

The Breath with the Breath:
Contemporary Performance Art in India

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Melissa Rose Heer

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Abstract

This dissertation examines contemporary performance art practices in India, with a particular focus on the work of three artists with diverse approaches to this ever-evolving art form: Ratnabali Kant, Samudra Kajal Saikia and Nikhil Chopra. In my examination of specific performances, that have taken place between 1985-2012, I weave together performance studies, histories of theater, postcolonial critique, and a theoretical analysis of “the performative” nature of the nation-state in area of art and globalization.

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Introduction-Inhalations and Exhalations of Contemporary Performance Art in India

Are you looking for me? I am in the next seat.
My shoulder is against yours.
You will not find me in stupas, not in Indian shrine rooms,
nor in synagogues, nor in cathedrals:
not in masses, nor in kirtans, not in legs winding around your
own neck, nor in eating nothing but vegetables.
When you really look for me, you will see me instantly—
you will find me in the tiniest house of time.
Kabir says: Student, tell me what is God?
He is the breath inside the breath.

-Kabir¹

The real magic happens with the word hits your breath.

-Anna Deavere Smith²

This dissertation examines contemporary performance art practices in India, with a particular focus on the work of three artists with diverse approaches to this ever-evolving art form: Ratnabali Kant, Samudra Kajal Saikia and Nikhil Chopra. All three of these artists are still living today, and the performances that serve as the focus of my analysis took place during the period of 1985 to 2012. With this recent historical framework in

¹ Kabir, in *Risking Everything: 110 Poems of Love and Revelation*, translated by Robert Bly, edited by Roger Housden (New York: Harmony Books, 2003), 5. Unfortunately, the English translations of this specific poem are limited. Since Bly is a scholar of literature and not a translator it is like that the reference to “synagogue” and other religious structures are modern interpretations and not historically accurate.

² Deavere Smith as quoted by John Lahr in, "Under the Skin," *The New Yorker*, June 28, 1993, p. 92.

mind, it may come as a surprise that the title of this study, *The Breath within the Breath*, is derived from a poem composed by the fifteenth century poet Kabir.

Kabir was among the first generation of poets in India to compose couplets and songs in a mixed Hindi dialect, a language that the common people of his time could understand. Born to a family of weavers in Banaras, Kabir boasted about being illiterate. His poems were performed through live oration, often in the narrow alleyways of Varanasi, and were passed down through generations by oral tradition. Like so many of the artistic and cultural traditions to which I make reference in this dissertation, Kabir's poems, seemingly from a bygone era, are still very much present in India's contemporary culture. Not only has Kabir's work made a recent resurgence among a young generation of contemporary artists (as I will discuss in my second chapter), but the enduring legacy of this spoken verse is a testament to the historical depth of performance-based practices in India. Moreover, the philosophical frameworks within Kabir's poems themselves, offer useful conceptual models for thinking about the complex nature of contemporary performance art.

Kabir's poem describes a student searching for the presence of God in various places of worship and through a number of devotional rituals. But in all these places God is nowhere to be found. God, Kabir suggests, is not in the Buddhist stupas, nor in the shrines devoted to Hindu deities, nor in the Catholic mass, or even in the *kirtan*, that is, the *bhakti* call and response ritual of chanting. Rather, God is "the breath inside the breath." Kabir refused to associate himself exclusively with any one organized religion. His personal philosophy was thought to combine elements from the *Bhakti* and Sufi

traditions of his day, so that his relationship with God was grounded in an intimate internal encounter with the divine, often described as “mystical.”³ For Kabir, God was both an unknowable abstraction and personal friend. The poem itself is meant to leave us with a sense of resounding paradox through the form of an unanswerable riddle: where exactly is “the breath within the breath” inside the “tiniest house of time? ”

The intention of Kabir’s poem is to turn the listener “upside down.”⁴ The riddle briefly shifts us out of our habituated patterns of thinking so that we might expand and unsettle, not only an understanding of the divine, but as an extension, our very understanding of society and experience. While the performances I look at in this study have differing creative approaches, and take-up a diverse set of social and political concerns, the underlying approach across all the works I address is much the same. Like Kabir’s poem, the performances I examine present irresolvable paradoxes, and destabilize comfortable ways of knowing. To that end, Kabir’s poem, with its emphasis on breath, voice, time and locationality resonates with some of the key concerns of performance: the dialogical, the corporeal, the spatial and the temporal. The poem makes use of the metaphors of respiration and home to evoke a sense of illogic and transport the listener into a greater internal level of spiritual and conceptual depth. Similarly performance artists use breath, time and space in a critical analysis of the paradoxical relationship between the individual and the collective, the corporeal body and the social body, the religious and the secular, and the material and immaterial.

³ Linda Hess and Shujdev Singh. *The Bijak of Kabir*. (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983) 3.

⁴ Wendy Doniger, “Introduction” in *Songs of Kabir* translated by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (New York: New York Review Books Classics, 2011), 6.

American actress and scholar Anna Deavere Smith notes, “The real magic happens with the word hits your breath.” As a performer and performance theorist whose work often deals with issues of marginality through race and class, Smith is interested in oral histories, and modes of expression that exist outside of the reified space of the conventional text. The “real magic” refers to the moment in which the living, breathing body uses diction to create voice, forcing words to “come to consciousness of what they know.”⁵ While for Kabir, the divine could be found within the duration between inhalation and exhalation, the divine keeping our bodies and souls animated, for Smith, the moment in which the words and breath meet is the moment in which performance allows for a voice to come to life.

For both Smith and Kabir, the breath itself contains something transformative, in which live bodies summon us to a moment of unanticipated reflection. This is perhaps why it is such a challenge to write a history of performance art through the limited space of the written text. The very term “performance art” presents a conceptual conundrum, because the question of what is “performance art” in India is itself a historiographic riddle, rife with paradoxes. As Kabir’s own work demonstrates, performative practices have been at the heart of Indian culture for centuries before that term began to be applied in the latter half of twentieth century. Nonetheless, while the works I examine in this dissertation are certainly indebted to this longer history, they exist within a very specific category of practices that arose out of the art institution in the last quarter century, a period in which artists trained in visual arts academies began to turn towards the body

⁵ Deavere Smith as quoted by John Lahr in, "Under the Skin," *The New Yorker*, June 28, 1993, p. 92.

and in so doing towards the long history of body-based practices in India, as a means of investigating social and political relationships within live space and time.

