



WHEN ART IS NOT RESTRICTED BY MEDIUM: EXPLORING THE OEUVRE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTIST AMITESH GROVER

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GROVER'S SHOW WOUNDING REPRODUCED PHOTOGRAPHS FROM HIS FAMILY ARCHIVE BY BREAKING THE CODE THAT VISUALISES THEM

Artist Profile



Amitesh Grover

Seamlessly melding theatre, performance and interactive art since 2009, 41-year-old artist Amitesh Grover has been described as to have "transcended the barriers of disciplines", working with live acts, texts, objects, images, installations and films over more than a decade.

As he navigates and investigates the overlaps between performance, digital technologies, game design and public intervention, Grover has professed to have "created work on Grief, on Sleep, on Happiness and on several other ephemeral grounds of knowledge".

But while this intersectional oeuvre may sound esoteric, it is actually searingly engaging and identifiable. Take for instance one of his more recent shows – in a Freshwheeling chat with Abir Pothi, the interdisciplinary artist reveals, "In September 2021, I opened a work of mine at the Foundation of Indian Contemporary Art (FICA), a collection of family photos. I work a lot with technology as well and this was a project I had been developing for a long time – on how to intervene in data and digital code that we see in our computers, mobile phones, etc. That which makes everything work – as an artist, I wanted to disrupt that. So, I went back to my family albums, looking at photos from the '40s and '50s of my great grandparents and grandparents, and decided to scan them in high resolution. Every jpeg was basically a set of intricate digital code that translates into what you see on screen. Inside that foundational code, I began to write the stories of the people in the photo – tales of my nana, nani, dada, dadi, from how they endured the Partition of India and Pakistan, how they migrated, how they started their lives from scratch in Delhi and their trajectory thereafter. I was tracing through memory and tellings and retellings of their stories in the photos of them that I had and writing that into the code. But the moment I did that, the digital page started to break. I was intervening in the code, so it started to produce cracks and glitches and started to break the photo. I thought this is an absolutely wonderful metaphor – the moment I intervene into this impersonal code with my personal stories, the façade begins to come apart. I worked on a series of photos like this, about 16 of them, and

made an exhibition out of it, which opened at the Foundation in August this year. We need to understand that digitality is politics and philosophy and can become a site of artistic intervention! It is not just a popular tool everyone is using to make art more accessible."



Grover's show Wounding reproduced photographs from his family archive by breaking the code that visualises them



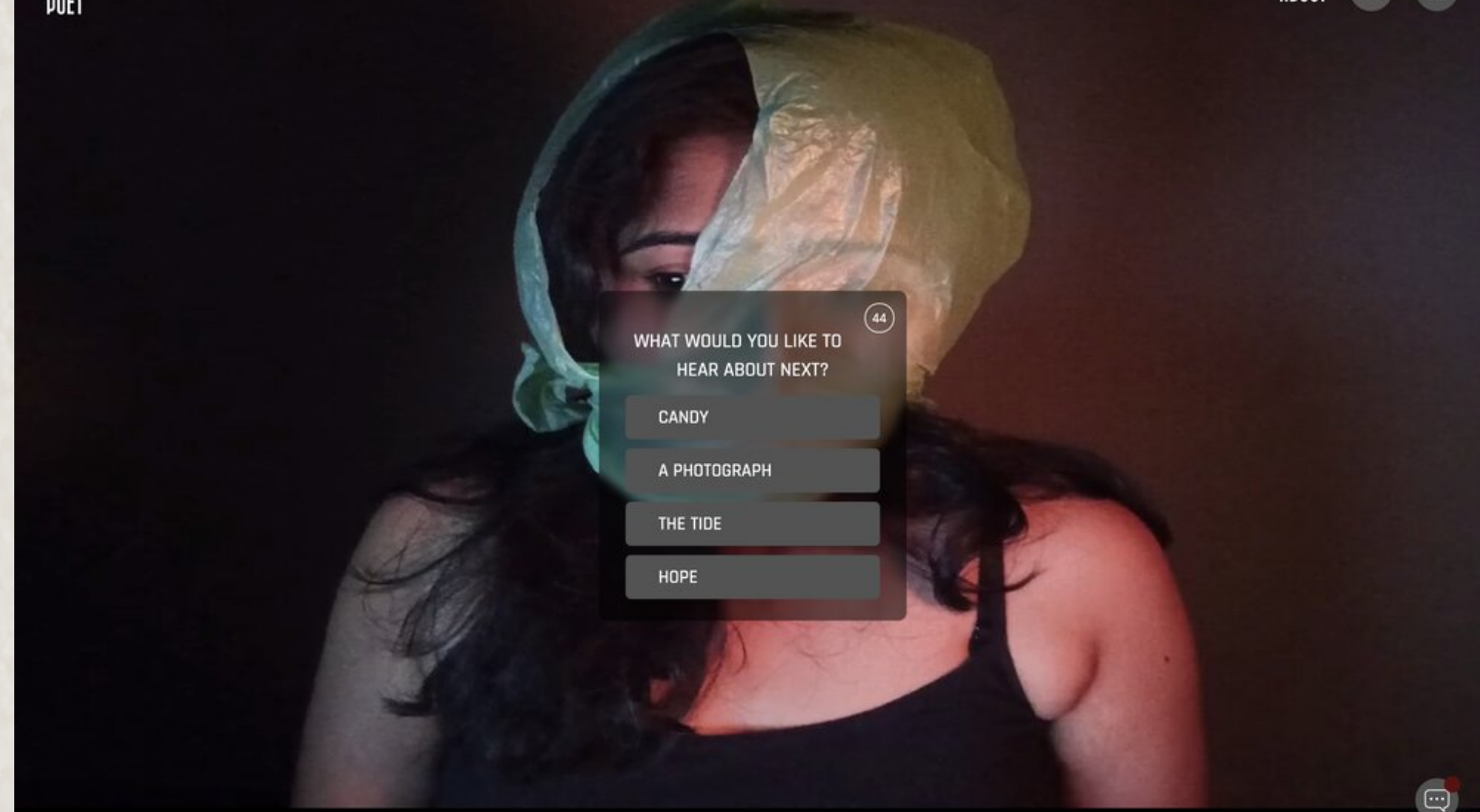
Grover's show Wounding reproduced photographs from his family archive by breaking the code that visualises them

