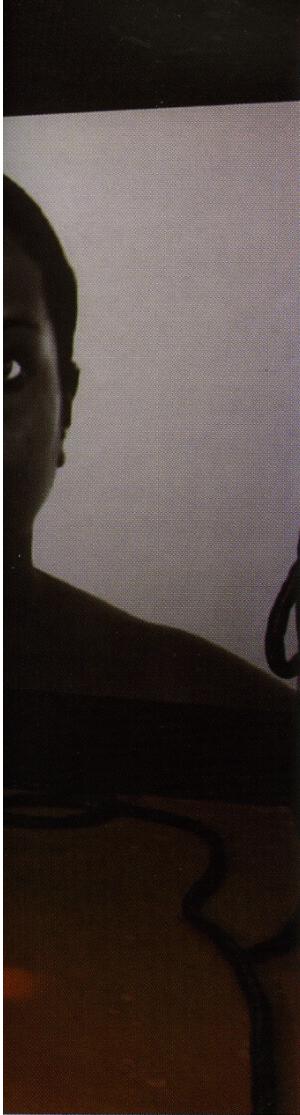




— Mithu Sen, **Tattoo**, 2007, Video installation, Duration: 10minutes, Courtesy Bose Pacia Gallery, NY, Photo Credit: David Flores, 2007

Experiencing  
Peripheries



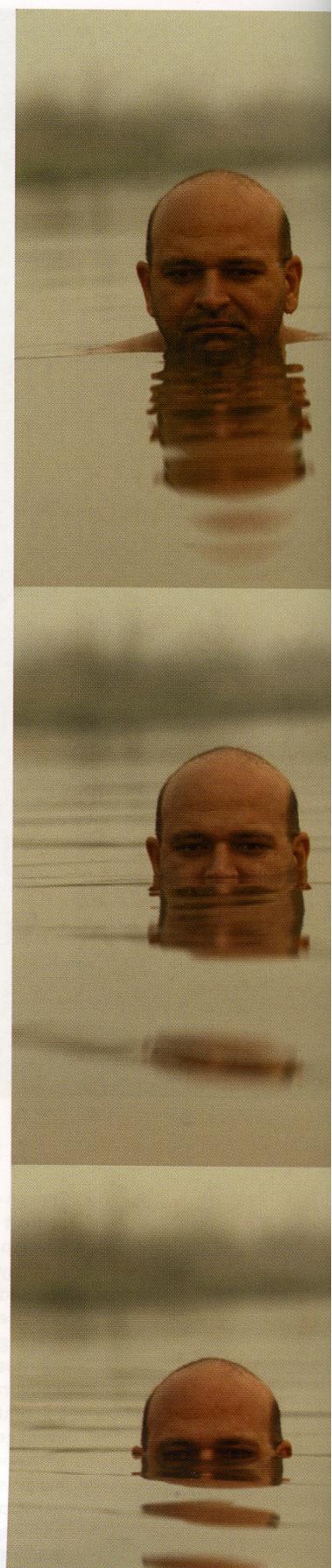
Alongside the explosive growth of painting, sculpture, and installation objects in India's contemporary art world during the past decade, performative art practices have experienced a tandem, if less publicized, launch into the international public sphere.

