



The Maze

A collaborative art project by
Bandu Manamperi & G. R. Constantine

2nd to 5th November 2006 at the Lionel Wendt Art Gallery

Exhibition organized by the

theertha International Artists' Collective, 36 A, Baddegana Road South, Pitakotte, Sri Lanka
www.theertha.org / theerthaiac@yahoo.com / Phone (00 94 11) 440 6019, 286 1071 / Fax (00 94 11) 552 7402

Main text written by:
Jagath Weerasinghe
Edited by:
Krishantha Sri Bhagyadatta

Concept written by:
Anoli Perera
Edited by:
Sasanka Perera

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Anoli Perera

Ours is an anesthetized society. We are oblivious to the other's pain. We have lost our capabilities of either empathizing or sympathizing.

The weapons of "mass instruction" give us the view of a distant theatre. Our living rooms become the safe pavilions for watching far away wars and killings. We are the cheering spectators.

We have found psychological mechanisms to justify our collective amnesias and have anesthetized ourselves to block out traumatic experience of the society.

Once we are in this world of decadence, we lose all rationality where priorities get misplaced and extreme emotions govern the order of the day.

This is the maze we have entered into.



Performing the Male Body, from Nude to Naked

Jagath Weerasinghe

Performance Art: A brief history

Performance Art is a genre of art that has its roots in early 1950s New York, where artists combined elements of theatre, music, dance and visual arts. The beginnings of Performance Art have close affinities to another art form called ‘Happenings.’ A ‘Happening’ involves a high degree of entertainment, where an artist plans an event combining elements of theatre and visual art with sufficient space for spontaneity.

Performance has been an important component of many 20th century avant-garde movements. The performance aspect of art became pronounced in the works of “Kinetic Artists,” the “Action Painters” of Abstract Expressionism and Art Informal, the Japanese Gutai Group as well as the Beat Artists. New York artist Allan Kaprow, one of the early exponents of Performance Art or what was then called ‘Happenings,’ traces the development of ‘Happenings’ to the action painting of Abstract Expressionism and to Jackson Pollock.¹ Indeed, anyone familiar with the image of Jackson Pollock in his studio working on one of his large paintings, where he has laid the canvas on the floor and is dripping paint on to it in an action that has totally absorbed the artists into the act of dripping

paint, cannot fail to see the high performance aspect in “Action Painting.” As Kaprow has argued, the performance aspect of it can be seen as a “return to the point where art was more actively involved in ritual, magic and life.”²

Performance Art acquired different forms and shapes, gaining momentum in the 1960s. Visual artists, dancers and musicians associated with such New York avant-garde movements as “Nouveaux Realiste,” “Neo-Dada,” Fluxus, E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology) and the Judson Dance Theatre, brought in newer dimensions to Performance Art, where performance became a part of the creation of the artwork, and Performance Art, an event where jazz music and poetry performance collaborated with visual art. A few of the great American art personalities of the 1960s, such as artists Yves Klein, Robert Rauschenberg and Niki de Saint Phalle, musician John Cage, and dancers Merck Cunningham and Carolyn Brown, were among the main animators of the New York Performance Art scene of this time. The most attractive and meaningful dimensions that Performance Art acquired in the 1960s, which drew artists and audiences to it, was the conscious involvement of the ‘real world’ and its multi-disciplinary nature in the act of art making. These aspects imparted a highly democratic sense regarding the act of ‘art making’: ‘anyone can do it.’ It is worthy here to quote how dance critic Jill Lohnton recalled the mood of the time:

*Anyone can do it. During the 1960s, this idea swept through the art world like a bushfire. ...Artists made dances. Dancers made music. Composers made poetry. Poets made events. People at large performed in all these things, including critics, wives, and children.*³

Performance continued to bring in more and more artists into its fold throughout the 1970s in the form of ‘Body Art,’ an important development in the genre of Performance Art. For my discussion here, most of the works by Sri Lankan Performance Artists fall within the category of Body Art. In Body Art, the body of the artist becomes itself the medium of art.

