



FABRIQUE DE L'ART N°3 | 4
FABRICATE (FABRIC OF) ART

ANNÉES | YEARS | 2017 | 2018

FABRIQUE DE L'ART N°3 | 4
FABRICATE (FABRIC OF) ART

In 2018, **TRIMUKHI PLATFORM** celebrates ten years. On this occasion, the present issue of **FABRICATE (FABRIC OF) ART** (designated *double issue n°3/4* because to go to ten is to move to two digits) offers analyses, testimonies, conversations, reflections, images that give a lively account of this singular and joyous adventure which started in West Bengal with a few Santhal dance steps, one morning of August 2008, in the village of Borotalpada.

En 2018, **TRIMUKHI PLATFORM** fête ses dix ans. À cette occasion, la revue **FABRIQUE DE L'ART** (dans un numéro baptisé *3/4* car, passer à la dizaine, c'est passer à deux chiffres) rassemble des analyses, des témoignages des conversations, des réflexions, des images rendant compte de cette aventure singulière et joyeuse qui débuta au Bengale Occidental par quelques pas de danse, un matin d'août 2008, dans le village tribal de Borotalpada.

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conversation after the night
wine-inspired thinking

On March 16 2016, at the Alliance Française du Bengale, Samantak Das was invited by Jean-Frédéric Chevallier to share his thought after Trimukhi Platform's performances in Borotalpada village and at Jadavpur University. To stimulate the brain activity that evening, wine was offered to all by the Consulate General of France in Kolkata.

Normally when I am invited somewhere, I thank them, but I can tell the Director of the Alliance Française and the French Consul General that they should be very grateful that they are hosting this event because I am absolutely certain that, when the history of 21st century theatre is written, this man [indicating Jean-Frédéric Chevallier] will be there. And I will tell you why.

As you know, I am an academic, I am paid to analyse things. I met Jean-Frédéric Chevallier eight years ago shortly after he'd arrived in India. My first thought was: "*What is this white guy doing in India?*" You know, is he going to turn out to be another fellow who goes to villages or, you know, who works with so-called "traditional" people? Just how bad is he going to be? That was my first thought. I am very suspicious of people who come to our country. Do pardon me for saying this!

And then somehow we became kind of friends and he and I decided we should have a performance in Jadavpur University, where I work. And so, naturally, I asked him, "*What kind of stage do you need?*" And he said, "*I don't need a stage.*" "*What sorts of light do you need?*" And he said: "*I don't need lights.*" "*What kind of sound equipment do you need?*" "*I do not need sound equipment*", he said. [Laughter] And I said, "*Are you bloody doing theatre or something else, man?!*" And then there was this extraordinary performance, *Monsoon Night Dream*, which took place in the corridors of the university and it involved people who are not middle-class, not English-educated or Western-educated like you or me: they were very obviously from villages but not defensive about their origins when coming to this important and well-known institution. And they told a story which you could interpret in many ways – I am not even sure it was a story – but those images from eight years ago still come back to haunt me.¹

And I said to myself, "*Ok, here's this man and somehow he knows how to touch you and he does it without doing any of the obvious things when you think of French avant-garde, European avant-garde.*" So much of what they do is about *épater les bourgeois*, you know, shocking the bourgeois, doing something unexpected, spilling blood on stage, the theatre of cruelty, showing naked bodies.... He does none of that and yet you feel a connection with what he is doing. Amazing! Just amazing!

If I have a bone to pick with Himel's work [the short documentary on the dry rehearsal for NIGHT OF THEATRE n°9, screened before this conversation was directed by Nazmus Sakib Himel], it is that what you

showed, Himel, was maybe a tenth or less of what actually took place. Because Trimukhi Platform's theatre actually begins from the time you approach the village and there is this very gentle kind of ritual involving the villagers. They are dressed in traditional Santhal dress. They come to you and you sit down and they ask you to take your shoes off and they wash your feet and they anoint your feet with oil and they welcome you. And this is such a strange thing for someone like me that I initially said to Jean-Frédéric Chevallier that I am not going to do this, I don't want somebody to touch my feet. Jean-Frédéric said, "*Come on, do it*", so I thought, "*Ok, fine, for you I will do it*", and I did it.²

And the other thing which is completely missing [from the video documentary screened before] and I am sure Himel will introduce it later, is the use of traditional Santhal performance, with the thirty-forty performers who were there doing this dance. If you ask me what I thought at that time, if I had to choose a single word to sum up Jean-Frédéric's work, it would be a very old-fashioned word which we are not supposed to use nowadays and that word is "Love". It is love in the sense of a love for humanity and he shows it by doing the most bizarre things. He will go to a place like Jadavpur University where everybody speaks English and Bengali and he will do a play in Santhali which nobody understands and he provides no explanations: he doesn't give you a note, he doesn't give you a translation, he doesn't tell you what is going to happen. He just does it and he goes away or he sits down to talk with you and yet you are able to understand what is happening.

