Performance Writings #13

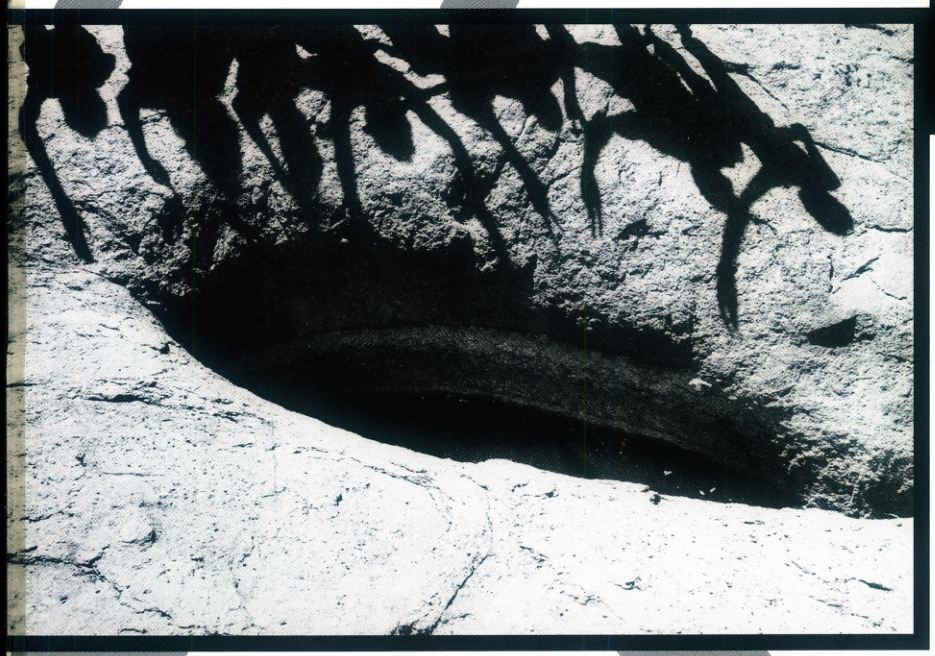
Across Cultures

on Dance

Autumn 1995

Writings on Dance

FRONT COVER: Walking to Wungbari 1986 (detail)
Popeye Tchooga at Wungbari Rockhole. Photographer Jon Rhodes
Reproduced courtesy Popeye Tchooga, Yaruman WA



#13

Performance Across Cultures

WRITINGS ON DANCE 13
PERFORMANCE ACROSS CULTURES

EDITORS / PUBLISHERS
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PREFACE

In this issue the question of categories is raised. Organised thought creates categories and then makes use of them to study the objects that the categories themselves brought into existence. The essays brought together in this volume reflect a prevailing crisis of categories, especially in what Mallika Sarabhai calls 'the white world' (page 66).

Throughout the world, old and established categories are being seriously and deeply challenged by present realities. Nor is there any shortage of new categories to take the place of the old, like the idea of 'multiculturalism' which Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett critically examines here in 'Making Difference: Mapping the Discursive Terrain of Multiculturalism'.

Practices have always defied the categories used to organise them from a distance. The following articles, all in their own ways, reflect an essentially *practical* 'movement across borders', borders that have literally marked out the land, marked time, and divided one thing from another.

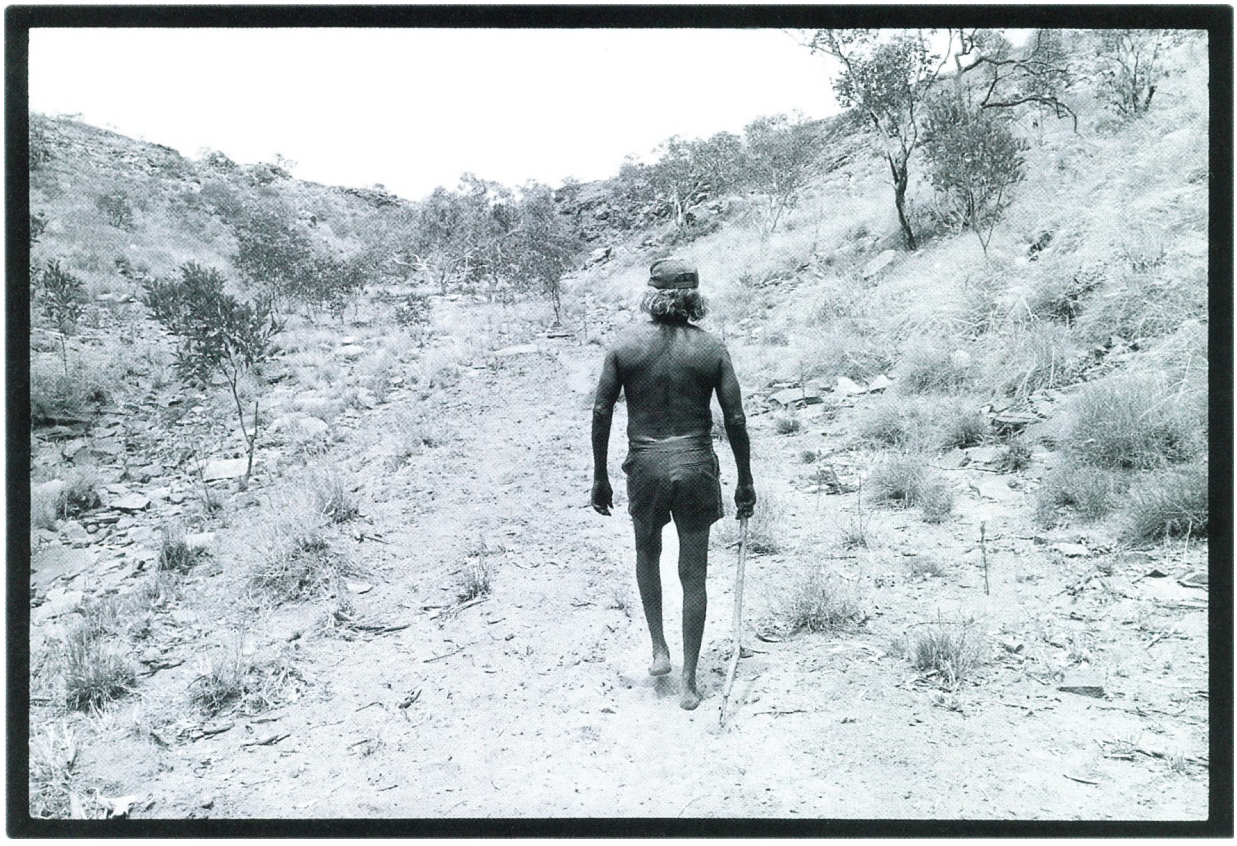
Rachel Fensham, discussing her own theatre work *The Worst Woman in the World*, 'remembers' how the embodied experiences of women one hundred years ago had to be confronted in the bodies of women now.

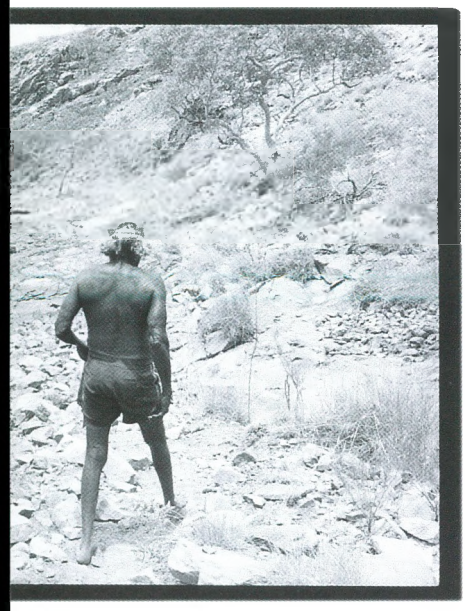
Stephen Muecke reflects on a mode of walking and of the knowledge it suggests in those for whom it is still a meaningful way of traversing 'spaces between'.

Kalpana Ram reviews two performances by the Canberra-based Kailash Dance Company. In doing so she places in question any simple and unproblematic contemporary reception or rendition of Indian classical dance forms. Instead, she suggests, these practices are the complex point of focus for contradiction and the play of competing systems of power and value. They embody a history and a present that are never simple or singular, but always multiple and complex.

Trinh T. Minh-ha's essay 'Painting with Music: A Performance across Cultures' gives us a title for this issue. Drawing on Japanese sources, she outlines an aesthetics within which arrested categories, borders, boundaries, frames of art practice are set vibrating, shimmering, one into and out of the other. She cites a number of (white) artists whose work partakes of this particular vitality, but which does not at the same time *define* it. For, Minh-ha writes, in soliciting new relationships 'a space is opened up, *which will have to remain unoccupied* (emphasis added) despite the many engagements between the dissimilar itineraries that criss-cross it'.

Sally Gardner





Footwalk

Walking to Wunghari 1986
Popeye Tchooga at Wunghari Rockhole
Photographer Jon Rhodes
Reproduced courtesy
Popeye Tchooga, Yaruman WA

Stephen Muecke

I am squatting in my backyard straightening a few nails and thinking about the multiple and beautiful resonances that this activity engenders. Not just the contact of metal, the coordination of hand and eye, the willed and at the same time reflex action of the muscles, the carpenter's ethic of holding the hammer well down the handle so as not to 'choke' it, the skill in producing a well-straightened nail; but also the influence of a father who taught me this technique, brought up as he was in the parsimonious thirties on a sheep farm in the arid Mallee near the Victoria/South Australia border. Strange that then, even nails could be scarce, as settlers strove to build in country through which Aboriginal people still walked.

Strange too that much of the history of Aboriginal life has ignored walking as a basic activity. Walking should also be of general interest. It is as easy to learn and as interesting as language, in fact the acquisition of language comes hot on the heels of learning to walk – and there is the isomorphism of their rhythm and their linear *telos*. Walking was the technology that ***enabled*** later classifications like 'nomadic society' to emerge from the comparative accounts of the anthropologists. There are peoples for whom walking is a way of life, for whom walking might be a mundane, taken-for-granted, or yet even a noble activity. In any case, it is an activity which fundamentally relates the machinery of the body to a country with distances to be crossed. Evolutionist accounts would have us suggest that mountain peoples have short stocky legs, and peoples of the plains have long legs, but we will only think about that briefly in passing.

I tried to teach my friend how to walk, the Aboriginal way. I said, look, you have to take your shoes off, because with your shoes on your soles are too far away from the ground. Your feet have to ***skim*** the surface – no more than a couple of millimetres above the ground. And you have to incline your whole frame a little in advance and as it were to ***fall*** slightly forward. Let your body begin to fall (I hold her, we laugh) and then your first foot swings forward on that falling momentum, then the next. So you are not ***bringing*** your feet forward, not lifting them up and putting them down again, not tramping, nor marching. Marching is a little like the opposite of walking, or its 'fascist' equivalent. With walking your footfalls are light. Your arms hang from relaxed shoulders, you let them swing with whatever movement the rest of your body induces. You don't need your arms to walk, you need your legs and the automatic rhythm that legs and trunk induce. Your might need your arms to carry something whose weight becomes part of that rhythm.

When Aboriginal people walk together they may have to cover quite a distance, and if you look at them they seem to move as one, the idea of 'mob' is invoked. Hardly marching, like a platoon; but rather drifting, like a swarm of bees, or a flock of birds or a school of fish. Who is the leader, does any individual in the group know, since they all seem to know how to move as a group such that no-one falls out?

Contrast the movement of people in a city street. These peoples' trajectories are constrained by the imperatives of the individual motivation over short distances. Or seductive strolling as an apparatus of capture. They bump into one another, they race to be the first off the mark when the lights turn green; they tire easily, they can't gather momentum as a group. They look like Charlie Chaplin with his feet at an obtuse angle, Jacques Tati with his head forward and his bum in the air. They look like models whose 'catwalk' is propelled from the hip. They have the genital rotation enhanced for the general gaze by the mini-skirt and midriff top. Do they have the mincing walk, ram-rod spine, swiveling head, forearm poised like an emu's head, or is that a worn-out cliché? And increasingly rare, the loose-limbed, loose-jointed Australian slouch which really wants to culminate in a *lean*, shoulder against the verandah post of a country pub, one foot crossed over the other, the body inscribing a perfect descending curve in the right angle of the post and floor.

Prints

'A friend always leaves a footprint, this is the teaching of the Aborigines.'

I have quoted these words a number of times before, ever since I first noticed them in the story by David Unaipon that we published in *Paperbark*.[1] Then I used them again in the preface to the new edition of *Wild Cat Falling*, and elaborated there an account of fiction writing as inscription, leaving traces, making the reader want to follow. These words crop up here and there, and will do so again, one place or another. Why shouldn't I quote them again and again, if I like them? I like the repetition. Like walking, it is the same movement, over and over, lively spoken words, put down, lightly, leaving a friendly trace. Then I asked myself what gave one the right to follow, as I heard a story on Aboriginal television:

> Harold also talks about how travellers who come to Alice had to enter through Honeymoon Gap and only when escorted by our elders ... Each person travelling through here had to follow the footprints exactly, each footprint on top of another...[2]

There is a lesson here for thinking about getting to know places, or texts—it's all in the approach. If you want the opinion of the Aboriginal custodians of sites, then you have to observe the protocols. In the observation of following the rules, that is, the footsteps, you can get new insights into places and their meanings.

So that is how I found myself following the Aboriginal writer, David Unaipon writing in the twenties and thirties, not far from where my father was straightening nails: 'A friend will always leave a footprint – this is the teaching of the Aborigines.' So if Aboriginal people sometimes make themselves scarce, then it is perhaps because they are wisely avoiding the dangers of the unfamiliar. Unaipon's story goes on, and I feel compelled once again to follow: 'So he thought to himself, like all wise men do, that he would always be on the alert; and during the day he was not seen.'[3]

> '...not feeling, as we say, the ground I went on, but terrified to the last degree...'

Building and walking – activities of civilisation, like Robinson Crusoe who obsessively rebuilt the structures and institutions of the old world in the new, but recorded all this in the 'sacred act of writing': the log book. Only the discovery of a writing which inscribed the existence of the Other – Friday's footprint – really throws him:

> It happened one day, about noon, going towards my boat, I was exceedingly surprised with the print of a man's naked foot on the shore, which was very plain to be seen in the sand. I stood like one thunderstruck, or as if I had seen an apparition; I listened, I looked around me, but I could hear nothing, nor see anything; I went up to a rising ground, to look farther; I went up the shore and down the shore, but it was all one; I could see no other impressions but that one. I went to it again to see if there were any more, and to observe if it might not be my fancy; but there was no room for that, for there was exactly the print of a foot, toes, heel, and every part of a foot: how it came thither I knew not, nor could I in the least imagine; but, after innumerable fluttering thoughts, like a man perfectly confused and out of myself, I came home to my fortification, not feeling, as we say, the ground I went on, but terrified to the last degree; looking behind me at every two or three steps, mistaking every bush and tree, and fancying every stump at a distance to be a man.[4]

This is rewritten by Tournier in a book which, as Lingis says, 'discovers the vanishing, metamorphosing moment that makes the I. The I is in the adventures of the island Speranza.'[5] He finds in his own trace a perfect mirror which seals his 'ownership' of the land – a signature of occupancy:

> He came to a flat, weed-covered rock surrounded by a pool of clear water, and he was amusedly watching the antics of a small intrepid crab which was defying him with two upraised pinchers of unequal size, like a hired assassin with a sword and a dagger, when he was struck dumb with amazement at seeing the imprint of a naked foot. It would not have surprised him to come upon his own traces in the sand or mud, although he had long since given up going without clogs, but this footprint was stuck into *the rock itself*. Was it that of some other man? Or has he been so long on the island that the imprint of his foot in the sandy slime covering the rock had had time to become petrified? He took off his right clog and set his foot in the imprint, which was half-filled with sea-water. That was precisely what it was. His foot fitted the imprint as though he were putting on a well-worn slipper. There could be no doubt about it, no fantasy or mystification; it was not Adam's footprint when he had taken possession of the Garden, or that of Venus rising from the sea; it was his personal signature, the unique token of Robinson, impressed in the living rock and thus made indelible and eternal. Like one of the free-ranging cattle herds on the Argentine pampas, which bear the mark of the branding iron, Speranza bore the seal of her lord and master. [6]

Pieds Nus

The barefoot anthropologist created something of a scandal at the Sorbonne. Professors were startled sometimes when she'd knock at their doors. They were used to hearing loud well-heeled footsteps approach along the halls of the old building on the Rue des Ecoles. She was quiet because she was an indigenous Australian, and she had bare feet, at least in the warmer seasons. For Parisiens, bare feet are an ineffaceable sign of poverty, or they are associated with some bourgeois taboo which Fatima was deliberately provoking. But she would make them laugh, these professors with their classical minds. Pierre once told me that after their discussions – about her thesis, about some book – he would find himself grinning away happily after she had gone. And he would have to stop and ask himself: what's going on here? She must have put one over me. Why am I so happy?

Fatima is indigenous, but her ideas are 'corrupted' by European ones. She is driven by a postcolonial imperative which specifically includes the emancipation of her people. Her methods are lateral: barefeet, Nietzschean laughter opposing itself to and derailing the earnest positivist programmes of rational argumentation. She may not always be right, but the trace of her work is a lingering professorial smile which is not condescending but is as light and gay as sunlight in a meadow shining equally on all. Even in Europe the sun sometimes still shines like this and illuminates the soul of the philosopher, even there the sun gives freely still. But the Sorbonne philosophers are now a little more wary of hard loud footsteps in the halls, they remember the silent approach (they can't forget Prévert: *'tes pas, enfants de mon silence/lentement, doucement placés/ vers le lit de mon vigilence'*) they suspect, ultimately, that the real joy that touched their calcified geriatric hearts comes from a place where the sun burns more intensely, from a place which could also bring an unexpected knock on the door – a premonition of death.

Hinged around our genitals, the walking legs massage our abdomens. They aid the movement of food through inner tubes. The rhythm of walking can beat with the beat of the heart, with breathing which quickens as the body warms up, translating eventually into the rhythm of sexuality, one of Kundera's obsessions, as he and Fatima had got it together a few years ago when she appears in his book as 'an Australian student, she was one quarter aboriginal (which was not apparent though she talked about it readily), she studied the semiotics of painting with a Zurich professor, and for a time she had made a living in Australia dancing topless in a night-club.'[7] He can't understand why she is wearing 'enormous tennis shoes' when she comes to see him expecting to make love. He hates the shoes and now will not see her again, assumes she will be disappointed: 'He knew that he was to blame if her tennis shoes would now walk through the world with a step more melancholy than before.'[8] Kundera's character Rubens from this moment turns and is drawn back to the loves and excitements of his past. Fatima has already forgotten about the man, his egoism and indifferent lovemaking. She is thinking about changing from semiotics to philosophy, from white tennis shoes to barefoot. She is moving towards Paris.