Within the globalized era of contemporary art, in which Euro-American discourses and economies often determine the terminology and aesthetic categorization of artistic production, the term “performance art” is inevitably grounded in histories in the West. Within the American academy the history of performance art refers to practices that primarily arose in the U.S. and Europe in the 1960s that took a particular stance against the object oriented, ocular hegemony and capitalistic structure of the art market. Art historian RoseLee Goldberg has documented this history in her seminal book *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (1979) and more recent work by scholars such as Amelia Jones, Jane Blocker, Paul Schimmel, Kristine Stiles, Kathy O’Dell, Janet Kraynak, and Peggy Phelan have examined performance art within the last three decades. Performance studies, upon which many of these scholars also draw, includes a broader range of social practices in everyday life that involve elements of performance, as outlined by Richard Schechner in *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. A history of performance could be read, for example, in the ways that press surrounding popular photo studios in India in the late nineteenth century reflected a performance of national ideology.

In my examination of specific performances that have taken place between 1985-2012 in India I weave together these strands of performance studies, histories of performance, and a theoretical analysis of “the performative” nature of society at large. The performances I examine question the ways in which historical memory is itself

performed through national spectacle, the reiteration of social norms, and the production of subject formations. This obviously refers not only to performance in the sense of creative practice, but also to the “performative” as outlined by the linguist J.L. Austin, and taken up, and complicated by, contemporary theorists such as Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida. In his highly influential book *How to Do Things With Worlds*, Austin outlines the use of “utterances,” which are forms of authoritative speech that exercise and bind power, and not only “describe doing something, but do it.”⁶

There is no scholarly history of performance art in India; by which I mean that there is no published document that offers an overview of the development of performance art practices as defined by the discipline of western art history. Yet, this does not mean that this history does not play a prominent role in development of artistic production in India across the latter half of twentieth century and into the present. Readings of specific performances by Indian artists have appeared across writings on contemporary art of India, which is a limited but growing field. Significant scholarship that takes note of recent performance-based art in India includes *The Khoj Book*, edited by Pooja Sood (2010), Betty Seid and Johan Pinjapeel’s book *New Narratives: Contemporary Art from India* (2007), Yoshodhara Dalmia’s *Memory, Metaphor, Mutations: Contemporary Art of Indian and Pakistan* (2007) and an introduction by Chaitanya Sambrani in the exhibition catalogue for *Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India* (2005). In addition, there are a handful of books on performance art practices by individual Indian artists, which include a catalogue on the work of Nikhil Chopra entitled

⁶ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 21.

Yog Raj Chitrakar (2010) published by Chatterjee and Lal Gallery in Mumbai, and Peter Nagy's discussion of Subodh Gupta in *Sidewinder*, an exhibition at Kolkata's CIMA Gallery in 2002.

These contemporary art historians and curators draw from a body of literature on modern art in India to contextualize artistic practices in relation to the broader artistic movements of the twentieth century, which includes Partha Mitter's 2007 book *The Triumph of Modernism 1929-1947* and Rebecca M. Brown's 2009 book *Art for a Modern India 1947-1980*. These texts wrestle with the question of how modernism can be contested and defined in relation to nationalism and "Indianness." Brown's historical framework obviously picks up when Mitter's project ends, beginning with Indian Independence. Moreover, Geeta Kapur's text *When was Modernism in India: Essays on the Cultural Politics of India* (2000) interrogates how modernism is defined and located within a broader historical framework while also offering a theoretical analysis of art works from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century.

While studies on modern and contemporary Indian art obviously frame my understanding of the material I examine in this dissertation, my analysis does not focus specifically on linking performance art to these histories. While performance art in the West is commonly understood to have developed solely through visual arts traditions (primarily painting), and is almost entirely divorced from theater history, I found through my interviews with various contemporary performance artists, and through an examination of performance art's institutional lineages, that theater histories do in fact play a significant role in the methodologies and politics of contemporary performance art

in India. In particular, I found that the concept of the body as a tool for social and political critique was already established through the philosophies of political theater in India throughout the twentieth century.

I turned to a number of writers on the history of political theater and street theater in India to examine how the body became cemented in the cultural landscape as a viable tool for social critique and political dissent. Writers such as Sudhanya Deshpande have addressed the history of street theater in India by focusing particularly on the Jana Natya Manch founded in 1973 by a group of radical “amateur” performers in Delhi, most notably Safdar Hashmi. Jessica Moss and Ram Rahman’s recent exhibition at the Smart Museum, entitled *The Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism in Indian since 1989* (2013), looks at the legacy of Hashmi’s work on a generation of artists working the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT). Moreover, Rustam Bharucha offers a complex reading of the history of the Indian People’s Theatre Association and the SAHMAT as forms of practice that contest the state. Furthermore, in his book *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture* (1993), Bharucha offers a critique of intercultural theater by interrogating the assumptions and exclusions imbedded in twentieth-century Western performance theory and offers a reading of Indian theater, while criticizing the reductive interpretations of it by Western directors and critics.

All of these writers share a common interest in examining the ways in which theater in India has served as a viable medium in various forms of political and social resistance. As I will demonstrate in the work of Kant, Saikia and Chopra, this spirit is also very much at the heart of contemporary performance art in India. While in the

U.S./Europe, performance art was promoted as essentially critical of art as a commodity, seeing performances cannot be "bought or sold, only supported" as American artist Allan Kaprow put it, the performances I address in this dissertation are less concerned with a critique of the commoditization of art and more invested in how the body acts as the most practical, viable and culturally recognizable creative medium through which to critique the state's role in issues such as violence against women, immigration, subnationalism or class inequality.

When I talk about modern Indian theater within the context of this dissertation I am not referring to the traditional proscenium play. Rather, I am referring specifically to what is commonly referred to as "street theater" or "political theater." These forms of theater took place on the streets and in open spaces and intentionally engaged the general public. I am *not* interested in arguing that contemporary performance art is a form of theater, as this is an important distinction. Performance art is tied materially, conceptually and institutionally to the art world (i.e. artist residency programs, gallery spaces, biennials, and arts institutions), and contemporary performance artists often play with time and narrative in ways that are intentionally less linear and coherent than didactic frameworks that structure political theater. Moreover, in an era of globalization performance artists in India are undeniably influenced by the history of performance art in the West through the work of well known figures such as Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic, and Yoko Ono. By virtue of its history and its recent place within larger global economies, Indian performance art is always a negotiation between complex

internal histories and influences, on one hand, and the contemporary global art market on the other (both of which are always, already inextricably intertwined).

