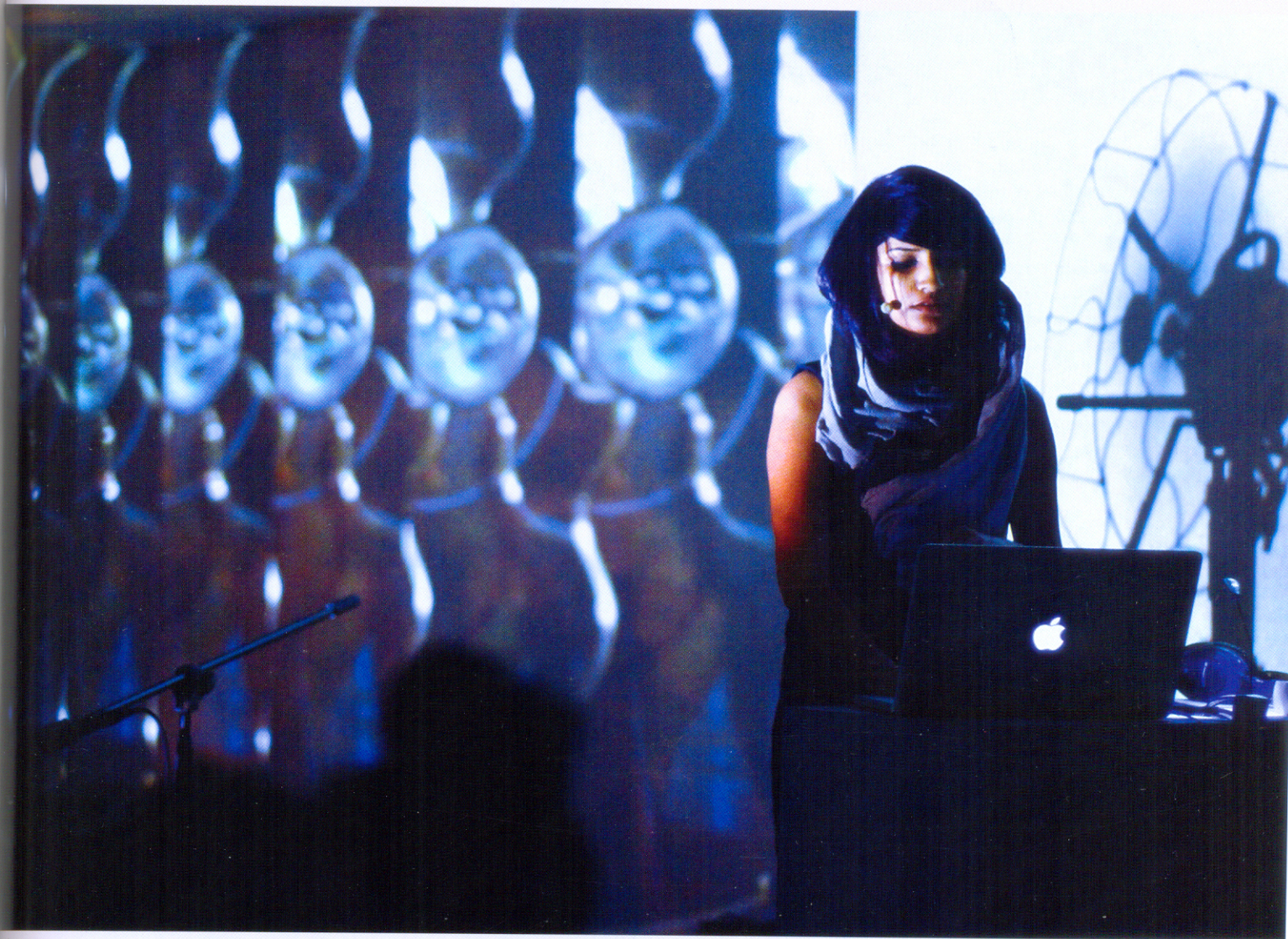


ODE TO THE WHIRRING FAN

Machines and movements coupled with their sounds allow Surabhi Saraf a window into the choreographies of everyday life, claims **Sandhya Bordewekar**.



Surabhi Saraf. *Spinning Four*. Audio-visual performance. Live at Goethe Institut, Mumbai. 2013. Photograph by Ajay Koli.