Women hunting goanna
Photographer Jon Rhodes
Reproduced courtesy AIATSIS 'After 200 Years' collection and Yuendemu community

Notes

1 David Unaipon, 'Narroodarie's Wives', in *Paperbark: A Collection of Black Australian Writings*, ed. Jack Davis, et al UQP, 1990 p. 26. **2** *Wedgetail Eagle Dreaming*, CAAMA, 1991 Arrente/English. Presented by Rosalie Riley. Narrated by Harold (Ross) Ellis. **3** idem. **4** Daniel Defoe, *Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, London, Ward Lock & Co, 1911 [1719] , p. 129. **5** Alphonso Lingis, *Foreign Bodies*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 190. **6** Michel Tournier, *Friday or The Other Island*, trans. Norman Denny, Penguin, 1974 [1967] , pp50-51. **7** Milan Kundera, *Immortality*, trans. Peter Kussi, London: Faber and Faber, 1991, p. 342-3 **8** ibid. 345-6

Trinh T Minh-ha

Painti

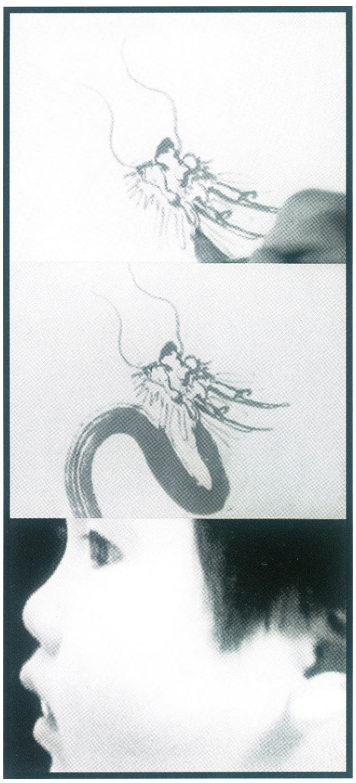
A performance

Art lies in the slender margin
between the real and the unreal
— *CHIKAMATSU MONZAEMON*

ingwithMu

across cultures

The name is the performance. Theatre, dance, mime, art, architecture, music, film, video, *other*. What is born from the combination and at the intersection of different idioms continues to defy naming. The easier the distinctions between genres and categories, the smaller the capacity to depart from and return to performance as a (in)finite spectacle. Art situated both outside and inside 'art' loses its fixed boundaries. As a (named) message it palls, passes, and perishes. As a (naming) sign, it is the work of rhythm: breath manifested as voice, body, space. Or sound, movement, light: the vibration of a gesture – from silence; the resonance of space – from darkness; the music of life – from stillness. The 'frame' is the performance. It takes form by limiting, yet its finality remains free of attachment to an end. The same critical work of nam-



Trinh T. Minh-ha
Composite image of stills from the film
Shoot for the Contents

sic

ing and framing arrests the flow from outside-in-inside-out and incites movement across (the) borders (of the frame). What has come to perfection perishes. Without the potential for new departures and returns, its vitality is doomed to wane with the rivalry of that other measure of perfection named: imperfection.

Essence — Performance

In the art of Japanese Noh theatre, master Zeami Motokiyo (also spelled Seami, 1363-1443) identified three aspects of the art and equated them with the senses: seeing was called the skin, hearing the flesh, and feeling the bones. While failing to find anyone among his contemporaries who could offer more than 'a feeble representation of just the skin,' he insisted that performers not only possess all three qualities, but also develop these qualities to their limits. The performance, in other words, should be 'effortless and ineffable'.[1]

Truth requires the most imagination. 'True accomplishment' cannot be attained merely through the assiduous search for it or the accumulated efforts to materialize it. Those who only see with their eyes are said to see only the performance, which they seek to imitate. But, wrote actor and theorist Zeami, there is no such thing as performance by itself, for without the 'essence' there cannot be any 'performance.' The relation between the two is compared to that of a flower and its fragrance, or the moon and the light it sheds. 'To imitate the performance is to create a false essence' – one 'doomed eventually to perish.'[2] Here, imitation of the false means both limitation and lack: the inability to go beyond the limit of one's immediate perception, and to accomplish the arts of the flesh and the bones. Truth, apparently, does not yield itself to what is shown or said. One may grasp it as event, never really as substance. Didn't the poet Basho (1644-1694) already warn: 'Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the men

of the old; seek what they sought'?[3]

What one calls the 'truth' of a performance is a form of language among others. Since each language carries with it a certain mental context and a locatable history of thought, to read 'essence' across contextual borders, one must necessarily displace it from the central position it occupies within Western metaphysics. Founded on the notion of pure (self-)presence – Being as full presence, absolute proximity to oneself, or nondifference – such metaphysics moralizes according to its humanistic tradition and its own idea of True and False, Good and Evil. Thus, 'essence' in Zeami's writings requires a multiple, different/differing reading. The relation it establishes with performance is not so much that of a mere opposition between true and false, as that of a mutual challenge between change and permanence, the two vital principles of life and art. 'If you must make spasmodic effort to search for it and, having found it, to hold it up ostentatiously,' Polish drama teacher Jerzy Grotowski also remarked, 'then the tradition is no longer alive inside you. There is no point to do that which has ceased to be alive because it will not be true.'[4] Here, what changes and cannot be merely held up to view is alive; what is no longer alive is not true; and what is true presents itself effortlessly, for what usually takes shape independently of effort lies at the limits of the performable and the expressible.

A Musical Accuracy

Zeami's pairing of essence and performance calls into mind the mindful mindlessness of both Basho's *hakai* and Merce Cunningham's dances. Excelling in a verse-form that may be best described as an awakening to the thing in its fragile essence of appearance, Basho noted for example that: 'A good poet does not "make" a poem; he keeps contemplating his subject until it becomes a poem.'[5] While he carried on the tradition of Japanese literary criticism, evaluating the merit of a poem according to the proportion of 'surplus meaning' (*yojo*) it offers, Basho also insisted that there be no predecessors in the poetry of his school, and that both change and permanence be the essence of *hakai*. What makes this verse-form a major contribution to the poetic literature of the world is apparently its unpretentiousness. *Hakai* poetry has been evolved for the ordinary man and woman, and historically it allowed Japanese poets to break with what used to be the incontestable measure of perfection: the conventional aristocratic practice of imitating the masterpieces of their predecessors and of restricting themselves to the same vocabulary. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Basho, who made *hakai* the glory of the Japanese people and whose poetry (partly due to the attention it gave to the humour of the everyday details of our lives) has become popular with people of every class, also be the man who declared in his time: 'My poetry is like a stove in the summer or a fan in winter. It runs against the popular tastes and has no practical use.'[6]

The story of poetess Chiyo (1703-75) is another well-known example of poetic performance as 'becoming' rather than 'making'. In her quest for what constituted a genuine *haiku* and her eagerness to widen the local fame she had already acquired, she met with a noted *haiku* master who happened to visit her town. He then asked her to compose a poem about a conventional subject: the cuckoo. One of the favourite birds of Japanese *haiku* poets, the cuckoo distinguishes itself in that it sings in the night as it flies, making it difficult for the observer to translate its fleeting visual or aural presence. Chiyo tried, but again and again the master rejected everyone of her attempts as being 'not true to feeling'. One night, as related by Daisetz T. Suzuki, while losing herself intently in the subject, she failed to

notice the day already dawning through the paper screens, 'when the following *haiku* formed itself in her mind':

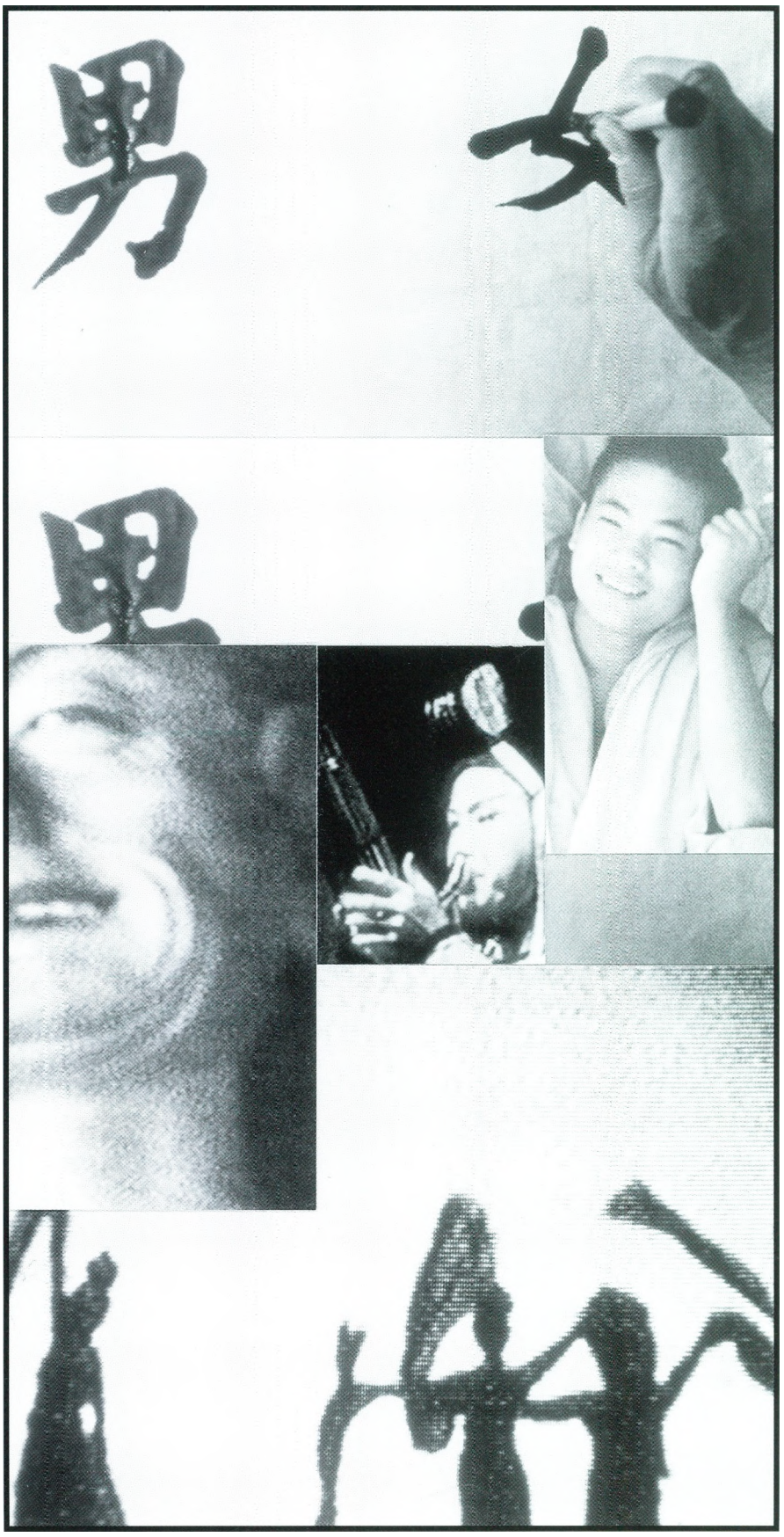
Calling 'cuckoo,' 'cuckooo,'
All night long
Dawn at last!

Upon its reading, the master at once decreed it to be one of the finest *haiku* ever composed on the cuckoo.[7] A most conventional subject thus takes on a new lease of life as the unique moment it offers is also a most banal, 'true-to-feeling' moment in which criteria based on 'popular taste' and 'practical use' turn out to be essentially inappropriate.

In the state of 'no-mind'/ Noh mind, the highly mystified 'presence' of the artist is both a presence and an absence to one-self. The moment in and out of time is the movement outside of the self – in itself. Chiyo's most 'genuine' *haiku* materializes a state of becoming speech in which neither the inside nor the outside is privileged. What is achieved is not exactly the 'ineffable,' but a musical accuracy – an 'echoeless breach of meaning,'[8] as Roland Barthes put it, for the music referred to here is both a music of meanings and a music of sounds. The awakening to 'the suchness of thing' has no ulterior motive. It is, as Suzuki put it in Christian terms, 'to see God in a flea as a flea.'[9]

Merce Cunningham's dances, for example, also express nothing but themselves. Instead of telling a story or exploring the relationship between movement and the psyche, they focus on the physicalness of the body. In other words they feature the body simply as 'a way of moving.' Cunningham composes movement with no attempts to direct expressivity, and with no specific meaning or emotional referent intended. Shattering any sense of plot and sustaining no literal interpretation, his approach to movement sequencing relies largely on chance operations. The dance derives its rhythm not from a music preconceived and imposed from without, but from the very nature of the step or of the phrases, and from the dancer's own musculature. A movement is thus expressive of nothing else but itself. Yet, if the interest of such a dance resides in its own consummate physicality rather than in its ability to reveal what is verbally inaccessible, it is precisely because dance here refuses to encode the 'natural.' It 'denaturalizes' the body by disengaging itself from the quest for a so-called organic choreographic process, which often dwells on a narrow concept of the discursive, hence remaining blind as to how subject and body come into being and how every dance participates in a given discourse.

By acknowledging no 'natural' ties between movement and feelings, or between feeling and meaning, Cunningham's dances invalidate the tradition of cultivating binary oppositions between mind and heart, thought and action. Such tradition tends in this case to sanctify intuitive feelings in its endless attempts to berate or exclude verbal expression. (This, precisely in a society marked with the stamp of dualistic rationalism, where demonstrative reasoning and explanatory discourse dominate, and where in the name of 'logos', all forms of the 'non-verbal' are dismissed and defined negatively as non-sense, non-reason, non-truth, or non-reality.) When dance is no more and no less than 'a moving image of life,' the performance of movement in space is also much less a display of the spectacular, virtuoso perfected body, than it is a full and evenly passionate execution of pedestrian activities, in which the articulate body can be said to be at best, *musically accurate*. In Cunningham's words, 'through this devotion to mindful movement the dancer achieves technical competence that manifests itself in flexible responses to novel situations.'[10]



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A Moment In and Out of Time

The traditional aesthetic ideals that pervaded all of the Japanese arts and accomplishments has been summarised largely in the concept of *yugen*. A performance may be said to possess *yugen*, the mark of supreme attainment, when for example a gesture, which is beautiful in itself, is also a gateway to something else. *Yugen*, translated as the Unfathomable, is often used to suggest the profound and remote as well as the tranquil and elegant: the aspects of things that cannot easily be translated into words, and often lead to a blind alley as far as verbalism is concerned. Attempts to find equivalences to *yugen* in Western literatures have, for example, resorted to Edgar Poe's 'suggestive indefiniteness of vague and therefore of spiritual effect;' or else, to T.S. Eliot's 'moment in and out of time.'[11]

Noh spectators, as related by Zeami, sometimes delighted in the moments of 'no action,' which they considered to be the most enjoyable ones of the performance. Occurring in between two actions, these are the moments when both the music and the actor's movements come to a stop. Yet, instead of slackening while the dancing, the singing, the dialogues, or the different types of miming are suspended, the actor maintains an 'unwaivering inner strength,' manifesting thereby the spirit of his role more intensely than through all his other modes of performance. Much of the pleasure of the spectators is due here to this underlying spiritual strength, whose presence should also remain an absence as it cannot visibly be shown. For, 'if it is obvious,' Zeami specified, 'it becomes an act, and is no longer "no-action"'.[12]

Moments of suspension not only expand the imagination and stimulate interest, they also move the audience in ways that no music, dancing or role-playing can. The performance is determined both by the actions performed and by the in-betweens of these actions. Far from being merely 'a man of action,' as Grotowski defines him, the Performer is here also a person of no-action. Or, at least, the kind of (spiritual) 'action' involved in such moments of (physical) no-action defies the limits of the visible and the audible. It exceeds the arts of the skin and the flesh. Noted philosopher Nishida Kitaro (1870-1945) almost seemed to echo the opinion of Zeami's Noh spectators when he made the following comparison: 'In contradistinction to Western culture which considers form as existence and formation as good, the urge to see the form of the formless, and hear the sound of the soundless lies at the foundation of Eastern culture.'[13]

Although the difference between East and West can hardly be so conclusive, still, in traditional Japanese and Chinese aesthetics, one is often made aware that the form expressed is never really intended to express form, but rather, the Formless. As with the *haiku* which draws its poetic effect from the effortlessness and infiniteness of its 'surplus meaning,' a painting with *yugen* – also translated in this context as Subtle Profundity or Deep Reserve – enables us 'to feel infinite reverberations' without having to resort to minute detailing.[14] A similar comparison can be made between the white unpainted area which constitutes the very soul of such a painting, and the visibly-formless-audibly-soundless moment of Noh theatre which Zeami designated as 'the undone interval' (*senuhima*) of pause. Wrote the master:

> Often critical acclaim rests on the idea that 'parts left undone stimulate interest.' This is a secret point of assurance for the performer. Say that there are two measures of music for which he must assume the proper stances and all the various body postures. The parts left undone, then, refer to the interval of pause... (But) it is

no good for this sense of inward awareness to visibly show, for were it to show anywhere it would become a mannerism and so cease to be 'undone.' In this artless balance, in this peace of mind when one's thought are lost even to oneself, the undone interval links that which came before and that which is to follow. This in itself is the sensitivity which unites the whole of art.[15]

An Artless Balance

While being beautiful in itself, a gesture with *yugen*, as mentioned earlier, is also 'a gateway to something else.' The performer never loses sight of the 'correct balance'(Zeami) between spiritual and physical actions, or between the painted and unpainted surfaces of a performance. (With the understanding that 'correct' here does not refer to an order imposed from the outside or to a preconceived set of values, but to a precision that arises from the [non-] gesture in itself – a 'musically accurate' [non-] gesture). Furthermore, Subtle Profundity inscribes a form of darkness, one that calms and stills the mind, clearing the way for renewed creativity. As a musician from India puts it, 'repose is... the secret of getting in tune with that aspect of life which is the essence of all things.'[16] Since action and stillness mutually define each other; since a painting is determined as much by its filled-in surfaces as by those left undone; since a body can only structure space while being structured by it, a performance that includes no interval of pause is no doubt also one that 'needs tuning.'

