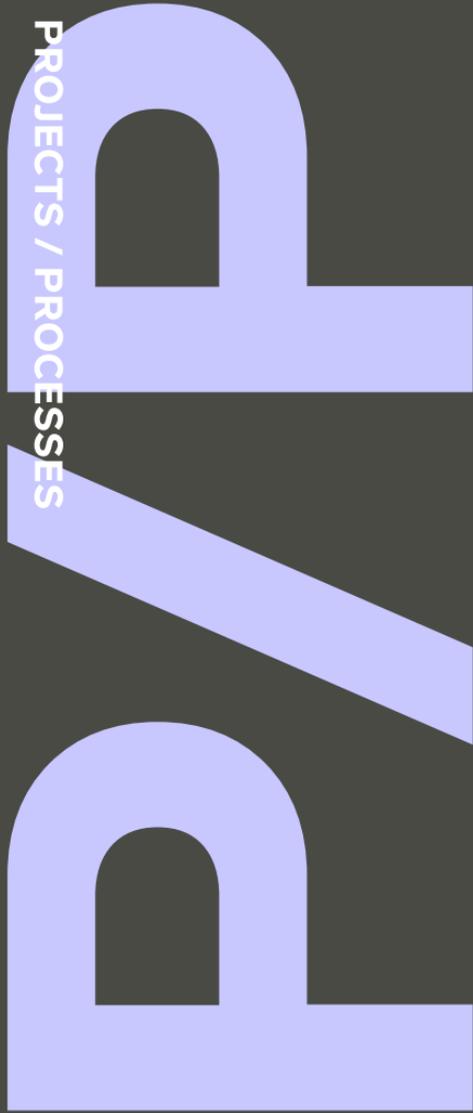


PROJECTS / PROCESSES



**LIVE ART AND ECOLOGY:
A PERFORMATIVE
MAPPING OF
SPECULATIVE FUTURES**

NAJRIN ISLAM

PROJECTS / PROCESSES VOLUME I

Series Editor: Senjuti Mukherjee

**Live Art and Ecology: A Performative
Mapping of Speculative Futures**

Najrin Islam





A still from a live performance by Olivier de Sagazan at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Shivani Gupta, HH Art Spaces.

Concrete Skies

Curated by HH Art Spaces

Venue Old Goa Institute of
Management

Curatorial Note

Artists *The Wishful Fall* by Lucifer's Ensemble; *Room to Breathe* by Madhu Das; *Sea of Serenity* by Pierre 'Pyaré' Friquet, Jean-Baptiste Friquet & Kannakee; *In Conversation With* by Raghu Wodeyar; *Untitled* by Venuri Perera; *Untitled* by Tinu Verghis; *Transfiguration* by Olivier de Sagazan.

Curator HH Art Spaces

The highway leading in and out of Panjim—National Highway no. 17 or ironically renamed route 66—with its many branches of flyovers and exit roads, has created the impression that we might as well be getting ready for war. It is not an easy relationship to concrete that the world has inherited since World War II, when the need of the time was low-cost, quick-fix, prefabricated housing.

Goa is quickly running out of dredged sand to sustain the supply of concrete, causing environmental havoc; in sharp contrast to the romance of coastal lyrical drives and country roads with the old charm of traditional dwellings and rural simplicity, and the carpet of green and blue that the eyes can rest on. Did we not anticipate the heat and carbon particles created by more commuter cars and vehicles for construction, dust flying about with all the trucks plying over the unfinished highway, piles of concrete building blocks, heavyweight scaffolding strewn about, and the unhygienic working and living conditions for the migrant road workers?

The new bridge to Panjim is finally complete. During the 2016 edition of the Festival, we saw it half-built and we witnessed the process in wonder and with a faint anxiety at how it would impact our daily lives and common vista.

The life and history of Goa is forever changed. No longer is it a paradise; this is a cause of intense anxiety and before us are being laid the foundations of a completely dystopian future.

That people have always related to Goa as a place of relaxation, tranquility, and letting-loose will have to be renegotiated. Relationships, social hierarchies, Corporate India, advertising billboards, coal dust, and IT companies, will have to be negotiated. The question is, are there any new designs and constructions for a critical-pedagogy that empowers? And, how might we bring a little humour to the heavyweight grey, since, We, the people, were not asked, we were assumed.