Performance Artists, due to the flexible nature of the medium and its high potential for gestures of storytelling and protest, since the late 1960s and through the 1970s, created work that directly addressed and interrogated the broad social and political issues of the time: sexism, racism, war, homophobia, AIDS, and all sorts of social taboos. Even today, such issues make the most palatable themes for Performance Art throughout the art world. In other words, Performance Art has opened up a highly charged space for creativity that was political in every sense, as it blurred the boundaries between media and academia[/?disciplines], between art and life, and between art and protest.

Performance Art in Sri Lanka

South Asian artists are not as big fans of Performance Art as they are of ‘Installation Art.’ However, artists of Southeast and East Asia seem to have taken Performance Art more seriously. The performance aspect, in its various direct and subtle forms, of contemporary Chinese artists, foremost amongst the Asian giants of the art world, is unmistakably the strongest in the region. In Sri Lanka, we have only three artists who have taken ‘Performance Art’ as their medium of artistic investigations and expressions: G.R. Constantine, Bandu Manamperi and Janani Cooray being the artists who identify themselves as ‘Performance Artists.’

The arrival of Performance Art into Sri Lankan art occurred with Jagath Weerasinghe’s “Anxiety” exhibition of 1992. This marked the beginning of a new era in art making – now proudly titled as “the ‘90s Trend.” The ‘90s Trend constitutes an artistic explosion that brought in several radical-critical dimensions to the contemporary art practices of the Colombo-centered art scene of Sri Lanka. The artistic explosion of the ‘90s Trend galvanized a whole new generation of younger artists on both sides of the modernist divide: the modern and the late-modern. The ‘90s Trend pushed over the cusp a Sri Lankan modernist art steeped in introspection and meditation, as the way to think about art and abstraction or quasi-abstraction and non-figuration as the way to construct art – pushed it beyond modernism. It opened up a decisive new space for Sri Lankan art where younger artist on both banks of the modernist divide plunged into highly dynamic narrative moves. Highly charged moves thus emerged, activating many artistic currents and thematic that had been pushed aside by the high modernist rhetoric of the 1970s and ‘80s. One such motif or thematic that had been marginalized by the high modernist thought of Sri Lankan modernism of the 1960s and ‘70s was the representation of the male body in painting and sculpture. The repression of the male body/nude in modernist art, and its entry in the 1990s, is of importance to the text I am weaving on the entry of Performance Art to the arena of contemporary art in Sri Lanka.

The Entry of the Repressed ‘Male Body

The representation of the male body is not entirely an unfamiliar phenomenon in the modernist tradition of Sri Lanka, nor in the traditional Asian arts of the Buddhists, the Jains and the Hindus. Nude representation of sages and gods with clearly visible copulatory organs, and Buddha statues



Jagath Weerasinghe. *Crumbling of everything ii.*

1993. Acrylic on canvas

with sure and clear indications to the presence of the same beneath the robe, is quite familiar and profuse in the religious art of Asia. However strong the tradition of representing the male body and nudity in traditional arts was, the Sri Lankan modernists seem to have not looked much at male body/nudes with any deep intellectual feelings or emotions, as one might