Tambura players, for example, are said to tune their own soul while they tune their instrument. Such tuning constitutes a performance of its own, and the listeners, likewise, need to tune themselves to the music while appreciating the way the musicians sing *into* a chord. As the latter become concentrate, they also tune themselves to their audience. They usually have no program beforehand and do not know what they will perform next. Yet each time, they are inspired to sing a certain song or to play in a certain mode.[17] Tuning outwardly, tuning inwardly: these are other intervals of pause which, to many music lovers, often prove to be more enjoyable than the real piece of music itself. In the process of tuning, a subject becomes a poem effortlessly; what is brought about in time is not the search for a given pitch – the standard A or the preconceived correct chord which constitutes the universalized measure of perfection in Western musical traditions. On the contrary, what progressively materializes is an 'artless balance' through which takes shape, each time differently, the evolving pitch to be shared among performers, listeners and instruments played. After all, to recall a statement by Peter Sellars, in the ongoing process of becoming isn't every single performance a rehearsal?[18]

'Men must learn to be silent,' novelist and film director Marguerite Duras affirms. 'They are the ones who started to speak, to speak alone and for everyone else... They immediately forced women and extremists to keep silent. They activated the old language, enlisted the aid of the old way of theorizing, in order to relate, to recount, to explain this new situation... '[19] The encounter with silence – the moment in and out of time, not quite unreal nor quite real – is precisely what allows a text to vibrate and to breathe. In women's contexts, the reality of silence is further complicated by the fact that the coming into and breaking away from language is at once a necessity, a discovery, and a damnation. For language, as is well-known, is a site of both empowerment and enslavement. Women's literature, in Duras' words, is often 'translated from darkness. Women have been in darkness for centuries. They don't know themselves. Or only poorly'. So to trans-

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Composite image of stills from the film
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late, she may have to 'make darkness the point of departure in judging what men call light.' She may have to tip the balance in order to find her balance. And she may find herself facing a vast 'undone interval of pause' – a world of suspension – in which, more than ever, occupied territories saturate the field of vision. 'When I write', confides Duras, 'there is something that becomes silent. I let something take over inside me... It's as if I were returning to a wild country. Nothing is concerted. Perhaps before everything else, before being Duras, I am – simply – a woman...'[20]

Making Music with Painting

A wild country. Where writing constantly solicits the interval of silence. Where, even when speech is no longer, words continue to move, borne on the echoes of women's voices. Duras tuning herself to the unknown ends up meeting with her simplest self: being a woman. The gap left unoccupied becomes a silent multivalent transitional space, whose fragrance and reverberations can only make themselves felt through an artless balancing of abstinence from display/speech and the urge to create/speak everything anew. In Duras' films, Pierre Felida wrote for example that her writing 'gives birth to a strange speech; speech which moves in that inner tone of silence where the power of hearing is spoken and vhere voices can intrude upon the echoes of fragmented words.... This speech is terrifying because no narrative can contain it nor prevent its shiftings nor even guarantee a boundary to what is opened up by it and in it'.[21]

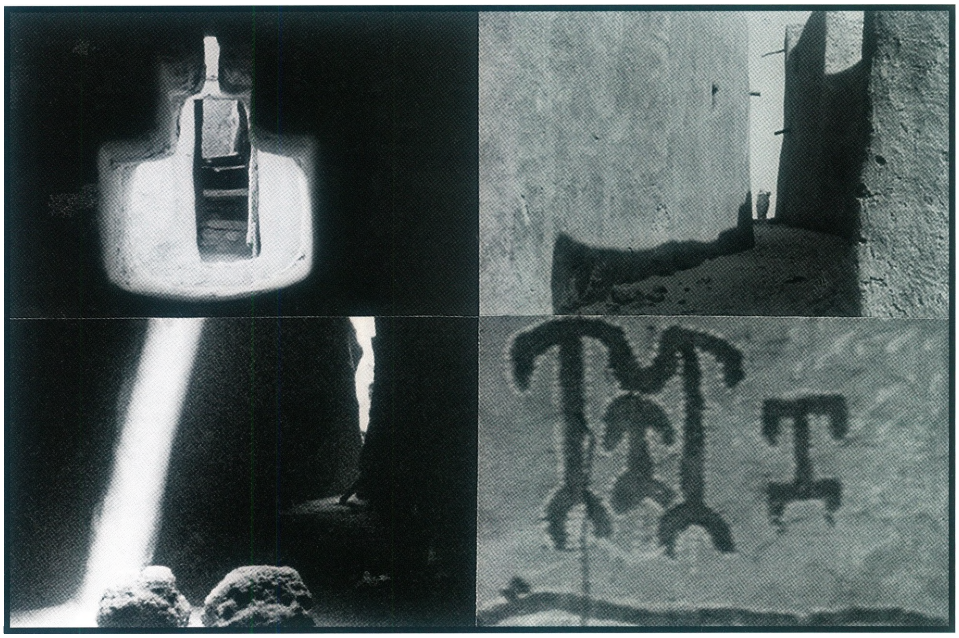
Of great importance but rarely developed to its limits in cinema is the compass of the voice and the way its presence and absence musically structure the filmic space. Working with voices and working with actors are not necessarily the same. Voices and

actors move in spaces that at times meet synchronously or interact in syncopation, and other times have nothing to do with one another, except through a process of transformation, in which effects of rupture are likely to challenge the way the media's economy of suture produces an entire class of inattentive viewers/makers who see without seeing and hear without hearing. What is questioned in such a practice is not only the homogeneity between voice and image, but also the compartmentalization of sensual and/or intellectual faculties. Voice is breath. A wo/man's breath manifested outwardly, the sound and colour of a voice are, in fact, one and the same: movement. Colour is heard when sound is most visible and least audible; and reciprocally, sound is seen when colour is most audible and least visible. In the rupturing of realistic effect of the filmic image, the relationship between voice, sound and silence transforms itself and becomes musicalized.

Music lies both at the source of creation and in the means of absorbing it. 'There is terror in noise,' drummer Mickey Hart intently remarks, 'and in that terror there is also power.'[22] The name is the same for that *other* power or de-power – of freeing noise and rhythm. Light and life. Everywhere one looks, one sees rhythm. Every physical illness, indeed, is a musical dis-ease. Change is inscribed in noise, and as a reflection of power, the control of noise remains fundamentally political. In a musicalized relationship where everything possesses a rhythmic value, an image or a sound always has the potential to be *other* than what it is. Thus, although cinema remains a highly guarded territory, Duras (whose films, because of the risks they take, often give the viewer the feeling of assisting to the birth of cinema) can still affirm: 'It's because my cinema scarcely exists as cinema that I can make these films. The type of perfection to which mainstream cinema aspires (in its use of clever technique with the sole aim of maintaining order) is accurately inscribed in its precise adherence to prevailing social codes.... Mainstream cinema can be very clever, but it is rarely intelligent.'[23]

To show everything, to gloss over the operation of suture, and to catch a reality 'as it is,' is to condemn it to the *cliche* and to leave nothing to the imagination. Asserts Dyonis Mascolo: 'The cinema was born stupid because it was born powerful... It is stupid like Power.'[24] So unless an image unsettles itself from its naturalized state, it acquires no resonance and is bound to remain flat – that is, unmusical hence lifeless. Creating does not merely consist of reforming or inventing a character within a situation, but rather of drawing new relationships between people and things as they exist. Everything is in the differing, displacing and rearticulating of intervals. Yet, as Zeami acutely warned, intervals cannot be forged. To maintain the vitality of an image-sound-silence that reverberates, stimulates as well as empties out the eye/I for example, radically means to put oneself in an intense state of non-knowingness and of curiosity, living thereby fully the contemporaneity of bodies and movements, while also being able to exceed the moment in the present. Filmmaking thus thrives on the desire to see with and beyond the fragment; to envision what is left out or remains necessarily undone; hence, to sustain infinite surprises in a finite frame.

'The real antonym of the "poetic" is not the prosaic, but the stereotyped' wrote Roland Barthes.[25] Zeami, Chiyo, Basho, Grotowski, Cunningham, the Tambura players, Duras, and the list goes on. The poetic leap can hardly be achieved through self- explanatory links between names and practices. To solicit new relationships, a space is opened up, which will have to remain unoccupied despite the many engagements between the dissimilar itineraries that crisscross it. Nothing, indeed, stands more acutely



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Composite image of stills from the film
Naked Spaces / Living is Round

in opposition to the poetic than the stereotype, which is not necessarily a false, but rather an arrested representation of a shifting reality. The constant challenge faced in dealing with stereotypes is precisely that of assuming representation without being limited to it (to *return* freely to representation, the potential of a form to *depart* from representation must be affirmed and set into motion). The challenge is also that of placing the viewers in relation to the subject filmed – not as one routinely places them according to some visual and aural habits (the *cliches*), but as one places oneself blindly according to one's own unpredictable impressions and feelings. To quote filmmaker Robert Bresson, 'The beauty of your film will not lie in the images (postcardism), but in the *ineffable* that they will emanate.'[26]

The story goes that when Basho asked his teacher and pupil, samurai Kyoroku, why he liked painting, the latter said it was because of poetry. 'And why do you love poetry?' Basho continued, 'Because of painting' Kyoroku replied. It seems appropriate here to borrow Basho's happy conclusion and to say that, since Confucian tradition has decreed it is shameful for a person to have many accomplishments, it is only adequate that s/he should excel in making one use of several arts.[27] But what can 'excel' mean when placed in this context of 'slender margin between the real and the unreal' (Monzaemon)? Perhaps an example can also be found here in the well-known case of Jean-Luc Godard – one of the filmmakers who consistently refuses to abide by the Western tradition of setting, in the name of Pure Vision or of Communication, a mutually exclusive relation between writing and painting or between the verbal and the visual. For this much fetishized giant of cinema (of the Left), the 'incredible' is what people don't see, and indeed, the camera constitutes 'only a moment' – at times more, and at other times less powerful than other (off-camera) moments.

Much has been said on how Godard's film work defies the finished product to offer a process that unfolds in front of the viewers – above all, as an activity of production. His scripts, always written as the filming and rehearsal evolve, incorporate simultaneously the actions on and off camera, in and out of the performing self. His highly controversial interchange with actors is both condemned and praised for being 'execrable' and 'baffling,' since the roles they are supposed to play never exist prior to their performances, and the actors never quite know what they are fabricating at the moment of fabrication. What can be said of the reception of Cunningham's dances does apply very well here to Godard's films. In the multiply diverse references to the world that interactions between performers offer to the audience, the experience of each viewer like that of each performer is unique, not merely because individuals differ in their background and actualities, but also because each of them has literally seen/heard/felt/made a different dance/film. As the participants' moves are mutually defined by one another, each response is a performance of its own. Reflecting on women's representation in Godard's films. Julia Kristeva thus concluded: 'His modest pretention is not to propose solutions, but to show, through hints, without really unveiling. Rarely has the image come so close to the ellipsis.'[28]

Godard's 'wild gestuality' in the filmic space (projected for example in the way a violinist fences the visual space with his bow: the way people and cars suddenly enter the frame; the way they move restlessly in all directions or collide violently with one another) excels in making use of more than one art to open the boundaries of what constitutes cinema. It has earned him many labels, including that of a 'Beethoven composing a film with two violins, a viola and a violincello', or that of a painter whose combination of color in painting are 'so accurate, yet so unreasonable.' An anecdote related by painter Bernard Dufour further exposes how Godard reflexively proceeds with his 'paintings.' Invited to visit and draw in Godard's studio in Génève when the latter started work on *Passion*, Dufour came with his working tools. Scarcely had he started drawing in the manner of Poussin than Godard, shooting with his video camera, asked him to draw with his eyes closed. Dufour agreed to the challenge and started a new drawing of the soldier in *Massacre des Innocents*. As expected, Dufour momentarily got lost as he lifted his right hand, which held the pen. However, he succeeded – bumpily – to complete the drawing by finding again with his left hand the memory, the muscular trace of the necessary position of the right hand. Dufour was then led to conclude that this 'perverse childishness' and delirious project of making a painter draw with eyes closed, denying thereby his very essence, not only became a terrific investigation of Godard's own work; it also 'set into relief the eternal hours of acquisition of "knowledge by rote" only to end in the discovery of a "I don't know" if not a "I can't".'[29]

A new way of writing, hence of feeling. The anecdote further suggests that to 'excel' in 'returning to a wild country' is to realize this artless balance in performance, to live and let live these undone intervals of pause where knowledge acquired remains suspended in non-knowingness (Basho's change and permanence). Where inter-arts/inter-cultures involves not the the accumulation or the melting of previously identified objects, competences and frontiers, but the discovery of different objects produced by new multiple competences in different situations across different cultures. Something is being born that invalidates the institutional/professional vision between 'painting' and 'writing,' East and West. This newly-formed-formless sensitivity bears, in fact, the trace of an old name: curiosity. A

name that materializes itself anew each time, inscribing accordingly the variety of context and the specificity of circumstance. Wrote Bresson: 'I dream about my film gradually forming itself under the look, like a painter's eternally fresh canvas'[30]; and Godard: 'Cinema is the art of making music with painting.'[31]

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Composite image of stills from the film
Shoot for the Contents

Notes

1 Zeami, 'The Book of the Way of the Highest Flower (Shikado-sho),' in *Sources of Japanese Tradition* eds. R. Tsunoda, W. T. de Bary & D. Keene (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958, rpt.1965), p. 301.

2 Ibid., pp.302-303.

3 A statement inspired by the writings of Kukai. Matsuo Basho, "The Rustic Gate" in *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, p. 459.

4 quoted in Zbigniew Osinski, 'Grotowsti Blazes the Trails. From Objective Drama to Ritual Arts', *The Drama Review* (TDR), Vol 35 No 1, Spring 1991, p. 106.

5 quoted in Makoto Ueda, *Matsuo Basho* (Japan:Kodansha International Ltd., 1970, rpt. 1982),p. 163.

6 'The Rustic Gate', p. 458.

7 See Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970, rpt.1973) pp. 224-25.

8 *Empire of Signs*, trans. R. Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), pp.69;76.

9 *Zen and Japanese Culture*, p. 228.

10 Quoted in Susan Leigh Foster, *Reading Dancing. Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986)pp. 35- 36. Previous quotes in this paragraphs are also Cunningham's own words. For a more comprehensive analysis of his dances, see chapter I, pp. 1-57.

11 *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, p. 284.

12 Ibid., p.291.

13 Quoted in *Philosophy of Painting by Shih T'ao*. p.13

14 Shin'ichi Hisamatsu as quoted in Earle J. Coleman, *Philosophy of Painting by Shih T'ao*, (New York: Mouton Publishers, 1978), p. 15.

15 Zeami, quoted in Kisho Kurokawa, *Rediscovering Japanese Space*, (New York: Weatherhill, 1988), p.66.

16 Inayat Khan, *Music*, (Claremont, California: Hunter House Inc., 1988) p. 13.

17 See ibid., pp.33-35.

18 Quoted in Richard Trousdell, 'Peter Sellars Rehearses Figaro', *The Drama Review* (TDR), Vol 35 No 1, Spring 1991, p. 71.

19 Marguerite Duras, 'Smothered Creativity', *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, eds. E. Marks & I. de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachussetts Press, 1980) p. 111.

20 'From An Interview'. ibid., pp. 174-75.

21 'Between the Voices and the Images', in Marguerite Duras, *Duras by Duras* (San Francisco: City Lights Boolzs, 1987) pp. 147-48, original italics.

22 *Drumming at the Edge of Magic. A Journey into the Spirit of Percussion*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), p. 12

23 *Duras by Duras*, p. 120.

24 Dyonis Mascolo, 'Birth of Tragedy' in ibid., p. 135.

25 Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. R. Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1985) p. 124.

26 Robert Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe* (Paris: Gallimard 1975), p. 123. (My translation and italics.)

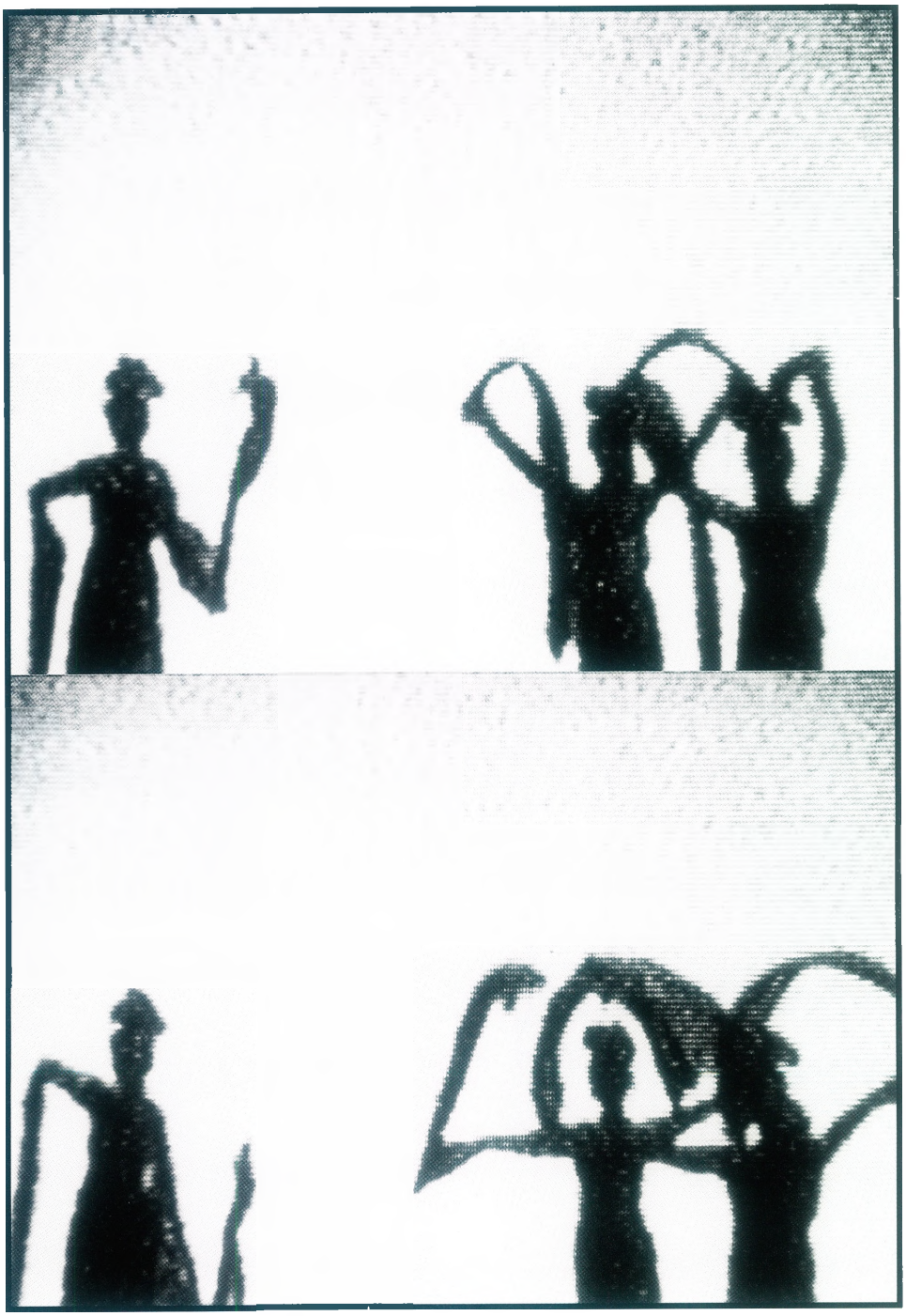
27 *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, p. 458.

28 Julia Kristeva, 'Ces Femmes au-delà du plaisir', *Art Press*, Hors Série No 4 (December 8,4 -January 85), p. 31. For previous quotes from Godard, see Jean-Luc Godard, 'La Curiosité du sujet', ibid., pp. 12-16.

29 Bernart Dufour, 'Les Peintures et Godard', ibid., pp. 59-61. The 'Beethoven' label mentioned earlier is by Jacques Drillon, ibid., p.62.

30 *Notes sur le cinématographe*, p. 128.

31 quoted on back cover of the above issue of *Art Press*.



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Above: Photograph by Mona Newman, based on the Max Ernst lithograph 'Woman at the Open Door'
Left: Publicity for 'The Worst Woman in the World'

Rachel Fensham

Re/membering bodies

an archaeology of bad women

I want to offer some ways of thinking about the body, that have, I believe, a bearing on what we think we are doing as teachers or students working with bodies. I will address those questions that concern me when I talk/think about the performing body as she is gendered or in fact, the gendered body as she is able to perform. Although I will be referring to a particular project, I am also considering the implications of performing bodies in a wider context than that of my work and indeed of any one person's artistic projects.

I recently directed a project involving a small group of theatre students at Murdoch University in researching and devising a performance (*The Worst Woman in the World etc.*). It focused on the specific history of madness in relation to the social construction of women's lives in the nineteenth century and in particular to the women who were in the Fremantle asylum from 1856 to 1902.[1] It involved detailed archival research in order to piece together characters, movement repertoires and the social ideas of the time. We also explored nineteenth century melodrama as a way of exaggerating gender roles and expectations. These two different forms of textual material – the historical record and the popular theatrical genre – meant that the performers were working with both inner and outer investigations of movement, exposing and enclosing the crudeness of psychological definitions in physical gestures and concentrations of the face and body. We performed in the asylum, which is now an arts centre, and had the audience seated amongst us in what was an old dormitory. The project was, in every sense, concerned with the materiality of the experience of women's lives in the past and in the present. But although we were dealing with the past we were also concerned with the present in terms of our own bodies and lives – what was possible? and how do we make sense of remembering the past?