In this performance that we saw at Borotalpada, there were at least four languages being used: French, Spanish, English, Bengali and Santhali, actually five languages that were used.³ And none of them, none of these were translated from the other and yet you didn't feel that you weren't comprehending it. What did I feel? I missed my son and my wife who were not there. My two daughters came with me but not my wife and son. And I had an argument with my wife before going and throughout I kept thinking, you know, this is something that I should be sharing with her, this is something that she

¹ You may watch the full performance at <<https://youtu.be/q3GyETmvHdg>>. More information: <trimukhiplatform.org/monsoonnightdream/>.

² You may watch an extract at <<https://youtu.be/vqplj0mAuK4>>. More information: <trimukhiplatform.org/ifeachdayiloveyoumoreonedaywilliexplode/>.

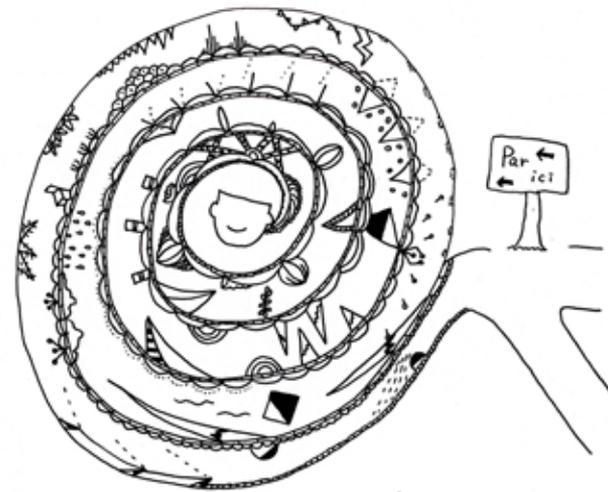
³ You may watch an extract at <<https://youtu.be/8ukE83XidY>>. More information: <trimukhiplatform.org/essayonseasonalvariationinsanthalsociety/>.

should be seeing too because so much of it has to do with the kinds of things that we discuss...

Jean-Frédéric does it by using extremely avant-garde techniques in the middle of this village where there are no properly metalled roads, working with exceptionally poor people. And yet there is no sense of patronizing: I don't feel as if he is there to help them or somehow is this great white saviour who's teaching them about theatre. You never get that sense, to me it is... it has been the most extraordinary theatrical experience that I have ever had anywhere. And that he is saying something and the way in which he is able to build connections, that makes it really special. I already knew he was able to build connections between human beings but the other thing which I saw is this ability to make connections between our human selves and nature.

He uses also a kind of "Landscape Theatre", where we were taken through the field in utter darkness, with a small light showing the way. And then we went near a large water body, which wasn't really a pond, and some of his theatre troupe members went into it. And in another place there are images of us, the spectators, taken during the performance, projected onto the trunk of a tree... In a third spot, there is this depression in the ground and a fire is lit... In every instance I felt that things had happened too fast, I wanted it to take more time, I wanted that sense to sink in because being a person from a city, just to see the stars is an extraordinary feeling because you can't see the stars like that in Kolkata: here, you look up at the sky and it's pitch black and the stars are clearly outlined against the sky and you look around you and there is no ambient light – but you never are away from ambient light in Kolkata or any other small or big town – and yet you look around and it's pitch black and every small pinpoint of light, every torch light that is shone, kind of creates a strange sensation in you. The one thing which I told Jean-Frédéric was that it should have been slower, we should have had more time to let that whole thing sink in... so, basically what I'm saying is... for those of you who haven't experienced this theatre, please do.

