

Is art for the artistes' sake, or the audience?

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which was inscribed 'I am here'. "No one took the balloons home, probably because the stimuli were pain and melancholy," she laughs.

Her recent performance at Nimtala Ghat, Kolkata in January this year was her reaction to numerous rape cases. Clad in yellow, she held turmeric powder in her hands and walked, asking people to apply the "healing" powder on her. She walked, on drenched with yellow powder, making a bright contrast to the grime and emotions of the cremation ghat. She aroused curiosity as she walked. "The rape cases created agitation in me and this is my way to heal myself," Shah explained.

Two college girls who were waiting at the bus stop had watched Das's performance in B'lore incredulously. They later questioned Aishwaryan about his "mellow" reaction. They asked why he wasn't disgusted like them. "In a situation where it is hard to explain what performance art is, Das's performance won't be forgotten in a hurry. May be a small explanatory note may have helped the clueless ones," he says.

"One of the audience members asked me what she is up to," says art historian Suresh Jayaram. "I replied that it was a small theatrical piece, which kind of gave them an idea."

While performance art is considered fringe or marginal, this type of live interactive exhibition is increasingly stretching the notion of what is considered art.

Curator Lina Vincent feels that for artistes creating performances in public, audience reaction comes with a pinch of salt. "A large part of the crowd is the artist community; and for the rest, you never know how much is understood and how much is the lure of the quintessential 'spectacle'. Art and artists are often equated with spectacles for entertainment, particularly in the public arena, and in a country mad about the *ta-masha* of cinema."

Aside from the aspect of spectacle, in a live performance experience, there is a moment of engagement. Another performance artist Jeetin Rangher believes in using the art as a way to connect with the audience. Recently, he kept four masks on the table in a public space as part of his



The crowd at Nimtala Ghat in Kolkata looks on at Dimple Shah as she is doused in turmeric powder

performance *Power Play*. There were two white masks that denoted hate, one black mask that denoted love, and a golden one that denoted envy. He put on a white mask and sat at a table ready for an audience member to arm wrestle with him. Whoever wanted to arm wrestle had to choose a mask and tick either love or hate on the board. Love was ticked the most. "Only an old beggar ticked envy," says Rangher, "but that was understandable."

According to him, performance art can be scorned or intellectualised, but the day it is shunned, it stops being art. In short, love me or hate me, but for Pete's sake, don't ignore me.