

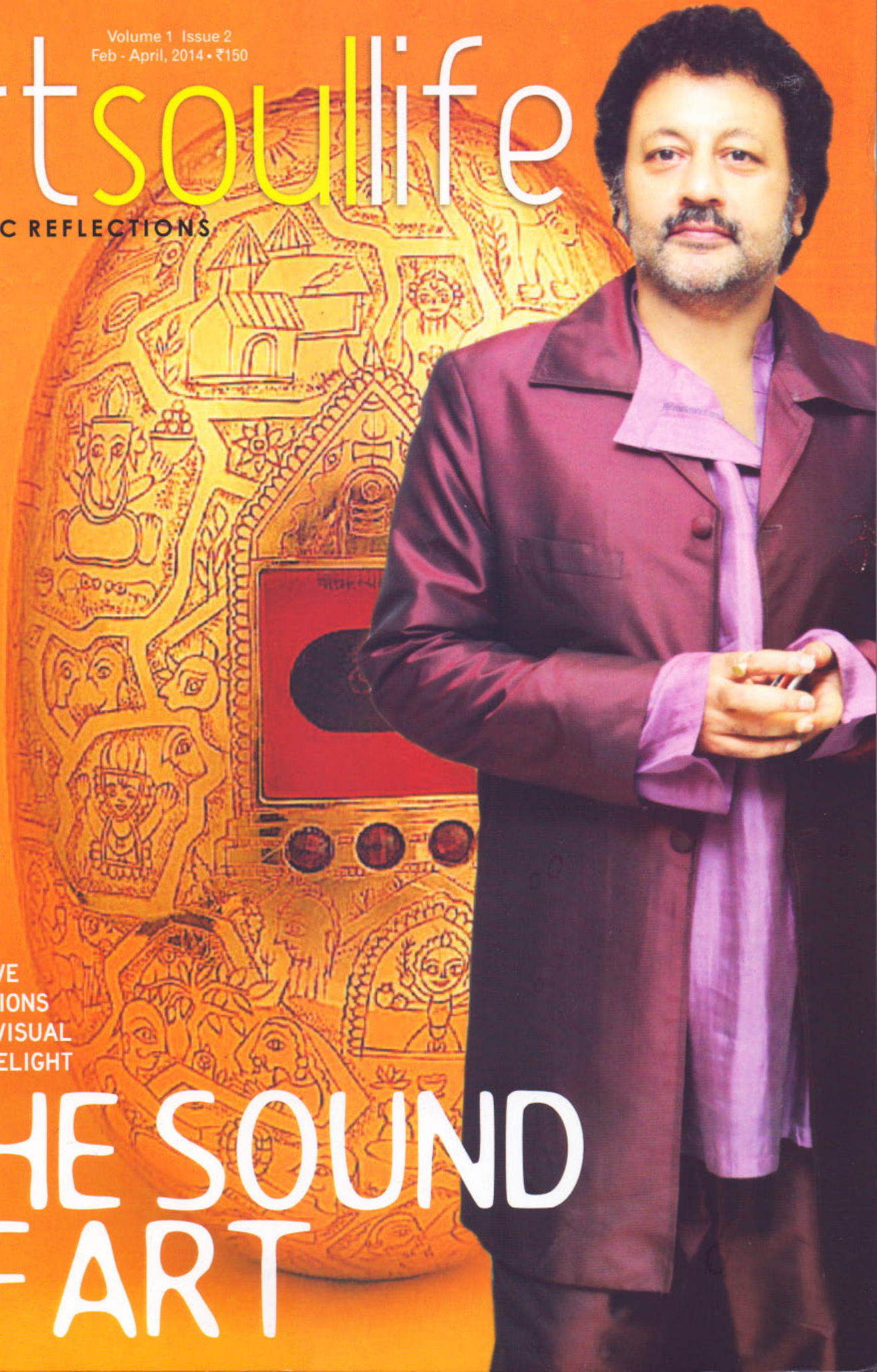
Volume 1 Issue 2  
Feb - April, 2014 • ₹150

# artsoullife

AESTHETIC REFLECTIONS

IMMENSELY  
CREATIVE,  
RANJIT  
MAKKUNI'S  
INTERACTIVE  
INSTALLATIONS  
ARE BOTH VISUAL  
& AURAL DELIGHT

# THE SOUND OF ART



**NOW HEAR THIS:**

# THE SOUND OF ART

India's best-known multimedia artist and designer of sophisticated interactive installations, Ranjit Makkuni wants to bring the art browsing experience to the social media platform by exploring new ways of collaborative sharing