This brings us back to questions quite simply around—survival, and the dichotomy between the time lapsed and the time moving forward. And so, the historical site of the Old Goa Institute of Management, across from the Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary, on the Mandovi riverfront in Ribandar, forms the impetus of this proposal for the performance section of the Festival. The site has been through multiple iterations through time. With its origins as the maternity wing of the GIM, in circa 1600, where generations of Goans were born, to being annexed by the Indian Union, after Goa’s liberation in 1961, when the building was further transformed into a space for education; bringing us to its current iteration—a jot in history as a station for artistic and cultural exchange. Positioning this concrete “archive”, if you will, this post-colonial structure, in the larger more dystopian architectural landscape of Goa, is our entry point into Concrete Skies, HH Art Spaces’ intervention for Serendipity Arts Festival, 2019. The more complex transitions that have burgeoned around this heritage building, from the temporal strain of the tourism industry, to the unabashed plough of real estate and iron ore mining, allow a didactic discourse to emerge, through these performances. This site as a cultural pressure point could be activated and converted by artists and cultural practitioners into a node and focal point of negotiation, renovation, and creative invention allowing for a vibrant living cosmos during the days of the festival and perhaps beyond.



Still from a live performance by Tinu Verghis at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Shivani Gupta, HH Art Spaces.

Live Art and Ecology: A Performative Mapping of Speculative Futures

NAJRIN ISLAM

There have been incremental and aggressive changes in weather patterns, species extinction, and collateral anthropogenic disasters over the last few decades that have compelled the human actor to take increased cognisance of their imperialist position in view of the non-human actors that constitute the ecology. Purportedly our current epoch and condition,¹ the Anthropocene² looks at human activity through the perspective of geological time, and insists that the earth has entered a period of rapid destabilisation following the relatively stable period of the Holocene,³ when the climate was conducive to the growth of civilisations. The attendant changes of the era have resulted in a multicentred reality that decentres the human in terms of a teleological imperative, attributing other forms with agency. A way of framing time, the Anthropocene is a “felt temporality”⁴ and its constitutive changes may not be legible for the human sensorium immediately, but could exist as an archive of inscriptions in deep time. In this heightened reality of a disintegrating ecosystem, the concrete stands as a representative of an insular world removed from the cycles of death, decay, and regrowth. In its ontological properties of ubiquity and longevity, the concrete materialises the desire for the impenetrability of and a separation from organic life that it replaces in its perimeters. As a low-cost and quick alternative to traditional building materials, concrete became a burgeoning commodity post the Second World War and now pervades the neocolonial urban landscape. In Goa particularly, the curators of HH Art Spaces are concerned about its endemic presence and continued use to change the landscape of the state and by extension, introduce a new sensorial regime for its occupants and visitors. At this contemporary

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moment, in a departure from the tableaux of expansive beaches and pristine seawater in mediatic representations, Goa looks like an altered city both structurally and in terms of its lived lives, which has triggered questions around time, space, the logic of evolution, and sustainability of local food and livelihood. As a curatorial project, “Concrete Skies” looks at the metaphors the eponymous material evokes in its connection to the larger concerns of the Anthropocene, the mutation of carbon-based forms, regimes of visibility, hierarchical power relations, and networks of meaning. It looks at the farmer, the construction labourer, the shaman, the astronaut, and the flâneur as figures navigating complex intersections of memory, identity, ritual, and data in an attempt to understand their place and relevance in a rapidly mutating biosphere.

The historical complex of the old Goa Institute of Management (GIM) in Ribandar was decided as the site for the curatorial project. Historically, the site has undergone multiple occupational transitions in form and function, and stands today as a relic of this cumulative past, offering itself up for new occupations through participation within the ambit of this project. As a postcolonial architectural site in Goa, the space stands as an archive of memories across generations of both human and non-human actors, including the ecology of Goa and its inhabitants’ varying relationship to it. The contours, nooks, and corners of the Old GIM are activated by the invited artists to develop a space of creative negotiation with their own bodies of practice, the intention having been for them to use the site as a “cultural pressure point”²⁵ for other narratives to realise. Each artist and/or ensemble spent a considerable amount of time in Goa prior to the Festival with the motive of excavating or establishing connections with the site. Whether sourcing material from the site or using its geographical value as a tangent to thinking about their own work, the artists mounted installations and accompanying performance pieces which highlight Goa as a conundrum of distinct realities and histories that resonates like narratives on other spatio-temporal axes. Cumulatively, the works navigate concerns about the Anthropocene and the ecology; they provoke thinking about embodiment, virtuality,

agency, and anthropomorphism through a mobilisation of material and histories from the site, as each artist presents different terms of engagement with the premise. The body is activated as a mediator in the performances, where its improvisational relationship with the architecture, objects, and the elements is used to imagine new futures.

