

Public Art Ecology:
The Performative Force of Public Interventions in Context at KHOJ¹

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During the recent open studio exhibition of the works made during the first iteration of the “In Context: Public Art Ecology” program at the KHOJ International Artists Workshop (April, 2010), for which I was Critic in Residence, a profusion of localized public interventions with ecological implications took place in New Delhi. The works included such public interventions as a cycle rickshaw that required the cooperation of both “driver” and “passenger,” thus violating their customary roles; a car enclosed in its own bag of pollution, that enacts the laboring of the lungs of this smoggy, vehicle-clogged city; a dynamic interactive installation in which ordinary Delhi residents could contemplate genetically modified crops through the embodiment of the idea that “you are what you eat;” a low-tech, DIY water purification system made with the inexpensive materials; a liberation of urban trees being choked by concrete cages in the city center; and an object designed to trace the invisible migrations of stories, memories and lives between working-class Old Delhi and the new, affluent suburbs of Gurgaon.

As Critic in Residence at Khoj, during this program I worked together with the artists as they developed their projects, and here offer one way of looking at the larger productive dynamics animating this kind of site-anchored, public art interventionist practice. In my brief overview of the work below, I offer the conceptual toolbox of “performativity” for understanding a less-noticed, but perhaps most significant dimension of the artworks in question.

After an overview of the concept of “performativity,” I look at the artworks presented during the residency in terms of what they embody, how they are implicated, and the stances which they take or entail, rather than merely the after-effects of the works in the minds of the viewers. This is a move away from focusing primarily on the symbolic or representational dimension of the work, and also a move that goes beyond theories of consumption and reception by audiences. Rather, the approach offered for understanding the works in question involves an optical, conceptual, epistemological shift that allows us to examine more than just the works themselves but also their “workings”—their animating principles, their internal logics and the dynamics that constitute what they are—and always, of course, “in context.”

¹ Originally written as part of the 2010 KHOJ In Context: Public Art Ecology I program, for which I was

Performativity and Contexts for Public Art

Performativity is a tricky concept. It has enjoyed a certain vogue of late, but is often batted around in discussions about performance and used in ways that demonstrate ignorance of its actual meaning, and fail to elucidate its actual import. To the end of undercutting this pervasive, trendy misuse of the concept, and showing how it can offer a efficacious analytic for making sense of the functioning and what philosopher J.L. Austin—the father of the concept of performativity—called (in the context of Speech Acts) “illocutionary force,”² in this case the force of an artwork, rather than its content or representational meaning, a brief overview of the concept of performativity is in order.

When he came up with the concept of performativity in his landmark book *How To Do Things With Words* (1955), J.L. Austin was responding to a specific set of philosophical debates about truth claims and language made in the dominant paradigm of the moment logical positivism. At the time, positivist philosophers were making grandiose claims about the relationship between language and meaning, and how we can determine the “truth” of a statement. In essence, they argued that truth was a function of correspondence between “statements” and “states.” That is, it can be said that the statement “it is raining,” is true if and only if it is in fact raining.

This stance seems unobjectionable on the surface of things until one realizes the larger implications for how we are to conceive of the relationship between language and the world if this view is indeed so. The underlying assumptions about language in the positivist paradigm, then, included the idea that words were names or labels for extralinguistic things “out there in the world” and language was primarily a vehicle of communication—the conveyance of either true or false information—that took place between idealized “speakers” and “hearers,” and the “truth” of a given utterance or claim could be ascertained by examining the worldly “referents” encoded in the sentences uttered and checking to see whether the state of things was truly as asserted and implied in the statement.