During the same period, the late nineteenth century, and yet in a place far from the colonial outpost of Perth, the philosopher Henri Bergson addressed the classical problem of the relation between soul and body by arguing that memory was the intersection of mind and matter. As any performer knows, this relation, the connections between mind and matter, is not a constant, nor is it a simple one. As Bergson says: 'our psychic life may be lived at different heights, now nearer to action, now further removed from it, according to the degree of our *attention to life*.'[2] When I attend to the question of performing bodies in relation to remembering, I need to investigate the relations between psychic life and action, particularly and not only, because I am interested in women as performers.

What follows is, therefore, structured around the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*'s definitions of **Re/membering**

Re: in the matter of I address myself to the performing body not as a matter of aesthetic interest or aesthetic delivery but as a matter of limits and expectations. We have grown accustomed to the idea of performing as achieving, as showing credibility. I have a problem with what this notion has done to the body; to how any body, regardless of its social gender, can have relegated its matter to the necessities of function, its performability, even in relation to what we call 'art' whether you call it theatre or dance.

re: again, back, un- There is always an again in performance – 'let's do it one more time' 'next time we'll get it right' and again and again the body will learn what it should do, what it must do. But it can't go back, there is no beginning, no point of origin, the body was never there before it all began, before there was a man and a woman, before there was a story, before there was a rehearsal. 'Let's go back to the begining' is a dance game I play with students, it teaches them about paying attention but it is never back even if it is a return. And I like it when there is an un- in the body, in the space, in the text although un- is always disconcerting – what will turn it back? flip it over? undo the terrible weight of the doing and can we live with it if we find it, the un-body I mean.

re: is treated as a living prefix This is wonderful, there is vitality here and it comes before and is attached, but how do we avoid this body being the 'living feminine', of becoming the transcendent 'other' which is the dead heart of philosophy, the stone in the belly of the dead man's mother. But the body is, in itself, living in its necessary precedence and attachment, and should be treated as a potent sign of hope.

re: may be prefixed for the occasion to any verb or verbal derivative I know, you know, the body is always in motion, it is kinesis, that which flows, which must move however it is worrying when it becomes too abstract. Bodies are not abstractions, they are material entities with their own histories which may be prefixed for the occasion to any verb. This cannot be elided for it comes up, in terms of what kind of living goes on under the skin and if this physical difference is avoided in rehearsal and in performance, the hierarchies of looking remain in place. The bodies are connected and situated on the occasion, when she and he did this or that in this place at that time there – so there.

re: also when the idea of repetition is to be emphasised We know those events accumulate, they make a life also when the idea of repetition is emphasised – there is only the possibility of repetition, there is no original genius, there is no original body, there is no original dance, there is only repetition – let us not fool ourselves about what we are doing, let us emphasise that what she did a hundred years ago, I do now. I repeat, I understand, you repeat, you understand and there is no other way of the body.

remember: retain in the memory, not forget, recall to mind On Anzac day and on November 11 we recall to mind the dead, or some people do. When do we recall to mind the dead mothers, the dead women, the women who died, so we may live? There is a project for doing that – recalling, saying their names, bringing their bodies to mind – feminist histories you might call it. We called it, *Absence of Evidence*. Then let us retain them, hold them a little in the memory, the memory of my body, our bodies, those cellular memories which can hold the traces of their agony, pleasure, anger, sadness, or delight – but it is not always pleasant to do so. But how else can we re-hearse? how else can we live? In one of the asylum case books, Catherine's entry reads: 'orders have been given that at any future exhibition of her passions she be immediately put in a separate cell and the canvas mufflers be put on.' Lest we forget.

remember: recollect, know by heart There were so many women, how to choose, which ones to pick – they chose one each or at least a collection of ones which could be known by a one body, one heart. The characters had to be gathered in fragments, the return to the pieces enables the body to know its heart, to have a heart for what it is to do.

remember: archaic as I remember me that, they remembered them of It was long ago, on this occasion not what we know as archaic but maybe before that they remembered them of the time before. There is a passing of time which makes it seem far away but it is not separate from what I and they are doing now. As they, the students, remembered those women, those women in the asylum I remembered me that they are contemporary women and young women whose now was both a remembering and a repetiton of a body still in process. And the audience remembered them now as present too.

remember: mention in one's prayers; convey greetings from one person to another It was like a prayer, one of the best kind, full of grandeur and sweeps in scale and intensity from bitter pathos to damning retribution. And we often said how we felt they were there in that room upstairs, their dormitory or downstairs and outside in the courtyard. We conveyed our greetings from us to them and them to each other and from them and us to the audience-them and from them to the other, one person and another, beyond the limits of the text, sitting on the beds together.

member: part, organ of body esp. limb We found the answer lay in these parts, 'she kicked Mrs Manning in the shin', ' she tore her shawl off' it was these body parts that gave her away – 'she had a fixed stare', 'she sucked her lip', 'she took her clothes off', 'she threw a stone', 'she beats herself'. She could not keep the organs under control, she smelt and wept and spat and leaked. It was those members, those parts that were repeating themselves again and again and not being whole – thoroughly distasteful!

member: an elaboration - unruly member - tongue We loved the bits where they 'used foul language', 'were excitable' or 'irritable'. That unruly member it never co-operates, it wants to talk back, to snigger, to laugh behind his back. I think this made the audience uncomfortable – what was that tongue really saying? Why are they talking so much? He'd rather they shut up and danced.

member: person belonging to a society Here I want to emphasise this body cannot be treated as artistic object, as beautiful performance or even pleasurable experience. All these are far too seductive. For she who moves, or is it dances, does belong to a society. And it is this which gives her matter substance, whether she becomes debris, or fallen leaves is another matter. But she is a matter for the social body to consider even if, and even when, and even because, the society might put her away. This belonging makes sense of her existence, she, we, the body has no other sense.

member: constituent portion of complex structure She is a constituent part of a complex structure. The institution may not deem her significant but she helps to constitute its structure and as such she must examine her part, take her actions, steal the keys, steal the screwdriver, unlock the gate, climb the wall, over and over if necessary. The structure always has and always will, include her even when she, we, only see a part of what that complex might be. As constituents perhaps we could think about the matter of our parts again.

member: part, branch of political body And here it is very explicit, the branch reaches up, and down or across if we think in rhizomes, but the body is political, every reach it makes is implicated politically, socially. If we are looking at women's lives, the matter of experience, then those politics will not be detached from their bodies. Don't tell me that you can keep looking and labelling and taking pleasure and taking stock and adding them and their tongues to your collection without it being political. And what is your body doing?

membrum: limb A membrum sounds like a murmur, an inaudible boundary; like a voice warm-up, that begins in the breathing with a movement behind the lips, perhaps the limb is the beginning of audibility. We breathed and panted and gasped for air. The limbs reached out in pleading gestures – pathetic isn't it? From Bandyup women's prison, a woman writes to the paper. She says that they are denied the privileges of the male prisoners to education, to privacy. She is a membrum, a voice-border asking for help – do we shrink from the limbs or let them drop off because the wind is too strong out there?

memory: faculty of remembering Is it a faculty, of the mind? or of the university? that lets us remember – I doubt it. What is a so-called training in theatre or dance? But we might like the collective responsibility to do so, to become a feat, an ability of remembering together.

memory: as a record of, to keep alive the memory of Curiously it is the records, those historical documents in leather bound volumes kept in the Battye library and recorded in pen, in cursive script by a beleagured matron – her Private Book it says on the cover – which has kept alive their story. We needed permission of living relatives to use their names, they remain private and rightly so. The story of women who were locked up, but what of today; we don't record anymore in outmoded technologies but prefer the electronic databases, the 01010101, or the magnetic strips of video machines. These are assumed public property, freedom of information or mass circulation on the airwaves. After a while, seven years for public institutions, they must be erased to make room for more, so we will not keep alive too many unwanted bodies, undesirable records, imperfect pictures. Un-alive women can disappear today with a push of the delete button.

memory: posthumous repute And this is what we enjoyed, the sense of fame that has come back to them, they were of ill-repute, not wanted, not understood, misbehaving, erratic, running away and causing a fuss but they have now a posthumous repute, of sorts. They deserve the memory of the spectators (isn't that all there is for performers?) – the men who didn't know whether to smile or not, the women who lived it three times over, for then, for themselves and for the present – they knew the memory of, for what its worth.

memory: length of time over which memory extends They say the tyranny of today is the loss of memory but the memory cannot be taken away, even when it is quantified and found by psychologists, even when we think we have learnt it well and it will be automatic. The performance is an empty length of time until you remember it and even when you don't, you do. Because as we forget, so can there be the possibility of memory. So for as long as I live, or we live, or she lives there can be memory and we can stretch that time. Make it longer by doing the body again even if it is not the same. Even if the laughs don't always come in the same place.

memor: mindful We must be mindful that the body is not full and we must be bodyful that the mind is not full otherwise we risk going mad.

ing: originally formed mere nouns of action; verbal action This is what turns the woman into a site of actions – get that body moving! Things that have been done, things that she did, the network of actions threatens to choke her – sewing, lifting, scrubbing, spinning, cooking,

cleaning, bending, crying, talking, stretching, shouting, washing, stealing, stepping, breaking, laughing. Uncontrollably, she becomes a dangerous proposition. What would woman-ing look like? If only, to clean, could be unattached to her body, not assuming any original relation to a sex but instead a verbal action which has no subject.

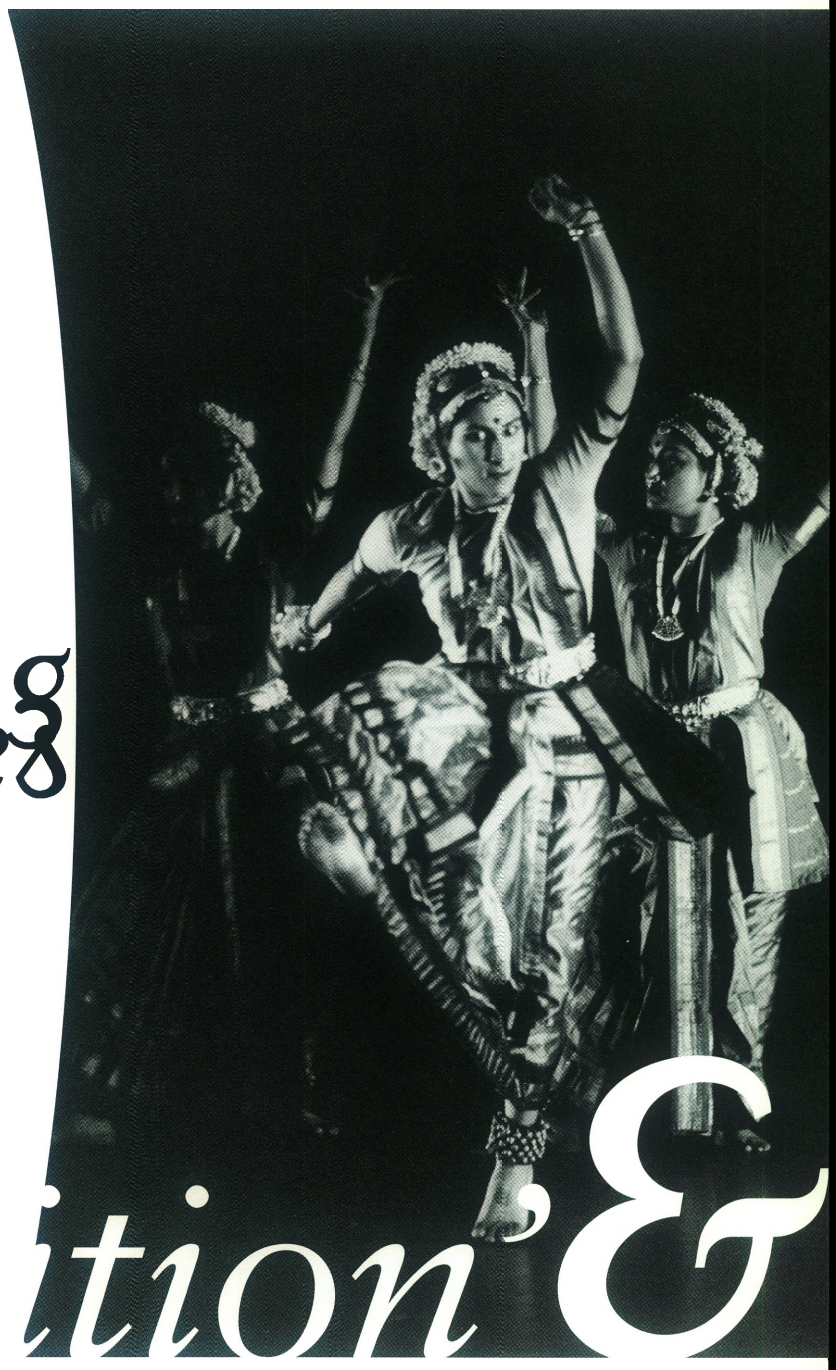
ing: what is to be operated on; set or arrangement of As a director, as a doctor, as a mother, there are things to be operated on, decisions to be made about what to cut, what to remove, what to sew together, what to cover up. The rehearsal process coming to an end becomes an operation, a cover-up. Dr. Barnett writes in the matron's book 'perhaps the nurses should wear uniforms so that we can distinguish them from the patients'. The costumes will make the difference, the audience will know that there is a set, an arrangement of scenes, a sequence of events that will protect them from the knife. Their bodies remain safe.

ing: being qualified by adverb or governing an object And at last they are qualified – we will perform carefully, well, sensitively, boldly, cheerfully, sadly, and this will govern the object. The object is, even after all that has been said, still the woman's body. She is under control, especially when she is performing because looking helps to qualify the object for our attention. She gets recorded for doing and the object can then be governed, and trained to be a dancer or an actor, for that matter.

To conclude Re/membering is no methodology for performing better but it may be a reason for giving women a different place in relation to the matter of ideas about bodies, about gender and about pedagogy – of embodying what Elspeth Probyn has called a care of the self that 'must be constructed somewhere between myself and hers; it must be able to reach beyond "me", beyond who or what "I" am.'[3]

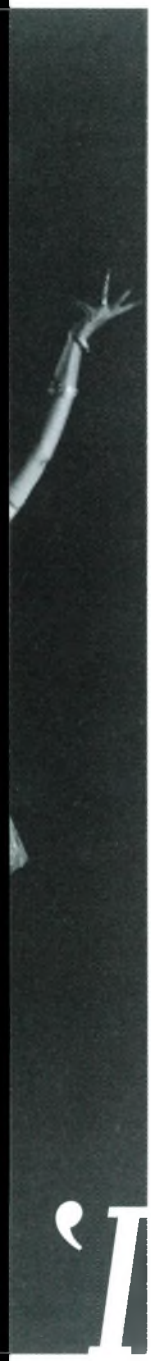
Notes

1 The performance of the *Worst Woman in the World etc.* was one component of a large interdisciplinary arts project *Absence of Evidence* based at the Fremantle Arts Centre in May/June 1994. 2 Bergson, Henri (1988) *Matter and Memory* New York: Zone Books, p.14. 3 Probyn, Elspeth (1993) *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies* London & New York: Routledge, p.4.



Migrating Dances

'Tradition' &



'Innovation'

in the work of an Indian dance company in Australia

Kalpana Ram

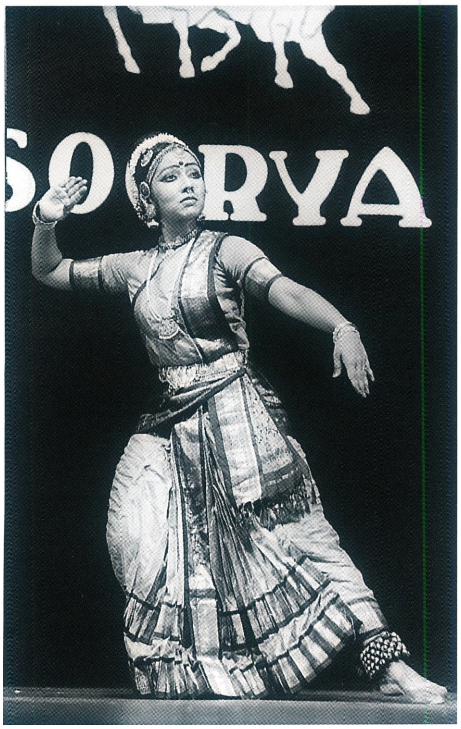
In this paper I wish to examine the performance of two dance/theatre pieces entitled ***Siva*** and ***Chandalika*** respectively. Both were staged (in 1993 and 1994) by Canberra's Kailash Dance Company[1], one of Australia's two Indian dance companies[2]. Under the directorship of Padma Menon, the company is beginning to make available to audiences in Australia performances of Indian classical dance which involve subtle but significant challenges to hypostatised notions of 'Indian culture'. Such notions are prevalent not only in dominant Anglo-Australian culture, but within immigrant Indian communities themselves. Through my examination of Kailash's production of ***Siva*** and ***Chandalika*** I hope to highlight the nature of the tranformations (both actual and potential) at work. My discussion of these transformations necessarily involves an attempt to delineate some features of the dominant discourses which shape the way in which understanding about Indian culture is constructed. Relevant here are three particular kinds of discourses:

Photographs

Preceding page and left: Aruna Sampath, Ann Mitra and Vicki Shepherd in *Siva*. Photograph by Ross Gould

Right: Padma Menon as the title character in *Chandalika*. Photograph by Ross Gould

Padma Menon at the Soorya Festival. Photograph by Gopalakrishnan



a) the kinds of understandings of 'culture' which inform Australian multiculturalism. I am here particularly concerned with the way in which dominant understandings of culture and of the arts shape the way in which non-western cultures in Australia are in turn understood. In the case of Indian culture, of course, there is a much longer and more complex history of such unequal cultural interactions which goes back to prior colonial codifications of India;

b) Eurocentric notions of 'tradition' and 'innovation' and the appropriate relationship between them - in particular, as this has come to be played out in the realm of the arts;

c) Immigrant communities' tendency to perceive 'their' women as pure carriers and passive bearers of a reified (and often romanticised) cultural and historical past. Such notions come to the foreground in the training of middle class Indian women in the classical arts, whether in India or in Australia. The Kailash company's work implicitly moves against this tendency.

I begin by alerting readers to the difficulties posed in pursuing the well-worn trail of a writer positioned (as I am) as intermediary between Indian and western culture. The discursive history which shapes the available language on Indian dance is one which already reflects the unequal positioning of the two cultures, and it is important to begin with an historical awareness of the problems which have shaped previous projects of cultural translation and advocacy on behalf of the colonised culture.

The discourse of the partisan intermediary: Daumal and Coomaraswamy on Indian art, and the contradictory confluence of orientalism and nationalism.

The discourse of the intermediary – whether Indian or western – comes to us from the earlier part of this century as one which is necessarily partisan, attempting to rectify western ignorance and even hostility. The examples I have chosen of this earlier history will permit me to reflect on the problems posed for contemporary Indians by the resultant confluence of terms taken from western orientalism and Indian nationalism. Equally, I wish to register a sense of respect and appreciation for the efforts made by these pioneers to combat a situation of patently unequal cultural exchange.

