Performance as ‘Process’ in Public Engagement

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As a facilitator of processes, I have often pondered a question: What constitutes a creative professional? Around 2005, after changing directions from a formal background in Environmental Science and Neurobiology, I turned to visual-narrative media like theatre. I felt the need to explore theatre tools in order to develop alternative engagements due to a fractured sense of intimacy with my city of birth, Bangalore (now Bengaluru). My initial experience with urban theatre groups led me to be critical of the competitive, celebrity culture permeating many media forms. Instead, a strong sense of social consciousness, collaborative creation, and community engagement was induced through my time with an urban theatre group called Rafiki. Gradually, I was introduced to a large but fragmented network of alternative theatre groups and practices in India.

While participating in and observing street protests, I could not help but notice that the human-rights centric social justice discourse developed by NGO workers and urban activists elicited a weak and unsustainable public response. Somewhat disillusioned at this disconnect between urban development issues and the public of neoliberal India, I chose to pursue introspective cultural engagement using theatre, storytelling, community media, and (later) design thinking. My engagement with community spaces grew and allowed the development of creative tools that aided a new emergence of relationalities and culminated in the role of an educator in a design school in 2009. Over the past decade, this work has developed into what I consider ‘Critical Practice’ with a social design focus. Creative professionals such as artists have, over time, created their specialisations based on form and medium as output. Research and facilitation are often cast as a prior or external to art production, used to develop inspiration or as art pedagogy. Furthermore, community artists are perceived to be hierarchically beneath artists who work with a defined form or commercial output. Conceptual art and mixed media movements that historically began as critiques of aesthetics, meaning, form and politics stand usurped by capitalist, elitist forces who determine funding, visibility, and trends. Casting process-driven commentaries as “outreach” – and not as art itself – is partisan to market-driven notions of art. For the past 16 years of my practice, I have switched between denying and reclaiming the label of an artist. These have both been my way of responding to work on the fringes of conventional art networks.

My work has evolved through cultural research and community facilitation, yielding different layers of output which emanate from converging processes. First, such work facilitates inclusive, participatory, creative communication tools within various community contexts, from children who are school dropouts to collectives working for the rights of street-based sex workers. These processes manifest as periodic workshops or performances that work on the level of personal struggles. Often told only as super-achiever biographies accompanied by a list of inventions and dates, the humans behind their science are often poorly depicted in Indian schools. A project theme titled Scientists of the East exploded a few early Indian scientists’ work, philosophy, life, and social context. Much of this history is poorly archived. Two of my student collaborators, Gauri Sanghi and Rajasee Ray, further helped develop a parallel exhibit, Scientist Salon, where school children could dress up as a scientist and conduct experiments of their own. Such a performative intervention at a public school and allowed young visitors to be relieved of being constantly reprimanded for touching exhibits. It enabled them to have a sensuous, formative experience of the material and context with which they had come to engage. As contemplation on notes and experiences in the process, a final artist’s book was produced.


Bengaluru Karaga is an urban ritual–performance held by a traditional community, and it marks the city’s geo-cultural site. I was born in 1979 in this city, to parents whose families were naturalised here for a couple of generations. Yet, the Karaga remained relegated to the traditional old city, while a reverent, yet festive atmosphere with food, music and other activities take place. My students and I developed a project titled Design for Dialogue. The larger project hoped to facilitate community experiences and develop performative interventions for a local, government-funded planetarium event, for which Srishti was commissioned to design. My students and I developed Unscientific Storytelling, a process that worked with layers of memories and histories imprinted in our culture around the context of ‘School and Science’ (Fig. 1). A final performance was designed using documentary film and theatrical improvisations that would interact with a live audience.

Working with the premise of stiff post-colonial impositions of science in schools — where “content-feeding” supersedes “context-creation” – the process of dialogue created a community cross-dresses and is said school-going children to understand their learning through creative tools. As artists, we delved into our own school experiences and developed an alternative layer of storytelling about scientists like Newton and Galileo and their personal struggles. Often told only as super-achiever biographies accompanied by a list of inventions and dates, the humans behind their science are often poorly depicted in Indian schools. A project theme titled Scientists of the East exploded a few early Indian scientists’ work, philosophy, life, and social context. Much of this history is poorly archived. Two of my student collaborators, Gauri Sanghi and Rajasee Ray, further helped develop a parallel exhibit, Scientist Salon, where school children could dress up as a scientist and conduct experiments of their own. Such a performative intervention at a public school allowed young visitors to be relieved of being constantly reprimanded for touching exhibits. It enabled them to have a sensuous, formative experience of the material and context with which they had come to engage. As contemplation on notes and experiences in the process, a final artist’s book was produced.¹

Fig. 1: Unscientific Storytelling workshop with public school children on theatre and science (Photo courtesy: Unscientific Storytelling/Deepak Srinivasan).
against communities of transgender women and cross-dressing men also escalated during this time. As an anomaly, the Kanaga procession stood as an instance of permissionality and reverence for a male priest crossdressing in public. This thought triggered the need for a series of live performances, where I donned the character of Draupadi and spoke to the city’s public on the streets. Conversations organically arose around topics like gender, courtship, violation, and changing cityscapes.