The epistemology and ontology (that is, how philosophy of how we know what we claim to know, and what the essential being and nature of things is) implied in this stance seems all fine and good if we are trying to tell whether it is raining or not. But it gets a lot more complicated if you want to know whether I am sad, or what it feels like to have a broken heart, or whether I am mature enough (for what?), or whether a certain person (say an authority figure like a teacher, a parent, a police officer) actually has any *real* authority, and so on. The upshot of the positivist paradigm of language was widely held belief that every (sensical) sentence could be distilled down to its basic “constative” components and “truth functionality,” and thus assessed by

² *How to do Things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University, 1955, 1962*, (eds. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa), Oxford: Clarendon Press.

referencing the external conditions in the world which is assumed to be “out there,” i.e. outside of our heads and existing in complete independence from our languages and our minds.

Austin (as well as ordinary language philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was also doing brilliant, path-breaking philosophical work on similar questions around the same time, though in a very different register³) attacked the foundations of the positivist view of language. He attacked the notion that language (and thus the mode of truth functionality contained therein) was essentially “constative,” and argued that words are quite meaningless (or at least we can’t get at their meaning) outside of specific contexts of use, and the proper unit of investigation is the sentence, particularly the spoken utterance, not the word, or lexical item.

Austin demonstrated quite forcefully that words are not simply “referents” for worldly “things out there,” and that speech is as much a kind of *action* as it is a vehicle of conveying information between speaker and hearer. Focusing on what he called “Speech Acts”—the things that we are *doing* that are *entailed in the saying of what we say*, as opposed to the *information conveyed* by the speech—he showed how the use of language has a “performative dimension.” He began by focusing on a class of verbs he called “explicit performatives,” such as saying “I do,” as a bride or groom in the context of a wedding. Saying “I do,” in this context, is not a *comment* about the wedding with attendant constative “truth values,” but indeed a *performance of the act* of getting married. At stake is the question of what words are *doing* when they are used in certain contexts by certain people. Those words, uttered in such contexts, then, have a certain weight, or, what he called an “illocutionary force.”

Later Austin showed that nearly all utterances have a performative dimension. In making any kind of statement, asking any kind of question, indeed, in speaking at all, we are also simultaneously doing something—making judgments, or taking stances, or trying to persuade others, or capitulating, or whining, or gloating, or showing off, or being rude, and so on—that is implied necessarily in the words we use—not in their “semantic” meaning, but in their “pragmatics”—the underlying structure of conventions and shared practices that allow for intersubjectivity and some degree of commensurability, which make communication possible, in the use of language among members of a community of speakers.

The pragmatics of language are what *counts as X* in the context of Y—say, what counts as “art” on the global biennale circuit, or what counts as “art” among a circle of *nouveau riche* collectors (obviously not necessarily the same)—the implicit criteria and standards for judging *what something is*, not merely *what it means*.

³ *Philosophical Investigations (PI)*, 4th edition, 2009, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (eds. and trans.), Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

So, in this view, both meaning and being are tied to context, and context is shaped by intersubjective convention, within an *ecology of linguistic practice*, as it were. But convention is also shaped by acts of speaking, and innovation within patterned limits, so the relationship is dialogical and bi-directional, not “one-way.” And power within that ecology—like who has the right to speak and who gets listened to—is asymmetrically distributed and wielded among speakers/actors.

The concept of performativity got picked up and popularized across the social sciences and humanities by philosopher Jacques Derrida⁴—who introduced notions of iterability and citationality, and authority—and Judith Butler, who extended the concept to encompass considerations of power that were absent from Austin’s pioneering work. While Derrida was more interested in the textual manifestations of performativity via citation and the authoritative functioning of intertextual iterations, Butler focused on the constitutive power of speech and performativity as a way of understanding how subjects are constituted through language—both as its object and its speaking subject. She grounded her investigations in areas such as the functioning of “hate speech,” and the performative constitution of the gendered subject, extending the scope of performativity to include far more than linguistic speech acts, encompassing forms of symbolic speech and ritualized, conventionalized practice.

Thus, invoking the concept of performativity is not a fancy way of saying there was a performance (in the convention sense of a staged action based on a script (or improvised from a set of internalized skills), by a performer before an audience or that the work can be seen allegorically in that way. Instead, it should be clear that performativity is a way of talking about the “force” carried by certain utterances, actions, practices, behaviors, forms of expression, creative acts and works, which include artworks, interventions and engagements of various sorts.