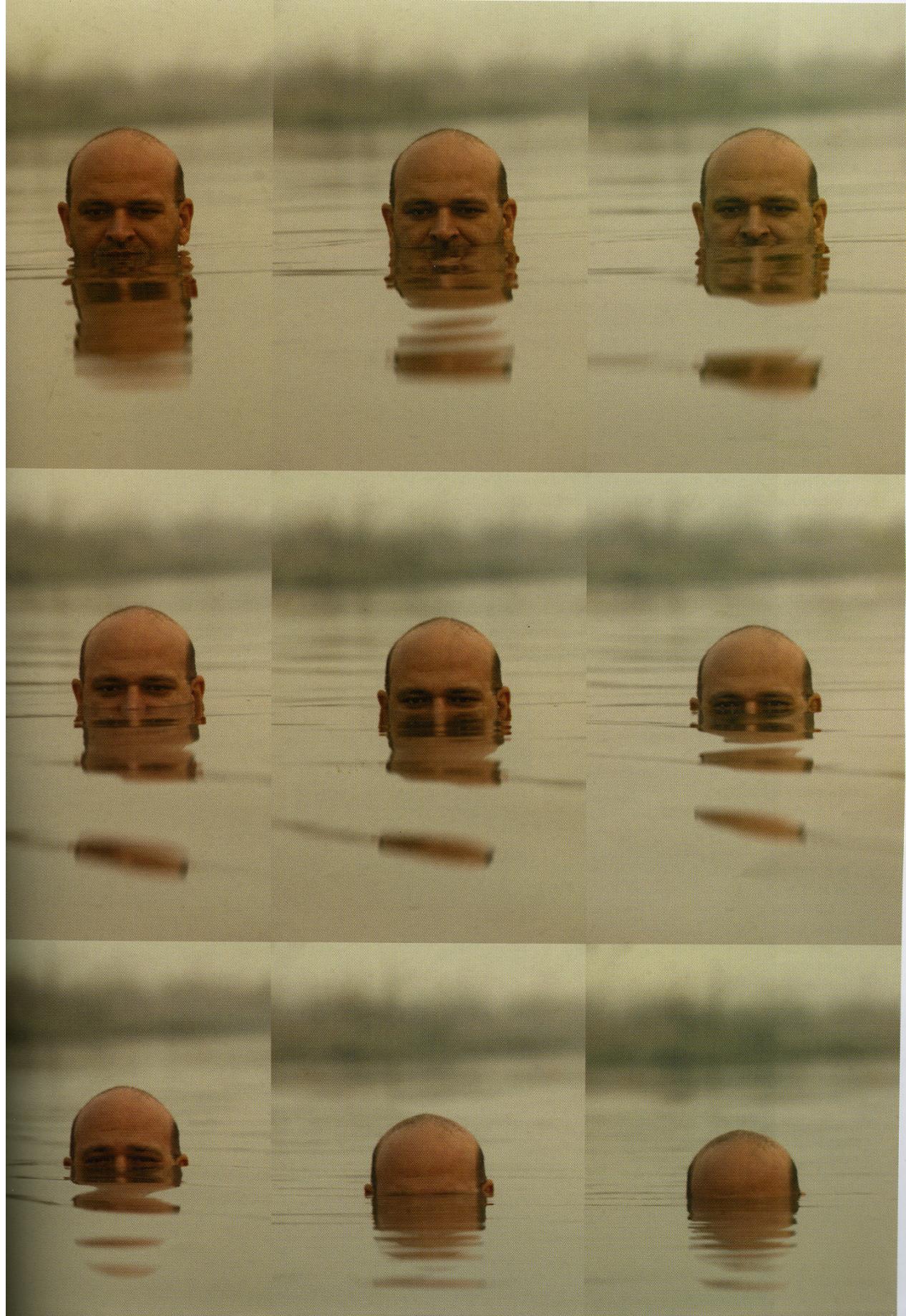
Though often perceived as an isolated and recent phenomenon, context for performance art today lies in seminal pioneering developments by leading artists of the 1970s. Beginning in 1970, Bombay and Baroda based artist Bhupen Khakhar began to integrate Pop and Nouveau Realiste modeled "happenings" into his artistic practice. Among his boldest gestures, in 1971 Khakhar staged an opening of one exhibition of his paintings to simultaneously mimic the rites of an Indian marriage procession and a governmental inauguration. Poking fun at the overblown excessiveness of wedding celebrations and at the formality of official public ceremonies, the event generated polemical media publicity that questioned the role of the professional artist in Post-Independence India. In transforming his artist friends like Vivan Sundaram and Nasreen Mohamedi into participants in the event, Khakhar became the first artist in India to challenge the conventional interaction between artist and audience, subverting the presence and necessity of spectators to come.

After a recession in the exposure of performance art in the 1980s, Khoj International Artists' Association launched in New Delhi in 1997, providing an alternative institutional face to foster and promote experimental art practices in India. Founded by a group of artists that included Subodh Gupta, Bharti Kher, and Anita Dube (APT Mumbai), along with curator Pooja Sood, its long-term Director, who is now also the Director of APT Mumbai, Khoj has focused especially on creating opportunities for the often marginalized practices that comprise contemporary performance art. This has been especially critical because of the continuing lack of venues and institutional support for the creation and exhibition of alternative art media in India.