Porous Bodies

Tinu Verghis is a former model who makes performance art and cultivates a quarter of an acre of agricultural land with seasonal crops in Goa, where she also lives. Having made a conscious departure from the modelling industry and its attendant issues of idealisation of a certain version of the female body, Verghis embraced the life of a farmer. She started harvesting rice in 2007, but observed that the production of rice on the land over the years was undergoing a drastic change. Against an ideal of one quintal (or 1000 kgs) in production of rice, she procured only 600 kgs last year owing to changes in the weather pattern. She talks about how the brutality of climate change can only be really understood by those that are directly dependent on the climate for livelihood. Due to inconsistent rains and delayed monsoons, a series of mishaps arrange themselves in queue, which disrupts the natural cycle of growth and cumulatively upsets the production amount and quality of the grain. She points out that 65% of the agricultural workforce comprises women, who are not recognised as “farmers” as they cannot inherit land on paper due to patriarchal constraints; land remains a state-subject and only those with land-titles are officially accepted as farmers. This consequently excludes female farmers from access to government subsidies and rights, and by extension, from the narrative of production itself. As part of “Concrete Skies”, Verghis travelled to the venue of Old GIM with her production of 750 kgs of paddy with the intention of using them for a performance piece that looks at the female body, its relation to food production and associated notions of labour, dirt, and disgust at the labouring body. A site of cultural anxieties, the labouring body has been seen as the “body of the Other”,⁶ the disgust in question is an agent of creating and preserving social as well as



Still from a live performance by Tinu Verghis at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Shivani Gupta, HH Art Spaces.



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political hierarchy through which physical attributes such as odour, appearance, and language become markers of class and caste. The emphasis on dirt is central to this discourse, and can be traced in the upper caste gaze on embodied labour, which is deemed inferior in a paradoxical contempt of its quintessential function to produce and sustain the consuming body. It is a double-bind for the female working body, which is invisibilised by an institutional denial of its labour as legitimate service.

In the scope of the performance, a small room is seen filled with the paddy (Verghis' entire season's harvest) in a horizontal heap. The artist is seen touching the paddy, arranging them in different permutations and designs on the bare spaces on the floor and further, thrashing them in different directions in coordinated routines with the result that the grains fall on (and touch) the audience standing at the narrow doorway or peering through an open window. In physically navigating the contours of the farm produce in tandem with the body of the female farmer on the field, the artist manipulates the terms of her embodiment as one in a slow probe into the demise of her agricultural land. At different points, she hunts out live weevils (small beetles that inhabit rice stalks naturally) from the paddy and eats them with attention one by one. The disgust at the body here constitutes in the act of ingesting that which is deemed dangerous for its capacity to contaminate or pollute owing to its alien-ness in the regime of the consuming body. For Verghis, there is no panic or compunction evoked by the possible transgressiveness of the act. The weevil is rendered outside the social and psychic order of control enabled by normative understandings of disgust; the body admits both the grain and the bug.

A few metres away, artist Madhu Das has converted a room into a landscape that changes every day with a performance. Sourced from Goa, rocks, aluminium strips, and tarpaulin sheets populate two adjacent rooms, with the smell of the tarpaulin overwhelming the senses and establishing a link with the ubiquitous truck (that uses them as covers) and by extension, routes of transfer and the emerging



Stills from a live performance of *Room to Breathe* by Madhu Das at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Shivani Gupta, HH Art Spaces.

construction industry in Goa at large. The rocks are covered with fabric, simulating a natural landscape in a constricted indoor space. Das talks about how the way we view a landscape has been shaped by a colonial position in that we look for depth and perspective along straight horizontal or vertical axes; the artist sets out to map and reconfigure the space using his body as a tool of measurement.

As part of the work, “Room to Breathe”, Das lay on one of the rocks under the weight of a wooden beam. Completely horizontal and structurally at one with the rocks, his body became a sculptural entity, its beating life discernible only by its audible, laboured breathing. In one of the later performances, he wore the familiar worker’s uniform (orange overalls) and stood perpendicular to a rock in the room. Then he used a flexible scale and a marker to draw lines all over the uniform over a period of six hours. In the course of this performance, the body was foregrounded in its uneven contours (akin to a natural landscape), which the artist physically sensed every time he pressed the marker to make a line; no line was a strictly straight one. Over the days, through subsequent performances, the artist keeps moving the rocks to the peripheries of the room, with the result that the landscape looks completely changed by the last day of the Festival. This process mirrors a longer one in geologic time, where small, imperceptible movements express themselves as a cumulative change only after a significant amount of time has passed. The labouring body is simultaneously highlighted in their participation in the ecological mutation, driven as it is by a larger industrial drive at territorial expansion through concrete. The project highlights Goa as a conundrum of distinct histories of occupation and change. In the scope of the performance, the boundaries between permanency and temporality dissolve, while the space evolves as a site of everyday memory re-narrated through a geological time-lapse.