Chandraguptha Thenuwara. *Space.*

2001. Acrylic on canvas

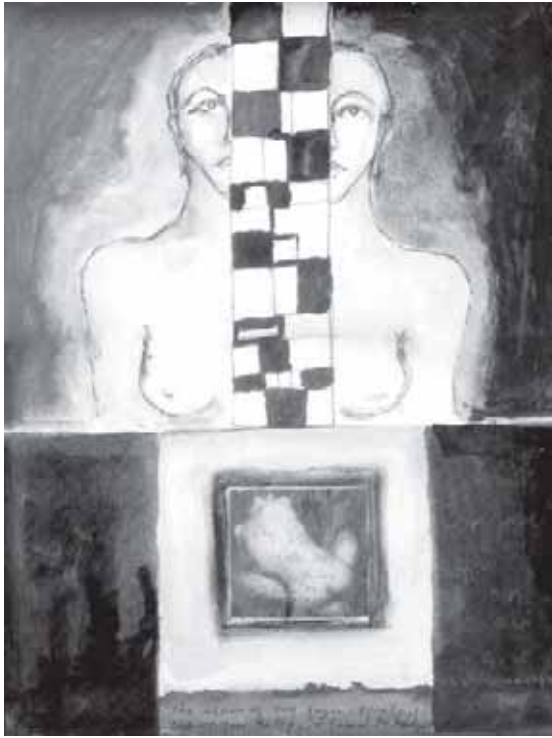
expect, except in the works of Lionel Wendt in 1930s and '40s, the peerless founder of the '43 Group, and a few works by Justin Deraniyagala, Ranil Deraniyagala and George Classen. After the '43 Group, the male body/nude seems to have disappeared from paintings and sculpture. While the purpose of this essay doesn't allow for dwelling on the question, why the Sri Lankan modernists averted the male body/nude from their gaze, I would only make a cursory remark that this was probably due to inhibitions acculturated by Victorian values during British rule.

It was with the '90s Trend that the repressed male body/nudity found its way back onto the painted surface and the sculpted form as a visual terrain where the deepest complexities of the human condition and of human existence could be investigated. With the works of Jagath Weerasinghe, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, Anoli Perera, Sarath Kumarasiri, Pushpakumara Koralegedara, Pradeep Chandrasiri and T. Sanathanan a whole new visual discourse on the intellectual, emotional and narrative potential of the nude male



(right)
Pushpakumara Koralegedara
Unveiling the Contradiction I. 2004. Acrylic on Plywood board

(left)
Sarath Kumarasiri
Burnt City. 2004. Fiber and computer parts.



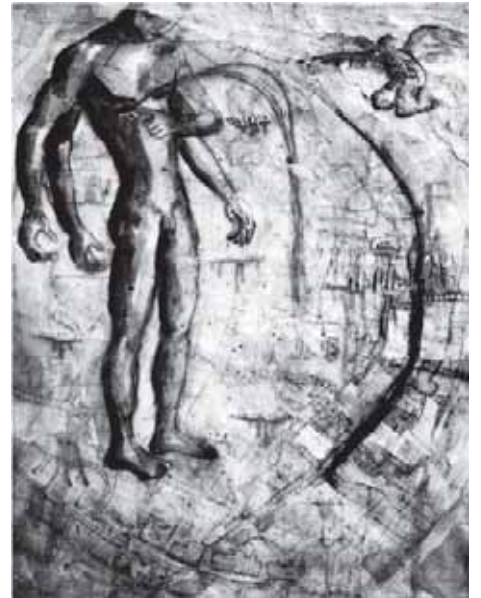
(above left)
Anoli Perera.
Your body and my eye.
Mix media

(above right)
Pradeep Chandrasiri
Address The Hirt, 2000
Acrylic on canvas.



(below right)
T. Sanathanan
The doubting thomas.
2005.Mix media on paper.

(belowleft)
Jagath Rawendra
The doubting thomas.
2005.Mix media on paper.





Sanjeeewa Kumara. *Emperor*.
2002. Oil on canvas.

body embarked center stage upon the art of the 1990s. Artists of varying temperaments on both sides of the modernist divide could not escape the newfound appeal of the nude male body, and the idea of the presence or absence of the male body.

The reentry and the appeal of the 'male body' since the 1990s in the form of a tortured, agonized, internally suffering motif, or as a figure lost in limbo, can be read as a deeply

existentialist, therefore philosophical, position unconsciously adopted by artists across the board who are caught in a malevolent social moment. What is important to notice is that the reentry of the male body into Sri Lankan visual arts has not in most cases given rise to any sensuous or gratifying or seductive representations of the male body/nude, which marks an obvious difference and a distance between the representation of the male body in the 1990s by the artists of the '90s Trend, and the 1940s' work of Lionel Wendt. I would like to argue here that the 'male body' that entered the painted surface in the 1990s, and which made its presence felt in the society and elevated itself to a higher position by way of art, was the body of the male artist himself, whose corporeal as well as spiritual existence was threatened by the unavoidable forces of the organized political schemes of violence and the

chimerical forces of globalization. As such I would say that the representation of male body/nudity in the 1990s and early 2000s was autobiographical in essence and meaning.