Throughout 2008, Khoj is celebrating its historic 10th anniversary, kicking off events with KhojLive08, an unprecedented six-day international performance festival in New Delhi, from March 25-30, 2008. Artists from India including Sonia Khurana, Neha Choksi, and Nikhil Chopra joined a diverse contingent of international artists and media practitioners that included Steven Cohen from South Africa, Doug Fishbone of the United States and London, and Da Motus!, a Swiss troupe. Chopra performed the latest unfolding of a narrative centered on his fictitious character Yog Raj Chitrakar, based loosely on the identity of his grandfather as a member of the landed gentry in colonial Kashmir. After leading his audience on accelerated foot from Khoj Studios to the top of a nearby mosque, Chopra created a live charcoal drawing of the surrounding landscape while transforming from the male Chitrakar into a costumed female empress. This followed up on Chopra's breakthrough 72-hour open performance in Mumbai in December, in which the artist enacted a series of physical transformations while creating a room-size drawing of the city harbor over the course of three days. While drawing on personal and national historical paradigms, Chopra's acts more broadly question the boundaries inherent in the mediums of both drawing and live art.

Beyond live events, Indian artists have broadly incorporated performative gestures into artistic practices that rely on traditional media like photography and painting. Most prominently, Pushpamala N. (APT Mumbai) has canonized the medium of photo-performance by casting and posing her own body in various characters and personae, which are then incorporated into groups of photographs that invent layered narratives. Among her most well-known works has been the series *Phantom Lady or Kismet, a photo romance* (1998) in which the artist, dressed in a black mask and costume, staged various moments of an action thriller, performing the archetypal role of "good girl-bad girl."



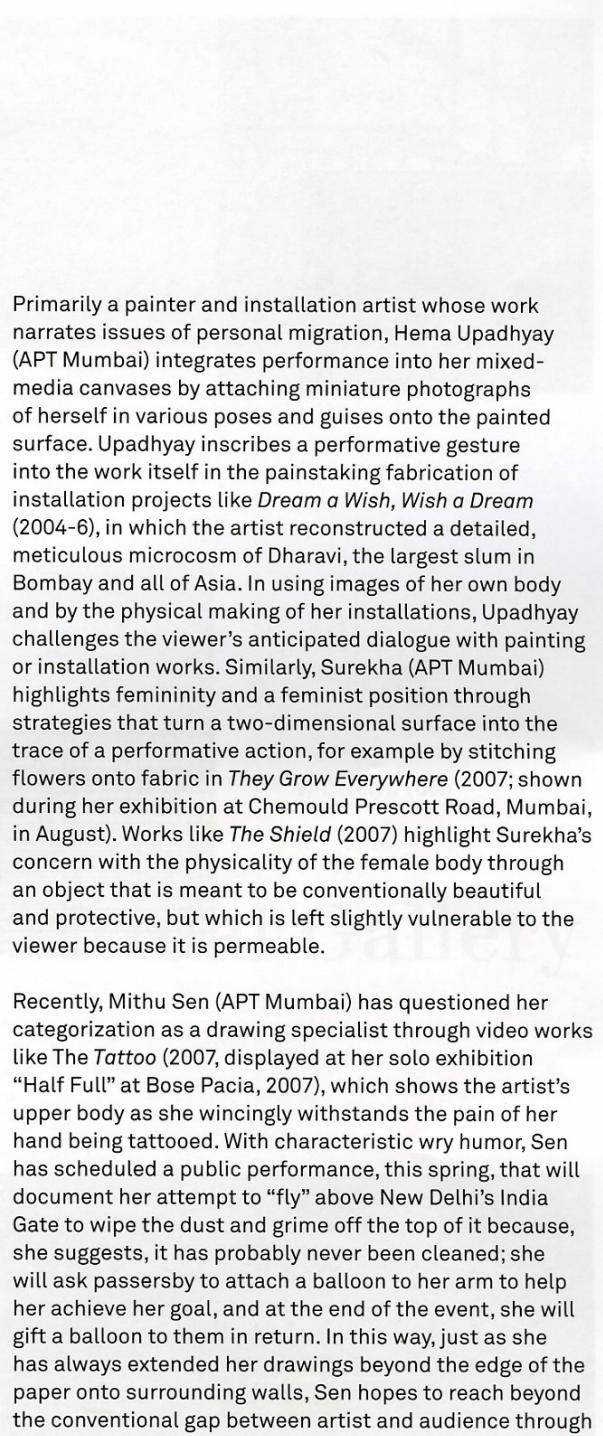


Atul Bhalla, I Was Not Waving but Drowning, 2005, Archival pigment print, Edition 1 of 5, 12 x 18 in