In the adjacent room, artist Raghu Wodeyar occupies a corner on a high pedestal, his head obstructed from view as it extends beyond sight into the other side of the ceiling. As part of the tableau of the work, “In conversation with”, a see-saw moves heavy cubes back



Stills from a live performance by Raghu Wodeyar at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photographs by Shivani Gupta, HH Art Spaces.

and forth (the audience is expected to engage by taking control of one end as the artist manoeuvres the other) while his hands remain occupied with a rubik's cube. There is no attempt at coordinating the coloured blocks on the cube; it is rubbed against a knife with rough force (a discomfoting noise issues from the friction), which results in parts of the cube falling off. The artist remains seated on the high stool as the compulsive motion of rubbing continues. The actions are repeated in continuous motions through the day, creating a condition for exhaustion. The see-saw remains engaged in a game of control, where the artist and the audience shift roles in exerting and releasing forces. Wodeyar relates this to how nature functions, and his belief that a balance will be restored in time despite (or perhaps, following) upheavals caused by its disruption. In attempting to make sense of an epochal shift being driven by industrial societies in a quick accretion of cataclysmic changes, he believes that the ecological crisis will have a culmination and that with or without human life, nature will restore itself, of which the mobile plank is a hopeful signifier and reminder.

Each of these performances issues from the core drive of the curatorial premise that seeks to view the mutating landscape of Goa against a broader narrative of development and its attendant anthropocentric gaze that legitimises nature in so far it exists in material service of human industrial imperatives. The performances advocate a case of ecological symbiosis or coexistence, while drawing attention to concomitant issues of institutional erasure, the politics of the labouring body and the seemingly indiscernible changes wrought by human interventions that manifest only in drastic incremental shifts in the landscape. The body is established as a porous entity through a politics of intimacy with the ecology.

Mourning through Material

A Colombo-based dancer and performance artist, Venuri Perera, spent two weeks in Goa prior to the start of the festival to explore the surroundings and look for objects and text she could work with.

During her meanderings, Perera found herself occupied with thoughts of death that led her to foray into local cemeteries. Outside a certain church in Goa, she found a group of people exhuming skeletons from a cemetery in a move towards reconfiguring the space to accommodate more corpses. Near the skeletons, Perera found a newspaper that was dated April 22, 2019 (the day right after the Easter attacks had taken place in Sri Lanka) and carrying a piece of related news. The Easter bombing refers to a mass killing across churches and public spaces manoeuvred by extremist Islamic outfits in Sri Lanka, which resulted in the death of many people from the Christian minority group who had gathered to pray on a Sunday. The attack shook the country as people who suffered first-hand or lost a loved one are still dealing with its repercussions. The artist found herself affected by the incident as well, and the serendipitous presence of the dated news-text seemed to be a call for her to regard the trauma through a processual piece.

At the Old GIM, the artist placed the newspaper text on the walls of a room, and covered the floor with locally sourced cow dung, which she hoped would act as an agent of purification in the space. The placement of dung in this capacity raises concerns around its particular significance to the project, especially in light of how it has a history of having been mobilised by Hindutva nationalism to propound a narrative of sanitation based on blind faith in the bearer's elevated place in Hindu mythology. The choice may have been whimsical in this respect and made in view of its contextual value, but it merits inquiry as this item may no longer operate in a political vacuum. As the dung dried up over the days, Perera placed on it a series of wax figurines shaped as different body parts—lungs, hearts, limbs, heads, eyes, et al. Sourced from another local church in Goa, the wax candles, as the artist found out, were offered in worship by people as prayers for the healing of ailments anchored in those specific correspondent body parts. The figurines, laid out on the floor in neat permutations, counted 258 in number—the same number of people reported dead in the Easter attacks (per an online archive the artist referred to). She also placed 258 pieces of concrete debris that she had collected from a house in Goa (she chanced upon it during



Still from a live performance by Venuri Perera at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Shivani Gupta, HH Art Spaces.



