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Amitesh Grover

What Do You Share With a Stranger?

DDD interviewed Indian multimedia artist Amitesh Grover about his Encounter 6134 crowd performance project that connects strangers from all around the world.

Amitesh Grover creates performance situations, reflecting upon physical and cultural distance using digital technologies. His art format known as “Performapedia” is set to trigger knowledge of the everyday through activity wrapped in experiences like mourning, sleeping, walking or storytelling. We talked with him about his Encounter project in which participants from Mannheim, Germany, and Delhi, India (6,134 kilometres separate the two cities as the crow flies) were invited to connect in virtual one-on-one conversations. For one hour participants discussed, agreed and disagreed on philosophical ideas involving concepts like time, beauty and crisis. They got to know each other while remaining strangers. Director and curator Amitesh shared his motivation for and experience with this unique art project.

DDD: You mix art and the real. What inspired you to do transcultural

crowd performance art?

Amitesh Grover: We have a very vibrant academic community and cultural sector in India which mostly exists without the support of the state, so we have a very rich tradition of arguing and printing essays and articles. I am interested not only in the different points of views held in the global South, but the conversation between the South and the West/North.

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We are at a critical juncture where we are really testing what the idea of globalisation means. All these points of view need space to enter into conflict or into a space where they can engage in dialogue. So in that sense, these projects are not only directed at the art field, but at everyone who is interested in globalism. Encounter invites anyone who is willing to begin a conversation and to participate, so in that sense it is really open to all.

DDD: It's interesting that you say it is open to anyone, because I think of post-developmentalism, the idea of telling the story by itself, as being very popular in India. You seem to want to take this critical idea of post-development and link it to other ideas. How does your work challenge people's mind-sets, especially in your Encounter project? How have people responded?

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You kind of hinted at the idea of why it should be open to everyone, why it shouldn't be limited to just the art community or a group of actors or activists. I think this need to open the project to many people comes from the fact that the state and the government have failed in countries like ours. They have failed to deliver on the promise of progress; they have failed to deliver on the promise of democracy. And I think that all the major people's rights movements that have happened in countries like India have been driven by the people; they have not been driven by governments. We increasingly depend on the emergence of civil society and people who come to watch theatre, people who participate in art, people who

come to join protests outside. We increasingly depend on these crowds, on these anonymous people to gather to take us forward. That is why I don't work with actors on stage and don't tell people what they should be doing, but actually open a space and create an art form in which we can invite people to choose for themselves.

When we did Encounter in the German city of Mannheim, two German participants left the show in the first five minutes. Both said that they could not possibly sit down for an hour and hold a conversation with a stranger from another country. Correspondingly in India, almost everyone said that one hour was not enough for them, that they felt the need to talk and build a conversation for much longer than an hour. Why do different cities respond to the same situation and the same art format in different ways?

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The other thing I wondered was how people would interpret the conversation when they participated in Encounter. The show asked them to think about micro-philosophies, so the stack of cards in front of them quoted a diverse collection of sources, philosophers, poetry, fiction, different kinds of cultural writings from both Germany and India. It was interesting to see how people translated their knowledge. They tried to explain to the stranger what a concept really means in German or Indian culture. They also acknowledged moments when they were unfamiliar with their own country and their own culture. That is something I remember from Encounter. A lot of participants wrote to me saying that they had had no idea that there was a certain German philosopher who said this, or that there was a certain Indian poem that meant that. Today we experience neither fully belonging to where we were born, nor having entirely adopted another culture. And I think the fact that we are somehow stuck somewhere in the middle is something that got exposed well in the Encounter shows.

DDD: On your website you ask “how must we live today?” That is somehow the core question for Encounter as well as for development policy. It references the idea of what good living really is. Did you receive feedback that showed something specific people could agree on no matter what their cultural background was?

So whether happiness or development, a lot of ideas and issues were actually invoked in many different ways.

To be honest, I did not think of Encounter as an event at which people had to agree on something. I think it was quite the opposite. As an artist, I wanted to look at how we can disagree! The show had four themes, the first was dedicated to the idea of time. We discovered that in many parts of European philosophy, time is seen as something that is always progressive, that always goes further on a straight line. Whereas in Eastern philosophy, especially in India, time is a circular system. So the four seasons, the year, life, everything gets re-visited in a way, everything comes back again and again. So whether happiness or development, a lot of ideas and issues were actually invoked in many different ways. The shows were trigger points where people could anchor the beginning of the conversation based on a difference and then try to start resolving the difference from there. The only condition was that they could accept or reject a premise together, so they had to convince each other that each philosophical statement was true/real/productive or distasteful/disappointing/alien to them. And I think this kind of a dialogue of persuasion, of trying to explain to a stranger what I believe should happen, led to many conflict points. This was the intention of the show, to open these areas of resolution, yes, but also areas of conflict.

DDD: As I read about all the different projects you have done, one core theme occurred to me which is closely connected to our issue on “sharing”: You use performance instead of a piece of art and crowds as well as digital technologies. Is this a kind of new art that includes technical progress?

I think the dawn of the Internet has presented us with the possibility of doing very different work. As an artist, I would like to explore this possibility. What are the different forms in which we can shape the world now? India has the highest mobile Internet penetration worldwide and phone-call & Internet rates are the cheapest here. Everybody in South Asia is embracing the Internet. And this embracing, this sense of freedom, whether it is freedom of expression or the freedom to connect with people, to form our own networks and to collaborate, and also to express dissent and to protest, is a freedom in the virtual space that many South Asian countries have not experienced before. And I think in this way the Internet is becoming a very important tool for an artist to make use of.

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What was very interesting with Encounter was the fact that when somebody sits in a room full of strangers and connects with another stranger halfway across the world, it presents you with kind of a paradox. I think this is the paradox of virtual connectivity that we seem to be invested in two different worlds now. There is the immediate physical world around us: my city, my culture, my family, my people. But equally immediate is the entire world that I do not see physically around me. And that is on the Internet. But I no longer have only to travel to see that world and to connect and participate with it. Many participants experienced a sense of getting completely lost in this virtual connection. Many participants said that when they finally took off their headphones after an hour, they felt like they landed back in the room they had been sitting in the whole time. And I think that is really the possibility of the Inter-connectedness. We don't talk enough about it in the art world. The art world does not seem to be embracing the power of virtuality quickly enough. Yes, it is a dangerous area. There is a lot of anonymity, there is identity theft there, and it is hard to trust the virtual landscape. But on the other hand, it has the sheer power to connect us in ways that were not possible before.

Interview by Frederik Caselitz

Photo: Eddy Joaquim (Getty Images)



Amitesh Grover

Amitesh Grover is a performance-based artist and curator. His interdisciplinary, contemporary art projects create ‘performance communities’; he invites people in specially constructed ‘situation rooms’, often connecting participants transnationally, through internet and mobile technology. His work has received critical acclaim in the domain of performance and visual art, and won him several awards and residencies, of which his most recent nomination was for Forecast Award for Emerging Curator (HKW, Berlin 2015). His works have been shown in performance festivals, galleries, exhibitions, the internet, and other public spaces around the world. He lives and works in New Delhi, India, where he also teaches and writes on performance, interactivity and knowledge-production.

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