Ravi Agarwal, *The Shroud*, 2007, Photographic inkjet prints on Epson archival paper, 60 x 36 in



Other artists have used photo-performance to address the critical problems and politics of life in urban India today. Ravi Agarwal (APT Mumbai) and Atul Bhalla (APT Mumbai) have both enacted performances that reflect the dire pollution and scarcity of water in the capital city of Delhi and many other areas of India. Agarwal developed *Shroud* (2006) following a series of visits to the contaminated Yamuna River between 2004 and 2006. Standing near the river, which can appear almost solid and stagnant in the places where it is thickest with pollution, he cloaked himself head-to-toe in an opaque shroud, which was then covered in a transparent cloth and bound with rope. As an ardent environmentalist, Agarwal was articulating his concern for the physical degradation of the river and for Delhi as it globalizes; and as an artist, the work represents a struggle with his own alienation in a city he had always known. In Agarwal's own words, "*Shroud* represents an immersion and emergence. It is my relationship to the dirty, polluted, but holy river which is also the life-line of the city of 15 million people. At another level, the mythical river is intimately linked to the Hindu idea of life, death and rebirth. Upon dying, the cremated ashes of the 'mortal' body are immersed into the holy river, back to the five elements of nature. The soul is reborn, in a new body, and the river becomes the carrier of the emergence." Environmental issues and the urgent scarcity of clean water in Delhi have been recurring and dominant trope in Bhalla's work in various mediums too, fashioning sand from the polluted Yamuna River into water carriers in his sculptural installation *Immersion*. In his photo-performance work, Bhalla has explored the broad significance of water to Indian culture and history, reflected in the importance of rivers like the Yamuna and Ganges, which are at once sacred and contaminated. His series of photographs *I Was Not Waving but Drowning* speaks to the transcendent importance of water and echoes Hindu ritual bathing practices in documenting 14 stages of the artist's submersion into a still body of water.



Primarily a painter and installation artist whose work narrates issues of personal migration, Hema Upadhyay (APT Mumbai) integrates performance into her mixed-media canvases by attaching miniature photographs of herself in various poses and guises onto the painted surface. Upadhyay inscribes a performative gesture into the work itself in the painstaking fabrication of installation projects like *Dream a Wish, Wish a Dream* (2004-6), in which the artist reconstructed a detailed, meticulous microcosm of Dharavi, the largest slum in Bombay and all of Asia. In using images of her own body and by the physical making of her installations, Upadhyay challenges the viewer's anticipated dialogue with painting or installation works. Similarly, Surekha (APT Mumbai) highlights femininity and a feminist position through strategies that turn a two-dimensional surface into the trace of a performative action, for example by stitching flowers onto fabric in *They Grow Everywhere* (2007; shown during her exhibition at Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai, in August). Works like *The Shield* (2007) highlight Surekha's concern with the physicality of the female body through an object that is meant to be conventionally beautiful and protective, but which is left slightly vulnerable to the viewer because it is permeable.

Recently, Mithu Sen (APT Mumbai) has questioned her categorization as a drawing specialist through video works like *The Tattoo* (2007, displayed at her solo exhibition "Half Full" at Bose Pacia, 2007), which shows the artist's upper body as she wincingly withstands the pain of her hand being tattooed. With characteristic wry humor, Sen has scheduled a public performance, this spring, that will document her attempt to "fly" above New Delhi's India Gate to wipe the dust and grime off the top of it because, she suggests, it has probably never been cleaned; she will ask passersby to attach a balloon to her arm to help her achieve her goal, and at the end of the event, she will gift a balloon to them in return. In this way, just as she has always extended her drawings beyond the edge of the paper onto surrounding walls, Sen hopes to reach beyond the conventional gap between artist and audience through her performative practice.

Reflecting an accelerated moment of critical transformation and expansion in India's art world, these artists, through their dynamic and inventive engagement with performance, are ready to lead us into new experiences of viewing art itself.