Performativity, then, in our context, is the dimension in which an artistic work or intervention enacts something, embodies a certain force (just like saying “I do,” under the right circumstances, is not a *comment* about marriage, but a *partaking* in it; not just a cause leading to an effect, but an embodiment or instantiation of the “wedding” of two lives). To wit, Austin distinguished between the “illocutionary force,” what one does in saying something, and the “perlocutionary effects,” what takes place as a result of that saying. In other words, performativity is more about *what the work constitutes* (in and of itself, and in the minds of its interlocutors), than it is about what “effects” it has in the world, though it clearly has those too, and they are not uninteresting or irrelevant.

In the context of making sense of the projects realized in the *In Context: Public Art Ecology* program at KHOJ, I use this concept of performativity to try to illuminate the

• ⁴ *Of Grammatology*. 1974. Tr., Gayatri Spivak, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

“force” constituted by the interventions and artworks rather than explore them as representational objects or vectors of the artists’ personal affect.

PROJECTS

Sylvia Winkler & Stephan Koeperl—*The PPR Experience (Passenger-Propelled Rickshaw)*

In line with the internal logic of many of their other works, Winkler and Koeperl’s PPR—the Passenger Propelled Rickshaw—modifies an ordinary, local object to instantiate a new set of relations, and engage local viewers to think critically about larger issues. In this case, they took the cycle rickshaw—the ubiquitous three wheeled bicycles used for cheap, short distance transportation across Delhi and elsewhere in India. By modifying the cycle rickshaw so that the passengers do the peddling while the driver only steers, they achieve a number of things in one go. Rather than merely advocating values such as equality, eco-friendly transportation and the health benefits of exercise, they combine the *performance* of these into this one intervention.

By being structurally engineered such that the driver and the passengers must coordinate and cooperate with one another to operate the PPR, this intervention instantiates a non-hierarchical relationship, and by riding the PPR, the passengers, who normally sit back and let the driver do all the work for a pittance, are *per force* and *de facto* engaged in an egalitarian relationship with the driver—something quite radical in this society characterized by deeply entrenched, rigid and non-porous class stratification, in which the cycle rickshaw walas exist at a very low level on the social hierarchy. For many local participants, this may be the first time in their lives where they experience a non-hierarchical relationship with people such as the cycle rickshaw wala. Moreover, by participating in the PPR Experience, the participants are partaking in eco-friendly transportation, and getting a good workout in the process.

Rather than lecturing “viewers” about how to be more environmentally responsible, healthier, and egalitarian in their outlooks, Winkler and Koeperl induct members of society as *voluntary participants* into the experience, and it is their experiences of the process that constitute the work itself, and not simply the modified machine the artists have created. Thus the process becomes a dialogical one, capable of making a variety of meanings out of the work, as well as effecting its particular sort of illocutionary force in the process.

Sohei Iwata—*Field Work*

As an extension of his long-term, multi-year *Apam Napat* project building eco-houses with local minorities in Shantiniketan, West Bengal, Iwata created an intervention in Delhi that brings his experimentations with the potency of harnessing the power of bacteria, as well as inexpensive, ordinary, bountiful objects, such as sand and gravel, to the service of low-tech water purification. On site, at Khoj, he constructed a simple, water purification system, using nothing but plastic buckets, rocks of varying sizes, sand, a meter deep tank, tubes and a pump. Over the course of the next few months, as polluted water is pushed through a series of buckets filled with large stones, then medium, then small, and finally a tank of meter-deep sand, the aerobic bacteria living in the first three of these buckets will consume most of the waste materials and toxins in the water. Finally, after being driven into the depths of over a meter of sand, where no oxygen exists, the bacteria die and fresh, clean, potable water is produced without the assistance of chemicals or expensive machines.