Daumal

My first example comes from the French writer René Daumal (1908–1944). In the introduction to his book *Rasa, or Knowledge of the Self. Essays on Indian Aesthetics and Selected Sanskrit Studies* (1982), the translator Landes Levi introduces Daumal as a founder of a journal of experimental metaphysics and poetry, who developed contact with the Gurdjieff Institute in Paris. In 1929 and 1930, Daumal worked as secretary to the Indian dancer Uday Shankar who was then undertaking a pioneering tour of western Europe and America. The essays are described as 'historic pieces, written pre-eminently to clarify these performances to a naive Occidental audience, and to an inimical critical appraisal'(Landes Levi, 1982:1). Daumal in turn introduces Uday Shankar in an article entitled 'Concerning Uday Shankar' (1931):

To those beings, bearers of the always new immemorial beauty, I can offer no more than a barbarian's salute. In their presence, I felt grotesque, ignorant, false. As I watched them, the word 'civilization' pronounced itself within me, perhaps for the first time, without evoking anything odious.

The great miracle of the arts and sciences of the Orient was there, millenial, perpetually reborn: the rigorous determinism of a tradition, opening to awakened invidividuals, the door to a real liberation.

Crippled in the chaos of the Occident, without a connecting thread, I can only wish to play the necrologist-poet to an inimical culture. The Orient is still alive. If, by a miracle, it is not dragged into the Occidental suicide, it will still live and there will be men on the earth who can think (1982:31-2).

Daumal's rhetoric is aimed at 'a rather common European opinion of Oriental music', according to which:

Oriental music is essentially 'magic', sympathetic magic and a little bit satanic; it would make no appeal to the intelligence. The Oriental auditor submits passively to it, asking only to be bewitched; he experiences a rapture differing only slightly from the intoxication of hashish. Occidental music, in contrast, is 'anti-magic', thus praiseworthy and good. It asks above all, to be understood (1982:32).

In order to oppose this particular variant of the long-standing western philosophical separation of the body from the mind, Daumal instructs readers on a kind of understanding which Indian music locates in the stomach (timbres, intensities), the thorax (the *ragas*, fixed series of notes determining the character of melody), and the head (rhythm). Daumal thus finds in the performance a unity addressing itself simultaneously 'to the most hidden resources of flesh and desire and to the most lucid facets of the spirit' (1982:34).

Daumal's characterisations are intense, their intended effect that of ending or at least heralding the end of the 'Occidental free-arbitrary individualist, the sad capitalist-colonialist-imperialist, fettered with

the etiquette of his order'(1982:32). Certain distinctions which he grapples with, such as western art as requiring conscious intelligence, and eastern art as a supine bodily submission to a mesmerising magic, are not only acutely observed but continue to haunt western understandings of Indian dance and music.

However, his language – passionate, imprecise and impressionistic – only further embellishes certain other features in the construction of India as the Other of the west. The antinomies are well known, particularly in the anthropology of India: the western individual ('free-arbitrary') versus the social collectivities (caste, religion); the ability to reflect and innovate *versus* 'the rigorous determinism of tradition'; materialistic west *versus* spiritual India; modern *versus* ancient. In an inversion of western denigration which is characteristic of notable contemporary French intellectuals such as Louis Dumont, Daumal elevates the Indian dancers over the western barbarian onlooker – they are 'men more wise and beautiful' than the occidental admirer, bearers of 'a very ancient country', 'of a golden age' (1982:37).

Coomaraswamy

It is entirely understandable that Indian nationalism was able to absorb and utilise such characterisations for its own purposes, namely in an anti-colonial mobilisation. I will here continue to concentrate on nationalism in the sphere of aesthetics and dance. Indian writers on aesthetics such as Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) who naturally enjoyed a great deal more knowledge about the actual meanings of Indian art than appreciative outsiders, neverthless were confronted with a limited range of options. Notions of spiritual superiority must have seemed irresistible weapons to turn against the crude denigration that formed the other pole of western evaluation.

In his essay 'Indian Images with Many Arms' (1934, 1991 edn), Coomaraswamy finds that he needs to make explicit the values which provide the unity and integrity of sacral images. The political context is provided by 'a certain class of critics', western philologists and historians, who are applying a crudely realist notion of art. These critics find in Indian art that 'the idea of power is clumsily expressed by the multiplication of members'. Coomaraswamy quotes epithets such as 'hideous and grotesque', 'hideous deities', while a Sir George Birdwood finds that the 'monstrous shapes of the Puranic deities are unsuitable for the higher forms of artistic representation; and this is possibly why sculpture and painting are unknown as fine arts in India' (cited Coomaraswamy 1991:96).

Coomaraswamy brings a formidable array of specifically aesthetic arguments to bear on such crass statements. In his essay 'The Dance of Siva', he virtually sets in place some of the parameters for a relatively new Indian discourse on dance which has endured into the present. Its features may be characterised as follows: the linking of the dance theory to the meaning of iconography; a detailed textualisation of the iconography with specific attention to associated myths; a system of inter-textual references with which to establish the existence of a pan-Indian system of meanings; and finally, a lyrical appreciation and re-validation of the integrity of Indian vision.

However, such aesthetic arguments are embedded by Coomaraswamy within a proto-nationalist framework which re-works the premises of orientalist veneration.[3] Instead of locating India's 'golden age' somewhere in the past, nationalists located it as a potential still inhering in India's spirituality, but which could release its full utopian contribution to the world only on the basis of self-rule:

> **I have suggested that India has nothing of more value to offer to the world than her religious philosophy, and her faith in the application of philosophy to social prob-**

lems... If, either in ignorance or in contempt of Asia, constructive European thought omits to seek the cooperation of Eastern philosophers, there will come a time when Europe will not be able to fight Industrialism, because this enemy will be entrenched in Asia. Nor will it be possible for the European nationalist ideal that every nation should choose its own form of government, and lead its own life, to be realized, so long as the European nations have, or desire to have, possessions in Asia. ('What Has India Contributed to Human Welfare?', essay written in 1915, for the London Athenaeum, 1991:36-7)

PART 1

Siva: The Cosmic Dancer

What is the relevance of this history to the performance of *Siva* in Australia?

THE CLASSICAL/FOLK DISTINCTION IN REPRESENTATIONS OF NATIONAL CULTURE

The overlapping of certain key terms in both orientalism and nationalism, particularly around religion and spirituality, has meant that Indian culture has come to be represented internationally in the artistic sphere through those arts most closely allied to centres of religion such as the temples. I have written extensively elsewhere on the complex internal re-constitution this has required of 'temple dances' such as Bharata Natyam where, for example, lower caste but prestigious groups of women dancers were displaced by middle class women centrally involved in the constitution of a nationalist discourse (Ram n.d *a*).

The dance style 'Kuchipudi' taught by the Canberra dance company, is less prestigious in the nationalist discourse, but as another 'temple dance', it nevertheless partakes in its own way of this history of re-constitution as a genre of 'classical dance'. Indian dances more centrally concerned with themes derived from daily life such as births, deaths, weddings, harvests are classified as 'folk' dances in India, and have not made the transition to the modern concert stage. This differentiation continues on in Australia. Indian 'folk' dances may continue to be important to immigrant community groups, but do not form the repertoire of the two Indian dance companies that aspire to enter the 'mainstream' of professional dance in Australia.

A simple multiculturalism which takes the culture of the non-European 'Other' as unproblematic (both to the westerner but especially to the member of that culture), and as a given object for promotion, fails to recognise this prior history of colonialist interactions with nationalism in the colonies. In neglecting to interrogate this legacy, multiculturalism threatens to further entrench the most easily availaible – and hence the most dominant – representations of a culture that come to hand. When Daumal witnessed Uday Shankar, the word 'civilisation' pronounced itself within him as if for the first time. Yet this was neither the first nor the last time that such assessments served to classify India and Indian dance. According to Menon who has been on the ACT Cultural Council from 1992-3, as well as currently being a member of the Dance Committee of the Australia Council, funding proposals from Indian dance groups are rarely classified as 'folk' or 'ethnic'. Instead, they are representatives of a great 'civilisation' (personal communication). Yet the classification of certain art forms as confirming the existence of a civilisation, while others are understood to represent 'the folk', must be understood as a characteristic of cultural domination wherever it occurs, including in India with its distinction between the '*desi*' and the '*margi*'.[4]

The Performance

Siva opens with the chanting of hymns from the Rig Veda by temple priests in Kerala: the program tells us they have never before been recorded on tape, and that the temple priests gave 'elaborate instructions for its use' (Menon 1993). The chants of the priests sound not simply archaic but slightly shocking to Indian ears trained to expect a lighter quality of melodic utterance at an evening's entertainment on stage. These *slokas* are intoned by the priests, pregnant with the gravity of a ritual performative context. The dance sequence opens with women in sculpturesque poses, but with their backs to the audience. For the rest of the evening, we are treated to an exploration of Siva dedicated to restoring 'the mystery and indefinability' (Menon 1993) of an ancient strand of Hinduism, in contradistinction to the popularised explorations of Visnu more readily available in the repertoire of the south Indian genres of classical dance.

The readiest interpretation of *Siva*, and the one most easily availaible to Anglo-Australians and Indians alike, is as the unfolding of a timeless dance form, steeped in Indian spirituality, and conveying the other-worldly essence of India.

The problem is not one of simple error. There *are* spiritual well-springs in performing 'temple' dance styles, even within the terms of a modern concert stage. The historical context of south Indian temple worship gives to these dances their central narratives which revolve around the themes of love and power in the religious mythological imagination. Recent efforts to depart from orientalism by historians have sometimes taken the form of stressing the importance of kingly power as an alternative and dynamic principle in the Indian polity (cf. Dirks 1987). However, even when the dance styles were performed in kingly courts, the context is difficult to describe as 'secular', owing to the intricate semiotic overlapping of notions of kingly power with notions of the sacred power appropriate to male deities (Narayana Rao et al. 1992). The rituals of evoking power in all its *aesthetic* perfection – a process in which dance and music were central – were therefore transposable from temple to court and vice versa.

It is therefore not possible, were it even necessarily desirable, to depart entirely from the terrain of religion in our interpretation of *Siva*. Instead, the production exemplifies the fruitful strategy of staying within the religious terrain while challenging the particular interpretation of Indian religion which has become dominant. In the Kailash company's production, the style and idiom are given by the religious tradition, but this does not occur at the expense of the operation of a conscious and critical intelligence, evidence of which is writ large in the particular assemblages and selections of texts, readings and choreographies, and in the re-interpretations of meaning in the performance.

It is tempting to immediately assimilate such evidence of selectivity to the sign of modernity.

However, there is, quite simply, more than one 'tradition' at work here. In addition to religious mythology and narratives, the traditions bequeathed by Sanskrit theatre and dramaturgy to temple dance are of an explicitly aesthetic order. The *Natya Sastra* (composed anywhere between sixth century BC and sixth century AD) assumes the need for conscious effort in order to develop specifically aesthetic means of representation. There is no assumption here of spirituality as an outpouring either of individual performers' inner subjectivity nor as a mechanical effect of prescriptions. While dance and drama are meant to take place within a broad acknowledgement of the power of the gods, particularly of Siva as the god of dance, and the text itself claims divine origin as the fifth Veda, the emphasis of the treatise is to develop the concrete means available to skilled

aestheticians to create an aesthetic effect on their audience. This includes the use of costume, make up, lighting and stage management as well as song, mime, rhetoric, narrative, drama, and the techniques specific to dance such as utilising facial expression, hands, feet, bodily stances and movement. With the aid of these techniques, the skilled performer aims to arouse in audiences the appropriate *rasas* or emotions. These emotions are also not the raw emotions of everyday experience. Like the aesthetic theory itself, *rasa* is a highly conscious rendering of emotion as effect. The *rasa* of erotic love, for example, known as *sringara rasa*, would in real life be termed 'anubhava' (experience). This experience contains many transitory and not necessarily pleasurable emotions such as doubt, jealousy, impatience etc. Through artistic technique, the experience of love is re-presented to the audience in a form where it can be stabilised enough to be savoured – much as cooking transforms raw ingredients into a relishable *taste*.

'Innovation' in *Siva*

In *Siva*, and other productions by the Kailash company, the director Padma Menon takes up this permission, indeed, this injunction given by the tradition, to think carefully as an aesthetician and as performer, about audiences and new contexts. There are new demands in utilising a western stage setting, or in adapting to the separation of audience from performers by spatial distance, by lighting arrangements, and indeed by cultural barriers. In *Siva*, her response to this last challenge has led to the adoption of English translations of devotional poetry, accompanied not by dance (*nritta*) as such, but by the use of expressive gestures (*abhinaya*) and mime. In previous performances such as *Parijatha*, she has incorporated the device of a 'comic' trickster figure, whose role is to communicate directly to the audience and to provide a commentary on the unfolding of events.

There are also the deliberate choices that she has made in presenting an existant but neglected strand in the Kuchipudi repertoire – that dealing with Siva's dance (*tandava nritta*) as against reproducing dances relating to Vaisnavism (that is, derived from the worship of Visnu). Both strands are conceived of as co-eval in the history of devotional Hinduism or *bhakti*.[5] *Bhakti* has been crucial in the development of cultural constructions of emotion, of religion, of aesthetic as well as social experimentation. It has entered into music, into popular devotional practices, into dance, as into the cultural mainstream. Menon, however, takes '*bhakti*' not exclusively as a generic set of emotions as they have already been choreographed into dance, but turns also to the actual poetic texts themselves, and along with the oral renditions of the best and most sensitive of the available English translations (Ramanujam 1973)[6], has her dancers directly attempt another kind of translation: the translation of the oral poetic meanings into the movements of the body. The results include some of the most thrilling and intense moments of the evening, with the movements of the dancer to the rhythm of '*jhanana jhanana*' imaginatively evoking the pulsation of ecstatic energies from one end of the body to the other.

A break with the erotics of hetero-sexual domination/subordination

The very turn to the figure of Siva allows Menon to reformulate the terms of dance and its relation to devotion.

The interpretation of devotion and of the emotions which accompany it have become dominated in the south Indian dance repertoire by the figure of the *nayika*, the love-lorn heroine languishing for her lover, who is none other than the male divinity himself (we may transpose divinity for king/heroic war-

rior without much alteration). While there are in every dance performance long and intense passages of pure rhythm without any narrative intent, the interpretation of the love of man for god has tended towards the *rasa* I have referred to earlier as *sringara rasa* or erotic love. This love, as the love of an inferior for the superior, or of the part for the whole, orients the narrative perspective towards that of the woman – the more incomplete partner – as she communicates to her female companion her hopeless love for the absent and virile male/divine. In other words, there is a playing out of the eroticism of power and submission.

Padma Menon's decision to revive the 'pre-anthropomorphic' complexities of meaning attached to the figure of Siva gives her an opportunity to break free of this particular dominant interpretation. Instead of being relegated to the contained space of a statue in the corner of every performance (as 'Nataraja', or god of dance, to be propitiated as inspiration), Siva now takes over the entire stage and the entire evening. In the course of this 'takeover' he restores to dance its wider evocation of the meaning of energy and spirituality.

These meanings escape from their confines within the heterosexual dyad and indeed, from the confines of socially defined eroticism itself. Instead the dance becomes a celebration of the energies which connect the body to the flow of water and of life, of the tense and necessarily contradictory equipoise between ascetic containment and the unleashing of creation/destruction and death that leaves us with little opportunity for a passive form of erotic contemplation and longing, or for anticipating the resolution of union.

Gender transpositions

For the women who are Padma's students, brought up in a social context in Australia where the erotics of hierarchical emotion and submission are certainly present, but not as highly developed as they are in Indian culture, the turn to 'Siva' gives the performers permission to make connections with what for many of them is their own cultural heritage – but in a manner which is less restrictive and possibly less at odds with their own subjectivity. To see female dancers open the performance with their backs to the audience runs against the grain not only of the usual 'openness' of dancers to the audience, of hosts to guests, but it also violates the gender specific prescription that the female body in Indian culture must remain ever-open to pleasing and servicing society. Several Indian members of the audiences reported unease and dissatisfaction with such choreography (personal communication).

Not all of the innovations we see in *Siva* are a product of conscious intention or choice by Menon. There are also wider historical forces shaping the changes within dance forms within India. This is particularly evident in the sphere of gender transpositions within dances such as Kuchipudi. Unlike other temple dances such as Bharata Natyam, Kuchipudi was danced exclusively by men until the middle of this century. One result of this feature was a far greater freedom of movement in the dance form, with dramatic upward leg extensions for example, as well as a greater freedom in expressing and interpreting the erotic and comic aspects of theatre. Women's entry into the dance form has not been allowed to occur without an accompanying curtailment of such freedoms. The bodily movements of the erotic woman (such as the swaying of the hips) have been subdued, and we have also witnessed in India, a gender polarisation of the two main genres in the repertoire.

Medieval dance texts such as *Abhinaya Darpana* by Nandikesvara (1934edn.)[7], distinguish between two gendered forms of dance or *nritta* – the more langorous and feminine *lasya*, and the dynamic rest-

less energy of the *tandava* form of dance. *Lasya* is not only associated with the depiction of the gentler emotions such as love, the *sringara rasa*, but it is also attributed to Parvati, the female consort of Siva, who is said to have taught it to Usa, the daughter of Vana. *Tandava*, on the other hand, is reserved for performing the adoration of the gods, and is attributed to Siva (also known as Tandu). The dances choreographed for male dancers today strive to confine them to the *tandava* style. The *lasya* mode, and with it, the depiction of *sringara rasa* has become the exclusive province of female dancers.

This recent history accounts for the unexpected challenge to Indian audience's gender norms in seeing women perform a whole evening of dance in the *tandava* style in the Australian production. To see the unbounded movements and unsmiling and intense countenance with which Aruna Sampath whirls through the stage in her rendition of Siva is a significant break with the boundedness of feminine comportment as it is socialised into women's motility in everyday life, but even in dance, in Indian culture.[8]

Challenges to gender norms are again of particular importance in the immigrant context, where the imperatives of cultural transmission are not only in tension with the Australian cultural environment but also in tension with the considerable changes and transformations of Indian culture itself. Many women dancers in India – such as Chandralekha of Madras, Manjusri Chaki Sircar, or Mallika Sarabhai (known to Australian audiences for her role as Draupadi in Peter Brooks' production of the *Mahabharata*) – are themselves uneasy with reproducing the *nayika* role referred to earlier and are responding with a search for more dynamic interpretations of dance, embodiment and gender. Such experimentation is usually edited out in the version of 'Indian culture' which is preserved for purposes of transmission to a younger generation of Indian-Australians. It is therefore vital to recognise the significance of having in Australia a teacher who is herself young, intellectually labile and at the same time deeply immersed in the cultural language of Indian aesthetic traditions.

PART 2

Chandalika: An Indian contribution to Questions of Difference and/or Equality

Chandalika, a play by Rabindranath Tagore, deals with the conversion of an untouchable woman (Chandalika) to Buddhism. The dancers in the Kailash company presented in Canberra (July 1994) an interpretation rich in materials for further reflection. I will utilise the performance as the basis on which to develop certain themes I have touched upon already. First, I will use it to expand upon the question of how 'Indian culture' might best be represented and understood. 'India', like many other non-western cultures, has been reduced to a few signifiers – for instance, 'caste' or 'religion' – that become metonyms for an entire society. *Chandalika* allows us to consider instead the resources within the culture for auto-critique, in what are at the very least, various competing versions of 'tradition'. A conscious intellectual effort to make available to people in Australia the variety of internal critique and reflection characteristic of Indian history is vital for both Indians and non-Indians in Australia, if for somewhat different reasons.

