

PERFORMANCE ART: The absurd and the meaningless **By PARVEZ**

In 2020, I learnt about a place called Museum 1 in Luzern, Switzerland. It appeared to be a museum without doors, walls, roof, security, entry tickets or any of the other paraphernalia usually associated with a museum. The description made me curious, more so when I realised that it was not a knee-jerk reaction to the Covid pandemic - when many art practitioners were disturbed by the closure of the usual art/cultural spaces and wondered how to carry on with shows. In contrast, Museum 1 stood there, posing a conceptual challenge to the notion of 'white cube' art spaces, since 2015.

A few months later, in July 2020, I met Stephan Wittmer, the curator, next to a sign board that read, 'Museum 1' and marked the fallow land surrounded by roads on three sides, accessible 24 x 7, where the natural vegetation grows and withers down with the seasons. Within the next fifteen minutes, Stephan had me asked if I would like to do something there. I accepted the offer, only to realise a little later that he meant a few months long show while I thought of a single intervention on one day. Thus came about 'COMMODI-FICTION', a solo show at Museum 1, from April 10 to October 2, 2021, right in the middle of the pandemic that had otherwise pushed most of the art community to explore the virtual space through online platforms.

As I developed the concept and worked on the details of COMMODI-FICTION, I realised even more how Museum 1 challenges the notion of an art space and with that, forces one to think about the kind of art work (especially with regards to 'material / monetary' value) one would need for a show. At the same time, it also opens up new possibilities for interventions and display, merely by its unconventionality.

Finally COMMODI-FICTION was built around three things:

1. The concepts proposed by Karl Polanyi, an economist, historian and thinker who analysed the industrial revolution in his book, *The Great Transformation: Political and economic origins of our times*; that was published in 1948.

2. I started collecting objects that people leave outside their houses in Basel with '*Gratis*' written on it, since I moved there some years ago. This act of 'collecting things from the roadside' had begun almost involuntarily. It was as if I was trying to save things that were still fully functional and also not easily affordable - when seen from an understanding of the third-world. The problem however was that while I placed a value on their 'functionality and need' from the third world perspective, they remained 'things in access' in the first world, that must be discarded to free-up space/s in a house/office to replace them with newer/better items. This economic disparity - the affluence on one end versus the poverty of the third world - remains troubling and also connected somewhere to how Polanyi looked at 'economy and the society'. So these objects, that were both valuable and discards at the same time, became the main material for the works I created for this show.

3. The idea of evolving a larger and continuous narrative till the very end of the show, while keeping each intervention / act also a complete work/piece in itself by populating the space along time was in a way pushed on by the space. That also led me to choose Performance Art / Live Art interventions as the central media for the show. I intended to play further with the un-conventionality of the space and generate

encounters to engage the visitors, often even in creating / shaping the works. That is how the seven interventions were planned, starting with 'Colonising M1' a symbolic takeover of the land at the opening; and finally a real 'Auction' as a performance at the end of the show.

Museum 1 is a conceptual space of contradictions. It opens up unusual possibilities also poses a challenge about the very notion of an art work and its material value. A similar contradiction is also present in Performance Art. The interventional and performative framework for my show stemmed from this connection based on contradiction. And, it is this aspect of Performance Art (also known as Live Art, Interventions, Happenings, Action Art etc.) and its political relevance that I wish to deal with in this piece.

My journey to Performance Art has been a long and tortuous route through other disciplines. The conceptual nature of Performance Art tickled my imagination as I sensed a potential there – that of doing almost 'anything' without worrying about the label it would need, and through that also the possibility of creating one's own vocabulary of expressions. However, exciting as it may sound, that also requires conceptual clarity, which in turn implies a lot of work and perseverance. A look at the history of this relatively young art form also reiterates the later.

Performance Art apparently took off from a variety of influences that include the Situationists, Fluxus, installation art, conceptual art and DADA-ism among others, around mid-1960s onwards in Europe. It was largely considered as "...an antithesis to theatre, challenging orthodox art forms and cultural norms. The ideal had been an ephemeral and authentic experience for performer and audience in an event that could not be repeated, captured or purchased." (Source: *Performance art - Wikipedia*)

That implies that it was designed to pose questions and challenge the rigid frameworks in art, society and even the system that bought and sell art. It is also quite clear that it was the social conditions of those times - the world war/s and their connection to colonialism and the disturbing facets of the capitalist economic system - that prompted artists who could see through the facades, to find ways to challenge the very system that even provided them the money (through the act of buying and selling art) to survive and carry on. This critiquing and interrogative nature of this form, which is intrinsic to its existence, cannot be ignored.