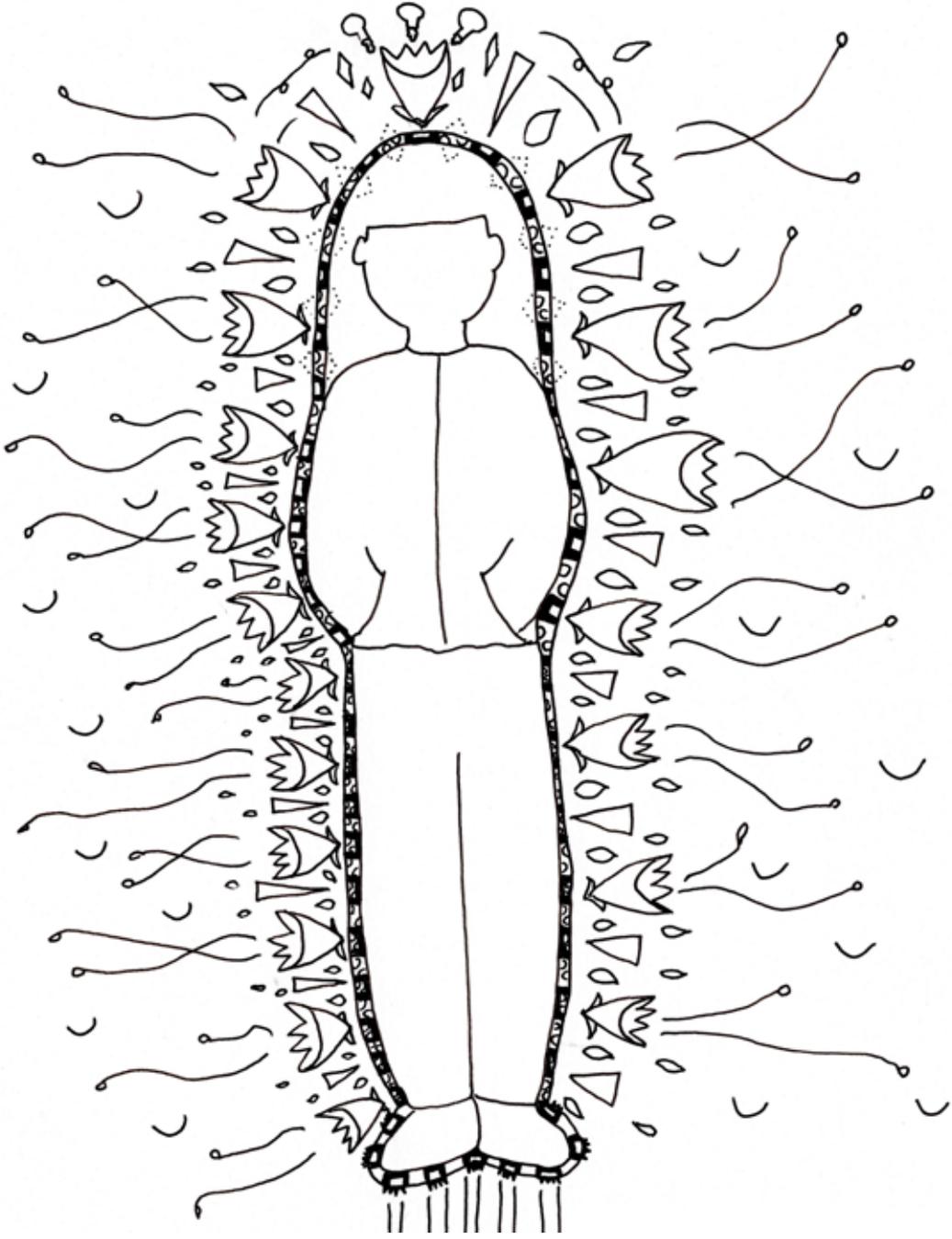
At a time when art has become yet another item of consumption, I think Jean-Frederic Chevallier, along with the members of his troupe Trimukhi Platform and his wife Sukla, is doing something quite extraordinary. He is asking us to examine our human selves – not intellectually but to feel what it is to be human and what it is to connect with other human beings in a non-exploitative way, in a non-sensationalist way, which is the most difficult thing to do. One final thing which I have to say to you because I am familiar with his earlier work – this is the third piece by Jean-Frederic that I have seen, the first one was the one he did in Jadavpur University in 2008, or perhaps in January 2009, and the second was something we did about a month ago, also in January 2016 – is that this is the only one which kind of had a story. The story was extremely tragic about this orphan girl, a Santhal girl, who kills herself, but even when Jean-Frédéric doesn't have a story, when he doesn't have a narrative, he is able to create these connections between apparently dissimilar groups of people: between people from the city and the village, between poor and rich, Santhali-speaking and Bangali-speaking, Europeans, South Americans, Indians, in this landscape which he is able to, to... control with a kind of mastery and a lightness of touch which is extremely rare.