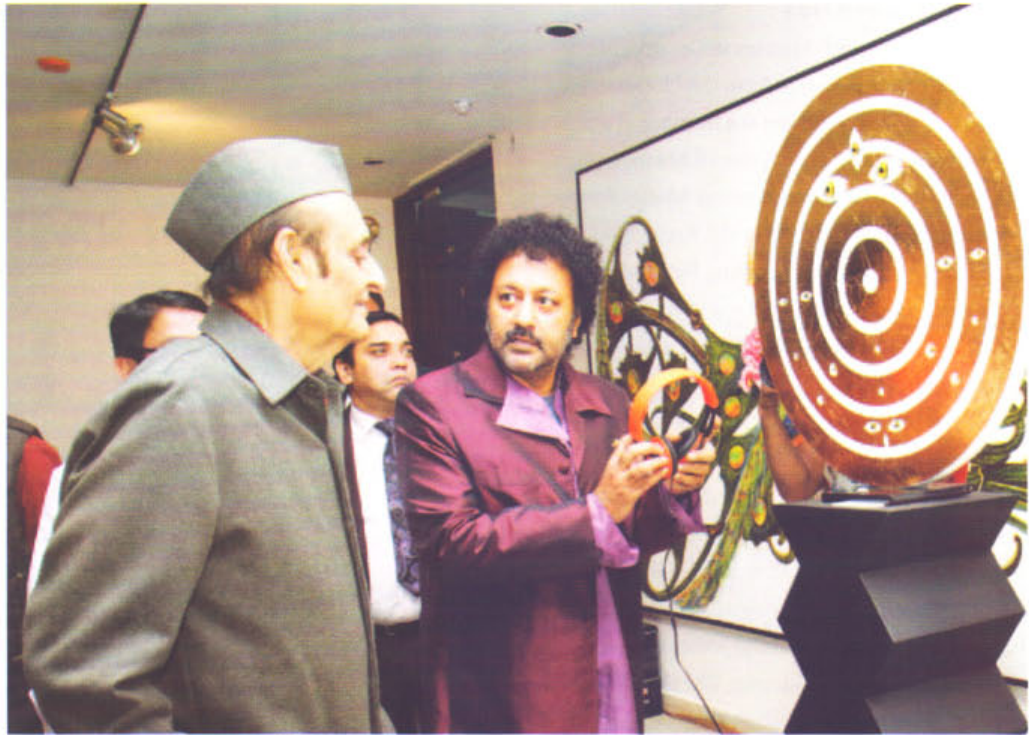


Inviting museumgoers to use their ears as well as eyes is becoming increasingly common at arts institutions around the world. In November last year, the National Museum in New Delhi opened “Musical Landscapes and the Goddesses of Music,” an exhibition intended to introduce “sound art” to a new generation of viewers and listeners. The artworks, which were on exhibit through January 15, 2014, were not just sculptures or paintings, but musical installations! A mesmerizing sound-art event, visitors were encouraged to walk among them and hear the musical performances, Buddhist chants, shlokas etc., or step back and listen to the total choral effect. Besides exploring the science, art and spirituality of music and its reflections in the Goddess images across Asian cultures, the exhibition by Ranjit Makkuni established a fine connect between traditional musical instruments and technological changes. Making innovative use of the traditional sitar and other instruments based on Myanmar saung harp, Thai xylophone, Korean kayagum, Chinese guzheng and pipa, Vietnamese dan tranh, Japanese and Balinese gamelan, Makkuni tried to bridge the gap between the traditional and the modern. In a heart-to-heart with Karan Verma, the multi-talented Makkuni explains: “With the help of technology, we created music and notes using traditional instruments to make it interesting for the youngsters. Through the use of these musical instruments, I wanted to remind people that at a time when technology is changing fast, our traditional music and instruments have survived the test of time.”