In this dissertation I draw from theater histories to tease out the philosophical connection between body-based practices and political critique and its influence on a younger generation of artists in India. While contemporary Indian performances inevitably share philosophical methods and aesthetic approaches with a Western history of performance art, it is essential to consider the ways in which the performing body is itself a social text that must be situated in relation not only to global performance art practices, but also to specific histories of political dissent in India. Political theater in India moved directly into urban space and created a disruption in state-monitored spaces of the city, and often took-up specific activist causes such as labor rights, land rights, and violence against women. The contemporary performance art practices I examine take a more ambivalent and conceptually indeterminate position in relation to specific activist pursuits, however, they continue to place a strong value on critical disruption in public space, a critique of socio-political paradigms, and the enactment of resistance. By “enactment of resistance,” I am referring to the ways in which artists use their own bodies as tools of dissent as an affront to the material and conceptual force of dominant ideologies. While it could be argued that many types of art express some type of resistant to dominant ideologies, I am interested in the physical expression that performance art enacts through the body-drawing from the spatial and physical aesthetics foreground through histories of protest, passive resistance and disruption in public space.

Thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci and James C. Scott, who tend to the mechanisms, possibilities and limitations of dissent, inform my theoretical interpretation of resistance.⁷ Gramsci, a devout Italian Marxist who was imprisoned by the Fascist Italian government in 1926, famously analyzed the dynamics of power and dissent in his *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci's well-known theorization of hegemony is based on the primacy of ideology as a form of culture and the complex relationship between the state and civil society. The controlling classes are given space and time to mold an ideology that manufactures a system of norms, values, meanings, and identities that create a limited, yet coherent conception of what constitutes social "reality." Gramsci felt that the intrinsic contradictions of capitalism, both moral and material, would give rise to bottom-up movements led by "organic intellectuals" that would disrupt or overturn the state.⁸ For Gramsci the state apparatus was an instrument of education, and resistance to this structure took form through counter philosophies, that begin with intellectual critique and ultimately develops in physical acts of protest. Scott, a neo-Marxist who focuses his attention on the individual and cultural levels of society is interested in undeclared forms of resistance. Scott argues that "everyday forms of resistance" are crucial because they create "a culture, a movement, a nation" of resistance that allows subordinates to remain active revolutionaries through the material realities of cultural expression even when there is no mass revolution.⁹

⁷ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), 29.

⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 12.

⁹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1990), 18.

Gramsci's theory of resistance is useful because it provides a way to think about the function of the state apparatus as an engine of culture, and resistance as a counter-intellectual and material resource. Scott's concept of resistance is valuable because it suggests that it might take shape through basic, everyday acts of cultural expression such as performance. To that end, both thinkers resonant at an intellectual level with the Communist-based philosophies of political theater in India, which sought to utilize the body as an active instrument in the education and mobilization of the public against state-based inequalities. As I will discuss, theater became a platform through which to literally animate the ideological contradictions of the state and civil society, by utilizing living breathing bodies as catalysts for a visualization of alternative realities.

In my first chapter I provide a broad history of theater and performance art from the twentieth century to present. I start with the current state of performance art in India, and then link this conceptually and historically to the legacy of Indian political theater, as well as, influential trends around performance art within a globalized art market. Then, in the remaining three chapters I focus in on specific examples of contemporary performance art practices that exemplify the contemporary performance of resistance. In the second chapter, I show how the artist Sumudra Kajal Saikia directly engages with the philosophies of twentieth century theater practitioners, Badal Sircar and Safdar Hashmi, to reflect on the politics of immigration and subnationalism in his native state of Assam. I then turn to the work of feminist performance artist Ratnabali Kant. Kant draws upon her own body to address the complexities of women's rights in India, as her career intersects with the history of feminist activist movements in India. In the final chapter, I turn to the

work of Nikhil Chopra, a Mumbai-based artist of Kashmiri decent who steps into the politically fraught space of Srinager's central square, in order to reflect on the political significance of cultural memory and history in India's postcolonial city.

Moreover, there is a historiographic component at stake in tracing these historical fault lines between theater and art. Performance art in India, and non-Western contemporary art at large, is susceptible to what Partha Mitter refers to as the "unmarked case" of modernism, in which the term modernism "implicitly stands for 'Western' modernism... [and] a qualifying epithet becomes necessary to speak of any other: East European modernism, Chinese modernism, Indian modernism, and so on."¹⁰ As Mitter argues, modernism acts as an extension of colonial lineage, which perpetuates an origin story in which imperial powers are the guardians of modernism. In this model, "History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity."¹¹ Evidence of this type of myopic historicism is present in the repeated comparison of non-Western artists to their seeming Western archetypes, so that artists from the "developing world" are often reproduced as a localized version of a European or American artist who assumes primary authorship.¹² This dynamic has been addressed by a number of thinkers working in art theory and criticism such as Olu Oguibe, Okwui Enwezor, and Nestór Garcia Canclini, who all think critically about the inconsistencies and contradictions involved in the acceptance and promotion of non-

¹⁰ Mitter, "Decentering Modernism," 532.

¹¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 5.

¹² See for example, Holland Cotter "Art in Review: Pushpamala N" *The New York Times*, May 7, 2004; Anthony Downey "Yinka Shonibare in Conversation" *Wasafiri* 19:41 (2004); Lowenstein, Kate "The Seen and the Hidden (Dis) Covering the Veil" *Time Out New York* 723, August 6-12. 2009.

Western artists on the global art scene. Their work examines problems of place, location, and identity for non-Western artists who are often subjected in the U.S. and Europe to exotic, monolithic, or derivative narratives in which they are held to account primarily for their national experience as an outsider or other.¹³

These thinkers paved the way for thinking critically about these types of reductive readings, but they also left the door open for alternative modes of analysis. The relationship between India's theater histories and contemporary art in India provides a useful platform through which to examine the material and cultural complexity of contemporary Indian performance art through an alternative model beyond reified notions of place. Instead I examine how performance art forms through intricate networks of creative engagement and resistance that develop in, and travel among, the global, national and local.