In order to further support my argument, I would like to reveal the fact that Sri Lankan modernists were very reluctant or timid in portraying themselves or their own bodies as terrains of emotional and visual complexities. Even the occasional male nudes they made were of a model or of a



Bandu Manamperi, *Bandaged Barrel Man*.
2004. Performed in Jaffna. Sri Lanka

sitter, not of their own. It may not be wrong to say that all of Wendt's male nudes were of individuals from a lower social class than his own. Nowhere in his work can one see a nude representation of his own body or that of his fellow artists. Unlike Indian modernists, the Sri Lankan ones seemed to be occupied with a kind of a "penis-phobia"⁴ till the dawn of the



G.R. Constantine. *Silent Witness*. 2004.
Performed in Colombo.

'90s Trend in the last decade of the 20th century. Thus, am I to conclude here that it took that much violence occurring in the society for the male body to acquire expressive and emotional norms, and to find its way into the culture of art?

The purpose of the foregoing discussion on the entry of the male body into contemporary Sri Lankan painting and sculpture was to contextualize the embedded meanings of the formation of an artist-identity as 'Performing Artist' by G.R. Constantine and Bandu Manamperi, for whom I am making this essay on the occasion of their new joint Performance Art project titled, "Maze." Before Constantine and Manamperi, there was no such artist-identity as a 'Performance Artist' in the art world of Sri Lanka. My attempt in the rest of this essay will be to look for subtle reasons that might have contributed towards the formation of an artist-identity as 'Performance Artist.'

Why I am looking for 'subtle reasons,' as opposed to reasons per se that could have caused a 'Performance Artist' identity to emerge in the Colombo art scene, is because it seemed so improbable and unpredictable for such a development to occur! The modernist tradition that Colombo fostered in the 1970s and '80s was deeply conservative and 'safe.' The high modernists of the time conceptually dwelt on a plane that had no intellectual links whatsoever with other forms of art. The Art and Design section of the Institute of Aesthetic Studies (IAS, now the University of Fine and Performing Arts) – the then citadel of high modernism – groomed its neophytes with an arrogant and isolationist attitude towards and away from popular forms of art. As an undergraduate at IAS in the late 1970s and early 1980s I can reminisce about the presence of this isolationist position quite

vividly. The artist personality that the high modernists imagined was that of a non-protesting, self-absorbed, introverted individual whose knowledge of visual art was abstruse and esoteric. As such, I find it difficult to see any art-historical or art-cultural reasons that would have underpinned the formation of a new artist identity such as Performance Artist; an artist personality grounded in a genre of art in which various art forms had converged to realize a radically new artistic persona.

I have suggested above that the meaning of the coming of the male body/nude into visual art was autobiographical. It was autobiographical in the sense that the painted or sculpted narratives seemed to have resulted from a need to record tragedies experienced personally and collectively, caught in cruel social-political crises, which have extended their vicious and unreasoning tentacles into every part of people's lives in Sri Lanka. The crises referred to here are the bloody events that took place in the south of Sri Lanka during 1988 to 1991, as well as the decades-old ethnic war and the onslaught of uncontrolled consumerism. These crises have caused over 40,000 deaths alone in the south of Sri Lanka during 1988-91, and the number of deaths in the north and east resulting from the ongoing conflict has been much higher and incalculable. In short, it can be suggested that these crises severely penalized the young men in the south of Sri Lanka for simply being young, and those in the north of Sri Lanka for being young and Tamil speaking!