Surabhi Saraf studied Painting at Baroda (2005) and Art and Technology at the Art Institute of Chicago (2009). She is also a trained classical Hindustani vocalist. Saraf brings it all together – visual images, experimental and classical sounds, technology and choreography – to create video and performance works that have won her a bouquet of international awards over the last few years (Eureka Fellowship 2015; Nomination for SECA Award at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art 2014; Winner, Experimental Film Category at Disposable Film Festival, San Francisco 2012; Winner, Celeste Prize (Video & Animation), Italy 2009; Peers Students Residency at Khoj International, Delhi 2008; Nasreen Mohamedi Award at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda 2006; among others).

Saraf, now living in San Francisco, showed her works – performances and films – in Mumbai and Delhi for the first time in early 2013, including at the India Art Fair. She also presented *Illuminen*, her debut EP recording album produced in 2012, featuring edited and remixed versions of five tracks using audio excerpts from earlier projects. *Illuminen* includes three of Saraf's major, single channel, high definition videos. Most of the tracks were conceptualized as live performances along with field and studio recordings of sounds from everyday life. From frequencies of electro-mechanical vintage fans to sounds of birds and fire, from the patter of grains being scattered into different bowls to pure electronic sine waves and pink noise, Saraf's goal was to weave a tapestry of sounds, layered, multiple and fragmented, creating textures and immersive scapes that reflected her sensibilities.

In visual terms, Saraf uses everyday actions and objects (for instance, the whirring table fan, the act of folding laundry, cutting vegetables), engages with them in repetitive ways and induces a hypnotic experience. The viewer gradually becomes aware of the action/object which otherwise would hardly be worth noticing. In *Spinning Ten*, a video installation (3 minutes, 2012), she uses an oscillating electric table fan whose image is projected on a wall. The noise of the spinning blades increases but the promise of cool breeze from the fan is not realized, creating a kind of mixed response in the viewers. At the same time, the intonations of Saraf's own singing also fade in and out.

In fact, the ubiquitous table fan, a standard fixture in almost any Indian home, was a Saraf favourite in most of the early works. In an interview¹, she has attributed it to a 2006 residency at Khoj Studios, New Delhi. "I was given an empty studio, where all I could hear was the sound of a broken

fan," she said. "I am interested in these percussive rhythms." Saraf recorded the sound and mixed it live for a six-channel, two-hour performance. The fan as a visual image is featured in audio-based interactive or performance installations like *Oscillations*, *Spinning Four* and *Spinning Ten*; there is also the sound of its whirring, live/recorded vocals and sometimes an interplay of light.

Saraf began training as a vocalist from the age of four. "I was thinking music even when I was painting. I am thinking sound when I work now, be it for video, installation or site-specific public performance. Music and sound have always been integral to my life and I feel that almost all my works have a sense of musicality and movement to them ... It was later, when I started bringing vocals into my sound works, that the compositions got more musical"². In *Lullaby Daze*, Saraf layers her voice 1,600 times to create a densely textured soundscape. However, she continues to hold on to her visual strengths in works like *Peel* (2009) and *Fold* (2011), walking the visual-sonic tightrope with confidence – one of the ways she does this is by splitting the screen into a grid and manipulating the timing of the 96 frames such that even a repetitive movement appears mesmerizing.

Saraf's new work *Remedies* (2014), involves a series of multi-channel video installations inspired by her family's pharmaceutical factory in Indore, where she draws parallels between medicine and meditation. She assesses the anatomy of a healing experience as she explores the relationship between the repetitive movements of the factory workers and the motion of the machines. The 3-part series is based on different forms of medicines manufactured at the facility: tablets, capsules and syrups. Sound plays a crucial role in the conceptualization of this project. The initial plan was just to work with the sounds at the factory to create a series of new live performances and an album – these sounds are quite unique and dynamic ranging from those produced by 30-year old machines to those made by very precise state-of-the-art machines. It is sound that ties everything together and contextualises the rather abstract choreographed movements. *Remedies* will travel to India soon and is likely to be featured at the India Art Fair 2015.

End-Notes

1. See: <http://www.timeoutmumbai.net/art/features/sound-cloud>.

2. See: <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/art-in-everyday-sounds/1065880/0>.