To that end, my reading of artworks is in dialogue with a vast body of literature on globalization reaching across the disciplines of art history, anthropology, geography, communication studies and sociology. Because my project is concerned with performance-based practices in India, their modes of artistic production and spaces of display and reception, my analysis is indebted particularly to scholarly material that concerns itself with understanding the uses and forms of culture through global systems

¹³ See: Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). For further discussion around the politics of identity for non-Western artists in the global art world see Nestor Garcia Canclini, "Remaking Passports: Visual Thought in the Debate on Multiculturalism," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).; Hamid Dabashi, *Shirin Neshat: The Last Word* (Charta, 2006); Okwui Enwezor. "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition." in *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, eds. Okwui Enwezor, Nancy Condee and Terry Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

of circulation and exchange. Since the early nineties scholars such as sociologist Jan Naderveen Pieterse and anthropologist Arjun Appadurai have contested the notion that globalization acts as an all-pervasive force that erases local identities, and have argued for notions of cultural hybridity. In recent years various theoretical contributions have expanded this area of inquiry, including Bhabha's claim that acts of cultural hybridity function alongside, and intervene within, dynamics of colonial power and interstitial spaces of identity. In addition, Marwan Kraidy's work in the area of international communication studies articulates the dangers and possibilities of the notion of hybridity as it is discursively employed across various media and modes of communication, both academic and popular, and George Yúdice further theorizes the relationship between globalization and culture in his provocative argument that culture itself can act as an economic and political resource that travels through global institutional networks.

Moreover, postcolonial theorists have critically examined constructs, readings and uses of culture as it relates to global knowledge production and its structuring of territories of epistemological power. For example, Walter D. Mignolo, employs the term "gnosis" to talk about multiple forms of knowledge that extend beyond the categories of philosophy and epistemology and tries to account for marginalized forms of knowledge to "colonial difference from a subaltern perspective."¹⁴ My choice to give a great deal of attention to the analysis of performances that, as of yet, are not established within the so-called canon of art history (meaning in art historical literature and curriculums) is inspired by thinkers such as Mignolo as well as scholars of postcolonial studies and South

¹⁴ Walter D. Mignolo. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality. Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 35.

Asian history such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Pramatha Banerjee, Ranajit Guha, and Partha Chatterjee who critique knowledge systems and the relationship between history and the enterprises of capitalism, modernity and nationhood.

Performance studies and postcolonial studies, when engaged with one another, open up spaces that enhance each other's claims. Both postcolonial studies and performance studies share a critical eye to the privileging of origins and the category of "the past" within dominant archival logic. Performance studies wrestles with how to analyze the act of performance in relation to the material that documents it, and postcolonial theory interrogates temporal constructs embedded in notions of nationhood, development, modernity, and progress that inform historical enterprises.

Chapter 1- Formative Bodies: Troubling the “Rise “of Indian Performance Art

In 2010-2012, there was a curious murmur in the air about “performance art” in India’s capital city of Delhi. The words littered the pages of gallery opening announcements, art magazines, and the popular press. For example, a 2010 issue of *Art India* (a prominent contemporary art magazine) focused exclusively on performance art, and referred to the capital city, Delhi, as the “Mecca of Performance Art.”¹⁵ Shortly thereafter, the *Times of India* covered a performance by U.S.-based Japanese artist Yoko Ono, arguably one of the biggest global names in performance art, which took place at the India Habitat Center in Delhi. The *Times* described the piece, which coincided with Ono’s show *Our Beautiful Daughters* at Vadehra Gallery, as “one of the hottest events to hit the capital's art circuit.”¹⁶ That same month, *Time Out Delhi* (January 2012) featured a cover story and a four-page spread on performance art both globally and in India, highlighting performance events and video art pieces at the 2012 India Art Fair.

The 2012 India Art Fair itself, which drew over one hundred thousand national and international attendees, dedicated a key panel discussion to the topic of performance art. The panel featured a dialogue between well-known Indian contemporary art critic, Geeta Kapur, Indian performance and video artist, Sonia Khurana, and American art historian and curator, Roselee Goldberg, whose book *Performance Art: from Futurism to Present* (1979) is widely regarded as the first significant scholarly study of the history of Euro-American “performance

¹⁵ Menezes, Meera “Performance Art in India Has Come of Age,” *Art India* 15 (2010): 26-30.

¹⁶ Neelam Raaj, “Yoko Ono Coming to Delhi with Art Show,” *Times of Delhi*, Dec 3, 2011.

art.” Her book provided an overview of body-based art practices arising not directly out of theater but out of canonical movements in the history of Western visual art.¹⁷ Goldberg’s short panel presentation at the India Art fair did not focus on the historical dimensions of performance art most-often associated with her scholarship, but rather addressed her recent work with PERFORMA, a non-profit organization she directs that is “committed to new visual art performance from around the world.”¹⁸ Khurana offered a brief discussion on the conceptual impetus behind her own body-based practices, and Kapur served as an interlocutor and respondent to both. Despite the lack of emphasis on history or historical content in the panel presentations, this absence formed an anxious murmur in the audience, which later surfaced during the question and answer period in various rhetorical formations and raised the underlying question: “How do we understand the history of performance art in India”?

This concern with genealogy seemed particularly pressing given the resonate buzz around “performance art,” which appeared to be circulating with increasingly greater amplitude and building public awareness of an art form with an unknown history. While individual artists had been working in a performative mode and doing performance art pieces since the mid-1980s, most of them struggled to subsist on the meager remuneration from an ever-fluctuating art market. In 2012, however, there appeared to be an increasing public interest in their work.¹⁹ While there has been some scholarship on individual performance artists within the context of

¹⁷ Goldberg’s narrative begins with the performative gatherings and manifestos of Italian Futurism from the early twentieth century and moves through Constructivism, Dada, Surrealism and the Bauhaus, arriving at “living art” practices from the 1930s-‘70s. In a later edition (2001) Goldberg added a chapter on performance and “new media” from 1978 onward. Roselee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to Present* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001).

¹⁸ Roselee Goldberg, *PERFORMA: New Visual Art Performance* (New York: Performa, 2007).