The argument that I am advancing on the basis of the foregoing discussion is that the formation of an artist identity as 'Performance Artist' is yet another manifestation of the same social and cultural anxieties that have exposed the

impotency of the hallowed rhetoric of the high modernist thinking that paved the way for the entry of the male body/nude both in two- and three-dimensional forms. Constantine and Manamperi, a Tamil and a Sinhala artist respectively, are the pioneering exponents of Performance Art in Sri Lanka. With their performance work, the male body entered the real-space of elite culture called 'Art.' In one of his early performances, in 1997 at the Vibhavi Academy of Fine Arts on the occasion of the launching of the manifesto of the "No Order" group of the '90s Trend, Constantine entered the exhibition hall, carried by two people, in a cocoon made of newsprint, and emerged out of it by breaking it open, exerting rhythmic tremors from inside the cocoon, expressing the struggles and pains of coming out of a given identity. In this work Constantine, I would say, metaphorically 'undressed' himself in front of the audience, exposing the vulnerabilities of being, particularly as a Tamil, at a particular political moment. Keeping in line with the arguments I have advanced so far about the coming of Performance Art, I would say Constantine presented a 'naked' body, not a nude one, because it just emerged 'naked' out of the cocoon that constructed/protected his being. Similar gestures of dressing/undressing can also be seen in the performance work of Manamperi. In his first performance piece "Home Coming," at the 1st International Artist Workshop of the Theertha International Artists' Collective, held at the Lunuganga Estate of Geoffrey Bawa in 2000, Manamperi appeared bare-bodied in front of the audience with[?/carrying?/removing?] the bridal costume of his wife, and wearing a piece of white cloth as a shawl. The performance intended to address the issue of male chauvinism in rituals pertaining to Sinhala wedding ceremonies, yet for this discussion what is important to note is the act of

‘undressing’ that Manamperi performed in his work. The naked body also becomes the central motif of _expression in his later works, “Bandaged Body and Body in Ashes,” performed at Burragorang, Australia, in 2003; and “The Bandaged Barrel Man,” performed in Jaffna on the occasion of the opening of the “Aham Puram” exhibition at the newly renovated Jaffna Library in 2004. In essence, the presenting of the ‘naked male body’ as a locus of struggle and suffering – in real terms, as with Manamperi, or conceptually, as in Constantine’s work – lies at the center of their work in varying degrees, which links them to the expressions, meanings and norms embedded in the portrayal of the nude male body of the painters and sculptors of the ‘90s Trend. I would like to approach this aspect from another angle. The branch of Performance Art that Constantine and Manamperi have taken on, as mentioned earlier, is the Body Art trend, which uses the body of the artist as the medium of art. In other words, in a performance work made on Body Art, the body of the artist becomes the art object. When the artist’s body is converted to the object of art within a discourse of visual art in front of an audience, the artist allows his ‘body’ to become an object of interpretation and consumption, and by implication makes his/her body vulnerable. As such, the body of the artist is not presented only as a locus of struggle and suffering, but also as a target of attack.

In the performance acts of Constantine and Manamperi, the male body was real and ‘naked’; the male body walked into the audience in its full corporeal existence. As such, the formation of the ‘performance–artist-identity’, I would unhesitatingly declare, was a major confrontational stance that emerged from the para-modernist⁵ ideology of the ‘90s Trend. Deploying one’s own body for artistic expressions

that are radical, while protesting, was undoubtedly confrontational in every sense! Thus the established smug norms of the visual art scene of Colombo experienced another blow that shook them from their amnesiacal slumber.

¹ Allan Kaprow, *The Legacy of Jackson Pollock*, 1958; quoted in Amy Dempsy, *Styles, Schools and Movement*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2002, pp222-25.

