ground to feel and honour the soil, and rolled around on the ground and the sprinkled ashes. Finally, she rolled up the scraps of poetry and stashed them into the cup she had drunk from. The poetry was left behind for anyone to read, take home, or even burn or throw away.

"I was trying to reflect on my culture, what I've been taught and how I was raised, and how that has influenced who I am becoming as a person and an artist," Keepa explained to me after we climbed back up the pond. "I was trying to address how mythology doesn't really fit well with contemporary life." She was influenced by the Bhoto Jatra Festival of Nepal, which derives from the myth of a healer farmer awaiting the arrival of a snake king to prove that he had presented him with a diamond-encrusted vest.

"The story affects me negatively when I read it now," Keepa shared. "It contains such strong themes of class division,

experience for me."

OPEN INTERPRETATIONS

Mohaiminul Huq Khan, a musician and artist, who was present among the audience, was struck by how immersed Keepa and some of the artists were into their performances. "They were so into their character that they were surprised when I called the act a 'performance'," he pointed out. Finding parallels between Keepa's act and that of Indian artist Dimple Shah, who performed her interpretation of the 16th century Kannada poetry of Akka Mahadevi, Mohaimin said, "The beauty of it was that they both adopted a ceremonial/ritualistic approach. The utter intensity of the moment led me to believe that I was in the middle of a serious, almost religious, communication between both sides of death. Keepa's performance felt like an interaction between her own psyche and an external



supernatural entity."

Meanwhile, comparing the opinions of the artists with the audience revealed how subjective interpretation of live art can get. On the fourth floor of a lecture hall in Charukala, Korean artist Johyoung Park stood atop a cloth scribbled with Korean writing, smashing multi-coloured water balloons on her head. She washed herself clean with water from a plastic bottle. She sat down, picked up the coloured water that had collected in a tin bowl beneath her feet, and drank the bowl empty. She then lay on the ground, face first, and wormed her way beneath the scribbled cloth, covering herself with it. She slowly stood back up and walked out of the room, trembling with cold, with the cloth wrapped around her.

Toufiquel Huq Emon, a Drama teacher at Scholastica school and one of the audience members, took it as a commentary on the way the world imposes its weight on a person, until she has to drink it down and find the strength to rise back up while embracing it. We spoke to Johyoung about what had influenced her, and discovered a completely unexpected theme behind the performance. "My piece was titled 'Habit'," she explained. "On the cloth I had written 'How many times should one repeat an action?' I was trying to express how we tend to form habits out of repetition and traumatic events, and how that often prevents us from being open to new ideas. That's why I tried to cleanse myself with the water and internalise others' thoughts by drinking them in." Both Mohaimin and Emon, who had joined us in the conversation, were surprised at each of our different interpretations of the act. "I guess that's art," shrugged Mohaimin.



D'LAB 2017 materials exhibited at Edge Gallery Dhanmondi.

PHOTO: MD. RAHAT KABIR

AN INCLUSIVE EXPERIENCE

That live art can be fun as well as thought-provoking was revealed by the exercise put together by Yuzuru Maeda of Japan. Random audience members were roped into putting on a green spandex costume that covered them from head to foot—face included—and linking limbs together to form one moving organism. They had to shuffle and crawl their way through the Charukala building, down the stairs, and across the street while maintaining the huddle. Curses and directions flew out from within the knot in a handful of different languages. It was sweaty, messy, and hilarious.

Kazi Wasef Mustafa, one of the randomly selected participants, laughingly talked about how surreal it was to feel so connected to a horde of strangers. Burhan Al Rahman, another participant, shared, "The act displayed many realities of



collectivism such as evolution and communication of a single unified horde that is made up of individuals, united by their lack of identity and a current predicament. It reflected a primal yet ever continuing human process of survival, exploration and existence."

ARE WE READY FOR LIVE ART?

Most of the performances, in addition to the exhibition of 2017's Biennale materials at Edge Gallery Dhanmondi, had plenty of stimulating themes. Each act generated by turns fascination, laughter, confused, and frustration among many in the audience, and drew us into discussions with the artists and fellow viewers. It certainly generated conversation. But only because we were interested in the concept to begin with.

The minimal size of the crowd gathered at the 2019 Biennale points towards how niche the market still is for such endeavours in Bangladesh. For all its entertaining and inspiring potential, live art demands intellectual investment on the part of the audience. In this event in particular, it required the audience to hunt down the performances around the DU campus, follow the acts around sometimes for hours, and ask the artists as to what



message they were trying to convey through their projects. For such an experimental project, more coherent primers to the artwork might have been useful in attracting a wider audience.

Many live art enthusiasts in the West share the concern that to make it too common, too mainstream a medium will integrate it into the archaic way of thinking; that it'll become a part of the 'Establishment'. In Bangladesh, however, the establishment could certainly do with the breath of fresh air that live art promises. We could certainly do with a push towards more creative ways of thinking, especially about our myths and our traditions. In order for the medium to thrive, though, we need to figure out how to ease more people into it.

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