¹⁹ For example both Inder Salim, Ratnabali Kant and Monali Maher are performance artists who started their practices in the late 80s and early 90s.

contemporary art, a systematic history of the development of performance art in the context of India does not currently exist.²⁰

This chapter looks back at the broader exhibitions, institutions, and theater practices that intersect with the development of performance art since the early twentieth century. I am less interested in *how* performance art became *en vogue* by 2012, than with the fact that it did become such a significant concern, and with the consequent historiographic problems of this marginalized, yet increasingly popular, art form. RoseLee Goldberg's presence at a panel at the India Art Fair foregrounds one of the key problems of thinking about the histories of performance art and new media in India – namely, how does one situate (or circumvent situating) contemporary performance art practices in relation to a primarily Euro-American canon of performance art that claims an early twentieth century Western European lineage? If Indian performance art since the 1980s *were* to find its way into the final chapter of a new edition of Goldberg's *Performance Art: From Futurism to Present*, it would likely serve, as is so often the case in such histories, as an addendum to surveys of post-war art that include non-Western material as exemplary of art in the era of “globalization,” i.e., that period when the West was exposed to contemporary Indian art.

Thus, the challenge in writing a history of performance art in India is to circumvent the reproduction of a historical framework in which Indian performances are seen as merely

²⁰ See for example: Yashodhara Dalmia, *Memory, Metaphor, Mutations: Contemporary art of India and Pakistan*. (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Betty Seid and Johan Pinjapeel, *New Narratives: Contemporary Art from India* (London: Majestic Books, 2007); Kapur, Geeta “What’s New in Indian Art? Canon, Commodification and Artists and the Edge” in *Changing States: Contemporary Art and Ideas in an Era of Globalization*. Ed. Gilane Tawadros (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2004) 102-107.

derivative responses to a Western history of performance without sacrificing attention to the complex ways in which Indian contemporary art is in critical dialogue with Euro-American performance art practices and histories. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor writes of a similar challenge she faced in understanding the history of performance art in Latin America in her book *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memories in the Americas*. Taylor's work aims to make an overlapping intervention between performance studies and Latin/o American (hemispheric studies) while looking at a series of contemporary performance art practices. In doing so, she provides a useful critique of the double move in intercultural performance studies that "distances non-Western culture production as radically other, and then attempts to encompass it within existing critical systems as diminished or disruptive."²¹ Such moves, according to Taylor, involve a process of both forgetting and remembering: the West forgets performance from "elsewhere" exists and then "remembers the need to cement the centrality for its position as West by creating and freezing the non-West as other."²²

As Taylor suggests, the history of performance art in the global "elsewhere" is always forced to speak in some way to its relationship to a dominant historical framework of performance art history in the West, which reinserts the seeming centrality of this framework and thereby reinforces the notion of itself as a progressively developing and widely influential artistic culture. Even the frequently invoked notion of the "rise" of performance art in India is entangled in these politics of mobility and immobility. In a sense, performative practice in India gained the signifier of "performance art," and subsequently national and international attention, when it began to look and feel familiar to Western audiences even as, as this study shows, the

²¹ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 11.

²² Ibid.

precursors of contemporary performance art in India have been in flux and development at both the national and international level throughout the twentieth century.

The undeniable proliferation of Indian performance art in recent years seems to demand attention to its own history. If Goldberg's historical framework is simply superimposed upon the Indian context, then the stories embedded in the incongruity of this overlay begin to rise to the surface. Most notably, when these two histories are considered in relation to one another, the dominant historical position of the West, in which performance art is understood as a postmodern critique, is unsettled. Goldberg suggests, as do other established scholars of performance art such as Kristine Stiles, Amelia Jones and Peggy Phelan, that performance art can be traced back to the European avant-garde's desire to subvert the stylistic conventions of the institution of art in the twentieth century, and that this institutional contestation reappears later in the post-war era in the U.S. among artists who sought to critique the capitalist enterprise of the art world and its dependence on marketable art objects such as painting and sculpture. Yet, the history of painting and sculpture follow a different course in the modern and contemporary Indian art world, where painting in particular continues to be a dominant medium through the '90s and '00s, and on through to the present day.²³

Cultural theorist and art curator Nancy Adajania reflects briefly on this difference in her short essay "New Media Overtures before New Media Practice in India," when she identifies the misreadings that arose out of the failure of Western curators to understand the complex historical interplay between painting and new "media practices" in India (a category that for Adajania includes both performance art and video art). She refers to the way in which

²³ Take for example the work of well-known painters Nalini Malani and M.F. Hussain.

curators, assuming painting to be a *passé* practice when applying a Euro-American lens, misread the developmental trajectory of new media in India as a “late” arrival. She writes:

The discourse of new media art practices in India, such as it is, has largely been a pursuit of dummy doors. Most of its axioms and explanations originate in the transnational period of the early 1990s, when Western curators began to parachute into India, looking for idioms that they could recognize as “cutting edge,” such as the installation, the performance, and video art. Not finding much evidence of these forms, many of these curators concluded that Indian artists were victims of a time lag, that they were hopelessly out of date and out of touch. Secure in their mainstream Western art historical narrative, these visitors seemed unable or unwilling to accept that Indian artists had not quite exhausted the possibilities of the painted frame, and were grappling with their own specific issues of pictorialism, narrative and testimony.²⁴

Adajania’s observations point to the way failures to account for divergent trajectories in the development of performance art reinforce dominant historical narratives produced by the West of a derivative and culturally immature Indian art scene that arrived late to the party. She describes these misreadings as “dummy doors,” referencing Wittgenstein’s warning to his students of the trap that comes from a faithful belief in paradigms by using the metaphor of a man who stands facing a wall of painted “dummy doors” that he cannot open, while he is unaware that the real door is actually right behind him.²⁵

For Adajania, the real door standing behind these misreadings of the history of new media in India would open up onto the specific material differences in the histories of technology in India when compared with Europe and North America. These differences contribute to divergent developments of artistic production – namely, video art in India did not appear in the 1960s and ‘70s as it did in the U.S. and Europe, where advances in the military industrial complex depended largely on advancements in technology. To extend Adajania’s

²⁴ Nancy Adajania, “New Media Overtures before New Media Practice in India,” in *Art and Visual Culture in India 1857-2007*, ed by Gayatri Sinha (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2009) 266.