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her sojourn) whose ceiling had fallen down. Perera's performance consisted in laying out and placing the dung and figurines over days, the action comprising the labour (both physical and emotional) that went into the meticulous placing and counting.

The "concrete sky" seemed to have collapsed on the floor of the site just as it had collapsed on the unsuspecting victims in Sri Lanka. The room resembled a forensic excavation site—an inference that acquires symbolic value in how the Easter attacks had resulted in the dismemberment of bodies across sites and how the official evaluation of the remains had led to several initial miscalculations as different body parts found across an expansive site were found to belong to a single person on perusal. The mayhem around counting body parts of the dead acquires an uncanny character in its technicality, as the wax figurines evoke a visual memory of the massacre. But the context of the figurines also imbues them with faith, which is heightened with the presence of lit incense sticks in the room. A constant heartbeat plays prominently throughout, turning the space of the room into an immersive memorial site. Perera also leaves some leftover figurines and debris in the foyer area in acknowledgment of the still-missing or unidentified persons from the bombings.

The artist devoted the last few days to crafting a ritual of mourning around the subject, where her body entered a state of frenzy in lamentation of the dead. Her performance constituted a corporeal experience in the exorcism of the phantoms she had summoned through her project. In ejecting the ghosts from her body, she liberates both herself and the audience from the piece, believes co-curator Nikhil Chopra. In the performance, the cultural politics of emotion is navigated through individual affect where the body enters a liminal state of being, and consciousness is suspended in favour of an explicit physical abreaction of a historical event characterised by a psycho-physical excess of frenzy. Within the South Asian context, one may find a parallel in the commemorative event of *Muharram* where the singular body of the participant assumes a collective and transcendental character when it joins others in the ritual of self-flagellation. Akin

to this *matam* (or mourning ceremony), Perera enters, through her performance, a liminal state or “a threshold (where) everyday notions of identity, time and space are suspended”,⁷ although it differs significantly from the same in terms of social organisation of the event. One is led to think about remembering, forgetting, and memorialising on the occasion of an unnatural death as the body navigates an interruptive logic of time. Perera’s body, in the present, is reactive to a public event in the form of a ritual of lamentation using material paraphernalia sourced from Goa; it is thus performed at a spatio-temporal remove from the event concerned. The ritual embodiment of the affliction of a people by the artist results in an affective entanglement between her living private body and a decimated public body in a funerary navigation of trauma across sites.

Transfigurations and Anxieties of Loss

“Why do you call it ‘The Wishful Fall?’” I ask, referring to the title of the performance piece. “It’s probably the Fool jumping off the cliff”, guesses Violeta Lisboa, the artist invited by the Lucifer’s Ensemble trio to close the conceptual circle dedicated to the occult (following the visual of an inverted triangle and dots on their logo that makes this process apparent on scrutiny). In occult tarot, the Fool represents the figure of the jester who is seen standing on the edge of a precipice. The title may also refer to the Fallen Angels and associated figures deemed outcasts in Christianity. “The Wishful Fall” is a performance piece that is an amalgamation of physical theatre, interactive technology, and sound art. It is divided into several episodes, all tied together in a continuous thread through a live background score. The performance comprises a series of tableaux, with the actors responding to each other’s bodies and elements from the immediate site in which the acts are physically anchored.

Staged in the outdoor space of the Old GIM (with its occupations of an open pavement, garden area, and an idiosyncratic street-lamp), the performance adapts to the architectonics of the space. When two



Stills from a live performance by Lucifer's Ensemble at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photographs by Shivani Gupta, HH Art Spaces.

performers writhe in mud and against each other's bodies, they are foregrounded in a pre-linguistic and animalistic disposition as they assume the look of finished sculptures in rare moments of stillness; "their bodies look like Rodin's sculptures have come alive", says Chopra. At a heightened moment, they fight each other with sabers, the choreographed routine evoking awe and suspense, transforming a regular courtyard space into a war territory that draws its aesthetic from futuristic literature and moving image histories of science fiction. Painting a post-apocalyptic landscape, the performance charts a corporeal experience through live art that provokes the body of the viewer quite viscerally through the transfer of vibrations (from the sound boxes). At one point, Violeta performed a frenzied episode with a loudspeaker as ejections of artificial smoke enveloped the performance space; this mirrored a very immediate dystopia in 2019 when protests were raging across the country and protesters were fighting toxic gaseous elements (such as tear gas) in defiance of authority on the streets. I refer here to the nationwide Anti-CAA⁸ and Anti-NRC⁹ protests in India, where citizens are demanding the abolition of a potential institutional erasure of "illegal" immigrants (who would be disproportionately Muslim) and point to a covert (albeit public) agenda of ethnic cleansing by the ruling party in keeping with the Hindutva ambition of an India exclusively for (upper caste) Hindus. This connection points one to the violence of categories premised on legal concerns, and the human toll it causes and ignores in the process. One also thinks about the ubiquity of institutional wrongs across socio-political contexts and the visual history the resultant protests have acquired in the pervasive use of loudspeakers and like gear; the tableau in question makes visible a shared mediatic aesthetic and language of dissent. Fluid between acts and committed to muscle, the bodies in the performance writhe, sweat, dilate and collapse while drawing a cartography for a visually anarchic future.

