

Workshop Report

Workshop held at: Mahatma Gandhi Beach, Fort Cochin

Dates: 26-28 October 2016

Participating Institutions:

College of Fine Arts, Trissur

Raja Ravi Varma College of Fine Arts, Mavalikara

Number of participating students: 12

Resource Persons:

Avril Stormy Unger

Avril is a Bangalore based movement artist. She is the founder and principle choreographer of The Storm Factory, an independent dance company that finds expression through the movement arts and collaborations with artists from a variety of different artistic backgrounds.

She has performed in various public spaces in Bangalore, across India, and internationally, often working around subjects of time and local contexts.

Josephine Simone

Josephine is a writer, researcher, and educator who engages in community-centred processes to help envision and enact social transformation through cultural interventions in art and education. She recently completed her Masters degree in Indigenous Governance from the University of Victoria, for which she wrote her thesis on the subject of street theatre as a means of liberation from oppression, in collaboration with nomadic tribal street theatre group, Budhan Theatre.

She has worked with various theatre groups and Indigenous communities across India and is currently a member of Bangalore based art group, the Antara Collective, as well as a member of feminist street art group, the Fearless Collective, and an educator at the Sholai Centre for Learning, Organic Agriculture, and Appropriate Technologies. Her current research explores the concept of embodiment, looking at the relationships between bodies and landscapes.

Schedule of the Workshop:

	Morning sessions	Afternoon session
Day 1	<p>Students Arrive, Introductions</p>	<p>Group Activities and Discussion: What is Performance and Performativity?</p> <p>Site Visit: Engagement with Monuments on Mahatma Gandhi Beach, Fort Cochin</p> <p>Discussion: How can public performance be used to examine and (re)present different historical narratives?</p> <p>Discussion: Sharing reflections, identifying issues, and forming ideas for performance interventions</p>
Day 2	<p>Planning Session: Share ideas for public performance interventions to be tried on site in afternoon session</p> <p>Discussion: Colonialism</p> <p>On Site Activity: Collect stories about Fort Cochin from local people</p>	<p>Performance Experimentation: Try different performance ideas on site</p> <p>Planning Session: Discuss what worked and what needs to be changed, plan final performance piece, decide on sequence of performance</p> <p>Preparation: prepare materials needed for performance</p>
Day 3	<p>Body Activation Exercises</p> <p>Performance Session 1</p> <p>Recording and Documentation</p>	<p>Performance Session 2</p> <p>Recording and Documentation</p> <p>Discussion: Reflections on experiences with public performance and on workshop</p> <p>Closing Session and Distribution of Certificates</p>

Report on the Workshop:

In our three-day intensive workshop on Public Performance Art facilitated by Avril Stormy Unger and Josephine Simone in Fort Cochin, twelve students from the College of Fine Arts, Trissur and Raja Ravi Varma College of Fine Arts, Mavalikara came together to explore public spaces as performative spaces - to look at different ways history can be brought to life and re-contextualised through art, and to search for different sources of the imagination of the past.

The intent of the workshop was to present a series of activities to students who had little or no exposure to performance in a way that created space for them to explore their bodies as mediums of expression and open their imaginations to look at their own artistic practices in different ways. The workshop was structured so as to ensure space for ideas to emerge naturally from the students themselves. Spontaneous activities facilitated the opening of their bodies and engagements with public space, allowing them to explore the self and their relationship to history through performance. Over the span of three days, the students were guided through interactions, exercises, and experimentations that finally culminated in a public performance piece enacted by the students during the final day of the workshop.

The first day of the workshop started with a brief introduction session followed by two group activities aimed at encouraging the students to think critically about the idea of 'performance' and its location in daily life: How have understandings of performance changed over time? How do we perform certain roles and identities everyday within the context of specific socio-cultural norms and political-economic structures?



Students huddle together in a group activity led by Josephine Simone to illustrate the changes in performance as it moved from community spaces to the proscenium stage.



Students wrap mannequins in an exercise led by Avril Stormy Unger to examine how different actions can become a performance, expanding the definition of 'performance' to performativity in everyday actions.

At the end of this session, the students were asked to consider the value of bringing performance back into community spaces, positioned in relation to daily life.

The workshop then moved to the Mahatma Gandhi beach, where we engaged in a discussion about public spaces as performative spaces and how performance can be used to draw out and address the histories that shape those spaces. The students were then asked to interact with three historical 'monuments' along the beach walk - a cannon, a set of boilers, and an anchor - and consider: How are the monuments situated? How are they contextualized? Why are they considered 'monuments' when other historical objects are not? Who made them? Why are they placed in these spaces? What meanings do these objects carry? How do you position yourself in relation to the themes, relationships, and figures represented by these objects? What is represented? What is not represented? What is left out? Who is the audience viewing these objects? How is their understanding of the figure shaped/imagined?

