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## Civil Disturbances

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Last year when Priyanka Choudhary was invited to a residency in Mexico City, her kin were a worried lot. Mexico, to them, meant rampant crime, drug cartels, murders and the works. Their concerns were valid, but Choudhary was determined not to forgo the opportunity. She decided to chuck her paints and brushes, and instead take with her a *charkha* - the Mahatma's tool for peaceful resistance and an ideal antidote to the strife-ridden city, she thought.

In the Zócalo, Mexico's City's huge central square, Choudhary tied her *charkha*-spun thread around her body and invited passersby to write 'Si' on her. They readily scrawled the Spanish word for 'yes' across the artist's diminutive frame, without questioning her. Since ancient times, the Zócalo has been a site of both protests and celebrations, including the bloody *Tlatelolco* massacre in 1968, in which the police cracked down on civilians for protesting against the then repressive government. Choudhary's audiences' inability to say 'no' or to refuse to comply with the artist's demands, equated to a willing submission - very unlike the angry protestors who refused to give in to an authoritarian government. The irony in Choudhary's performance subtly called attention to a long forgotten past. One only had to be sensitive to pick up her nuanced gesture.

Thereafter, Choudhary travelled the world, staging similar performances in areas of conflict, ruffling feathers and stirring people - ever so slightly - to ensure that the brutal memories of the past were not forgotten in the humdrum of everyday life. The artist's solo show '1914-2014' mounted at Maskara Gallery, Mumbai from the 10th of January to the 28th of February, displayed photo and video documentation of these performances, among other installations. The show also marked the 100<sup>th</sup> year since the outbreak of the first World War, hence the title.

*Falling*, an installation depicting a cemetery, cleverly cut across the space of the gallery, confronting the viewer who entered.

Priyanka Choudhary, *You*, 2014 (Still from performance)

There was no escaping the work, which served as a grim reminder of the War's centenary. Viewers were forced to acknowledge the horrors of war, by metaphorically paying their respects at the grave, before moving on. Moreover, instead of inscriptions and fond remembrances, bullet shots were carved into the work's marble tombstones. It set a disturbingly ominous tone for the rest of the exhibits.

Photographs of Choudhary's performance in Soweto, where she felt the need to disrupt the quietude, dotted the gallery's walls. The South African town was a site for raging student protests in 1976. The police let dogs loose on children and even shot them for opposing the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in local schools. But all seemed to have been forgotten with the passage of time. So the artist, again knotted herself up in cotton thread, and got participants to scrawl across her body, the names of various 'colours' in a language of their choice. She hoped that the exercise would subtly evoke memories of the town's traumatic history of racial discrimination. Knots of hand-spun thread were given as 'souvenirs' to the participants, to ensure that the memories evoked wouldn't fade away again.

Elsewhere images of her performances in Jallianwala Bagh, New York and Ypres in Belgium were displayed. At the far end of the gallery, a sumptuous chandelier lying crashed on a frayed Kashmiri carpet, brought to mind the ever-present conflict in the disputed Indian state. The broken shards of glass seemed to indicate a sense of despair at the situation, while the cotton threads woven around the chandelier, desperately holding the pieces together, conveyed a flicker of hope.

For her performance in Mumbai, as part of the show, Choudhary changed the script. She used a staff instead of a *charkha* and walked the streets from Fort to Colaba, tracing the route taken by the 26/11 terrorists. A container filled with red powder was affixed at the base of the staff. Stencilled at the bottom of the container was the word 'YOU', such that when the artist hit the staff against the ground while walking, it left a red dotted trace of the word on the road. Dressed in white, Choudhary stood out in the all too colourful milieu of Bombay, as she went about her job, stopping at various points during her walk, firmly hitting her staff into the ground. Her anger was palpable even though her expressions remained stoic. Unfortunately, most passersby also simply went about their job. A few looked on quizzically, while a handful stopped to ask questions.



Zocalo, Digital C-print, 16 x 24 inches, 2013 (Still from performance)

'You', a word that is accusatory in nature, was used by Choudhary to intelligent effect. She seemed to denounce people for their apathy and constant blaming of each other. Unfortunately, as with her previous performances, only the more sensitive passersby were able to pick up her subtle message. Most others who walked over the yours strewn across the roads, seemed to metaphorically wipe off the painful memories from their consciousness.

Choudhary's brilliance lied in being able to unsettle her audience through subtle and nuanced actions, rather than grandiose ones. She didn't preach, nor comment, but instead used peaceful means to evoke violent memories. One only wondered whether her understated performance would go unmarked and be forgotten...just like the memories, which Choudhary struggled to keep alive.

'1914-2014' Priyanka Choudhury, 10 January – 28 February, 2014, Maskara Gallery, Mumbai

Images courtesy: Gallery Maskara