

An audience member interacting with Paramita Das during her performance, *Chewing Lump*



Jayanthi Madhukar
bmfeedback@gmail.com

Her head was shaven. Her eyes heavily kohl-ed. A black sari was draped around her body like a sarong. A red scarf wrapped around her neck. Paramita Das stood, against a bright blue background, holding a tray of Glucose biscuits.

She requested the audience to, "Please take some biscuits." But wait. There was a rider to the request. "Chew the biscuits," she said, "but don't swallow it. Instead, spit it out into my palm." Das would then eat the chewed biscuit, a gooey lump mixed and softened by the saliva of a stranger.

Artiste Aishwaryan K, an audience member for Das's performance art, observed that many people in the front row stepped back when Das requested them to spit out the biscuit.

The feelings evoked in the performance art called *Chewing Lump* held recently at Basavangudi for the Indian Foundation for Arts Project Code 560, were diverse. Not many understood what Das, a Kolkata-based moving image and performance artist, wanted to achieve. "Ewww" was the predominant reaction. An audience member felt horrified by what she called "a performance that crossed the general notions of accepted behaviour."

But there were active participants too — auto drivers, a man who stopped his bike especially for the performance; men were the ones who mostly volunteered to chew and spit. "The rest thought that they too had to do the same for her," says Aishwaryan.

Actor Sidhartha Maudhyanika was in the neighbourhood for a rehearsal

Between art & the audience

Performance art raises as many questions as it seeks to answer. Does the audience take away meaning from an interactive show, or is it artistic self-indulgence? We find out



Performance art can be scorned or intellectualised, but the day it is shunned, it stops being art

JEETUN RANGHER,
PERFORMANCE ARTIST

and like many others, stepped forward to see what the commotion was about. He noticed tears in Das's eyes as she chewed the regurgitated lumps. "I was struck by her willingness to chew a stranger's spit."

He stepped forward, asked Das to eat a biscuit and spit it out in his palm. When she did that, "I felt like gagging," he admits. He could not chew the way Das did but swallowed it in a hurry. "I realised then how the inner me is so different from the 'outside' me," he reflects. His "compassionate reaction" was something Das had not hoped for.

She calls the performance a highly spiritual and erotic experience. It encompassed her belief that everyone is connected to each other and uses another's energy to sustain oneself. "People have turned away in disgust, disbelief or extreme surprise. That's okay," she states. An award-winning artist and filmmaker, Das has performed within the country and Europe to diverse reactions.

Her other recent 23-hour performance at 1 Shanthi Road (part of her series *My Body is Land of Mirrors*) saw her sitting on a swing in a bright red sari through the long summer

night beside a path of sanitary napkins that led up to a bowl filled with dates. At the end of the performance, she broke the mirror placed at her feet and lay on the sharp jagged pieces. "Even then I wondered how to hurt myself some more," says Das.

Audience reactions to a performance artist and his or her art cannot be gauged beforehand. "There are no rehearsals," says artist Dimple Shah. She has done several interactive installations, including storing her own hair in little bottles for a show at Gallery Sumukha called *Catharsis in a Forbidden Zone* (2010). About 1,800 bottles were

placed in a cubicle filled with ash, salt, nail clippings and hair.

Shah feels that laypersons may shrug at the concept as 'this is not art'. "I expect odd reactions of disgust and shock," she says. Her performances have included *Milk, Melancholy and Me*, which she performed first at Venkatappa Art Gallery. Completely blackened with paint to denote melancholy, she poured milk on herself to show the healing process. She had placed black balloons in the space on