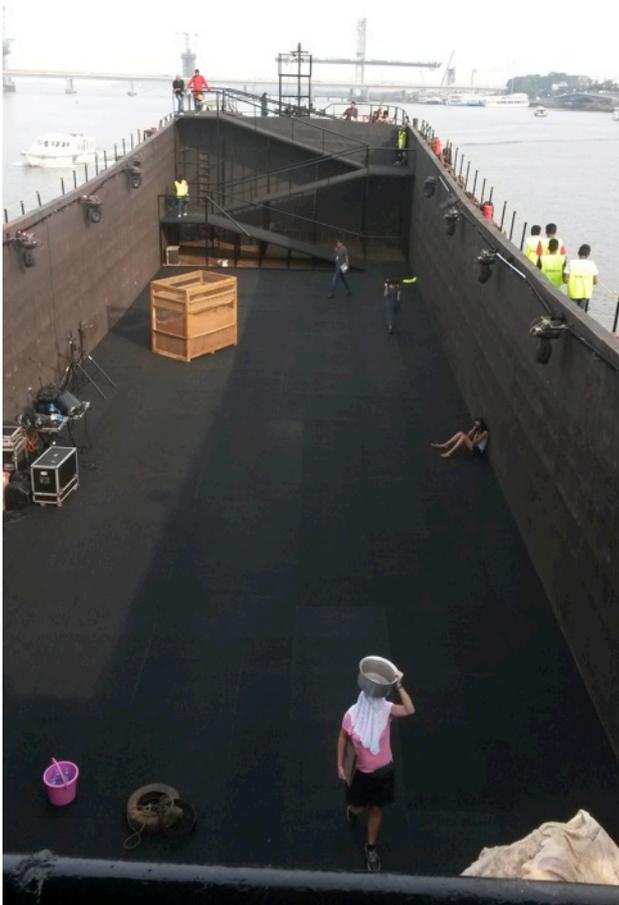


## Shifting Grounds Neena Percy

[*The Ground Beneath My Feet*, 15-22 December 2017, Panjim, India. Curated by HH Art Spaces, as part of: "After Event: Performance Art and its Mediations", a collaboration between HH Art Spaces, Serendipity Arts Trust and Asia Art Archive in India.]



Greasy black, rusted matt black, and the incoming black of the night sky made for a solemn sight along the river shore. This scene was made all the more ominous by the contrast with the surrounding environment: casino cruise boats radiated colourful signs that danced in the water, while on the opposite shore glowed blown up international brand signs, from mobile networks to sunglasses. It is amongst all this capitalist showmanship that the singular somber black barge, the site for *The Ground Beneath My Feet*, looked more as if it drifted in from a shipping graveyard than it was parked purposefully on the Mandovi River for an Arts Festival.

Yet this barge is no innocent bystander to the excesses of consumerism. In fact it is a reminder of a geopolitical debate around the mass-excavations of the mineral-rich red earth of Goa (about 55 per cent of the iron ore exported from India comes from Goa). Stripped out from under the locals' feet by their own government without any compensation, the soil is transported away on barges like this very one. Then, having extracted lucrative iron ore and minerals, the remaining soil is dumped, wasted. It was with this in mind, as well of course as a reminder of the mass-migrations happening across the seas so devastatingly today, that I approached the site.

Amongst such connotations, with an international group of artists, and a title addressing what lies beneath us, while also questioning what lies between us, the barge was incredibly poignant and relevant as a space for performance.

What was exciting about the barge as a space was that the audience had their own independently physical experience as soon as they stepped onto the boat. I walked along the rim to the front, to descend down a zig zag ramp. As heavy feet gave way in front of me, I was sucked into the black vessel and slowly the glowing signs of the Panjim river gave way to an entirely different world. At the bottom, unable to see any horizon of the shore, I was confronted with my own diminished body within a hollow roofless space.

Within this vacuum, my mind was particularly stirred by one artist whose performance is capable of disrupting the underlying solidity of one's presuppositions of meanings of images and objects.