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

An IIT-K graduate with Masters in Design Theory and Computer-aided Design from the University of California, Ranjit Makkuni is a member of the mentoring group of Nehru Memorial Museum, New Delhi, constituted by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. He gave up the top job at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Centre, US, after working for 17 years to set up a design think-tank - Sacred World Research Laboratory, in New Delhi. "It explores technology and design innovation created by building bridges between techno-and traditional cultures," he informs. Through direct engagement with traditional arts, the Sacred World develops a voice for the preservation of hand skills and 'heart' based creativity, which is the substratum of traditional arts and crafts. He has several museum projects to his credit, like Eternal Gandhi Multimedia Museum; Planet Health Museum; The Goddess and Temples of Music; The Crossing: Living, Dying and Transformation in Banaras; and Musical Landscapes and the Goddesses of Music, which was recently held at National Museum, New Delhi.





Makkuni explains to Dr Karan Singh how the form of the Goddess and her ornaments are interpreted as music. Touching the eyes in the sculpture play back melodies.

Firstly, someone called you a sitar player; a cyber guru; a computer designer; a multimedia expert etc. But how do you describe yourself?

Well, I could be a real lifelong student who hasn't declared his major yet! I love many fields, and once a learning curve is crossed, I love to be engaged in it. In all our multimedia projects, a common thread has been spirituality. Even as Big Science has advanced to explaining most physical forces, a large set of unknown, spiritual forces remain; and the Arts, Yoga and Meditation are vehicles for people to interact with spiritual forces.

Just like Palo Alto has been home to media giants like Google and Facebook. India could become a generator of innovations and new forms if our development planners invested in the creative class of people.

You went to IIT to study architecture. How did you first come to be interested in art? Did your parents take you to museums when you were a kid?

Yes, my dad was a patron of Kathakali and I got to witness and take part in many traditional, ritual dances of Kerala in the theater of temple courtyards, rice fields, groves; and these I guess made an impression on me.

Can you describe your creative process, what inspires you?

In each of my projects, I reinvent a language appropriate to the domain. I've been fortunate that I've been able to work on the sacred arts from the 1980s till now, with the Electronic Sketch book of Thangka painting in the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, to *The Crossing: Living, Dying and Transformation* in Banaras, to the *Eternal Gandhi Multimedia Museum*, to the *Green Consciousness and Planet Health*, and to the *Goddess*. Each project occurs in a historical time, where we push the limits of a technology/a media /an artistic genre suited to that moment. Our Banaras project in 1999 anticipated most of the mobile computing methodologies that are current today; the *Eternal Gandhi multimedia museum* explored the inclusion of notion of village materials and creativity in culture conscious product design, and with the *Musical Landscapes*, the project allowed a rediscovery of the value of music, its perception and musical experience in a world enveloped by unabated technological change.

Looking at your work at the National Museum, New Delhi, one first interprets it as a way to put voice to technology! It was like imagine, if technology had a voice, it would be something like what you're hearing now. It was only later that you realise it's a chance to enter the world of Asian music through electronic installations, digital images and

recordings of performances by maestros. Please explain. There are many layers to the project. At a technology level, musical instruments engage people's bodies, breath, voice, gestures and percussive activity. Our computing interfaces are still based on glass screens and button based, and musical instruments inspire the field to think of new ways of interacting with digital representations and new media. At the interaction level, there are so many diverse interactions between people and with musical instruments that engage the body. At the cultural unity level, the project explores spread of ideas and forms of India and China across East and South East Asia.

At Goddess level, this exhibition is one of the first explorations into finding a connection between Sound and the Goddess' form. At a societal level, musicians' brains are hardwired for lateral thinking; hence, investment in musicians can create the foundations of productive creative economies, much like Palo Alto has been the home to media giants, like Google, Facebook etc. So if our development planners invested in the creative class of people, India could become a generator of innovations and new forms and this could create economic growth.

Does it matter if quite a number of people have no idea whatsoever that they're actually looking at art? We all need to start somewhere, and the project speaks simultaneously at the visual, sculptural, musical, technological and cultural levels, and it doesn't matter which level one accesses an installation first as the next levels would naturally follow.

You've done some interesting stuff like develop wearable jackets that acted like iPod, or imagine shawls that could utter mantras when draped. Have you been in touch with corporations that were interested in or shared your ideas to develop these on a mass scale?

Since I spent 20 years at Xerox PARC (Palo Alto Research Center, which has a record of pioneering most of the innovations in computing we take for granted today), I had been trained from a young age into focusing on innovation and being at the edge of a field, and having discovered the edge, to move on. Unfortunately, I have in the pursuit of the new, traded off the constant 'rediscovery of the new' for the discipline of patiently developing a set of ideas and translating them into engineered, commercially sustainable products.