Initiated in 2012, the project has since evolved and traversed through theatre, film, and photography, adapting to different contexts of gender, desire, sexuality, and ecology [Fig. 2-3]. My interests in myth and memory have also subsequently expanded beyond the geo-cultural to also include queer readings of such material.7


My interest in communities emerged from a desire to democratise public space, to encourage public expression, and to reclaim “publicness.” As a facilitator, I have used theatre tools to aid a development of personal and political perspectives for marginalised groups (e.g., labour, gender, sexuality) and to contextualise learning experiences for young adults. These contexts would be conventionally categorised as emerging from social development frameworks. However, my deep interest has been to explore cultural and psychosocial transits.

Hasivu Kanasu was a community theatre project that ran from 2014–2017, in collaboration with Sadhana Mahila Sangha, a Bengaluru-based collective that works to secure the legal rights of street-based sex workers [Fig. 4-5]. Initiated by Rumi Harish and D Saraswathi from Karnataka state, they began collecting oral history narratives of sex workers to understand the social aspects of being human through her script. It gently prods the audience to think about the societal absurdity of exiling or dehumanising women who perform sex work by revealing their everydayness, aspirations, and philosophy of living.

Working with non-actors – women volunteers who doubled as field activists for Sadhana Mahila Sangha – and allowing them to find the actor within by working with stories from their own communities was a deeply moving process for me.4 My primary, visible role in this process was to facilitate a dramatisation of a textured script, but I wanted to reach into the actual being of participants such that they became aware of their internal dialogue and when working with the medium of theatre. I designed workshops to understand body, movement, voice, and improvisation, without the rigid imposition of the script’s directions alone. This allowed the participants to explore their inner being. Due to long colonial and postcolonial histories and legal-cultural battles over women’s bodies and agency, South-Asian beingness for women – especially sex workers – had many imbibed and hidden layers that required unravelling. As an artist interested in the histories of gender, art, culture, and eroticism, I feel that postcolonial delinking of sex work from artistic practice – and compartmentalising and shaming women’s bodies – has led to extreme social repression as well as to subsequent violations of women’s rights and safety in public and private domains. For women from lower socio-economic backgrounds, creative storytelling practices allow both intimacy and distance from experiences of familiarity.

To give a glimpse into the process, I cite an experiential moment here from one of the residential workshops. As a core process, we designed three-part residential workshops in rural terrain, where participants felt comfortable and familiar (most of them spent earlier years in rural environments before encountering harsh urban realities). Each day began with a walk into nature, and connection with the ecological landscapes brought memories of childhood back to the women. One participant with an agricultural background began identifying herbs and medicinal plants. Another darted from behind a rock, having grown up in the central rainforests of Chitradurga in Karnataka. The landscapes evoked knowledge systems lost or buried in the women, a legacy of which were Dalit.

With respect to the script, narratives that are deeply personal can trigger further victimisation. Hence, it was important to work not just with the text they knew so well, but also with their body, as holding in experiential memories. Participants were encouraged to explore movement, character development, and storytelling in the pursuit of self-expression and catharsis.

As one of the participants, Satya, quipped in Kannada, right after their first show in December 2017, “Since 1990, we stood on the streets with placards, voicing the violation of rights of our women by state and society. An apathetic Bengaluru would barely take note! Not a single passerby came over to dialogue with us, let alone be an ally. Today, in 2017, an audience of over 600 experienced our stories and bodies as art and artists, and they sat through, engaged for over an hour! This is all we wanted from this city, and what we waited for, for 25 years!”

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Notes

1. October Jam, curated by Marna: https://www.marna.india/feedback.
3. Excerpt from the Huffington Post: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/hasivu-kanasu/
4. Chris Beaty, A Children’s workshop: Digital performance, video from Unscientific Storytelling: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7gDRp_0Q70Q
5. Scientific Solon documentation video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrmgP1PedcE
6. This writer’s book: “The Stories you told: An apathetic Bengaluru would barely take note!”
7. Local English documentation of the project with translated parts of the script and an interview of participants: https://issuu.com/gaurisanghi/docs/hasivu_kanasu_marginalised_saloon_curated_by_maraa

The performance seemed to advent local journalism towards sensuality rather than sensationalism.