In the performance, "Transfigurations", artist Olivier de Sagazan crafts a conscious departure from (and plays on) the notion of gestural repetition that arises from habit and submission to

uniformity. Through the course of his performance, Sagazan's attire transformed from a suit and tie to nothing, as a lump of dimensional clay transmuted his form from perceptibly human to non-human. The clay became an additive component that added to and subtracted from his physical being alternately. In a trance-like state and while muttering incomprehensible words, the artist takes mounds of clay and puts them on his face (covering it entirely) in repeated gestures and varying permutations. His body becomes a living sculpture as the hand establishes itself as the agent of the making and unmaking. The artist relies on tactile interactions with the elements, using "blindness" to invite chance and improvisation into the performance. In the perpetual erasure of the self through a cycle of constant disfigurements, Sagazan draws from shamanist initiation rituals where he moulds his face into a series of grotesque death masks.

The rhythm of the performance was one of an escalating chant, where the body became increasingly aware of its physical contours (and limitations) and attempted to compensate for its extant features through attributes such as clay breasts, a vulva, and straw hair. At one point, Sagazan puts some straw on his clay-covered head in the guise of unkempt hair. He set the straw on fire while it was still on his head, which established his body in a peculiar precarity to the elements; the fire was a threat to the flesh, and the clay a guard against it. In his bare anatomy, the artist's body resembled an otherworldly creature: an animal, alien, and non-human. After the artist leaves the stage, one notices a trace on the tin-wall that stood as a remnant: a lump of clay and colours Sagazan used during the performance. It's a tangible residue of a body sculpted to life in real time.

Shamanism is frequently held to represent the origin of religion and shamans are characterised as the first artists. The metanarrative of shamanist practice as one that relies on and involves transcendental artistic experience, individual genius, states of ecstasy, and divine inspiration is a construct of the early modern period that saw the figure of the white male artist through the same lens. In indigenous communities, the shaman's journey is seen as a restorative mission

for the sake of the physical, mental, and spiritual welfare of their community. The ritual of self-emaciation that Sagazan engages in entails a shift where the singular physical body of the ritual participant assumes a transcendental quality akin to a shaman's. The resurgence of the artist-as-shaman in contemporary art has been a staple trope, with Joseph Beuys having first been ascribed the title of a neo-shaman. Beuys' aim was to assuage "the schism between native intelligence and European mechanistic, materialistic, and positivistic values", as Levi-Strauss puts it.¹⁰ Should this engagement with shamanism by Sagazan be looked at through the lens of anti-colonial scrutiny and cultural appropriation? The model of the shaman as an empowered inward journeyer with singular access to truth and knowledge resonates in the current landscape where manifest occurrences (such as disruption in the cycle of seasons) no longer elude our comprehension as vague and removed events, but have made the human actor significantly aware of their role in the mutation (and mutilation) of the ecology. Sagazan's ceremonial approach to the elements and frenzied shape-shifting animates the fears of such a disintegrating society.

The human pursuit of transcendental experience by way of altered states of consciousness is channeled in both these performances through the physical body and its performative vocabulary. In tangent to the curatorial premise, both draw attention to the ontological anxieties of the Anthropocene. In contrast to the techno-utopian fantasy (generated by enthusiastic literature on virtual technologies) that humanity would be delivered by the rise of artificial intelligence, the Anthropocene teaches us that the human cannot transcend its limitations or reliance on non-human actors.¹¹ While fearing an impending global catastrophe, how do we think of the transcendence performed by shamans, ascetics and artists who fall outside the ambit of science? One perhaps needs to think beyond the colonial violence of categorisation and encourage a new vocabulary to evaluate these practices.