You've learnt sitar from Ustad Ali Akbar Khan. Was it purely your love for Indian classic music, or because you wanted to explore the intersection of music and spirituality? I learned from a musician's musician, and Khan Sahib's approach was exploration into divinity of sound and pitch. I had played guitar before, and was pretty happy with myself till my world was



Trees are concentrations of dense sound of crickets, birds, insects and the plants. Leaves and birds complete the composition.

shattered after I encountered Khan Sahib, and had to learn all over again all the notes and srutis one by one.

How do you decide the topic and subject of your exhibition or installation?

I don't believe I decide anything. Issues and opportunities circumscribe and shape your reality, and each project has its set of languages and communities one gets to discover.

What is the rough process of your work from the early stages of its conception to the final realisation of an installation or exhibition?

Fundamentally, there is a focus on the argument for source



Placing coins in the bowl creates celestial compositions incorporating the rolling coin inside the bowl.



This installation explores musical correspondences between Yogi's Chakras and musical notes. Touching on the Chakras play back corresponding musical notes.

“Even as Big Science has advanced to explaining most physical forces, a large set of unknown, spiritual forces remain. The Arts, Yoga and Meditation are vehicles for people to interact with spiritual forces.”

ideas as to why should the idea exist? And the process is about ensuing that the pursuit of the idea is different than anything that has been done before - whether artistically, sculpturally, technologically, or musically. So the process is about rigorously challenging an initial set of ideas and forms and getting these forms transformed into something that is totally new.

How do your projects allow for the participation of diverse viewpoints of people whose skills face the threat of extinction? Give us some examples.

Starting from my works on Banaras and Gandhi, I made it a priority to use natural materials and hand crafted carvings to the extent possible. The traditions of wood carving, certain lacquering techniques are facing extinction; and my works have allowed certain village communities and practitioners to continue to sustain their expertise.

If someone needed a buy a Makkuni signature to remember you by, what would that be?

All my projects have a recurrence of the egg form, or the form of a standing man; and these could be signature forms.

What has been the biggest challenge you've faced?

When I stayed back in India after 9/11, having spent 20 years at Xerox PARC, to restart design innovation research in India and South East Asia, we needed to prove that world-class innovation in design and technology operating from India and S-E Asia as a base.

How long had you been working on Musical Landscapes & the Goddess of Music: Recent Advances in Interactive Art?

I have been a musician forever and a Goddess devotee forever, but although we shot films of many Asian maestros and their stringed instruments in 2006, I resurrected the project in 2012 and 2013 and focused on the completion of a project that theoretically has no end.



The minarets allow visitors to play back passages of music transforming the sculpture into a musical instrument of Gamelan orchestral music of Java. Different minarets present different passages of Gamelan instruments and voices, and users events trigger off the play back of the selected instruments or voice which seamlessly fit on to the ongoing rhythms.

“Like open source programming in programming development. I hope our museums will become open sources of ‘play’ and ‘innovation’ and move from their role as guardians of ancient artifacts to exploring connections between the past and the future.”

The idea behind the exhibition was to create interest in our classical musical forms among the young generation. So you think National Museum in Delhi was the right choice? New ideas are blowing into the National Museum. The notion of a museum will move from the current notion of a house for the display of artifacts to a space for the experience of art ‘process’, and, ultimately the museum. Like open source programming in programming development, it will I hope become an open source of ‘play’ and ‘innovation’ and move from its role as guardian of ancient artifacts to exploring connections between the past and the future.

What are your plans for the future? Are you working on any new projects?

Yes, there are many things. I am working on bringing the art browsing experience to the social media platform and exploring new ways of collaborative sharing of art, and making the forms available in day to day media interactions. I am working on understanding the proto Shiva image, Tree and Goddess worship



Embedded in the waist of the sculpture is a representation of the Sri Yantra, which, upon touch plays back the 1000 names of the Goddess, Lalita - the Lalita Sahasranama.

in Indus’ tablets, and understanding the state of deciphering of the Indus script. I am interested in neuro-biology and in the mind and how do the representations of the ‘future’ and ‘intuition’ exist in a field whose primary representation is those of past memories. And many more...