The students were given time to reflect and interact with the monuments and were asked to record their thoughts through writing and sketching. After spending some time with the monuments, without any direction from the workshop facilitators, the students migrated towards the beach, where they observed local people making nets in fishing boats. They asked the local people about the histories of objects and listened to their stories. Through this self-directed experience the students came to understand that while the 'monuments' have been contextualized in a certain way so as to present a specific historical narrative, one that glorifies a colonial past, there are many more narratives of the past surrounding these objects, located within the stories of the local people - sources of memory that exist

outside of what is presented to the public. Reflecting on a story about the remnants of an old structure destroyed by the British told to him by one of the fishermen on the beach, one of the students commented:

“when the British came, they displaced the local history of this place and replaced it with their own; the history of this land is buried just beneath the sand, the foundations are still there.”

Another student commented that many of the people who come to the beach are not thinking about history:

“they come to the beach to escape the stress of their daily lives, they look, but they do not see the monuments; they do not engage with the space.”

The question emerged: How can public performance be used to activate these hidden histories, draw attention to what is overlooked, and evoke a conscious reaction from viewers?

On the second day of the workshop, the students shared their ideas about actions that could be used in public performance as interventions to draw attention to the issues they had identified the previous day. Some of the themes that emerged included uncovering hidden histories, fading memories of the past, lack of affective response towards the ‘monuments,’ and preserving knowledge about history for future generations. The students also expressed that they would like to include the stories they had and storytelling in their performance. During the morning session, the students returned to the beach where they spoke to local people to gain different perspectives and collect stories about Fort Cochin and the monuments. In the afternoon, Avril and Josephine guided the students in experimenting with the different ideas for public performance interventions that they had come up with. In the evening, Avril and Josephine led a group discussion with the students to assess what worked and what needed to be changed, how the stories they collected could be integrated into their performance, and guided them in coming up with a performance sequence. The rest of the evening was spent preparing materials needed for the next day’s performance.

On the third and final day of the workshop, the students carried out their final performance twice, once in the morning from 10:00am to 11:30am and once in the afternoon from 4:30pm to 6:00pm.



Crowds gather and spontaneous movements emerge as the students explore their bodies as mediums for sparking public dialogues.



In Fort Cochin, students from College of Fine Arts, Trissur and Raja Ravi Varma College of Fine Arts, Mavalikara frame colonial relics lining the beach walk to draw the attention of sightseers and passer-bys to objects that carry a certain narrative of the past: History from above.



They start to search, looking, digging, moving onto the beach where they begin to excavate stories hidden just beneath the surface of the sand.



They move back to the boardwalk, grabbing the attention of strangers, gently whispering the stories they have found into their ears, like a secret.

At the end of the performances, the students shared their reflections on their experiences with public performance art. Many found that even though the performance had been planned, actually enacting the performance was a completely different experience, as many spontaneous actions had emerged, including using found materials and using their bodies in different ways. They also commented that through public performance they were able to open themselves to interactions with strangers, through intimate personal exchanges. They observed that this opened spaces for dialogue and sparked interest in the monuments and histories of Fort Cochin among the audience. For the students, this illustrated the use of art as a medium of expression to address issues that were relevant to both them and others. They discovered that they were able to use their art to provoke changes in people's mindsets. One student commented:

"As artists, we addressed a problem and were able to do something about it. Art became a tool for making interventions to change public consciousness."

Another stated:

"We have come to the realization that through art, we can actually do something about the situations we observe and want to change by drawing public attention to it."

They also noted that for them, thinking about space through public performance changed the visual landscape of Fort Cochin, stating:

"We cannot see Fort Cochin in the same way anymore now that we have engaged with it in a deeper way - the space has been completely reimagined for us."



Students share their experiences of public performance in a group discussion

The responses of the audience also revealed a great deal about the use and value of public performance art. One local street vendor expressed: "This year's Biennale will be good if things like this are happening, because you are engaging with the local community and their stories." Many passer-bys stopped to listen to stories told by the students and some took the time to share their own stories of Fort Cochin in return.

At the end of the workshop the students said that their understanding of performance had changed significantly: whereas before they had viewed it as a theatrical display, they now understood performance as an extension of everyday interactions, which can be used to evoke social change. In the closing discussion with the workshop facilitators they also expressed that they want to carry these conversations forward in their own practices.

Filled by
Vivek Chockalingam

Date: 2nd September 2016

Signature

Vivek Chockalingam