As an example, I illustrate upon just one of the important influences, Dada-ism, which is said to have come about in Cabaret Voltaire, a bar in Zurich that began in 1916. It became a joint for many artists who were disturbed by the First World War and the social conditions the war created in Europe. Many of these artists had moved to Switzerland from other European nations that were engaged in the War, since this was a neutral country. Thus, a critique of the art world began to emerge in the non-descript Cabaret and led to artistic experiments that were often termed 'anti-art' as they challenged the dominant narrative and the accepted norms of aesthetical expressions. One description suggests that "...the movement was a protest against the bourgeois nationalist, capitalist and colonialist interests, which many Dadaists believed were the root cause of the war, and against the cultural and intellectual conformity - in art and more broadly in society- that corresponded to the War." (Source: *Performance art - Wikipedia*)

What began at Cabaret Voltaire, later spread to other parts of Europe when the artists went back to their countries after the War ended and added to the other movements that too were brewing at the same time.

Around mid 1960s, these politically charged artistic experiments began to gain some recognition under the terms like Performance Art and some others used previously in this article. Irrespective of which word one prefers, the conceptual nature of this form opened up a frontier which allowed artists to do almost 'anything' they could imagine. And, that even included 'meaningless' and 'absurd' acts.

The dominant art spaces of course mostly avoided the form, most likely because 1. The (un)aesthetics did not sit well with them 2. It did not produce a 'tangible, sellable product' that could be stored or displayed the way the art world wanted and 3. The supposed connoisseurs / patrons of art did not want to put their money on it (most likely for the first two reasons) besides the difficulty in re-selling it.

Not putting a value (money) on something is also the market's way to let a thing (idea, object, human being) fall off the loop and fade away. However, not only did Performance Art continue to survive, but it attracted more artists and also more audience towards it. The persistence, in spite of a lack of financial and institutional support, could perhaps only be explained by what it offered to the artists who otherwise felt constrained and even conceptually imprisoned by the dominant regimes of aesthetics, expressions and form that were imposed upon them by the social condition and the market-war nexus. Performance Art allowed the artists the possibility to express themselves in a multitude of ways that were impossible in the recognised art forms and spaces. The notion of using the body to create conceptual works also freed the artists from the straight-jacketed, material/resource intensive methods that the market required. The formlessness of this conceptual form made it possible to articulate the pent up anger and frustration, speak out one's mind and mock the pretentious world that they could see.

The absurdities and meaninglessness, that such acts were often marked and associated with, were therefore not senseless acts. They were purposefully used to challenge the sensibilities, that the artists believed, had been artificially cultured and instilled in both the audience and the artists by the market forces that controlled art production and promoted certain idea of aesthetics.

Over the last couple of decades, while Performance Art appears to have gained some recognition in the dominant art scene - white cube spaces beginning to somewhat indulge in it; the market forces have also been trying to turn it into a 'tangible' product. One such experiment, for example, was the '14 Rooms' at Art Basel 2014, where many known performance artists presented instruction-based performances that were performed repeatedly by hired actors, in a fixed space (a closed room), every day during the art fair.

The current span and expressions of Performance Art is far too vast. The potential of doing 'anything' and even evolving one's own artistic expressions remains an attractive proposition. However, the soul of Performance Art lies in its political nature, out of which it was born. And, that infact is the only real promise that it carries. The absurdities were a calculated and purposeful political act, as was the idea of doing

'meaningless' performances in the context of those times. Therefore, merely doing an absurd or a meaningless act cannot be Performance Art. That is where the form challenges the artist and poses the contradiction – offering the possibility to do 'anything' while forcing it to be conceptually grounded in a critical thought. The expression (whether absurd or not) has to stem from there. For, it is only then that it can pose a challenge, a question, a thought to provoke sensibilities and / or examine the social situations and conditions that the system wants one to believe in and accept, both in the art world and outside it.

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