²⁵ Ibid.

claims further, it is important to note that the first at-home video system the “Sony Portapak” (or “Sony Video Rover”) was introduced to the U.S. market in 1967, which made video art technology more readily available to artists there than in other parts of the world. A few years earlier, in 1965, the Korean-born New York-based artist Nam June Paik, gained access to a hand-held camera, and famously recorded Pope Paul VI’s procession through the streets of New York.²⁶ Paik’s work is now regarded one of the earliest examples of what would later become known as video art, a genre which deeply intertwined new technology with the history of performance art as performance artists began to use video to document their performances, and artists using the medium of video began to use performative methods in their work. However, as Adajania notes, this historical trajectory plays out differently in the Indian context as the mass dissemination of video technology did not occur until the 1980s and video art did not really take form as an established genre until the mid to late 1990s. At issue is not a lack in the Indian art world during the 1960s and 1970s; rather, something different was happening, which has largely gone unrecognized by those critics who take the West as their primary frame of reference. As Adajania notes, “Indian artists had not quite exhausted the possibilities of the painted frame.”²⁷

Adajania’s reflections on these technological, material and socio-political divergences speak to the failures and pitfalls of writing a complex history of Indian performance art through the framework offered by the development of performance in the Euro-American context. In the context of the current “rise” of Indian performance art, it is necessary to consider its recent expansion while bearing in mind these divergent historical and

²⁶ Charlie Gere, *Digital Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008) 81.

²⁷ Adajania, “New Media Overtures before New Media Practice in India,” 266.

material realities. Adajania's critique opens the door for us to ask: from which spaces, practices and technologies did contemporary performance art in India emerge?

The contemporary performance artists whom this study foregrounds turned to performance art because it afforded them a body-based, site-specific mode of aesthetics through which to address the region and its publics. However, before we can think through these practices, it is important to understand that the very concept of performance and its relationship to social criticism and public engagement has a longer history within the Indian context than it does within the United States or Europe. Modern Indian theater, particularly in practices that arose with the Indian nationalist movement and subsequent independence, defined itself around a paradigm of social critique in which the body served as a tool for creative public engagement around the political. The impact that these earlier methodological and political foundations had on shaping the landscape of what was possible through body-based art practices provides a crucial lens for this study.

Nevertheless, the interest of this complex history lies in the fact that Indian performance art is *not* merely an extension of modern theater. In fact, as evidenced by its presence at the Indian Art Fair, performance art has a rather close tie institutionally and aesthetically to the visual art world, receiving support from galleries, museums and arts foundations in the last decade. It is, in this sense, an artistic practice that orients itself in and through the contemporary, "globalized" art world. That being said, it is equally important to note how major artistic movements in India in the later half of twentieth century borrowed philosophical and political approaches for the history of theater. Just as this dissertation refutes the notion that contemporary Indian art is simply an extension of Euro-American performance

art practices, it similarly resists the idea that theater practices and performance art practices refer to two mutually exclusive historical trajectories. Thus, this chapter demonstrates how the overlapping layers of two complex, interconnected and mutually produced histories gave rise to performance art in India: the political layers of modern theater, particularly street theater, and contemporary art in India through the globalized art world. As will be shown, Indian performance art is not simply a *consequence* of globalization, but rather a product of India's role in global cultural production through both theatrical and artistic developments.

Modern Indian Theater: Performance as State Critique and Social Engagement

Depending on how broadly one defines performance art, it may seem fundamentally absurd to suggest that it is a recent phenomenon in India. India has a very long, complex and multifaceted history of classical, folk and ritualistic performance practices that take place in both rural and urban contexts. However, given that “performance art” as a category in India arose out of a particular set of institutional and material circumstances in the late-twentieth century, it is useful to understand those types of practices that emerged in relation to this specific art historical category. This does not mean that the boundaries of this category are impenetrable or static. Contemporary Indian performance have strong history ties to the history of modern Indian theater, which, I argue, provides some of the fundamental ideas that remain central to contemporary performance art. In particular, Modern Indian theater cemented the notion that performance can act as a tool for activist interventions, state critique, and public engagement. As I will discuss, Modern Indian theater also helped to develop performance as a platform for multiple modes of

thinking and forms of participation in the creative articulation of social and political critique.

In the last decade, despite the dearth of studies on performance art in India, there has been a marked increase in studies in the area of modern Indian theater, most notably Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker's *Theatres of Independence* (2005), Vasudha Dalmia's *Poetics, Plays and Performances* (2006), Erin B Mee's *The Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage* (2008) and *The Modern Indian Theater: A Reader* (2011), edited by Nandi Bhatia.²⁸ This growing scholarly interest speaks to the vastness and diversity of Indian theater during in the later part of the twentieth century and also the ways in which theater provides a valuable and complex lens for understanding India's social and political life from this period.

Naturally, it is impossible to make any generalizations about modern theater in India or to locate a definitive nexus that points to its first moment of development. The term "modern Indian theater" itself often refers to post-independence practices that begin in and after the 1960s, promoted by figures such as Vijay Tendulkar (Marathi), Badal Sircar (Bengali), Mohan Rakesh (Hindi), and Girish Karnad (Kannada). But Bhatia and others contend that the early formations of modern Indian theater began as early as the eighteenth century with the colonial encounter and the subsequent influence of European models on local theater traditions. India's three port cities, then known as Calcutta (Kolkata), Bombay

²⁸ Other noteworthy recent literature on modern Indian theatre includes Minoti Chatterjee's *Theatre Beyond the Threshold: Nationalism and the Bengali State* (2004), Nandi Bhatia's *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theatre and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, G.P. Deshpande's *Modern Indian Drama: An Anthology*. These writings build up on earlier hallmark texts in this area, particularly, Rustom Bharucha's *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal* (1983) and *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture* (1992) and Jacob Scrampickal's *Voice to the Voiceless: The Power of People's Theatre in India* (1994).