Grover was born in 1980, and confesses to have been drawn to the arts for as long as he can remember. Writing poems as a child, drawing and sketching, he was also often on stage performing in plays and songs, throughout school and also in neighbourhood parks, during Durga Puja, etc. "In college, I discovered theatre and started taking it seriously. I also discovered a young community of theatre makers and was hugely drawn towards it all. After I left college, my professional journey began. I got into the National School of Drama (NSD) and then went to the University of Arts in London to pursue an MFA of sorts in the arts. It was a passion for as long as I can remember and then it turned into a profession and a way of life," he says.

But asked what drives him to create art, Grover pauses, then admits, "I am fascinated by stories and never forget a story I hear or read. I think that inspires me to make work. I also have this terrible need to remember things. I am afraid of forgetting things and I make art to prevent myself from forgetting."

A rather unforgettable facet of life as we know it today is the Covid pandemic, its onset since early 2020 having altered society and systems, and obviously the world of art, too. Grover spent much of the lockdown in New Delhi, and has emerged from this phase, he says, more mindful of paring down the hectic travel he is usually engaged in. Till date, the artist has created 15 performances and multi-media installations, which have had at least 125 showings across 11 countries, including Germany, Australia, the US, Switzerland, England, Mexico, China, Philippines, Romania, Pakistan, Oman and India. Some of the inspirations and influences he cites include the moving abstracts of VS Gaitonde, the detective fiction of Roberto Bolaño, contemporary artists like Mexican-Canadian new media artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, minimalist and conceptual artists, and others.

Grover seems to have mastered the art of taking a wide scope of elements and honing their focus into a more singular act. So, is having a variety of mediums at hand liberating, or does it actually make creating art more challenging? How does the mind of an interdisciplinary artist tick? "Let's say I make work from the lens of performance – it is my foundational field. That is where I studied, that is what I have been trained for, and that is what I find very pertinent to me. But what I have done in my practice is to expand on the understanding of what performance means. It does not always mean to act out something on stage, or play a character or do a film. The idea of performance can also be in an installation. In poetry or a photograph," he explains, adding, "There is certainly a rigid perspective encountered when it comes to interdisciplinary practice. Many people ask me: 'So what is your primary identity as an artist? Are you a painter or actor or poet or writer?' I do all these things, yes, but I often find that people are conditioned to attach a primary identity to you as a person or an artist. For me, interdisciplinarity comes very naturally. I think and create in a polyphonic way and I work in a way that creates a palimpsest of sorts. In one of my pieces the starting point was a particular kind of smell that I remembered. I wanted to invoke the memories around that particular smell for my viewers and I asked myself – how can I do this? When it comes to the choice of medium or form or how I make the work, the decision often comes from the work itself."