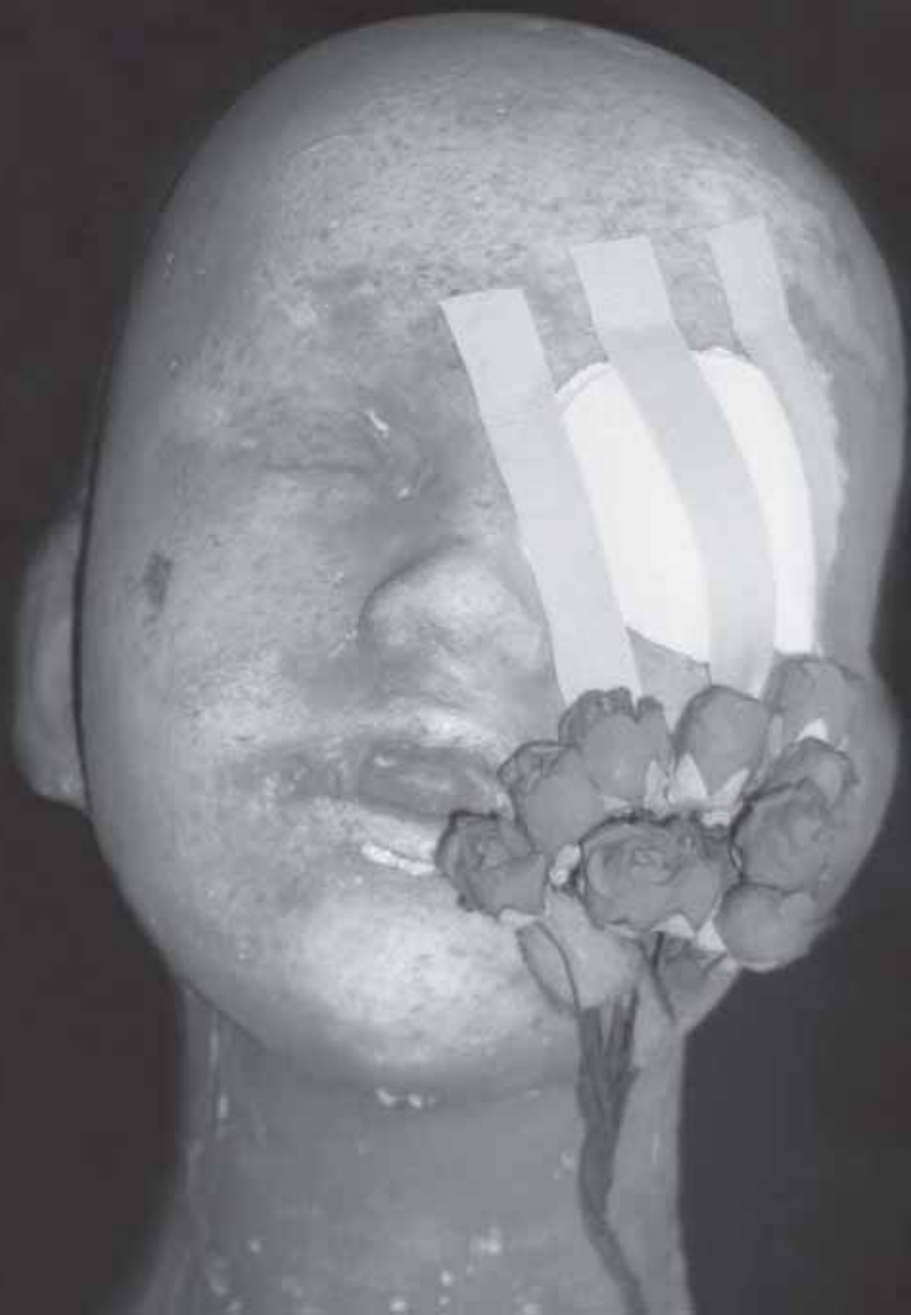
² Ibid.

³ See Amy Dempsy, op.cit., pp222-25.

⁴ However, I must mention here that I can recall seeing some time in the late 1980s a George Keyt exhibition of a series of works on Hindu mythological themes, at the National Gallery of Art, Colombo, where images contrary to the observation I have made here were the central motifs. Nevertheless, what is important to note is that the depiction of copulatory organs in full scale happened with mythical themes or in very private or intimate drawings only! Of the artists of the ‘43 Group, Justin Deraniyagala seems to have done the strongest male nudes.

⁵ Jagath Weerasinghe, “Contemporary Art in Sri Lanka,” in *Art and Social Change: Contemporary art in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Caroline Turner, Pandanus Books, Canberra, pp180-93.











G.R. Constantine

Born in Katugasthota

24.10.1946

Lives and works in Colombo

godwinconstantine@hotmail.com



Bandu Manamperi

06.04.1972

Born in Bandaragama

Lives and works in Bandaragama

bandumanamperi@yahoo.com

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