So I will end by saying to the Alliance Française du Bengale that you are privileged to be hosting a man like Jean-Fré and I don't say it because he is a friend of mine... I am speaking as an academic who knows a little bit at least about theatre and the arts.

As I said to begin with it, I was extremely suspicious, I was extremely suspicious... of who Jean-Fré, Jean... I did not call him Jean-Fré then, who Jean-Frédéric Chevallier was. What is he doing here, is he yet another white guy who's come here to stake out a little bit of India for himself? You know, why is he bringing these Santhals here? Is he a missionary, is he trying to convert them? All of these sorts of suspicious things that we have learnt thanks to, you know, our training because [looking at Subhajit Bagchi who spoke before] he is also from Jadavpur University, from the same department actually... I.. I was thinking these things and yet there was a kind of honesty and openness about Jean-Fré which attracted me to him right from the first day that we met in the room of the Head of the Department of English. And well,... I said "Ok, let's see, let's see what he is going to do".

And when he brought these people in, they were obviously villagers, and they were not the sorts of villagers you see around, say, Shantiniketan, who have mixed a lot with city folks. These people really haven't interacted with city people at all, virtually none. And certainly not from Kolkata. They are not sophisticated, they are not, you know, "educated" in the sort of way in which we are. And yet they perform this extraordinary piece of theatre... I still remember one scene. First of all, the lights he uses are ordinary torches, and Jean-Fré said "*Turn off the lights in the corridor, I am going to use the torches*" and I thought: "*Who the hell uses torches?*" And there is no use of makeup, there was no music as such, and the whole thing unfolded very gently, and he was using traditional things, you saw some of that, you know... the bamboo ladder, and he used a Khatia (string bed) and in one scene he had someone wrapped in cloth, wrapped very gently, with great care... you know and these torches shone and the unwrapping and the going away, and we were kind of left wondering what is happening but the predominant emotion was, "*Yes I get it !*" He is like me or she is like me, that kind of connection which is so rare. Because either you are overwhelmed with spectacle – that's one possibility, you know... There's lots of noise, sort of like watching *Avatar* or *Titanic*



or you know, whatever... *The Revenant*, a spectacle... or you do something so strange and so esoteric that it's like a crossword puzzle that you have to solve, you know ok, so this is what is happening and then you think ok, this is what Grotowski said, and this is what Peter Brook said, and then the *Natya Shastra* says this and all of your intellectual stuff, and this is what Victor Turner spoke of in *From Ritual to Theatre*... But Jean-Fré was doing neither: he was neither presenting a spectacle nor was he trying to shock me nor was he giving me a puzzle which I had to decode.

Jean-Fré's work is, at one and the same time, entirely superficial, in the sense that it is all surface, what you see is what you get, but also profoundly deep because of the sort of thoughts generated...

[turning to Subhajit Bagchi] Why did you want to go back and talk to these people? It is not because you are a journalist only. Is it because, to some extent, you want to find out about these rather different human beings? – and that is so difficult to do because, with heritage tourism or tribal tourism, you're taken, people like you and I, English-speaking, Western-educated, Jadavpur University *te parasona korechhi* (studied in Jadavpur University), we are taken there to say: "*Oh... these are the nice tribals, they do this, they do this kind of dance*", you know, what you found even in Satyajit Ray's film *Aguntuk*, you know as spectacle which is to see from the outside but you didn't perceive it like that, did you? You saw these people who are about as different from you as it is possible to be: they don't look like you, they don't share the same religious beliefs, they don't have the same culture, they don't even speak the same language. And yet here you are an experienced journalist, who wants to go back and find out perhaps their human essence. How did that happen? [indicating Jean-Frédéric] That happened because of what this man did. And I think that's a remarkable achievement.



Seeing it in Jadavpur University was very interesting, because the audience was made up of sort of jaded, cynical, know-it-all, been-there-done-that Jadavpur students, you know, and you had eight young Santhal boys and girls – they can't be called men and women – who are doing these very strange things, like climbing onto trees.