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Stills from a live performance by Olivier de Sagazan at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photographs by Shivani Gupta, HH Art Spaces.



Still from a live performance by Olivier de Sagazan at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photographs by Shivani Gupta, HH Art Spaces.

Beyond Terra Firma

The moon has been an inexhaustible source of stories for both artists and scientists. George Méliès was the first filmmaker to have experimented with cinematic special effects through his venture *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). Keeping his experiments in mind, Pierre Friquet began re-exploring the possibilities of visual effects through the medium of Virtual Reality (VR) technology. He took the moon as motif and material to create the installation and performance piece, “Sea of Serenity”. Friquet’s projects involved enthusiasts strapping on floatation belts and VR headsets (which double as snorkel masks) and float on a pool of water designed to be a sensory deprivation chamber. Floating weightless in simulation of zero gravity, the viewer gets to experience the environment on moon via the headset. In this particular installation, Friquet introduced a medium in the body of Kannakee, a fellow artist who floats on the pool (located in Brussels) and broadcasts her reports live to the seated audience at Old GIM. She puts on the waterproof VR helmet akin to a NASA spacesuit and immerses herself in the water, which is captured by live-cameras with microphones that record and transmit the entire content of her experience in real time.

Friquet compares Kannakee’s role in the performance to that of a guide or boatman who takes people from one side of the river to another. Here, the medium becomes a conduit for the live viewer for whom “the machinic vision becomes an epistemological product of a human-centered point of view”.¹² Kannakee’s reports are patched with video-maps created by Friquet as well as sections from documentary archives in the NASA that show the actual phenomenon of Apollo 11 landing on the moon with Neil Armstrong, which was broadcast live on the television in 1969. Live-streaming is a digital technology, Friquet points out, which was invented by the NASA during the Apollo mission specifically to enable the transmission of images from space to earth. The artist takes the medium and uses it to create a tiered performance where Kannakee reacts to her visceral VR experience in the floatation pool in Brussels, which is projected on different

media back on site in Goa. The media includes water contained in a crater (the audience is seated around it), which acts as a portal, the projection on its surface enabling the viewer to access an experience not immediately their own in a setting that simulates a cavity on the surface of the moon. Broadcast is key here, as both analogue technology (in the form of vintage camera footage with blurry images that evoke authentic, referential value) and high-end VR technology (which is designed to hack the brain and suspend disbelief through dissociation of the mind and body) come together to create a heterogeneous environment that challenges the senses and extends the limits of human perception.

In embodying and transferring the semantic import of the experience, Kannakee exists only in the liminal space between the mind and the screen and offers a new way of thinking about the human body in association with the machine. It fuses human attention with technological sentience by distributing cognitive capacities¹³ across bodies. It is not a strict division between a physical body and a disembodied subjectivity inhabiting a virtual realm; rather, it is a case of extending embodied awareness in material ways as the work delivers a post-human, prosthetic vision that marks the gradual “normalisation of perception as augmented reality and data visualisation”¹⁴ in the contemporary visual regime. This particular navigation of the ecology is activated by extending the topology of the Anthropocene to include the extra-terrestrial realm of outer space, thereby contesting the anthropocentric understanding of the “environment”, which is defined by an inward gaze on the earth and its constitutive elements. The VR experience marks the advent of the Space Age when the celestial body of the moon became a site for geopolitical territorialisation and subject to the imperialist ambition of ecological colonisation.¹⁵ In other words, the moon came to symbolise a spatial extension of the earth and the human voyage as a historical event established it as a topology of terror, awe, and potential conquest. With its attendant kinetic shifts in scale and gravity, the virtual realm in the performance can be read as an attempt to “un-Earth the Anthropocene”¹⁶ by reconfiguring its terra-

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centric boundaries and expanding its conceptual ambit to include environmental agents occupying the cosmos.