Secondly, I wish to present my comments on *Chandalika* in a way that critically brings to the foreground assumptions that inform multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism is commonly viewed as a way of fulfilling *immigrant* aspirations. The stake of the the dominant cultural group in multiculturalism is often no more than a means of adding to the variety of cultural 'styles' that are availaible for consumption. Such views continue to reproduce the notion of immigrant cultures as separate enclaves, while doing nothing to really critically challenge the hegemony of the dominant 'ethnic' group in Australia.

By contrast, it is possible to view the questions raised in the production of ***Chandalika***, not as an indictment of the horrors of 'caste' that exist in a barbaric oriental land, but as presenting a critical, specifically Indian contribution to the debates on difference and equality which have been so central to Australian and Euro-American politics of identity in the last two decades. As Aijaz Ahmad puts it in his critique of Jameson's 'rhetoric of Otherness' on 'Third World Literature':

..a *real* knowledge of those other traditions may force the US literary theorists to ask questions about their own tradition which they have not asked heretofore (1992:103).

The "two Padmas" and two alternative visions of untouchable femininity

It is the 'two Padmas', that is, Padma Menon and Padma Raman, that I will concentrate on in these comments. Their collective re-interpretation and rendition of the two key female roles in the play raises significant questions about gender and caste.

Taken together, the two versions of female untouchability played by the two Padmas are a form of tribute to the complexity of Tagore's vision.

The Daughter

Chandalika, the daughter, goes through a series of central moments in her responses to untouchability. I would suggest that these moments are best considered, not so much as the realistic portrayal of an individual untouchable's life, as an aesthetic exploration of a number of possible ways that stigmatised status might be experienced.

I would like to explore the significance of the first moment we are shown in the dance. The woman Chandalika does not *begin* with an internalised notion of her own untouchability. On the contrary, she is shown adorning herself with meticulous care, with ***pottu***, flowers and bangles – the very emblems of auspicious femininity in south India. Moreover, this is no different from the feminine preparations undertaken by women from upper castes – they would differ only in the degree of elaboration permitted by their greater wealth. Within the straitened circumstances of poverty, Chandalika regards herself as a self-respecting woman, sharing the desires of other women for the bangles and flowers she attempts to buy from vendors. Indeed, she also aspires to devotion towards the same god, Krishna, who inspires the devotion of higher castes.

We are therefore plunged straight into some of the profound tensions and contradictions of untouchability. Untouchables do not form a separate culture. Unlike forms of racism and cultural marginalisation such as those experienced by indigenous black people or immigrants, which invite comparison with untouchability, untouchables have no separate cultural formation to draw upon although there are certainly differences. Instead, those in untouchable communities are integrated into the same cultural system as higher castes, and are therefore bound to share similar values and aspirations. Indeed, the religion permits dreams of a common humanity in the name of the transcendental divine. Yet, untouchables are unambiguously and brutally rejected when they express these aspirations with too much confidence or eagerness.

The contradiction has been potent enough to generate, (from as early as the seventh century for the south of India) searing critiques of caste from within Hindu traditions which I have referred to earlier under the collective rubric of *bhakti*. *Bhakti* poets across India have performed two kinds of operations. They have critiqued and derided inequality, pointing to its socially constructed and arbitrary nature, and they have also produced an *alternative emotional culture* which is able to produce and to sustain living testimonials to the experiential accessibility of divine love.

Tagore's critique of untouchability in *Chandalika* is more modernist in flavour, influenced by the social reform movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the play as we see it danced is neverthless shaped by the basic idiom of *bhakti*, culminating as it does with the religious solution of Buddhism. Buddhism functions within the play as it has historically: namely, by offering an alternative to caste within the egalitarian enclave of the *sangha*.

I am suggesting that these religious traditions have mediated, as well as elaborated, the tension between a shared culture which generates common aspirations across castes, but which simultaneously renders a category of people ineligible for a true sense of *communitas*, that is, of shared mutuality in social and religious transactions. But how are these tensions lived by individuals?

Chandalika lives out what is an extraordinarily violent and hurtful set of contradictions at different experiential levels.

At the first moment, there is sheer bewilderment and hurt. She still has confidence enough in the god of compassion and justice, in whom she has taken refuge (*sharanam*), to ask him: Why this curse? Why is dishonour (*avamanam*) her lot (*bhagyam*)?

We are commonly asked to perceive Indian religion as creating passive attitudes to fate, and to *karma*, particularly among oppressed groups. Chandalika's responses are far more complex. Her questions change the meaning of *bhagyam* from the more common interpretation of untouchability as fate, into a search for understanding the logic of such a fate.

There is, of course, no real 'logic' (in the rationalist sense of the term), to be found. The second moment, complexly articulated, comes at the culmination of the rejections. In what was to my mind the most powerfully moving piece of dancing by Padma Menon during the evening, she is ablaze by now with the depth of the humiliations she has suffered. Here again, there is no passive acceptance of rejection. Faced with the verdict of untouchability, she is now shown actively schooling her own will and agency into a kind of savage acceptance. There is a turning away from belief in the presence of the divine for the needy, or in notions of justice. Instead, there is only degradation, and she visibly writhes in the agony, while exhorting herself to 'exult in the (self) disgust'.

The body in untouchable femininity

Although Tagore's play conveys the outrage of violating a common humanity, Padma's dance conveys a deeply gendered and embodied perspective on the violation. In the opening scene, as I have said, it is the *pottu*, flowers and bangles of an auspicious woman's morning feminine preparations which convey the girl's sense of pride in her own being. When we see the untouchable woman dress herself with the same kinds of half-habituated movements that Indian children grow up watching when their mothers and other Indian woman perform their daily grooming, what is created is a very embodied sense of the continuity of female experience.

Rejection is similarly corporeal, conveyed in part through the gestures of hands and face well known

in Indian culture, but also importantly through the besmirching with mud of the very garments that the untouchable girl had so carefully tied on that morning. Chandalika's horror is as much at the violation of her feminine purity as of a more generally conceived humanity.

Her question to her mother then becomes, 'Why did you give me this life? Why did you give me this body?'

The same body that gave her a sense of her own auspicious femininity, becomes a curse. The very capacity to dream and have aspirations becomes a source of torment. The mother who gave her life and dreams, becomes in part an enemy.

By the time Chandalika meets the monk, she has internalised the stigma and the curse, and it is only at this point that we come across the *dharmic* notion of untouchability as retribution for unknown sins in the past. She now begins to contrast her own *paapam* (sin) to the *punya* (merit) of the monk. This forms the third moment of untouchability, and one which now continues to recur throughout the rest of the evening. From here on there is frequent recourse to notions such as purification. The water she gives to the monk is simultaneously the holy water that purifies and washes away her sins. The logic of purification develops until finally it is the monk's Buddhist *sangha* itself which must help her to transcend her sinning existence.

Transcendence of the body is postponed till the last moment of the evening, however. For the girl initially experiences even the monk's equalitarian interpretation of life force (as flowing in her and him alike), his addressing her as 'goddess', in terms of a rejuvenation of bodily desire for life and love. For her, the rekindling of hope is integrally tied in with romantic love and sexual desire, even though such love is always mingled with devotion in the idiom of *bhakti* ('If I can be but a grain of sand under your feet...'). She is celebratory of the sense of *punar janmam*, of a new birth, of rebirth.

But this too, must ultimately be left behind, perceived as a source of selfishness. She must leave behind her body, reinterpreted for the last time as locus of selfhood and desire – the site of *maya* – as she turns towards the life of a Buddhist nun. Re-birth is no longer an occasion for celebration, rather, it is with the very cycle of births and re-births that she must now effect a break.

The Mother

It is here that the figure of the mother offers a significant alternative vision, even if it remains inevitably underdeveloped. I say inevitable, because the theme of the body as temptation, as *maya*, has been dominant in ascetic and renunciatory Hindu traditions, with which Buddhism cannot be said to have entirely broken. The figure of the mother offers therefore only a tentative glimpse of another understanding.

The figure of Chandalika's mother, played by Padma Raman, is a stunning portrayal of a woman who has not only never questioned her identity as an untouchable woman, but who derives considerable strengths from her own social positioning.

At one level, the contrast is drawn as one between pragmatism and romanticism:

Mother: What is wrong? You sit in a daze. What miracle are you waiting for?

Chandalika: In the forest, there are no flowers, in my sorry heart there are no rituals, in nullity there is no bhakti.

Mother: You have not drawn the mukku. There is no fire in the hearth. Take the goats for feeding, I can hear the palace bells. I hope you awake from your dream.

Chandalika: And who gave me dreams? And who shattered those dreams?

Yet the mother's stance can be seen as more than pragmatism. I will take just the drawing of the

mukku as my example. By this I take her to mean the ritual marker drawn by southern women at every dawn to define the threshold of the domestic space. The *mukku* is symbolised by decorative lines but also by elaborate patterns of ritual signficance (*kolam* in Tamil). There is more than practicality at stake here for women. It is part of the process by which women simultaneously perform both domestic labour, and give it a ritual and artistic signification of their own. Their own auspicious embodiment as wives, daughters and mothers becomes transposed onto domestic space, to become an auspicious sphere through their activities.

Again, this is an experience of femininity which cuts across caste divisions, but it is lived in particularly contradictory ways by untouchable women. As untouchables and women, they may be be performing auspicious functions within their own community, while simultaneously being regarded as *in*auspicious by upper castes.

In addition, Chandalika's mother is portrayed as enjoying a presence which is powerful both in spiritual and in sexual terms. She is in direct communication with spiritual powers, can invoke possession by the gods, and we can assume that she looks forward to her daughter being able to enjoy such a heritage.

Far from rejecting her daughter's awakening sexuality, she initially welcomes it, treating it with tender curiosity, evidently thankful that her daughter has re-entered the stream of life and living. ('Oho you crazy ascetic, nursing a broken heart. Your face turns the colour of the dawn. Tell me, who is it who holds time motionless for you?')

Her shock and disapproval ensue rather from the discovery that her daughter is in love with a monk. The reason for the disapproval is clear – a monk cannot give her daughter the kind of sexual and romantic happiness she expects and deserves. The mother's dilemma further deepens as the daughter pleads with her to use her spiritual powers to bring the monk to her bed.

Mother: My magic will move the immovable. But do you want this lifeless form, drained of all desires?

In this question lies one of the central features of the mother's reconstruction of untouchability. Instead of seeking transcendence of her own social location – as woman, as untouchable, as bearer of corporeality in a culture which prizes transcendence – the mother utilises the space allocated to her by destiny in order to carve out a sphere of power for herself. In the original play, this allows her to heal no less a personage than the king's daughter (see Menon, Catalogue 1994). Tagore's device is romantically extreme, but his device does exist in a continuum with the paradoxical centrality of untouchables to possession-based worship of village goddesses in southern India. These are not simple inversions of some norm, rather, they help constitute the norm.

Padma Raman's dance of spirit possession brilliantly dramatises this turning of corporeality into power. In much the same fashion as I have witnessed among women in spirit shrines and villages in south India, Padma's dance transforms the meanings of the female body. As with the performance of *Siva*, but without the element of historical accident, the dance of possession shakes off 'normal', domestic feminine embodiment, revealing capacities for enormous vigour and strength as movement and hair come unleashed. Clad in the archetypal sari colours of the village, Padma dances a dance of possession, through which we are permitted to glimpse another vision of femininity as *sakti*, as primary giver of life and energy.

Difference and Equality: some Australian inflections

Based on my conversations with the two Padmas, as well as Padma Menon's own publicly availaible 'Notes on the production' (Catalogue 1994), I would

suggest that the Australian company registers both an appreciation of the complexity of Tagore's vision of Chandalika, as well as introducing new overtones that arise from contemporary consciousness of issues of difference and equality.

Padma Raman is saddened, for example, by the fact that Tagore retains the contrast between the untouchable mother's spiritual powers as 'black magic' versus the Buddhist monk's powers as the higher form of spirituality. It is no accident that the mother is named Maya in the play – namely, the very locus of the desiring and illusory body – which must be left behind and overcome. It is of further interest to note that in Tagore's original play, the mother dies after using her powers to bring the monk to her daughter.

The daughter's access into the egalitarian sect of Buddhists is therefore bought at a considerable price: the death of the embodied mother, the death of her own sexuality, as well as the death of a certain vision of feminine embodiment as life giving, sexually active, and simultaneously spiritual as *śakti*.

It is significant that the women in the Kailash production felt moved to introduce at least a gesture in order to reclaim the ethical integrity of the mother's being. Before embarking on her possession dance, the mother's ethical dilemma is depicted with dignity, as a woman who must embark on a course of action whose consequences she is aware of, but cannot subscribe to completely. She asks, with tremendous strength and humility, the forgiveness of the gods for 'looking after her own (kin)'.

There are other palpable traces of the internal struggles of the women dancers. Unable to come to terms with the idea of the conclusion as 'resolution', for example, Padma Menon ends the final scene with deliberate abruptness.

It is small wonder that Menon was unable to effect a satisfactory resolution. The questions which remain with us are central to one of the foremost dilemmas of contemporary consciousness and social struggle: is it possible to rescue 'difference' from the hierarchical evaluation of upper (caste)/ lower (caste), pure/impure, male body/ female body? Is Chandalika's abrupt departure for an egalitarian enclave conceived as ideally sexless, genderless, and casteless, indeed the path to liberation (*mokṣha*) that Tagore may have envisaged? Can we afford the price of 'universal assimilation'? (Menon, Notes on the production.)

Such issues have become crucial not only in the context of multiculturalism, but in the context of women's struggle for equality, where equality constantly threatens to become assimilation into dominant male norms. India, with its simultaneous elaboration of difference-as-hierarchy, as well as socio-religious movements for equality (of which Tagore represents only the 'modernist' version), can allow us to reflect upon and extend this discussion in new and fruitful ways.

CONCLUSION

'Tradition' and 'Innovation'

Dance forms such as Indian temple dances, with the centuries of historical depth entailed in their evolution, face a stark dilemma when confronting western hegemony over cultural categorisation. Earlier generations of Indian women and men struggled hard to purge Indian dance of those social definitions which rendered them less than respectable in terms of a Victorian morality : namely, the label of 'prostitution' which accompanied all female sexuality occuring outside the confines of marriage (see Ram n.d *b*, Srinivasan 1988, Ramanujam et al 1994). In the process they won the right to have the dances viewed instead as representatives of an ancient civilisation, accompanying and legitimating India's

entry into the world stage of independent nation states. However, they also simultaneously incurred the cost of western definitions of 'ancient civilisations', which as we have seen, are constructed in binary opposition to the dyanamism, the self-conscious reflexivity and the innovativeness of subjectivity under modernity.

Multiculturalism in Australia cannot afford to be ignorant of such histories, for they haunt the terms in which non-western cultural forms are evaluated in contemporary Australia. What constitutes innovativeness? What constitutes tradition? How is each relatively rewarded in terms of appraisals by art critics, by funding bodies, by the so-called immigrant 'community' itself?

Bourdieu has argued, in the context of class domination *within* western culture, that definitions of value and merit in art are forever being re-constituted in ways that dis-enfranchise the working class:

The confessions with which manual workers faced with modern pictures betray their exclusion ('I don't understand what it means' or 'I like it but I don't understand it') contrasts with the knowing silence of the bourgeois, who, though equally disconcerted, at least know that they have to refuse — or at least conceal — the naive expectations of expressiveness that is betrayed by the concern to 'understand' .. (1984:43)

These 'games of distinction', – 'these winks and nudges, silent, hidden references to other artists, past or present, confirm a complicity which excludes the layperson, who is always bound to miss what is essential, namely the interrelations and interractions of which the work is only the silent trace' (1993:109) – assume a particular form with regard to immigrants from Asia. These immigrants may well, as Ahmed points out in his criticisms of 'Third World' intellectuals in western enclaves (such as Edward Said), belong to privileged classes in their own society (1992:13,159ff). Indeed, the predominant tenor of Australian immigration policy towards 'Asians' has given little opportunity for any other kind of immigration. Neverthless, when it comes to the cultural capital requisite of the western intellectual class, these immigrants are virtually reconstituted as 'laypersons'. More accurately, their cultural capital, which has been fashioned in a relationship to an older colonial discourse on high art, now falls foul of the contemporary avant-gardist versions of the same. Here again Bourdieu's comments on the way in which 'outdatedness' and 'old fashionedness' are constantly re-constituted within a power struggle, have a peculiar resonance all of their own for post-colonial subjects:

The ageing of authors, works or schools is something quite different from the product of a mechanical slippage into the past. It is the continuous creation of the battle between those who have made their names and are struggling to stay in view and those who cannot make their own names without relegating to the past the established figures whose interest lies in freezing the movement of time, fixing the present state of the field forever. On the one side are the dominant figures, who want continuity, identity, reproduction; on the other, the newcomers, who seek discontinuity, rupture, difference, revolution. To 'make one's name' means making one's mark, achieving recognition (in both senses) of one's difference from other producers, especially the most consecrated of them..(1993:106)

In the immigrant context, the power struggle between 'the classical' and 'the avant-garde' as this is played out in the field of western art becomes superimposed on quite another distinctive set of power struggles specifically colonial in character. Here the key terms of distinction are between 'tradition' and 'modernity'. Post-colonial and immigrant groups from the ex-colonies have a distinctive understanding of these terms, since 'tradition' has been understood not only in opposition to modernity, but to

colonial power and western hegemony. The particularities of post-colonial contexts are urged by several Indian commentators such as Gita Kapur:

Historically invented in the process of decolonization, tradition, governed in each case by a national ideology which emphasises difference, becomes a sufficiently variegated sign to merit close and special attention. (1990:114)

Using examples such as Coomaraswamy and Gandhi, Kapur finds in their use of 'tradition',

the power to transform routinely transmitted materials from the past into discursive forms that merit in consequence to be called contemporary, even radical. (1990:110)

As may be anticipated by Kapur's description, 'innovation' in the post-colonial context in turn takes on some of *its* specific meanings from this broader re-definition of 'tradition'. On the one hand, colonialism wrought incredible changes in the performative genres of dance and on the context in which this dance was performed. Women like Padma Menon and myself are beneficiaries of a complex process which shifted performances from temples and courts to the concert stage, but also from being the preserve of ritually honoured but non-elite women and men, to the preserve of a female elite active in nationalist re-definitions of culture.

At the same time, this very process of colonially induced rupture spawned the desire to preserve, to re-discover forgotten knowledge, to give elite recognition to the true, non-elite bearers of the past. Thus, group after group of dancers from the urban middle classes go in search of the true guru in the village: the male ***nattuvanar*** (musician), the female ***devadasi*** (temple dancer), or else the search takes the form of learning 'new', that is, forgotten or non-elite genres of dance and theatre. Such a plot forms the basis of a recent national television program, 'Nupoor', produced by a well known south Indian dancer, Hema Malini. The ***devadasi*** is now the subject of doctoral dissertations by Indian feminists (Srinivasan 1988), while dancers such as Padma Subramaniam have earned doctorates by conducting research into temple iconography and incorporating it into the dance repertoire. Others discuss the importance of re-admitting the explicitly erotic and sexual framework which underpinned the earlier community of dancers, in a reaction against the post-Victorian 'cleansing' of dance (Meduri 1988, Ramanujam et al 1994).