This project contains a performative aspect less in terms of enacting a critical transformative experience for the viewers of the work and more in the sense that the project itself embodies a transformation, as water is changed from unsafe and polluted to clean and potable. Moreover, by functioning as a model of low-cost, easy water purification, the project embodies a viable alternative to the kinds of chemical intensive, costly, and inefficient water purification systems currently in place.

Andrea Polli & Chuck Varga—*Breather*

Drawing on and extending the logic and performative function of their earlier work, *Cloud Car*, Polli and Varga arrived in India with the intention of localizing and reinventing that intervention in ways that would speak to acute problems specific to (though clearly not exclusive to) New Delhi. After a (literally) breath-taking experience in an autorickshaw on a traffic-clotted road, where air quality is often noxious at best, the team set out to create a project that would mimic the experience of suffocation, and tie that experience to auto emissions.

After beginning with the idea of using an autorickshaw, they shifted their plan in favor of showcasing the egregiously polluting Maruthi—an early icon of the automobile in India—encased in a plastic bubble resembling an alveolar sac, which was placed outside of the posh Delhi mall, Select City Walk. This lung-like bubble expands and contracts, inhaling outside air that fills it and then exhaling till the bubble is tight around the car that is inside it, filling it with imitation exhaust smoke.

On the car, in Hindi and English, is a caption that reads: “One person dies everyday from air pollution in New Delhi.” With this slogan, Polli and Varga are inviting the viewers to imagine themselves in two locations that embody metonymical relationships to the larger problem: inside that emission-filled car that is suffocating within the bubble, and in the place of the individual who dies each day due to air

pollution. The underlying implication is that this is not a problem that can be seen as “someone else’s.” This is a problem that affects every individual living in the city, child and adult, male and female, rich and poor, upper and lower class, alike. The performative power, then, of this simple but effective move is to elide the difference between the viewer and the faceless statistical victim of air pollution, and to collapse the boundary between them, which is the very boundary that allows people to treat such problems as outside of themselves and thus “not my problem.”

It is telling and ironic that during the opening, the fake emissions (harmless stage smoke, which emit a strong smell), caused a number of complaints to the Select City Walk mall management, as viewers found themselves coughing while they watched the bubble around the Maruthi expand and contract. The performative power and general effectiveness of the sign vehicle embodied in the sac-encased care, is instantiated and evidenced in the viewers’ fears about the negative impact of the installation on their health.

Aliya Pabani, Namrata Mehta & Tejas Pande—*The Object of My Extension*

Following a rhizomatic trail of social and economic relations from Chandni Chowk to Gurgaon, the *ad hoc* team of Aliya Pabani, Namrata Mehta and Tejas Pande, created two “objects” that were to function as the receptacles and carriers of people’s memories and aspirations, bounded within the context of the relationship between these two communities.

The objects that the team created were concave and convex stainless steel cone-shaped vessels that could be hung in quotidian local environs and were equipped to record sound and video. After developing a network of social relationships that interpenetrated the two sites, and the production of these objects, the team deployed them in the trust of locals with ties to both Gurgaon and Chandni Chowk. They were hung in shops, carried between the sites and offered to other locals for interaction. People treated them like reverse-oracles, uttering memory, rather than prophesy, and expressing hopes for the future.

Of the function that their particular kind of process-based anti-spectacle public art can perform, the team states:

“We foresee a shift from the concept of ‘Public Art’ as a unilateral communication with viewers, to a concept of “Art in Public” that engages actors within preexisting systems as a means of better understanding how a given cultural milieu is informed by the practices of the individuals within it. We believe that just as a cultural milieu is both influenced by and impacting upon the individual that constitute it, so too an art work in public space might act more as a feedback system that is co-created by its participants, viewers and the artists that initiate it. Our goal in this respect, with regards to this residency,

was to create a public art work that not only engaged participants from a variety of social spheres, but for it to be useful for people working with the issue of ecology from a variety of disciplines, and not only for an 'art audience'."