(Mumbai) and Madras (Chennai) not only saw the arrival of the British East India Company, but with it, the arrival of European theater. The British brought tours of European productions to entertain ex-patriots, funded productions developed by British ex-patriots themselves, and made English drama the primary component of theater education in Indian universities.²⁹ As early as 1757, Bengal especially saw the proliferation of playhouses, most famously the Calcutta Theatre (established in 1775) and the San Souci Theatre (established in 1839).³⁰ These theaters were managed under the direction of colonial officials, and were initially restricted to *sahibs* and *memsahibs*, until their doors eventually opened to the wealthy local literate elite.³¹

It was during this period that theater began to be promoted as a strictly plot-driven and text-derived form that was produced by a single authorial playwright and that included conversational dialogue within a narrative structure that produces the illusion of unfolding events and action developing in linear time. While early practices in India, dating back to the 5th century such as Kalidasa were structured around single-authored and dialogue driven theater, the dominance of staged works, written by a single playwright in a European style, were presented as elevated, exclusionary mod of theater. It was during this period that theater became a commodity; one now paid for the experience in the designated private space of the proscenium stage, as opposed to a freely attended community event honoring the harvest or other religious celebrations.³²

²⁹ Mee, Erin. *Theater of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*. (London: Seagull, 2008) 2.

³⁰ Nandi Bhatia, *A Modern Indian Theatre*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2011, xv.

³¹ *Ibid.*, xv.

³² *Ibid.*, 2.

India had a wide range of performance practices prior to colonial arrival, which varied according to region and genre. The most common styles were Bhavai, Kathakali, Jatra and Tamasha, but generally these types of performances were, in Mee's words, "not text-driven stagings of dramatic literature." Mee contends that this does not mean that these styles did not draw upon literary texts as a component of the performance, but the text itself was not the primary structure driving and containing the narrative. For example, she notes that while Kathakali draws from a poetic text sung by musicians, the actor-dancers use this text as a prompt for improvisation. Likewise, Bhavai, a theater practice which honors the Goddess Amba, follows a plot derived from texts but, in contrast to proscenium theater productions, it takes place in open-air and includes elements of dance, a *puja* (sacred offering), and the appearance of a comic character who points out society's wrongs to the audience. Thus, while a text determines part of the performance, the performance is ultimately more interactive and expository than the dramaturgical methods upheld by the British academy.

These colonially-influenced approaches to theater, including everything from the way texts were adapted to timing, costume, lighting and sound, became signifiers of theater's modernity and "western-ness," and ultimately became points of development and departure across various stages of modern Indian theater as Indian practitioners aimed to situate themselves in relation to, or apart from, the political implications imbedded in each of these formal and institutional characteristics. When Indian theater practitioners began to develop their own companies, each would be forced to reconcile these formal and

conceptual qualities in order to prove their legitimacy through knowledge of and mastery over theater in its Western form.

Thus, as theater and drama scholar Rakesh Solomon argues, modern Indian theater was always forced to contend with the problem of nationhood as it underwent stylistic and formal changes through the course of the colonial era. Solomon periodizes the development of modern theater through three politicized stages: the Orientalist phase (beginning in 1824), followed by a nationalist phase from 1920-47 and finally the post-Independence nationalist phase (from 1947 to the present). Solomon's "phases" speak to the way in which Indian theater developed in conjunction with the contradictions of colonial and postcolonial identity. While the early phase of modern Indian theater was structured by colonial and orientalist models, and therefore could be said to have aided in the colonial enterprise, the later nationalist phase paradoxically aimed to project a notion of modernity through Enlightenment modes of thought, while simultaneously articulating an anti-colonial politics and promoting pre-colonial indigenous styles.³³ Solomon contends that national theater would ultimately promote the intelligentsia's desire for a pan-Indian aesthetic, which signified 'modernity' as defined through European models of structure and narrative, while simultaneously bringing forth a nostalgic imagined pre-colonial nation by looking at ancient Hindi traditions and art forms.

³³ It is important to consider that it is often impossible to distinguish what is indigenous/local from what colonial/western. Erin B. Mee notes this in *Theatre of Roots* and uses the example of the theater in Kerala that was influenced culturally by Christianity, Judaism and Chinese culture for over 2000 years, noting the ways in which there has never been as essentially pure Indian theater (*Theatre of Roots*, 35). The idea is not that Indian theatre practitioners could actually make use of essentially Western or Indian modes of expression, since such an inherently hybrid cultural history makes this impossible, but rather that certain theatrical traits became symbols of Westernness or Indianess, and theatre became a platform through which one might navigate these complex expressions of national identity.

As Bhatia aptly notes, “Evidently, theatre could not be disentangled from the idea of the national; rather, it became deeply entrenched in nationalist thought and its accompanying contradictions.”³⁴ In the later part of the nineteenth century, this expression of nationalism took form through plays such as those by Bengali dramatist Dinabandhu Mitra, which used the text-driven modern theater structure but had a directly anti-colonial mission. Mitra’s famous *Nil Darpan* (The Mirror of Indigo), of 1860, was based on the events of the 1859 Indigo Revolt in which indigo farmers in Bengal rose up against indigo planters by refusing to sow a single seed of the plant. The Indigo Revolt became famous for uniting farmers across diverse religious backgrounds and it is thought that Mitra himself was directly involved in harnessing support for the Indigo Revolt movement. His play focused on the plight of the peasants of Champaran, offering a scathing examination of the injustices they faced, and aimed to harness support from across classes, including farmers as well as the Bengali elite, for the broader anti-colonial cause.

Mitra’s play, along with many others from that period, including those by Upendranath Das, posed such a threat to British policies and authorities that in 1876 the British Raj instituted the Dramatic Performance Act, which banned any performance that might incite feelings of anger or dissatisfaction towards the government. Under the administration of Viceroy Northbrook the act outlined specific instructions outlawing any public theater production that contained controversial subject matter or undermined the values upheld by the British system.³⁵ Scholar of Bengali language and literature, Manujendra Kundu has written about the covert role of Bengali intellectuals in the

³⁴ Ibid., xviii.

³⁵ Bhatia, Nandi. *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. University of Michigan Press, 2004.

promotion of the law. While a wide section of the intelligentsia openly criticized the act, Kundu reveals, through an examination of written correspondence from the period, that some influential Bengali intellectuals quietly promoted the law in order to protect their own future interests.³⁶ Such complex histories provide a testament to the ways theater was deeply embedded in the politics of state authority at both the individual and collective level. In a sense, theater became a battleground over the desires of multiple parties in the pursuit of power – or resistance to power – through complex and interconnected expressions of agency.