Dubbed as India's first theatre-for-the-internet show, The Last Post by Grover was an online interactive performance bringing together theatre, film, sound art, creative coding, and digital scenography

Grover further expounds, "It is really about perspective – about how people perceive or what people expect your art practice to be, and the rigid notions of what it means to be a painter, sculptor, etc. I know several artists from the Dadaist period were multifaceted – Salvador Dalí, for instance, was a poet, musician and painter; Rabindranath Tagore was a brilliant writer and poet but also directed plays. Similarly, NSD founding director Ebrahim Alkazi is the biggest art collector of India and was also the biggest theatre director, while his archive of photographs is perhaps the best in the country. The identity of an artist is more diverse and layered. It is a way to look at life, really. I reject the 20th Century notions of super-specialisation, which says that if one is a painter, they should only paint. I really want to work in varied media which is liberating and yet also challenging. I need to keep learning new skills when I enter a new field and it can get really frustrating sometimes, because what other people in the industry know from their training, I am only learning that 20 years later. I am actually always like a student of art – but I also bring to that field some very simple and necessary questions that need to be asked. And my work or practice begins from there. It is challenging, but for me it is also a natural way to exist as an artist."

Moving from his perspective to the gaze on him, or the receptivity he has found in Indian audiences, Grover admits, "It is difficult to survive as I have been and show work around in India. Most of my practice is experimental. It is avant garde in the sense that I am always innovating and trying out new forms and new ways to do something. It is not mainstream and the audience for this kind of work is very niche. I find my work in prestigious art spaces or theatre festivals, commissioned by high-end art organisations. As an artist, I do want to have a broader and much deeper reach and have more people watch what I do. But I often find that the audience in India is not art literate. They have not all read about art and theatre in school or college like the way they have read about physics, chemistry or math. At the most they have Shakespeare and that is also a very small percentage. Visual art is hardly even taught in schools and colleges. So nobody knows much about it, even names of greats like Pablo Picasso and others. But then again, the audience for my work has been growing over the last decade or so and whenever I open a new work, it usually gets sold out. A lot of people who know my work come back to watch it – but that is a niche crowd, not mainstream."



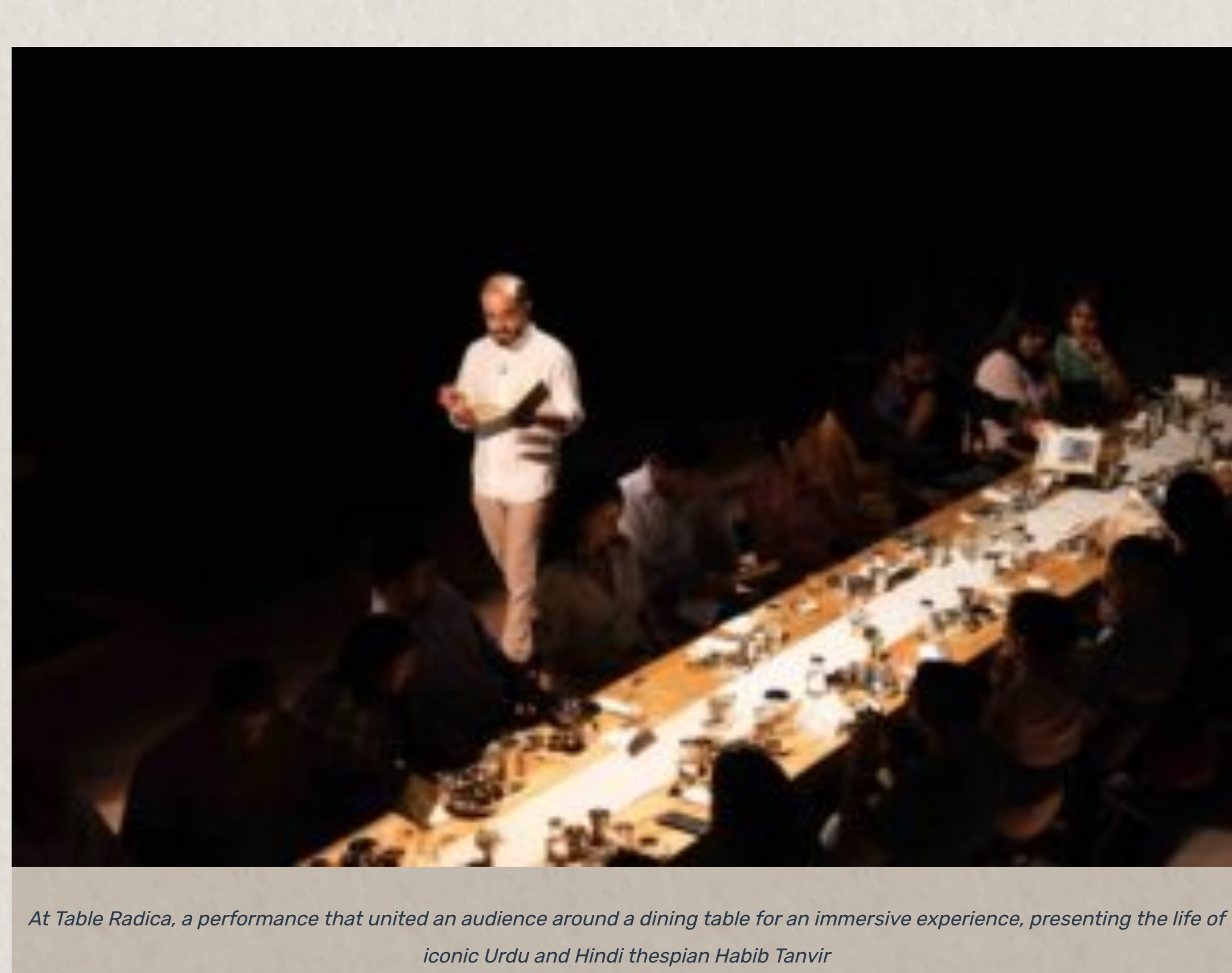
The installation Velocity Pieces saw that every day, for 100 days, the board unveiled a new activity to be performed



