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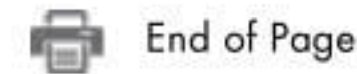
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Parvez's performative gestures: The subversion of the capitalist art economy



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Deeksha Nath

19 Jul 2021

Basel-based Indian performance and lens-based artist Parvez Imam is in the middle of a six month long 'art as intervention' live art project *Commodi-fiction* at Museum 1 in Lucerne, Switzerland.

The project unfolds over eight live art events centred on performance which include readings, preparation and presentation of food, artist led and audience constructed installations and open air games. Four of the eight events have happened: between April and June debuting with 'Colonizing M1' where audiences were offered a concocted drink followed by a reading of curated texts. The second 'The Edifice' invited audiences to construct a shelter based on the artists' blueprint in exchange for a meal cooked by the artist. Then came 'A Game of Alphabets' where participants added found objects to the installation. Lastly, 'The Hunt' was an open air game of chase. To follow are 'Disrupt the Performance #4' (3.7.2021); 'Audition for an Auction' (21.8.2021); 'Kunst-Hoch Luzern' (28.8.2021) and finally 'Release _957 I.A.M. #122_Commodi-Fiction' (2.10.2021).

What may be variously defined as 'performances' designed and staged by the artist or 'events' organised as a social occasion in a public space or 'happenings' defined by Allan Kaprow as participatory situation art, recognisable by their responsive and open-ended nature, are meant to be experienced and understood as interventions in both time and space. Performative gestures by their very nature are durational and unlike visiting a museum or gallery, the rhythm of the experience is paced by the artist. Because *Commodi-fiction* is planned over 7 months, the audience may experience simply one of eight events or may participate in the entire project. With this in mind the artist designs each performance to be unique and complete in and of itself with an objective, both in terms of a physical and interactive outcome on the day, as well as furthering the overarching premise of the project - to question and challenge the principles of the hegemonic capitalist and predatory economy. Thus in 'The Edifice' the artist "repaid" the labour of the audience turned participants/ collaborators with food, a practice still prevalent in many agrarian and indigenous communities around the world. This reciprocity of labor and gratitude was turned on its head in 'The Hunt' where a game of chase and capture was rewarded, thus celebrating a more predatory individualistic system of acquisition and reward.

While on the one hand Parvez controls the experience from the viewer, setting the agenda and the pace of the events, he relinquishes control by inviting audiences to participate in and even disrupt his plans and actions. This exchange of agency stems from an experience the artist had while attending the Swiss Performance Art Awards in 2018 when the artist was harangued by an art official for participating in /interacting with/ interrupting an ongoing performance by an artist. It was a watershed moment for Parvez for whom the reaction of the official far exceeded his own action and highlighted the

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stringent and codified functions of the art world, even in situations that purportedly challenge them. Disruption has become a central premise in Parvez's conceptual roster of ideas, a desire to challenge the status-quo.

It was while on a visit to Ecuador in 2005 to document the International Peoples Health Assembly that extended into a month-long backpacking holiday that Parvez encountered first world privilege. While travelling with some Americans he was painfully aware of the economic disparity between currencies, in this case the American dollar and the Indian rupee. He also witnessed first hand the fear of the other, the fear of colour as many of his white travelling companions were afraid to visit local drinking holes. It is only when the artist threw caution to wind and let his curiosity lead him into a local bar one night that he experienced an indigenous hospitality, when his money ran out, how locals offered to cover his tab.

It was on this trip that Parvez made the short film *Flight 208* (7 mins, <https://youtu.be/85BPK0biweA>), the number referring to the number of persons featured in the film. The work was a result of the frustrations the artist felt knowing that a truck driver from the first world could afford so much more than himself a trained doctor turned lens-based professional from the third world. Filmed over 18 days while in Ecuador the script, repeated by 200 people the artist met on his journey mimics the rant heard amongst many drawing room activists across the post-colonial world, a hopeless rage against economic disparity, against the nameless and faceless "they" whom the film evokes. This moment marked the artist's now over a decade long engagement with Karl Polanyi's notion of the three fictitious commodities - land, money and labour. The Polanyi Matrix, as it has been referred to, outlines how the commodification of land, money and labour makes it impossible to implement conceptual reforms such as socially responsible business, green economics, sustainable economics, the creative economy, natural capital, steady-state economics, caring economy, solidarity economy, cooperative economy, or any other suggested solutions to create widespread prosperity or sustainability.

Commodi-fiction attempts to reconfigure how we approach land, money and labour. Unlike traditional museums, Museum 1 in Lucerne is a large field with a small shed. There are no walls, no collection, no security guards, no tickets, no gift shop and in its unconventionality it is both intimidating and liberating. As Parvez's project questions the principles and modes of the capitalist economy and its celebration of materiality, Museum 1 is the ideal site for experiments in dismantling modern patriarchal systems of social and cultural ordering. Museums have been questioned in recent decades about their role and purpose in a post-colonial society, with increasing calls for repatriation and acknowledgement of their own questionable histories and collections. By displaying objects of utility from one culture as artefacts or aesthetic commodities in another museums have contributed to what Arjun Appadurai has outlined as the 'diversion of commodities from their original nexus'. For example, when a textile or utensil used in a ritual celebration in one culture is placed in a vitrine in a museum it loses its purpose becoming merely a thing of beauty and in so doing its purpose, its *raison d'être* is 'diverted' by the museums' intervention, reducing an object of importance to a mere 'thing' / 'commodity'. If we were to suggest this movement, or 'diversion' to use Appadurai's term, as a politics of appropriation then in this environment Museum 1 paves a way for a contemporary museum to be truly responsive to the concerns of present day artists and societies. Recognising the tension that lays value on every exchange, transforming every action into labour, Museum 1 and Parvez can thus stage projects such as *Commodi-fiction* with purpose and directionality.

Employing methodologies such as scavenging, an integral part of Parvez's artistic practice; hospitality as repayment of services; participation and disruption as modes of social and cultural engagement; a devaluation of material objects as gestures of generosity and equality, the artist continues in his hopeful quest to create like-minded communities and bubbles of dissent and change.

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