Padma Menon's own shift from the Bharata Natyam style, now firmly monopolised by urban Tamil cultural elites, to the less favoured, more rurally-based style of Kuchipudi forms part of this wider pattern, as does her desire to explore the lesser known strands within Kuchipudi.

The widespread interpretation of innovation as the re-inscription of continuity across colonially defined ruptures must be understood as among the key responses of post-colonial intellectuals from societies such as India. These are ruptures not only between the indigenous and the foreign, but between urban present/rural past, individual performer/ community-based past, elite based practice/non-elite history, 'secular' concert performance versus religious temple based performance, the 'purity' of the sacred versus previously more mixed notions of the religious in relation to sexual practices; local versus national definitions of culture. Menon's production of Rabindranath Tagore's ***Chandalika***, as 'an examination of the marginalised – women, untouchables, idealists, dreamers' (Notes on the production), derives from this peculiarly Indian experience of modernity in relation to the past, an experience crucially constituted in the realm of the aesthetic.

To this already complex set of contradictions that the medium of dance is required to mediate within India, we have to add the imperatives of immigrant

life in places like Australia: namely, to transmit 'culture' from first to second generation. There are continuities that link the post-colonial agenda of Indians such as Coomaraswamy to that of contemporary middle class immigrant Indians, such as the long-standing attempt to figure as cultural ambassadors, to win over dominant western audiences to the value of Indian culture. The continuity of the task accounts for the persistance of an earlier nationalism in the dance discourse that accompanies most performances. It is in the nature of the power struggle that this discourse will already sound old-fashioned, perhaps even 'orientalist' to the ears of the very western intellectuals at whom the discourse is aimed.

In a fuller and more adequate discussion of the Indian re-definitions of tradition and innovation, it would be necessary to involve the legacies of pre-colonial Indian aesthetics. The aesthetics of Indian music and dance adds fuel to post-colonial attempts to view tradition as a valued but changing structure, while innovation is to be forged in a relationship which is not antithetical and hostile to what has gone before.

If I may derive my example from the domain of south Indian music which is essential to every dance performance, the relationship between *raga* and its *sangathis* in a song (*kriti*) hit off this relationship perfectly. The *raga* sets the limits of a song by dictating certain notes which may be used in ascent and descent, precluding the use of other notes. At a certain point in the song the *sangathis* start to repeat the *raga*. Initially, the repetitions are simple in structure, but

> **each successive step [is] a build-up on the previous one, sprouting and budding in new directions, opening up new vistas in the raga, and reaching a climax... Through the repetition of a line of musical notes and words, expectations are aroused. When an unexpected combination of notes startles the listener, it brings a burst of laughter. Conversely, an unpredictable nuance brought out in a variation may sometimes move the listener to a mood of compassion and introspection (Jackson, 1991:146).**

To properly examine the way in which this pre-existing understanding of repetition and variation within a given structure has fuelled anti-colonial strategies would require separate treatment in its own right.[9] But it is worth noting in conclusion that western theorists writing on the mechanisms of contemporary resistance employed by the marginalised, are increasingly interested in exploring the possibility of innovation within the broader idiom of repetition and acquiescence rather within the idiom of total rupture. de Certeau's work on 'the cultural activity of the non-producers of culture' in everyday activities such as reading, cooking and shopping, takes as one of its paradigmatic examples the art of the European Middle Ages:

> **Reading thus introduces an 'art' which is anything but passive. It resembles rather that art whose theory was developed by medieval poets and romancers: an innovation infiltrated into the text and even into the terms of a tradition. Imbricated within the strategies of modernity (which identify creation with the invention of a personal language, whether cultural or scientific), the procedures of contemporary consumption appear to constitute a subtle art of 'renters' who know how to insinuate their countless differences into the dominant text (de Certeau, 1988:xxii).**

In the case of Indian dance, the political context of post-coloniality and immigration impels an even greater degree of 'imbrication' between strategies of resistance in the present, and aesthetic strategies given by the past.

Notes

1 I viewed both in Canberra. *Siva* is to be performed in Sydney in November 1995.

2 The other company is the older Bharatham company in Melbourne, under the directorship of Chandra bhanu.

3 The classic examination of the way in which Indian nationalism was both derivative of orientalism, and re-worked its key premises remains Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist thought and the Colonial World – A Derivative Discourse*, 1986

4 The distinction is such a precise translation of the folk/classical terminology – '*desi*' being 'of the local place', and '*margi*' being 'of the path' (a proper course, 'high' as opposed to 'vulgar' style of performance) – that one suspects it to be of recent origin. Until recently, anthropology too, provided only uncritical reproductions of these distinctions, cf. for example Redfield and Singer's 'great' versus 'little' traditions. For a recent innovative departure in this field, see Appadurai et al *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*, 1991.

5 The term '*bhakti*' has come to encompass a range of regionally based religious constructions, originating in south India by the eighth century, which re-interpret the more formalistic interpretations of worship offered by Sanskrit traditions of the Bhagavat Gita. Tamil poets such as the Alvars and the Nayanars begin instead to emphasise a direct experiential relationship with the divine, a relationship which is suffused by emotions derived from the most intimate areas of subjectivity. These areas are typically structured by dyadic forms of social relations: father/son, mother/son, husband/wife, male lover/female lover. The egalitarianism of a direct relationship with divinity is therefore constantly informed by the hierarchy of power and desire.

6 Ramanujam's 1973 translations began a process of making some of the finest poetic and critical traditions in Indian culture available for Anglophone audiences. The following translation gives an indication of both his skill and of the socially subversive messages of the *bhakti* tradition:
The rich / will make temples for Siva. / What shall I, / a poor man, / do? // My legs are pillars: the body the shrine, / the head a cupola / of gold. / Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers, / things standing shall fall, / but the moving ever shall stay.
Basavanna 820 (AD 1106-67) (transl. Ramanujam 1973: 190)

7 The text's title is usually translated as *The Mirror of Gestures*.

8 I have referred earlier to the general significance of *bhakti* in social critique and experimentation. In the specific context of *Siva bhakti*, it is worth noting the critiques of gendered social norms presented by both male and female devotees:
Look here, dear fellow: / I wear these men's clothes only for you. // Sometimes I am man, / sometimes I am woman. // O lord of the meeting rivers / I'll make war for you / but I'll be your devotees' bride.
Basavanna 703 (transl. Ramanujam 1973:29)
Women poets such as Akka Mahadevi (12th century) take up the general themes of moving beyond social distinctions of gender, but infuse it with the particular distress of wishing to transcend the sexual objectification of their female body:
Brother, you've come / drawn by the beauty / of these billowing breasts, / this brimming youth. // I'm no woman, brother, no whore. / Everytime you've looked at me, / Who have you taken me for? / All men other than Chennamallikarjuna / Are faces to be shunned, see, brother.*
* Literally, The Beautiful Jasmine-like Arjuna, a local epithet for Siva.
(Transl. by Susan Daniel, cited Tharu and Lalitha 1991:80).
According to local narrative, and indeed, according to many of her own poems, Mahadevi threw away her female modesty and abandoned all clothing, covered only by her long hair. For examples of the struggles of other female bhakti saints to bring their own experiences as women, often of low caste status, to bear on their religious aspirations, see the anthology by S.Tharu and K.Lalitha (eds.) *Women Writing In India. Volume 1: 600 BC To The Early 20th Century*, 1991.

9 Homi Bhabha's examination of mimicry in the anti-colonial context (1994) developes the theme primarily in terms of the aporias internal to colonial discourse. What I have in mind here requires detailed attention to indigenous traditions of knowledge.

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At a conference of the American Anthropological Association in December 1992 it was suggested that advocates of 'multiculturalism' had failed to make use of the insights gained from anthropology – regarding the politics of the construction of cultural difference – to examine their own presuppositions. In what follows ***Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett*** *pursues this issue. She undertakes 'a critical examination of the varieties of multiculturalism and the way they structure difference'. She identifies six broad types, with sub-groups, of 'discursive positions', constructing an inventory or 'cartography' – a veritable guide to multiculturalism in its many guises.*

Making Difference

Mapping the discursive Terrain of Multiculturalism

[Barbara's point of reference is a North American one and her examples reflect and illustrate the issues and particularities of her 'local' terrain. However, the word 'multiculturalism' will be no less familiar to the Australian reader – as an idea, a policy, a 'problem' and so on. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett's inventory, then, is offered here as a highly relevant and useful critical 'map' and as a provocation.]

A zillion types of multicultural ism

1

Universalist Multiculturalism

Variations on the paradox, 'the universal is multicultural', appear in defense of ballet, opera, and symphonies, whose audiences are declining and whose costs are high – $500,000 to bring a symphony orchestra from abroad to Los Angeles for a week.

a) Appropriation

Updating the old argument that Western elite art forms really are best, by singular and universal standards, art critics claim that Western elite art forms already meet multicultural objectives. Furthermore, they do so better than the sources they appropriate: Martha Graham, for example, proudly referred to herself as a thief. Arlene Croce, dance critic for the New Yorker, explains: 'There may be a need to promote the accessibility of Asian, Hispanic, and African dance companies, many of which lead a marginal life. But the dance forms themselves are hardly inaccessible – they're part of every dance tradition the West knows'. This line of argument naturalizes the process by which 'the West' separates forms from their performers, converts those forms into influences, brings those influences into the centre, leaves the living sources on the margin, and pats itself on the back for being so cosmopolitan. Croce defends the process: 'In dance, high art has always needed to be nourished by folk art, and folk art has always needed the mediation of the theatre. Without the theatre, dance isn't a medium; it's the preserve of anthropologists, not artists'. Where, we might ask, are the performers in this equation?

New York Times music critic, Edward Rothstein, attributes the crisis in western musical tradition to 'an ethnic division in musical culture as a whole' that has relativized standards. 'How', he asks, 'can cultures be compared once a standpoint outside them all is rejected?'. This relativism is the price of 'submission to the systems of judgement employed by the culture being studied'. In contrast, he continues, 'the impulse to universality helps explain why no other civilization has produced fields like anthropology and ethnomusicology'. These disciplines then are themselves evidence of the multiculturalism of Western Civilization.

b) Elevation

Lincoln Center was upfront about its plan 'to elevate jazz to the same level as opera, ballet and symphony'. Nathan Leventhal, president of Lincoln Center, confessed: 'I had the same prejudices about jazz that opera lovers or ballet lovers might have...but I've learned a lot, and now I am a convert. There is as much richness and as much vitality in Duke Ellington as there is in Mozart'. Mozart was the standard that jazz had to meet if it was to be accepted by the artistic academy. In allowing jazz to squeeze through the narrow aperture it opened for a moment, Lincoln Center

reaffirmed the elite culture it represents. The asymmetries of power in the relationship that kept jazz, and much else, out of Lincoln Center until now remain obscure.

c) Apologetics of Inclusion

When a music department meets the diversity mandate by hiring one ethnomusicologist to teach the one 'World Music' course, it reinstates the relationship between the West and the rest.
A remedial approach, the apologetics of inclusion fills in the blanks, but without changing the picture. The very conceptual and institutional structures that produced the exclusions in the first place are replicated, even as inclusions appear to do just the opposite.

2

Common Multiculturalism

'Paradoxical as it may seem, the United States has a common culture that is multicultural', declares educator, Diane Ravitch. This position is voiced by advocates of public education who are charged with producing citizens, scarred by bitter curriculum wars and in competition with private (and parochial) schools. After rooting common culture in democratic values and our 'historical experience as a nation', Ravitch identifies good multiculturalism with pluralism, by which she means 'the co-mingling of diverse cultures in one nation'. She identifies bad multiculturalism with particularism, by which she means 'loyalty to a particular group' – echoes of the fear of divided loyalties. The beauty of Black History Month and Women's History Month, in her view is that 'their purpose is to demonstrate that neither race nor gender is an obstacle to high achievement... if they (all children) aim high and work hard'. Difference, here, is not an asset, but an obstacle to be overcome in a land of equal opportunity. In placing the entire responsibility for success (and failure) upon the individual, we need look no further that the public schools as the instrument for advancement.
Ravitch's notion of 'ethnocentrism' which she uses synonymously with xenophobia, is not what anthropologists generally mean by the term. Indeed if it were, the anthropological project, which affirms the variety of ways of being human, would be over. For Ravitch, the opposite of ethnocentrism is the 'co-mingled', or 'larger culture'.
For contemporary anthropologists, the opposite of ethnocentrism is not the 'larger culture', but its decentring.

3

Avant-gardist Multiculturalism

Embarked on their own decentring operation, avant-garde movements, from the end of the nineteenth century, launched one attack after another on 'bourgeois conformism'. 'No more

masterpieces' declared Antonin Artaud in 1938. We need, in his view, an idea of culture that is first of all 'A protest against the senseless constraint imposed upon the idea of culture by reducing it to a sort of inconceivable Pantheon'.

We can see these ideas in action in the 1990 Los Angeles Festival of the Arts, an anthology of performances from the Pacific Rim. The approach here was not quite the synthesis and hybridity of a Peter Brook or Jerzy Grotowski, of Eugenio Barba's 'theatre anthropology', Victor Turner's 'performing ethnography' or Richard Schechner's interculturalism, or what counted as ethnosyncretisme in 'Magiciens de la Terre' at the Beaubourg in Paris. Rather, the Los Angeles Festival restaged their (the avant-garde's) sources, so to speak, within a new masterwork, the FESTIVAL. Here, the gate opened through which the rest of the world could enter. For once the avant-garde said that the art world doesn't belong to the academy, everyone – well almost everyone – can come in. Anyone that is who will yield to the experience – not because art is universal, but because the reception of avant-garde and experimental performance is based on the assumption that one can sit and watch and enjoy something one does not 'understand'.

Festival director, Sellars, wanted to avoid not only the stiff etiquette of the opera house, but also, he said, 'I want to remove anthropological and ethnographic labels. With their implied superiority of Western culture, those labels are out of date'. It could be said that the ethnographic labels, and the categories associated with them, posed a challenge to the Festival's working concept of art and that the Festival organisers transformed this challenge into a provocation by restaging the 'ethnographic' as art. The Los Angeles Festival began precisely at the point where the ethnographic and the avant-garde converged and it forged its own path by undoing the ethnographic – it not only removed ethnographic labels, but also withheld explanation, asserted the primacy of experience over hermeneutics, demanded attention to form as content, and pleasure in the incomprehensible. In the absence of 'ethnographic labels', performances chanced upon in unfamiliar places became *objets trouvés*, assembled on the surrealist principle of 'blend and clash'.

4

Transnational Multiculturalism

World Beat, discussed by Steven Feld, is a case in point. Some define this music as 'syncretic hybrids, fusings'. Others as 'rip-offs disguised as collaborative synthesis'. World Beat is distinguished from world music, which is the historic stock-in-trade of ethnomusicology. Time does not permit an extended discussion of how multiculturalism is played out here, except to offer Feld's observation that, 'As the discourse of authenticity becomes more militant and nativistic, more complicated and more particularized with interest and taste groups trying to hang onto patches of pure turf, the activities of appropriation will get more overt and outrageous, as well as more subtle, legally sanctioned, accepted and taken-for-granted'.

5

Encyclopaedic Multiculturalism

I take this term from John Comaroff. Here, too, I distinguish several subtypes – modular, paradigmatic, essentialist, centrist, and aggregative – on the basis of how they structure difference:

a) Modular

The modular nature of encyclopedic multiculturalism can be seen with special clarity in national folkloric ensembles – indeed in any medium that represents the nation through an inventory of attributes, their housetypes, costumes, songs, dance, language. The most literal examples can be found in the Ellis Island gift shop, where souvenirs have been produced in modular series, a mug for each nation.

b) Paradigmatic

Paradigmatic approaches proceed as variations on a theme, by asserting structural sameness in the face of difference – a kind of anti-essentialism. Plimoth Plantation and the recent Ellis Island Restoration offer evidence that we are witnessing an era of historical identification by consent (and dissent), rather than descent. Sites long associated with a discrete historical experience and exclusive set of participants, whether Pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock or immigrants coming through Ellis Island, compete for the status of definitive master narrative. How shall the founding of the nation be told? Which site can be more inclusive, which is to say, more 'democratic', more 'total'? At Ellis Island, virtually anyone, no matter when he or his relatives arrived in the United States or through which port, can pay a hundred dollars to have his name or the name of an ancestor inscribed on the American Immigrant Wall of Honor that rings the island – and that includes the Pilgrims and their descendents! Ellis Island, in a slick taxonomic move, has absorbed Plimoth. The rock is just another port of entry for just another group of immigrants.

c) Essentialist

In contrast, the essentialist version of encyclopedic multiculturalism gives primacy to descent, to the facts of birth, to the primordial. For this reason, essentialist multiculturalism elides culture and race and speaks with ease about 'racial and cultural groups'. Essentialism diffuses the force of the very difference it affirms because it pluralizes it in modular fashion. Recognizing the power in the monolith of 'whiteness', 'diversity consultants' are taking steps to dismantle it by encouraging everyone, not just 'minorities', to recognize that 'we are the children of many different and distinct cultures – Irish, Jewish, Spanish, Armenian, Syrian, Hungarian...'. This turning of the tables, what's good for the goose is good for the gander, radicalizes pluralism by extending it in all directions and multiplies the categories to include gender, sexual preference, age, disability, class, and if one cannot identify with any of the above, with a social cause. In other words, essentialise all the way. No one is exempt.

d) Centrist Multiculturalism

Centrist multiculturalism which is also essentialist, is perhaps most familiar because it has provoked such heated opposition, especially in the case of Afrocentrism. I will not go into detail here, except to clarify how I distinguish essentialist and centrist approaches – again, on the basis of how they structure difference. Centrist multiculturalism is about 'infusion' not 'inclusion', according to Asante. It challenges the location of reigning centre and rejects modular structures of inclusion. And it is threatening among other reasons because of the potentially uncontrollable proliferation of particularisms, of centrisms, and their racialist, if not racist, underpinnings.

e) Aggregative Multiculturalism

Here there is the vision of an 'American folklife repertory' from which 'the American people' create new aggregates along regional, ethnic, occupational, and other lines. The opposite of essentialist multiculturalism, this approach affirms an easy disaggregation of cultural ideas and limitless possibilities for distinctive reaggregations. There is no field of social forces to determine what will circulate and what path it will follow. Since there is no reference to hierarchy (and the relations of power that determine its configuration), the crucial question – how hierarchies are formed – cannot even be asked. The more persuasive such texts, the greater the temptation to believe that a discursive success is also a conceptual one and a material one.

6

Critical Multiculturalism

I distinguish two types of critical multiculturalism. The first entails a critical examination of the varieties of multiculturalism and how they structure difference, which is what I have attempted here. The second is modelled on the anthropological project itself – on decentring one's own assumptions through an encounter with more or less radically different ways of being human.

Here then is a clue to why multiculturalists are generally not inclined to listen to anthropologists. Multiculturalism in its many varieties, is basically a centring operation, whether that means making the centre more inclusive or contesting its location or creating multiple centres. But, I would argue, anthropology's real challenge – the real threat that it poses – is not to multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism is a diversion. Rather, it is the still relatively impregnable centre, the one that has the power not to be defined as multicultural, that most urgently demands analysis. As Stuart Hall has noted, the hegemonic does not represent itself as ethnic, or in Croce's terms, as the preserve of anthropologists – or in my terms, as multicultural – but rather speaks from the centre in universalist terms, making 'transcendent claims to speak for everyone, while being itself everywhere and nowhere' – even when coded as multicultural.