The "objects" they created for this project have traveled back and forth between the sites, and functioned as the receptacles of people's aspirations and memories, revealing both ruptures and continuities between the two, while eschewing the guise of art as spectacle and instead seeking to highlight the subtle processes that form the connective tissue between people and places.

Following this process, the team created video documentation that was displayed alongside the "objects" for the KHOJ open house.

Navjot Altaf— *Barakhamba 2010*

Working in collaboration with environmentalist Ajay Mahajan, and the New Delhi Municipal Corporation, Navjot Altaf set out to create an interventionist artwork that not only symbolized or represented a change, but in fact embodied and instantiated that change.

Altaf's objective was to liberate the rows of trees, lining central Delhi's Barakhamba Road, from their strangling cages of concrete and asphalt. De-choking these trees was at once a genuine environmental action that transformed the quality of life for over trees in a central, highly visible locale, and a potentially precedent-setting example for how the municipal government could better implement greenification regulations and maintain the commons at a higher standard.

More importantly, the project was also a knowledge-sharing experience. The artist, the road workers, as well as city Horticulture Department officials, were all drawn into the project, and their understanding of the status quo state of the trees in Delhi was transformed through the interaction. In addition, this dialogical process of knowledge-sharing passed between the artist and environmentalist, and the locals who rely on such trees for practical and much needed green cover during the many sweltering months in the city—water vendors, paan walas, ice-cream carts and cold drink sellers, as well as ordinary passersby, and people from lower echelons of the social stratum who have no access to the artificial shade of air-conditioned spaces, to which the rich and privileged retreat when there is no naturally produced shade, in the form of trees, in the environs where they work.

By making a specific, practical environmental action the core of her Public Art Ecology project, Altaf's artwork also transcended the merely polemical function of making people recognize an existing problem. Instead, the actual solution to the problem—the liberation of those trees—was the work itself. Thus an embodied principle carries practical, performative force that entails widespread implications across the web of

social and economic relations that intersect under the cover (or lack thereof) of those trees.

Moreover, by rooting her project in a small, finite, practical improvement of the living conditions of the trees, Altaf's intervention performatively embodies (rather than merely representing or symbolizing) a set of larger principles about our responsibility to the natural environment and those who rely on the normal functioning of that environment (e.g. healthy trees are needed to produce adequate outdoor shade for those who are forced to work on the street under conditions of extreme heat and exposure to UV radiation). These are also principles that *de facto* decenter the dominant narrative of anthropocentric dominion and exploitation of the environment for the narrow, immediate and short-term gain of the dominant segment of society. The performative embodiment of these principles enacts and instantiates a vision of different sort of relationship between human beings and the natural world; a relationship in which we have responsibilities, such as stewardship, towards nature, and cannot simply treat the natural world as a site of exploitative extraction. Indeed, for many who have encountered the intervention, the notion that the trees could have been suffering in their cages of concrete, or "choking" due to shoddy human arrangements, and that this is something that matters and merits our ameliorative attention, is a radical sort of proposition that shifts the entire terms of discourse, and raises questions about our responsibilities that radiate far beyond the trees on Barakhamba Road.

Sheba Chhachhi—*Bhogi/Rogi*

For her *Public Art Ecology* project, Sheba Chhachhi collaborated with German artist Thomas Eichhorn, drawing on his technical skills, to create *Bhogi/Rogi*—an interactive video intervention exploring the way we are constituted by our consumption. For the project, Chhachhi focused on genetically modified crops that are commonly consumed by ordinary Indians.

As the biotech industry attempts to gain a foothold in the Indian agriculture industry, a whole host of issues are raised in the process—as much as the agricultural intersect with the gastronomic here, the political, too, intersects with the economic. The work functions performatively to raise questions about our consumption patterns and their larger consequences in the minds of the viewers—that is, to embody a shift in thinking about these issues.