It is perhaps this expectation of nuanced understanding that also propels Grover to directly engage audiences with his work. Take for instance his most recent showing commissioned by the Chennai Photo Biennale – perhaps as the first theatre artist to do so. This exhibit, titled 'All That We Saw' is a series of image-less photographs... the artist says the viewer is "imagined as a witness of images, a mental archivist, a contemplative node in the memory of a collective, and as a participant in the act of restoring the image".

Interestingly, Grover also agrees that the shift to digital, accelerated by the pandemic, has impacted how the world absorbs his art. Grover says, "Consumption of art overall has gone up. Social media, Instagram and these 3D visualization exhibitions opening right now virtually, like by Vadehra Art Gallery in Delhi – all of it is absolutely fabulous for accessibility. People who would never visit galleries and museums can now quickly go online and see what it is all about. Yes, a window of opportunity has opened for all of us – but it needs to be sustained. Even when we go back to physical spaces in the post-pandemic world, these virtual spaces will need to build upon the attention they got during the lockdown time. I think what needs to go along with it is some kind of education around art as well. It is not enough to just look at paintings and sculptures and performance artists online, but consider why they are doing what they are doing. What is the context and history behind it? That is what gets people involved. The new so-called fan culture or follower culture is something that has existed in art and literature for a very long time! A sort of deeper, more meaningful understanding and engagement with the arts is what needs to be fused as part of this initial momentum that we are currently experiencing. It is not just a glistening, shining 3D walkthrough, which really doesn't mean anything more than a collection of digital elaborations of a painting."

This long-term perspective and understanding reflects brilliantly to the core of how Grover sees artistry and celebrates art. Take for instance his advice to younger contemporary artists, "I don't want to repeat done-to-death aphorisms. But I would say I guess I consider art like gardening – in that you prepare the soil and seeds, sow at the right time and then wait. It never grows right the first time. The next season, do it over again, and just like a gardener who gets better and better with age, I think so does an artist's journey. Till now, I am really just preparing the soil through my work, perhaps I will sow some seeds in a while. I am very patient and can wait a long while before I truly find something worthwhile. The same is the case with my projects. I usually take one or two years to make a project and do extensive research around it, which is a long phase. Often, these are produced in a series, wherein you may have episode one now and a year or two later, episode two comes along. As an artist, one has to think of long durations and be expansive. It is too easy to be immersed in the moment. That is what the world around us is right now. For example, in theatre, in terms of my temporality, I always, always slow time down. Whatever the play's character or performance, I see things in temporal ways and slow it down. That is one consistent approach I have had to art-making, which is why the gardening metaphor works for me. And that is something I would like to share."



At Table Radica, a performance that united an audience around a dining table for an immersive experience, presenting the life of iconic Urdu and Hindi thespian Habib Tanvir

ART OF THE DAY: BURNING GAZE



Artist Ramesh Garwood feels the pull to create something that captures the feelings of the human faces that surround him. This inspiration is reflected in the oil on canvas, piece 'Univesal' (50x30 inches), where hues of burnt sienna, ochre yellow and raw umber come to life in the form of an eerie circle of empty-eyed faces surrounding a presumably supine object or subject, even as a searing light as bright as the sun burns in the middle, right on top.

Check out more work by the artist [here](#) on Abir Space.

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