Julie Copeland

interMallikaview

The question of how to present Indian art forms abroad is a crucial one for dancer, choreographer and curator Mallika Sarabhai. She has observed that when Indian art, dance or music is presented outside of its indigenous setting it is often misrepresented, largely because it is divorced from the cultural and religious contexts which are a vital part of its meanings. Mallika Sarabhai's 'Worlds Within and Without' commisioned by and recently presented at the Festival of Perth was an ambitious, multi-arts project which aimed to provide a context for the presentation of Indian art and dance. The Festival's original commission was for a dance and music program only, but as discussions between Festival director, David Bleckinsop and Ms Sarabhai proceeded it became apparent that visual art and folk story components were also needed. The visual art and storytelling elements of the project were located at the Fremantle Arts Centre and it was here that Julie Copeland of Arts National spoke with Mallika Sarabhai:

Sarabhai

JC: Let's begin with a real star, the beautiful Indian dancer, choreographer, painter and publisher, Mallika Sarabhai, best known for her role some years back as Draupadi, in Peter Brooks 'Mahabharata'. She also has a Degree in Economics, a Ph.D. in Psychology and in between travelling the world with her dance troupe, is involved with human rights and the women's movement. I remember being quite dazzled by Mallika at last year's Festival of Perth when she performed with her dance company from Ahmedabad which is north-west of Bombay. And this time she's here with her two young children and her mother, who's also a famous classical dancer, for an ambitious Indian-Australian multi-arts project commissioned by the Festival. Under the title 'Worlds Within and Without', Mallika Sarabhai has choreographed new dance works with music by West Australian composers, Roger Smalley and Cathy Travers and curated an exhibition of Indian art based on traditional folk sources, accompanied by Indian storytellers, artisans and musicians. All this colour and movement is happening at the Fremantle Arts Centre and when I visited there last Sunday, the Old Colonial Buildings had been turned into a living exhibition of Indian culture. The dancers rehearsing under the pine trees, spicy incense wafting around figures in brilliantly coloured silks playing conch horns and drums in the galleries and chanting to the goddesses in the painted wall hangings in the courtyard. A holistic approach to the complexity of Indian culture, as Mallika Sarabhai explains: MS: I like to describe it through a story

that we used to be told as children, that four blind men were asked to go and touch an elephant and describe it. And the first one caught hold of the tail and said, the essence of the elephant is a bushy tail which is very small. The next one caught the trunk and said, no, the essence of the elephant is this big and rather rough trunk, and the third caught the legs, the fourth one the ears. Now I think the world's view of India is a bit like this. Some people say it's a country of poor people, other people say it's a country of exotic esoterica. The third group will say it's a nuclear power, the fourth group will say, oh that's where those dancers who make funny eyes come from. All of this is true and yet none of this is complete and what we are trying to do with these two projects, with 'Utsava' here and 'Worlds Within and Without', which is my collaboration with West Australian composers, is to show that everything you can say about anything is true in India. It also encapsulates several thousand years of realities and all of that is true. **Now how are you going to sum that up in these performances and these exhibitions? How are you going to deal with that huge history?** Well we are not; we are trying to give you a flavour of the fact that all contradictions are true in our country. Here you have very contemporary people doing very 'traditional' rituals. You have painters who are contemporary by any standard, using the same sensibilities, the same cultural ethos as the people who still do the things that their forefathers or foremothers taught them and yet who organically change as television and satellite comes into every single village and Bollywood, which is the Hindi film version of Hollywood comes into every single state. In 'Utsava' I think it is apparent by what you have here all around you. In 'Worlds Within and Without', the fact is that I am trained as a classical dancer, my groups are trained as classical dancers and yet we are working with Roger Smalley and Cathy Travers and David Pye. Cathy, who works only with computerised music, David who works with this very new sound of the Nova Ensemble, and Roger, whose pieces are very eclectic. And we are talking about on the one hand ritual, on the other hand my own rather jaundiced eye about what ritual is about, and the third about human beings and nature and our relationship with the world that we are about to destroy. **What is your jaundiced view of ritual? How can you sum that up?** Well, you see, the shows will start with Roger Smalley's piece 'Ceremony One', which is a piece about initiation rites all over the world in any culture. In any traditional old culture initiation rites are about a certain thing, about learning and becoming on top of the power, whether it's witchcraft or whether it's priesthood or whether it is healing, or whatever, there is that initiation process. The second piece which is David Pye's is called 'Ritual Fragments' and that is where my jaundiced eye comes in because I have always found that at some stage most rituals turn into hocus pocus and I have seen so many so-called saints in India who produce Rolex watches out of their elbows and do things that are much more magical than spiritual and the piece is about the same kind of ritual going completely mad where the priestess discovers that she can turn cocks into snakes and join the rabbit's tail with the peacock and suddenly tries these experiments on human beings. And somebody asked me the other day whether this was my comment on genetic engineering and it probably is, but you know where does serious ritual stop and where does chicanery

start? That's what I mean. **And then there's that element of story telling too, which is obviously very important to you. There's ritual and story telling; these stories seem to grow in so many directions, just looking at the paintings or even through the dance. Those stories are adapted as good stories are everywhere in the world. I mean you can expand through the storytelling as well.** Sure... **So we're standing in front of these beautiful large cloths which are all painted in dark red and black on a natural ground, on cotton. Where are they from and what are they about?** These are called *Mata Ni Pachedi*, the cloths of the Mother Goddess, and they are from a community called the *Vaghari* from Gujarat, from the state where our Academy is located. Now, in their tradition there are 64,000 goddesses. Most of them are minor but some of them are very major, and these cloths celebrate one or another of these. If you look around you will see, for the central figure in each of them is a different goddess on a different vehicle. This one on your left is on a cock and she is holding different weapons. The one on your right is on a bull that has burst and become two demons that she decapitates. **That's a very elaborate one, isn't it?** That is a very elaborate one. The one opposite, one is on a ram, the other is on a goat. The one opposite that is on a lion. Now these are all goddesses and these cloths form the background of the temples. **And are they the manifestations of the same goddess or are they all separate goddesses?** No, they're all separate goddesses, but ultimately The goddess. And the stories around them are very intricate, complex stories related to the episodes of the life of that goddess, her exploits, how her birth happened, what are the miracles she made, and that sort of thing. And you were here earlier when this ritual was going on of the telling of the story of this painting. Now all of this is hand-painted except the central figure which is block printed. **It all looks like a print to me because it is so intricate. It does look like a batik or like some of the wood block prints, but that is all done by hand, except for the goddess?** That is all done by hand and it has to be done in a certain pattern with certain episodes that have to go into it. The artist actually signs his name. This is one of the few traditional paintings in which the artist actually signs his name. The red is a madder and the black is an iron pigment and all the dyeing is done in a river. And again, when the cloth is torn or damaged, it is thrown into the river ritually to go back into the earth. **And this particular kind of work only comes from this one region?** And this one community.

[From the sacred cloths of the Mother Goddess of Gujarat in the courtyard, we moved into the gallery to look at paintings from different parts of India, on the walls and on the floor. Whitewashed drawings of women and children, flowers and the house gods]

I am wary of the word traditional. What is on the floor comes from the part of India called Bengal. Calcutta is the capital of that region, and these are works on the floor that women used to do every day creating new works, washing them away, recreating them. In some senses they represent the women's own aspirations, what they want, what they would like done with their lives, what they want

fulfilled and they make these paintings as a way of self-expression. Some of them are traditional in the sense of they are to appease a certain goddess and if you want to appease a certain goddess there are certain patterns you must draw, there are certain songs you must sing. Like the goddess of wealth and prosperity, Lakshmi: the hands that you see on the floor, they are the feet of Lakshmi coming into the home and the arch is the home and the owl that you see is the vehicle of Lakshmi. But the others that you see, the woman with the child, for instance, is obviously drawn by a woman who wishes to have a child and who doesn't have a child, so she is drawing this and singing songs that *she* writes and *she* sings and *she* makes up as part of a way of self-expression. **Now she also has a big blue cat beside her. I suppose I'm calling it traditional for want of a better word because this is not the work of professional artists as we see on the walls, this is the work of women in the home, as you say, who would have painted these things outside their homes, these patterns and pictures in this white paint and for how long would it be expected to last, I mean I presume it washes off, does it?**

One day. Every morning they would paint them. Sometimes they would paint patterns, sometimes, if there was a ceremony. But they would paint it and it would stay for the days of the ceremony. But you know this whole definition of professional and non-professional in India is very different from what you have in the white world. And I say white world, rather than the west, because Australia is not in the west of anywhere and I always find it very strange when people call it, 'we in the west'. If by professional you mean people who earn their livelihoods out of a certain thing, then most of us who spend all our time performing or dancing are not professionals, because that's not the way the economics of the arts work in India. But certainly these are done by people who do it as part of their daily living, as against the work of contemporary painters on the walls that we see here, which is done for them as their full time work. **What about this work here which is obviously contemporary, but certainly draws on traditional or - I'm trying not to use the word traditional - Indian patterning and colours?** This is the work of a contemporary painter called **J. Swaminathan** who died last year and yes, it is very much Indian and it is very contemporary, which is the whole point of 'Utsava'. What I'm trying to show by 'Utsava' is that in India one does not have to reject one's past to be in the present. One is in a continuum. One does not say tradition stopped 50 years ago and everything *post* to that is unrooted. As I was telling you earlier, for me, what typifies India is the sight of a bullock cart with super computers loaded on it about to be installed in an office where it will not be switched on till a priest comes and states a propitious time and breaks a coconut over it. But it is a super computer. **Now that continuity doesn't mean there's no change, does it?** No, no, not at all. Everything we do is, we are incorporating change into ourselves. Here you see a ritual ***Pithora*** painting. This belonged to the *Rathwa*, a tribal people, and traditionally they painted these when one of the village take a vow and at the fulfilment of a vow they ask that these paintings be painted on their walls as a thanksgiving. Once the painting is painted by the priest painters, the priest painters then sing to make it alive all night. Now if you see in this painting, the rest of the painting is a horse with a god coming onto it represented in many different ways, but here on

the right you see a clock tower and here you see guns and rifles. Now these are realities of today that are being incorporated into this. In another one I have seen the gods come in on an aeroplane and they don't see any contradiction with this. The gods have to be called in so they will be called in by the most efficient vehicle available. **Now is that what our conch player is doing here behind us, is he calling in the gods?**

The conch player is calling in the gods and the audience I think because they are about to tell a story of a scroll painting of a folk deity called Pabuji and this is a husband and wife couple normally with one other player and with a lamp. It's normally done all night, so with a lamp. It's like the original comic book because they light up each sequence and sing the songs and tell the story of that sequence, then they go to the next sequence and continue with that.

All right, so we've moved around now and the ceremony continues and what about these works here, Mallika, these are embroideries? These embroideries also come from the region of Calcutta, the State of Bengal. In Bengal, in the villages, women used to quilt and do patchwork to try and recycle old textiles and a particular kind of embroidery developed called *Kanther Kaaj*. Now *Kanther Kaaj* normally is something that women do with geometric patterns of embroidery. The lady we have here with us, the same one who has done the floor paintings, Bharati Gupta, she has innovated in taking the style of embroidery from *Kanther Kaaj* but turning these banners into story telling of some of the epic stories of Bengal. Now this has never been done before, characters have never actually been embroidered with this style to use these embroidered pieces as storytelling pieces and this is the story of the snake goddess, Manasa, and of her wrath when she is not appeased. **She's a very cute little snake goddess I must say. Are you saying this is a whole style that the artist has invented herself, it has not been done this way?** Yes. It's never ever been done. This is in twenty three panels and as you can see, extremely intricate hand embroidery where she has developed the characters. All the iconography is her own but she has used two traditions, one of epic story telling and one of traditional embroidery. **Yes, because you've said elsewhere that you have a very holistic approach to the arts that obviously while we're talking there's a dance and music performance going on outside, we're looking at what we call visual arts, but you don't really abide by that separation.** We don't call them two different things, no, because what the storytelling is that is going on outside is the storytelling to what you would call visual art. There is a scroll painting there which would have no significance except when it is brought alive by the storytelling that is going on around it. And according to me this must have been the original comic book because each picture tells a story and there's this whole long scroll which now we have turned it into little boxes with people speaking in visual print, but here it is a sort of spoken, sung story and the storytellers go to each bit of the painting with a lamp and that's all people can see. That's what is going on in the background. **So that's why the woman is standing with the little flame, a little candle lamp in front of the picture, she's holding it up to give light to whichever picture he's talking about.** That's right. **And here we have a very, well, a mod-**

ern painting on canvas, painted with oil paints or acrylic and yet it relates to an Indian subject matter, doesn't it? I mean it's a painting of monkeys. I think I would call it a common sensibility because we all come from, in some senses, a shared culture. There you have a very contemporary painting of the goddess Kali, the goddess of destruction. And on the floor you have floor paintings of the goddess Kali and what 'Utsava' is trying to show is this continuity, that one does not have to preclude or exclude the other in order to exist.

[Coming from this strong continuity of Indian myth and story telling, Mallika Sarabhai has also performed in storytelling projects around the world. Last year, for instance, with blind, deaf and handicapped children at the National Dance Institute in New York.]

But there are lots of story telling projects I have been doing. Actually a month before I came here I was working with a Nigerian Yoruba dancer/ choreographer called Peter Badejo and we were doing a project together on storytelling using stories from all over the world and seeing how they manipulate societies, how certain stories that we tell thinking they are very innocuous in fact are giving values to our children. Like for instance the rabbit and the tortoise. You know this whole business about slow and steady wins the race. I mean obviously some very bureaucratic type who doesn't want any creativity or doesn't want anybody to be innovative, has propounded this story a thousand years ago and we tell it to our children. **But isn't that one of the purposes of fairy tales and storytelling, that they're moral tales, they have a moral?** Yes, but *whose* moral? Isn't it always the ruling class's moral, haven't you always known that? I mean even the King Arthur stories, why is it that Guinevere is the prize and why is it that King Arthur is always after her, Lancelot is always after her? Why is it in stories all over the world that there's one king and there are two wives, the beautiful one is a bitch and the plain one is devoted and being devoted is the best thing. These are patriarchal stories and they're trying to rule our world. It's time we questioned these stories and I think storytelling is one of the most potent ways in which we can change the ills of society, whether it be gender discrimination or communal or religious or any of these prejudices that are today breaking the world apart. **So in your project in New York a while back, did you use Indian tales particularly?** No.Those were stories from everywhere based on things environmental. But looking at our very destructive attitude towards the environment and picking out stories from traditional societies including aboriginal, of their total living with nature where nature was the goddess and nature was the god and nature was the family and the distance we have travelled so that all we can think about is effluents and pollutants today. **Indeed. Now we've just finished in fact, you just finished being part of a story telling process over here. Tell me a bit about that.** I have never seen it before and I have never heard it before. **You sounded like you were very much a part of it, you sounded very familiar with the story.** Well, there was this wonderful story of the sun god and how young girls in East Bengal, what is now Bangladesh, used to want a husband like the sun, so they used to do

these rituals and draw these paintings and they would take sunflowers and go and beat the water of a river with sunflowers hoping to draw the attention of the sun god. But the sun god falls in love with a moonbeam and the moonbeam says, you will burn me, how can I marry you, and the sun god says, no, take me to your father and I will talk to him. And the father says, yes I will marry my daughter but here she has an entire family, when she comes into your land she will have nobody. And he says, don't worry, my father will be her father and my mother will be her mother, and so the moonbeam goes and the young girls then pray and say, may we also be the moonbeams and get a sun like you. **Well that's a pretty nice story, it has a happy ending. Now just tell me a little bit about the artist who was telling the story. In fact she was singing the story and also she's painted, as you pointed out before, she has painted the paintings on the floor here.** And done these embroideries. **And done these amazing embroideries.** Bharati Gupta is actually a Masters in history and anthropology and has been for the last fifty-five years interested in what was becoming unfortunately a fast disappearing family tradition of painting these and singing these stories and dreaming them and she in her Masters made a study of these, learnt these songs and has been teaching people and creating new ones for modern times, so it was very fortunate that we could find her and bring her here to give you a first hand knowledge of this. **It certainly was. She's wonderful and that's why I was wondering if this came out of her own background or ...** It is her background as well, she comes from that part of the country. **And is it just in that part of the country that...** this particular story? No, this kind of story comes everywhere and floor paintings with geometric motifs are everywhere in India but I personally am not aware of anywhere else where floor paintings are used as a means of dream or wish fulfilment.

[Mallika's mother, Mrinalini Sarabhai, is also a famous classical dancer and in fact Mallika has, for the first time choreographed a piece for her mother for 'Worlds Within and Without', which is full, as you've heard, of Indian myths and stories.]

Well you see, all our history and everything was done through oral traditions and what Mallika was trying to show was how the oral tradition influenced the dance and music because it wasn't always recitation. There is recitation but there was a lot of singing and dancing and the entire idea of worship was done always through dance. It says even in our old text that dancing and music are the greatest contributions you can make to god. So we start off with that and the whole history of each region in India was done through storytelling and the storytellers were singers, were dancers, they were like the old bards in England, but perhaps even more developed. And it was always passed from mother to daughter or father to son, or family to family, so the little children also learned it, like our little children learn today what we are doing. And so it is almost in the blood of every Indian to tell stories of the right kind.

What are the right kind? Well, there are the good stories, shall we say. It's always usually, in all stories I think it is a clash between good and evil and fortunately in the stories the good comes out well.

Yes, I was observing before with Mallika most stories are moral tales aren't they, I mean where naughty or rebellious children are punished and the beautiful young girl at the end gets her reward and the bad characters get punished. So are those original stories or those stories that go back a long, long time in the Indian tradition, are they still relevant to people today? I mean do people still respond to those stories when they see them danced or sung? Oh yes, I think there's still a big response, especially in villages because this is also a form of entertainment. Of course television is doing, I feel, a lot of harm the world over because people are losing their cultural roots, but yet when we go into a village or even in the towns I must say, we do get a tremendous response. I think the way of presentation today is a little more sophisticated and that has to be done, like costumes are more beautiful, you know, well done shall I say, and it can't be just putting up your tent and doing something, it has to be a little on the side of competing with good entertainment everywhere. That's the only difference. **So they would have more appeal, the kind of work that you're doing with your group, the dancing and the singing, in the rural areas of India rather than in the cities because I imagine the enormous Indian film industry must have made a big difference to this more traditional style of storytelling, must have had a big impact on the way people tell stories now.** Oh yes, it has and in my opinion, a rather bad impact because what they do is they take the classical and try to pep it up. I mean if they did something on their own as you often do in good dancing in the west, like you had good creative dancing, but unfortunately they imitate and they imitate badly and so that is a great danger which many of us feel. But still people, you know, what shall I say, basically, I think they like a creative piece that has its root in tradition and has some kind of classicism about it and somehow the very fact that all of us have gone on so long I think that shows that we're still wanted and I think it's getting more and more now that our work is being appreciated. **Is that both in the cities and in the rural areas of India?** Oh yes, in the cities. In the rural areas you see it always has been, in the cities one has to work harder towards it because there are so many other entertainments. But certainly, I mean we've always had good audiences and they look forward to anything new we do as well as the old and I think people are beginning to be prouder of their culture today when they see what a forceful culture it is.

CONTRIBUTORS

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