The questions raised by the work are big macro-level questions that are entailed within the installation and linked to ordinary viewers through the micro-level questions that those viewers will have about their own health, eating habits, choices and rights. Beyond the discrete individual experience of buying and eating foods that have been modified and are dangerous on multiple levels, are larger questions that

concerns us as a collectivity. These are questions about consumer rights and government regulation; homogenization of products, and the destruction of regional and local diversity via monocrop farming; questions about the health and safety of genetically modified foods, both to the individual and the environment; questions about massive multinationals (such as Monsanto) and their relations with politicians, the media, and local farmers; about power asymmetry between big corporations and little farming communities; about the impact of the aggressive introduction of genetically modified, or “BT” seeds into the Indian agricultural industry, as well as the larger ecosystems in which farming is embedded.

Bhogi/Rogi in Hindi translates as *Consumption/Disease*, and the progression of the interactive video performatively enacts the conceptual issues raised by the work and discussed above. The piece is simultaneously serious, and also fun and engaging. Its performative force—not merely in terms of information transfer, but more importantly, in terms of stimulating cognition and critical thought in the minds of the viewers—was demonstrated, in part, at the public opening of the KHOJ studios.

At the opening, ordinary local residents, many of them young men and children, flocked to KHOJ and stood entranced in front of the projection. They jostled to enter the room and become part of the installation, and cavorted before the camera, laughing as they watched their figures emerge in a lush yellow field of floating mustard flowers, only to be subsequently filled with bubbling, golden oil, surrounded by a rain of bottles of mustard oil. As the bottles of oil disappear from the screen, outlines of the viewer’s bodies are crowded by grains of rice, which then give way to a snapping sea of red mouths and hungry teeth. The chomping mouths fill the screen, momentarily obscuring the shape of the viewer’s bodies, before the bodies of the viewers metastasize into a gross, pulsating mass of tomatoes, and then aubergines—all genetically modified—that resemble cancerous cells proliferating and taking over the body.

What follows this in the interactive installation is a meditation on the relationship between the homogenization of our food and consumption patterns, and the homogenization and standardization of our own lives and selves. Images of genetically modified tomatoes and aubergine, grown square to fit more efficiently in boxes are substituted with human ID photographs and a barcode. This progression culminates in a creepy display of decapitated dolly heads, which left many of the viewers unsettled and questioning what the relationship between the BT food, its consumption, and our own subsequent transformations might be.

Conclusion

The force of this sort of questioning enacted by and entailed in so many of the KHOJ Public Art Ecology projects is one of the defining functions of performative

interventions, which operate quite differently from artworks that seeks to transmit prefabricated ideological polemics from a “speaker” to a “hearer.” With performative interventions, the object is to raise questions that activate a sense of the self in relation to those questions in the minds of the viewer, that is, to *embody* a change that is generated *within* the minds of the interlocutors of the artwork.

In the sense outlined above, and demonstrated in the works themselves, such performative interventions radically destabilize the old model of authorial authority over the meaning of an artwork. Performative interventions take a leap of faith in the capacity of the viewer to complete the meaning of the work in the process of viewing and making sense of it. This move of mind is egalitarian, rather than hierarchical, dialogical rather than didactic, polyvocal and heterogloss, rather than univocal and homogenous in its process of meaning making. The result is a proliferation of possible readings of the work, multiple groundings that make that meaning real and relevant by making the work mean *something to someone in some capacity*, as polymath philosopher and semiotician C.S. Peirce⁵ might put it rather than merely embodying the abstract concept of its maker.

It is precisely this performative dimension that makes such interactive public interventions so potent and forceful, and public art so vital to the project of reconstituting public space through critical dialogue and the meetings of minds, forming a space of possibility for paradigm shifts and meaningful action in concert by communities, collectives, and individuals.

⁵ “Logic as Semiotic,” in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. 8 vols. 1958. Edited by Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks. 1931–1958; vols. 1–6 edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, 1931–1935; vols. 7–8 edited by Arthur W. Burks. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