I mean, when I asked Jean-Fré [laughing] what do you want, he said "*I want a tree*", I said [laughing], "*Come on Jean-Fré this...*" [giggles], "*so I will perform any way but there has to be a tree*". "*Ok, fine*", [laughter] we found a tree for him, *Milander canteen er okhane* – there, next to Milan's canteen. And they climbed up the tree, they put on sunglasses, and then came to the students in front of the Subarna Jayanti Bhavan, with all these posters and political slogans you have on those walls, and said something in Santhali – I still don't know what – and there were images video projected, and the whole thing was a kind of surreal and yet strangely human experience at the same time.⁴ You know, Sujata, my wife, she was... she was there watching the... the show with me and at the end of it we were all invited to dance, like you were in the *Night of Theatre* in the village. So, you know, we matched steps badly with these extremely... hmm... wonderful Santhal dancers!

I will tell you what it was like to see it in Jadavpur, I will give you the story... When we were going to Howrah station, the one thing that was in my mind was "*I have to buy a box of sweets for the young performers*" because these kids were so lovely and I never really got a chance to thank them, so I actually bought a big packet of sweets... of eclairs... and I took it to Borotalpata and I gave it to Jean-Fré and said, "*You give it to them*" and of course he... Jean-Fré being Jean-Fré, he said, "*na.. na you give it to them*" so when we were first introduced, I handed over this box of eclairs to them. So that's ... that's how it felt, I mean you could ask Sujata what she felt when she... she saw this production because she doesn't know Jean-Fré. I mean I'm biased because he is a friend. But yeah... that's what it was like, for me.

⁴ You may watch extracts of the performance in Kolkata at < <https://youtu.be/Z3qqCtwjkk>>. See also: < trimukhiplatform.org/bachchaderexperimentum/>.

I am just trying to sort of decode what he said in terms of his ability... that one has to build bridges. Even in the e-mail in which he said we are going to be talking about the *Night of Theatre* and then there will be wine, you know, and I think that is part of what he does. I mean, have you heard of anybody else who highlights the fact that there will be wine? And the wine has to be served first and that everybody should drink...? This is his ability to create, to turn the mundane into the ritualistic, so you will all go back and you will remember ok, this is the one instance when we came to the Alliance Francaise and before anything else happened we were served wine and we had the wine and we had a good time, and somewhere in the drinking of the wine, and I don't mean it in a Christian way, we all somehow become part of one celebration. That's your genius, Jean-Fré!



And you remember, Himel, that there was this gentleman who came from Kolkata, the architect, who said that you can't have more than three or four people jumping on the stage but then [indicating a young lady in the audience] you said (because you were there too) that the whole point is that there shouldn't be few of them... there should be many more. You know, there's one scene in which the stage – [showing with hands] which is about this high, in fact almost exactly this high... – it's made of mud and people run in and jump on to the stage and there's one... two... three... four... five... six... seven... eight and this keeps happening and this gentleman said no you've done it and you've shown us there's six or seven and that's enough but then she made the point that the whole point of the exercise was that it would go on... for a long time and I think that matches with your sense of being, of it being sort of meditative, calming, slowed down, what I would call from my unfortunate training as an academic, a kind of meditative, ritualistic practice, no hurry, and that is also the reason why I felt that when we were walking doing the landscape theatre, somewhere you were not being true to yourself, because it was too fast.

[answering someone in the audience] You know when you went there and you screened the film and you did not screen a commercial movie, you did not screen a love story, you screened something which is actually fairly intellectual and avant-garde... I think that is one of the very important things that Jean-Fré has done, which is to show you that apparently "backward" people can have this extraordinarily sophisticated response. And I think that's a slap in the face for so many of us in the city who think "*Oh... they don't get enough to eat, so our first task is to provide them with a good school, preferably English medium, our second task is to provide them with life skills and skill-sets*", which is the way which unfortunately our central government is doing. And... and to go there and to say "*I'm going to do this extraordinarily avant-garde stuff*", we've got video projection, I've got, you know, the Spanish language, I've got English and I can tell you, sir, from my own experience with the villagers because some of them were very happy to see me... because they were seeing me after eight years and one of them has gone bald and he's got two children, and he told me, "*You look old*", and I said, "*Yes of course I have grown old and you've grown bald*", [with laughter] and you know we were chatting with him and so on and so forth... everybody understood what was happening, everyone. There was no question of not understanding, or saying that this is something that the babus have got from the city... And one word that you used I think in a sense sums up Jean-Fré's method of working: "democratic". There was a Russian lady who was with us and she was telling me, "*Why does Chevallier want to have a discussion now? Our director is a dictator, he just decides what is to be done and he goes and does it!*" But then after the discussion, she said, "*Now I understand, he really wants to know what other people think.*" I think again that is a very difficult thing to do.