Berlin-based performance and installation artist Anja Ibsch, in resisting our human tendency to consign everything to reassuring categories and answers,

allows for an unfolding of inexplicable situations to occur. In *Still\_5*, taking specific and at first seemingly unrelated daily objects from the Goan environment into her own world, Ibsch recomposed them. They are like words plucked from one language and placed mid-sentence into another, yet somehow they seem to fit perfectly as if that was their rightful place all along.

In this mode she creates quietly alarming images and tableaux, that are layered with her own meanings and connotations that we are welcome to tap into or to bend to our own histories. The objects within this installation included a plastic bucket and chair, a rubber tyre, a steel bowl of black grapes, bars of pink soap, water, two drapes of fabric, one pink, one white; a washing up glove, and sheer stockings that were pulled over her contorted face. Set between a cabin room up-deck, in which the male crew continued to live, and the back section of the boat hull, over one day Ibsch arranged and rearranged her installation of various objects to be performed with or moved by. A white cascading cloth hung from above, elegantly framing the entire image and drawing attention to the architecture of the boat.

Amongst this were printed images she collaged from art history books, blending multiple references. Ibsch seemed to be addressing and uprooting the history of women - slipping between the working woman quietly washing her fabric, and woman as a religious icon with arms held out bearing offerings.

Ibsch also made explicit reference to the context of women in India, carrying a bucket on her head, or covering her head with the drapery. Linking herself to the Gulabi Gang, or Pink Sari movement, the bright pink fabric and soaps punctuated the black space. But not allowing these overt references to consume the piece, Ibsch at other times stoically carried a bench on her head, bringing strength and power to her actions. As such it felt like a reflection through the body and space upon the artist's own relation to the environment of the barge and it's context, the artist's history (often including images of previous performances within the collage) and the history of women evoked through historical Dutch paintings. Within this three-way exchange visual symbols found common ground and opened up dialogues between them.

A highlight for me was an evolving interaction between Ibsch and an image of a Dutch portrait painting of a woman uncannily resembling the artist. The portrait had been stuck to the back wall the previous day within the installation. Returning to it for a final time, Ibsch faced the woman and, standing stiffly upright with arms outstretched either side of her body, their faces almost touching, Ibsch repeatedly thumped two talcum powder bottles against the black



metal wall. Puffs of white shot out to leave two explosive tufts against the metal, like sprouting wings for the crudely chalked figure - or cross. The moment felt charged, creating an iconic chiaroscuro image from a simple act, a new figure emerging from the meeting of the subject and the artist - or perhaps one and both were the same in this moment, enacting and imprinting themselves onto each other.

This was just one of the impactful punctuations within a fluid performance. For me there were moments of both aesthetic satisfaction in the shifting composition and skin-tingling discomfort through sound and bodily action. By the end I was left in a calm yet thoughtful place to mull over the moving fragments that slid from humorous, to tense, but always transforming and questioning expectations and associations between images.

As an artist and regular gallery-goer, I find it difficult to be surprised by an exhibition. But on the barge I certainly was and eagerly awaited the continuous transformations that occurred during the eclectic mix of performances.

However, in a sense the barge was itself constantly performing, or being performed. The initial act of transforming an industrial working boat and mooring it at a local arts festival, was beautifully poetic. It brought together two usually disconnected worlds and peoples. The energy shared between them was palpable. For this was more than an empty space to be activated by artists; this space had an memorable presence and character itself. Two square eyes of the captain's cabin glared out at you as you stood within its' gaping belly. While the boat seemed anthropomorphically alive, it also was and still is a lived- and worked-in environment and it was this bridging of worlds, with artists working alongside the barge crew, that brought in new audiences in a way that is rarely accomplished in an exclusive art world - and even the world at large.



HH Art Spaces is a is an artist-run residency space established in October 2014 in Siolim, Goa by Romain Loustau, Madhavi Gore and Nikhil Chopra. The program focuses primarily on live art and performance with a strong emphasis on interdisciplinary and collaborative work.

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