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# An Art Event Incorporates Itself in the Spaces of New Delhi

By JYOTI PANDE LAVAKARE

NEW DELHI — On a bright, crisp February afternoon, I hadn't exactly planned to sit in a hall full of strangers listening to intense conversations on death and dying — and in the process, becoming part of a discursive installation by a German artist in India's capital city.

But the distinctive yellow fliers across the city advertising Insert2014, a monthlong art event, had piqued my curiosity. “Last Minute Exercise,” performed by the Berlin artist Hannah Hurtzig as one of Insert2014's installations, pulled me right in as volunteers from the audience and specialists in biology, medicine, forensics, anthropology, law, journalism and religious studies talked about the different aspects of death.

Each participant was given a headset with four radio channels to toggle among the conversations. The discussions forced me to think about issues that I wasn't entirely sure I was comfortable with. The auditorium was full, the audience fully engaged in this experiential and experimental project. But how exactly was this art?

It is challenging to classify Insert2014, which began Jan 31 and runs until Friday, as it refuses to get boxed into any category. It is not a conventional art fair, exhibition, installation or art show. In fact, some of the works don't even fit into the narrow definition of art, in that they aren't visually appealing or aesthetically pleasing in any way. Yet it is art, if you define art as something that makes you think and feel, that pulls you out of your comfort zone and opens possibilities that you may never have explored otherwise.

Insert2014 focuses on the artist as the generator of ideas rather than as

an illustrator, one who questions things the world takes for granted. And its art takes viewers beyond the usual binaries of pleasant or unpleasant, beautiful or ugly, aesthetic or disturbing.

Its events are initiated and performed by 20 international and eight Indian artists, curated and directed by the Raqs Media Collective, whose members are Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta.

Why call it Insert? “The idea was very simple,” Mr. Bagchi said in a phone interview from Houston, where he and the Raqs team are already researching their next project. “We wanted a light exhibition model that could insert itself into the existing spaces of the city, with no new infrastructure being created — in a sense, insert contemporary art possibilities into Mati Ghar, and Mati Ghar itself into contemporary art.”

The focus of the avant-garde event, which took two years to plan, is an exhibition of site-specific works by artists from around the world at Mati Ghar, the dome-shaped building at the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts in central New Delhi.

“Celestial Invitation,” by Ivana Franke, a Berlin artist, fills the Mati Ghar dome with a sculptural matrix of illuminated fishnet wires, her signature transparent material and light, using the dome itself as the scaffolding. Another dark enclosure, disorienting in a different way from Ms. Franke’s work, had live spiders spinning a web within a perfect cube, which means it was changing every time one saw it.

Eyal Weizman, an Israeli architect who analyzes architecture from a “forensic point of view” — as a scene of crime — presented his investigations through an installation and symposium. Mr. Weizman examines a building as a dead body — looking at the cause of death, the condition of the cadaver, any signs of violence. He has applied this same concept in his analysis of sociopolitical events, like the drone attacks in Pakistan and the 1980s genocide against the Mayan people in Guatemala.

The Indian artist Gauri Gill envisioned her exhibition as “takeaway art.” Visitors can take home her small books of photographs of New Delhi’s anti-Sikh riots in 1984, which include responses to these images by writers, artists and poets.

Other disturbing images held my attention: A naked white woman injecting chemicals in her body in a sinister-looking, old-fashioned lab was, I later learned, the Polish feminist Katarzyna Kozyra filming her own chemotherapy in a nine-minute movie.

Viewers have struggled to understand the art, but it clearly has had an impact on them. “This was very intense—it threw me off, made me think,” said Siddharth Singh, a 26-year-old economic analyst and consultant.

But Mati Ghar was not the only focus. True to its name, Insert2014 inserted itself at several other sites within the city’s spaces, making it impossible to ignore. The Goethe-Institut, which supported the event, described it as the unfolding of “a series of unexpected encounters with contemporary art in the public domain ... at cultural sites across Delhi, bringing together a diverse group of international experts and contemporary artists to inaugurate a rethinking of the city’s cultural infrastructure.”

Which it does, through the Taiwanese artist Yao Jui-chung’s photos and video titled “Mirage: Unused Public Spaces in Taiwan.” Mr. Yao has been fascinated by abandoned buildings for almost 20 years, and Raqs had hoped that that interaction might inspire people to look at similar abandoned spaces in Delhi with new eyes.

Raqs even identified 17 unused sites in Delhi’s prime locations as having potential for cultural activities. These conversations will form the final live event for Insert2014 at Mati Ghar, called “New Models for Common Ground,” on Tuesday afternoon.

Rather than art meant for viewing, Insert2014 feels like a series of intellectual exercises around ideas generated by international artists. “The first response, that from the artists themselves, was wonderful — the way they were drawing from each other’s work, the openness and generosity they demonstrated towards each other,” said Mr. Bagchi of the Raqs Collective.

The response from the public has been robust as well, he said. About 1,500 people attended the opening day, and now the event draws up to 300 people on any given day.

Since the works are challenging to understand without asking questions and there is little or no wall text — Raqs deliberately kept it this way so as not

to distract from the actual art, and to keep the experience immersive — half a dozen interns were hurriedly trained after the opening to act as docents and aid engagement with the works.

“Insert2014 was envisaged as a platform to get a discourse going between emerging, midcareer and established arties, the international art crowd, the city of Delhi and the Indian cultural community,” said Azad Shivdasani, chairman of the Inlaks Shivdasani Foundation, an overseas nonprofit organization that financed and produced Insert2014.

Anecdotal feedback has also been good, said Mr. Shivdasani. “But more than anecdotal evidence and footfalls, what is important is the longer-lasting impact of such a show — will there be a ripple effect, dialogues and conversations that will outlast the dismantling of the show? I hope so,” he said.

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