Samantak Das's biographical note can be found on page 55.

Born in Japan in 1980 and now living in Belgium, **Ikuo Nakagawa** studied dance at Osaka University of Arts, then continued her training at the Choreographic Development Center of Toulouse in France. For *Night of Theatre n°10 • La Nuit des idées*, she presented two pieces: a solo of her own, and a trio with the Trimukhi Platform team. She also composed, with Jean-Frédéric Chevallier, a dance intervention during the reading of his philosophical capsule (see p. 70). Although she has always sketched, it is since she became pregnant with her second child that she has started developing her drawing more seriously, as a way to visualise her feelings. The drawings reproduced on pages 94 and 96 were made during her stay in Borotalpada in January 2018.



- 2008 | Borotalpada village
First assembly meeting
Monsoon Night Dream (theatre of presenting)
- 2009 | Ahmedabad DARPANA ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS
Drowning Princess (film-essay)
 Calcutta EASTERN ZONAL CULTURAL CENTRE + JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
Monsoon Night Dream (theatre of presenting)
 Mexico city MEXICAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY (UNAM)
Drowning Princess (film-essay)
- 2010 | Bogota TEATRO OCCIDENTE + ADRA + COLOMBIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
Drowning Princess (film-essay)
 Borotalpada village
An assembly takes the decision of building Trimukhi Cultural Centre (= TCC)
- 2011 | Calcutta MACE
International Internal Trimukhi Platform Seminar: the 5 Faces of Trimukhi
 Borotalpada village
Starting of the construction of Trimukhi Cultural Centre (= TCC)
 Calcutta MACE + ON THE FOOTPATHS
Light e³ Sight n°1 (creative photography workshop)
- 2012 | Borotalpada TCC
Light e³ Sight n°1 (creative photography workshop)
Night of Theatre n°5 (France, India, Mexico):
Guignol's दल (theatre of presenting)
 Paris STUDIO DUPLEIX
What Does To Build Mean? (film-essay)
 Calcutta INDIAN COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL RELATIONS
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Building Relations in a Space of Diversity
 Guayaquil NATIONAL PERFORMING ARTS INSTITUTE OF ECUADOR
What Does To Build Mean? (film-essay)
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Transdisciplinarity in Arts and Social Diversity
 Borotalpada GOVERNMENT PRIMARY SCHOOL
Creatures of Flesh e³ Paper n°1 (double workshop)
- 2013 | Borotalpada TCC
Light e³ Sight n°2 (creative photography workshop)
Night of Theatre n°6 (France, India, Mexico, Ecuador):
The Thing that Exists When We Aren't There (theatre of presenting)
What Does To Build Mean? (film-essay)
- 2014 | Borotalpada TCC
Night of Theatre n°7 (France, India, Mexico, Colombia):
Per Ruptam Silvam (theatre of presenting)
Crash Courses in Arts Production n°1
 La Habana CASA DE LAS AMÉRICAS + FRENCH EMBASSY IN CUBA
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Contemporary Arts and Community Dynamics
 Borotalpada TCC
Crash Courses in Arts Production n°2
- 2015 | Borotalpada TCC
Night of Theatre n°8 (France, India, Mexico, Colombia):
Bachbader Experimentum (theatre of presenting)
Pollir Shobdo Remix x 2 (sound installation)
 Calcutta JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Contemporary Theatre... What It Is?
 Calcutta GOETHE INSTITUTE
Drowning Princess (film-essay)
 Borotalpada TCC
Crash Courses in Arts Production n°3

- Worldwide ONLINE
Visions of the land in India and elsewhere (online workshop)
- Borotalpada TCC
Crash Courses in Arts Production n°4
Bachchader Experimentum (theatre of presenting)
Pollir Shobdo Remix (sound installation)
- 2016 | Calcutta JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY + MODERN HIGH SCHOOL FOR GIRLS + MINTO PARK + BANGUR PARK + MAGIC HOUR GARDEN
Bachchader Experimentum (theatre of presenting)
- Borotalpada TCC
If Each Day I Love You More, One Day Will I Explode? (sound installation)
Essay on Seasonal Variation in Santhal Society (theatre of presenting)
Try Me Under Water (night wandering)
- Calcutta JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Fabricating Texts for Theatre from a Santhal Village
- A Coruña THEATRE ROSALÍA CASTRO + SPANISH MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND CULTURE
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Contemporary Theatre Practices and Tribal Community Practices
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