Propositional Futures

How do we imagine an “end” to this world, as we know it? Do we then abdicate questions of inheritance, obligation, and responsibility to a future? Where does art stand (or matter) in the Anthropocene? These are questions scholars, scientists, and artists have been navigating, and while the insistence to slow down and ease has only gained traction in specific pockets of sensibilities and communities, there is an alternative way to process the anxiety around the present horrors of climate change. Anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli suggests that as opposed to imaginations of a dramatic extinction, the current systems of life, matter, and politics will mutate to accommodate new biological, technological, and social systems; life will exist in an altered mode through a circular persistence of the living form. This position provides one framework to the speculative dimension of the Anthropocene, premised on the notion of circularity. This concept of “extinguishment”¹⁷ recognises that the concrete will result in the emergence of this new world while remaining, in its ontological recalcitrance, outside the cycle itself. The corporate project in Goa is gradually altering its landscape, with bridges and concrete links having been made to ease the constant traffic of tourists and investors. In the scope of this curatorial project, the site wonders about the impact and transfer of the actions of the human actor in the deep future. There is no certitude of a final apocalypse, but a string of cautions that are mapped across the performances through affective modes and techniques. They write against a possibility with another, imagining ways of navigating the extant modalities of power and forces that precede and exceed human agency. The performances become a series of centrifugal provocations for further speculation on the ecology, acting simultaneously as propositional scaffolding on which to build alternate, affective futures.

Notes

¹ Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, “Preface”, in *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*, trans. David Fernbach (London and New York: Verso, 2016), 11.

² The term was first popularised by Dutch chemist Paul J. Crutzen in a 2002 paper he published in *Nature* as an improved designation for the contemporary epoch. There are several disputing theories debating the date of the epoch’s advent.

³ The Holocene is the name given to the almost 12,000 years of stable climate since the last ice age during which all human civilisation developed.

⁴ Ada Smailbegovic, “Cloud Writing: Describing Soft Architectures of Change in the Anthropocene”, in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments, and Epistemologies*, eds. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 96.

⁵ Curatorial note for “Concrete Skies”, by HH Arts Spaces, displayed at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.

⁶ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, “The City: The Sewer, the Gaze, and the Contaminating Touch”, in *Beyond the Body Proper: Reading the Anthropology of Material Life*, eds. Margaret M. Lock and Judith Farquhar (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 266.

⁷ Richard Schechner, *Performed Imaginaries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 112.

⁸ The *Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)*, 2019 proposes to fast-track citizenship for religious minorities who fled persecution in their home countries, namely, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. The use of religion as a criterion excludes the Muslim population of India from this premise.

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⁹ The *Nationwide Register of Citizens* (NRC) is a register which includes demographic information about all individuals who qualify as citizens of India per the Citizenship Act, 1955, its purpose being to identify and deport those who qualify as illegal immigrants. It has been implemented in the state of Assam (2013-14) with disastrous effects resulting in mass displacement, family separations, and death. The Government of India plans to implement it nationwide by 2021.

¹⁰ Nicholas Gilewicz, “I Like America and America Likes Me: A Meditation on Performance and Violence”, *Fringe Arts*, July 22, 2012, <https://fringearts.com/2012/07/22/i-like-america-and-america-likes-me-a-meditation-on-performance-and-violence/>

¹¹ Nicholas Gilewicz, “I Like America and America Likes Me: A Meditation on Performance and Violence”.

¹² Irmgard Emmelhainz, “Images Do Not Show: The Desire to See in the Anthropocene”, in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments, and Epistemologies*, eds. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 134.

¹³ Katherine N. Hayles, “Conclusion: What Does It Mean to Be Posthuman?” in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 287.

¹⁴ Irmgard Emmelhainz. “Images Do Not Show: The Desire to See in the Anthropocene”, in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments, and Epistemologies*. eds. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 133.

¹⁵ Anker, Peder, “The Ecological Colonisation of Space”, *Environmental History*, 10 (2005): 239–268.

¹⁶ Valerie Olson and Lisa Messeri, “Beyond the Anthropocene: Un-Earthing an Epoch”, *Environment and Society*, Vol. 6 (2015): 42.

¹⁷ Elizabeth A. Povinelli, “Can Rocks Die? Life and Death Inside the Carbon Imaginary”, in *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 87.

Biography

An independent researcher and writer, **Najrin Islam** is a postgraduate from the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), India. She has written for several platforms including Critical Collective, ArtAsiaPacific and the National Cinema Series published by Rowman and Littlefield. Najrin was awarded the first Art Writers' Award 2018-19 by TAKE on art magazine and Swiss-Arts Council Pro Helvetia which resulted in a residency and an associated publication titled Archive as Medium: Exploring the Performative Body. She has worked as the Associate Editor for Art Dose magazine, Cinema edition (October 2019) which focused on marginal histories of Indian cinema and questions of visibility across changing bodies of reception. Najrin is currently writing about Five Million Incidents on its official blog, 'Plural Futures', a year-long series of projects organised by Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan (New Delhi and Kolkata) and curated by Raqs Media Collective (<https://fivemillionincidents.blog/>). Her research interests include cinematic histories, archival studies and their various intersections in the arts.

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