

Daniela Beltrani's *Sewn* by Naresh Subhash

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The greatest thing about performance art is what it does to the audience; a durational performance for instance is a perfect exercise for the audience's sense of space, time and discourse. As much as it is a challenge for the artist, I find that a durational performance places the audience in a vulnerable position. As the artist, you understand the limits and demands duration requires, for the audience we are unaware of any of this, we are thrown into a span of time and then required to make connections to our experiences. Daniela Beltrani's work though simple in its execution is perhaps a beautiful illustration of this concept. Her piece works on a multitude of levels, and is perhaps most effective thanks to space, environment and intention in which it was created around.

Having experienced Daniela's body of work personally on several occasions, I'm acutely aware that her work centres on her exploration of human connection and communication. Her use of thread in most of her works creates this clear discourse while poetically weaves your own experience to her work. On a personal note, I've found Daniela's work grown and matured into a meditative element, as it should be. The quietness of her solo work is perhaps a signature in highlighting her exploration as well as an intriguing element to our innate ability to communicate within silence itself. Her solo work for FOI 9 not only further expands her personal exploration, it inevitably brought out discourses of culture, creed, nationality and fear - all common topics in the realm of communication.

Her piece simply invites the audience to sit with her on a mat as she allows them to choose the thread of their choice, and then proceed to sew the

thread between herself and the participant. The performance immediately evolves from one to a duo, and the participant becomes an inevitable performative element within the performance itself. They sit in silence looking into each other eyes, for the most part become oblivious to those around them. As audience we catch ourselves wondering “what could they be talking about?” and at times we become uncomfortable as the seemingly non performer becomes an active role within the piece blurring the lines between artist and participant.

However, as beautifully simple the work naturally is. I found the work incredibly powerful due to Daniela’s strategic placement of herself and the location she chose to explore at full length. Her rattan mat is a decorated with jasmine flowers along the in perimeter creating an enclosure within the mat itself. She sits upright and dressed in black keeping this neutral and non-offensive stance welcoming her audience. Here we immediately see a western female, seated as would any eastern meditative guru would be seen seated and is closed in a ring of jasmine demanding the attention of the general public who are made up of workers of Indian descent. The imagery evokes this shamanistic element that draws curiosity from these men who generally are susceptible to seeking the spiritual.

Immediately, and understandably one could assume this as an outright orientalist exploitation of the space and the audience. However, the spectacle could only be one if the intention was so, knowing Daniela this work stems out of her own meditative experience and this commitment to exploring the teachings of Hinduism through meditation and self recollection is further highlighted through her demeanour within the piece. She does not over play the symbols, but rather respects the silence, the participants and the viewers without alluding to practices that are incredibly iconic of any

eastern faith. In this respect, it would be too easy and sweeping to merely suggest her work to be anything by a manipulative element. She does none of the sort and the result is clear from her participants who were largely the workers. In the words of a certain worker “ you cannot go into it expecting anything, if you have an open mind you gain something ...” he explains in Tamil to the men who congregated around him after his experience.

As an onlooker, friend and Singaporean, I was naturally afraid that these men would behave in a less than respectable manner. However, through the duration of the work, we see these men whom we normally associate with violence and sexual crimes to be nothing of the sort. There was a certain sense of earnestly and curiosity that made me reflect on how much have we as trained art viewers have discounted these very simplistic attitude toward art. These men truly came with authenticity that heighten the value of the work and in turn made us the audience reflect and ponder on the very act of acceptance, and communication. In this sense, Daniela’s work takes this sociological element that demands that we reassess the way we see these men, humanises them and deconstructs the “otherness”. The fascinating element here is that it is through the “other” (Daniela) that we reconstruct humanity of the “other” (worker) and in turn relegating the term “other” to something that cannot exist in the experience of this work. Her piece as does not highlight the otherness, but in turn dissolves and renders it non-existent. It is simply about being human.

While there are strengths to her work, there instances, which I personally found, could be stronger. This is especially true, when it comes to her attitude and manner toward to each participant. While throughout the performance she remains calm, there are slight differences to manner she reacts to each participant. This is especially obvious to how she would react

to a female participant as oppose to that of a male participant, she tends to allow the female participant closer as oppose if when the participant was male. This is perhaps a natural reaction that is partially subconscious, however, going through this thread of participatory performance art I should think that the artist should remain as an instrument to the message and not be wavered by what would seem as a comfort zone. As an observer I sense her vulnerability, but would commend her on her ability to remain undeterred by few men who refused to cooperate as participants. Her ability to control the situation, only heighten her meditative experience and underlines her work of acceptance and equality.

Throwing caution to the wind, I decided that I would sit with her to experience the work for myself. However, I consciously decided to focus on her process and her connection. There is a certain amount of intimacy created as you allow another human being to thread himself or herself to you. The moment though lost when the thread is cut, remains an intimate moment shared by only you and the other. Nonetheless, the time we spend would be one that we would communicate through our eyes, aside from a familiarity, the moment we shared was undoubtedly one that allowed me to experience what those who came before me would have. There is a certain vulnerability that we experience when looking into someone's eyes, this is evidently very pivotal in this day an age when we spend more time looking at our phones than into someone's eye. The very essence of spending time with someone, highlights the rapidly lost human connection, during this time we let go of our phones, communication devices and just be part takers in this commitment created by a thread.

In retrospect, her piece reminds us of the various threads that run from or to each one of us. We are all sons/ daughters to someone, a parent to another,

a lover, a friend or a just a fling -regardless, we are connected in more ways than one. Her piece evoked this fragile connections we have and questions truly how much time do we have for each other and if we are truly vulnerable to the other. The time though fleeting is a moment we reflect on ignoring distraction and focusing on the connection itself. Is it ever really possible today?

The role of art has always been to evoke, question, instigate and contemplate. Daniela's work does everything and remains a humble piece of heaven set in a back alley on Rowell road. I write this not as a friend but as some who loves experiencing art, and it is through experiences like these that my faith in art is reignited. Her ability to control and curate her space enabled this piece the depth and strength to allow discussion of origin, religion and relationships. This in many aspects makes this piece a highly successful one.

By Naresh Subhash