The intimacy between the actual historical events surrounding the Indigo Revolt and Mitra's *The Mirror of Indigo* speaks to the profound connection between real political circumstances and their representation in the theater. Modern Indian theater not only mirrored political realities, it also acted as an agent in their production. The fact that British authorities found it necessary to survey and censor these and other theater productions, speaks to the political efficacy these performances had at the social and structural level. Mitra's play is exemplary of a broader anti-colonial sentiment in modern Indian theater that prevailed through the early decades of the twentieth century that helped to cement the relationship between theater and the nationalist cause. Theater acted as a social tool to promote developments toward an independent nation-state and highlighted the failings and injustices of the colonial system. *Nil Darpan* also serves as a foreshadowing of what would become a dominant social theme in theatrical productions in the latter part of the twentieth century: the struggles of the working class.

³⁶ Manujendra Kundu "The Dramatic Performances Act of 1876: Reactions of the Bengali Establishment to its Introduction", *History and Sociology of South Asia* January 2013 vol. 7 no. 1 79-93.

By the late 1940s, with the rise of the Left movements in India, many theater groups used theater as a platform to promote the concerns of working and lower class populations, who were emerging against the backdrop of the social and economic crises during the final years of British governance. It was during this period, in the 1943 Bengal Famine, that millions died of starvation or malnourishment, including many artisans and small traders who lost their income with the decline of the economy.³⁷ It was also during this period that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's call for *satyagraha*, or "insistent truth," in the form of civil disobedience against colonial authorities, gave rise to the critical mass of protesters taking part in the Quit India Movement in 1942. The Indian People's Theater Association (IPTA) formed on the tide of these economic and political struggles in 1942, and was largely funded directly by the Communist Party of Indian (CPI). In 1943, the IPTA held a conference in Mumbai, bringing together theater practitioners, activists and politicians from across the country to brainstorm ways in which theater could provide education about the state's injustices and mobilize people in protest.

One of the most famous IPTA productions of this period was *Nabanna*, a Bengali drama written by Sombhu Mitra and directed by Bijon Bhattacharya. *Nabanna* is the traditional harvest festival in Bengal, and the play ironically chronicled the events of the Bengal Famine of 1943, highlighting the role of complicit British officials and wealthy Indian elites who cast blind eyes on accounts of the massive deaths due to starvation. The play was later promoted and reformulated by the IPTA as part of the 1946 film *Dharti Ke Lal* (Children of the Earth), which aimed to reach a wider audience through the cinema.

³⁷ P. R. Greenough (1982). *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-1944*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

While the IPTA's goals were to harness the potential for political change through theater, the group also aimed to make use of cinema and music in order to garner mass awareness of the social and political problems of the time.

The IPTA's ties to the then undivided Communist Party of India, speak to the profound influence the CPI had on the marriage of art and activism in India. It was the mission of Puran Chand Joshi, the general secretary of CPI from 1935–47, that all writers, musician, artists, and theater practitioners, should make it their primary purpose to use art as tool for political activism.³⁸ Joshi's call for artistic action also gave rise to the famous Indian Progressive Writer's Association (PWA), formed in 1936, with a similar goal of educating people about the injustice of the colonial system through literary sources that promoted an anti-imperialist mission.

The IPTA began to dissolve around 1947, however; various members settled in major cities and continued to develop new theater practices as they wrestled with the question of what theater should look like in India's newly independent nation-state. One of the most influential modern theater practitioners among this group was Habib Tanvir. Originally from Raipur in the state of Chhattisgarh, Tanvir worked with IPTA and PWA in Mumbai, and eventually moved to Delhi where he and his wife and partner, Moneeka Misra, established the Naya Theatre Company in 1959. Tanvir and Misra are best known for creating a theatre that combined aspects of western theatre with elements of traditional folk theatre in India. In large part, these folk elements were drawn from a traditional form of performance known as Nacha, which originated from Chhattisgarh, and is made up of a series

³⁸ Ram Rahman, "A Journey of Resistance," in *The Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism in India since 1989* (Ram Rahman and Jessica Moss eds.) Smart Museum of Art: Chicago (2013), 15.

of expository dance and song pieces interspersed with shorter performances involving comedy and themes of social critique.³⁹ Such performances proceed through the evening and frequently last all night long. Alongside actors from Delhi trained in more “modern” traditions, Tanvir also recruited a number of Nacha artists from Chhattisghar to join his theater troupe.

Ultimately, Tanvir felt that any theater that drew solely from Western forms would be incapable of capturing the “social aspirations, cultural patterns and fundamental problems of contemporary India.”⁴⁰ He upheld the notion that the cultural influences of the West had destroyed India’s cultural identity and that, as a response, the new national theater should capture forms of indigenous culture that persisted from the pre-colonial period. Tanvir was insistent, however, that these folk elements did not inscribe his practice in a traditional, and therefore not modern, history/framework. On the contrary, he contended, “howsoever people would like to characterize it, my theater was, and still is, modern and contemporary”⁴¹

Of course, the terms “modernity” and “tradition” as Tanvir employs them in the above quotation, and as I have also used them, are fraught with political meaning. A number of thinkers working across various disciplines, including history, anthropology, cultural studies and sociology, have helped to theorize these terms in relation to the postcolonial problem (most notably Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Charles Taylor,

³⁹ *Oxford Companion of Indian Theatre*. Ananda La ed. Oxford University Press, 2004

⁴⁰ Mee. *Theatre of Roots*.

⁴¹ Habib Tanveer in conversation with Javed Malik, in Neeraj Malik and Javed Malik *Habib Tanveer: Reflections and Reminiscences*. Delhi: SAHMAT, 2010

Dilip Gaonkar, and Gurminder K. Bhambra.)⁴² Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his text *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000), famously articulated the problem faced by previously colonized nations in gaining the attribution of “modernity” (and its attendant notion of political consciousness) as a type of temporal relegation to the “waiting room of history.”⁴³ Such relegation gives rise to the notion that India only adopted a historical and political consciousness through its colonial encounter, and related notions that view non-Western nationalism as a localized version of a European form. This “first West and then elsewhere” model makes modernity “look not simply global but rather as something that became global over time, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it.”⁴⁴ Implicit in this story is the idea that modernity is an original feature of the West, which is then imported to the non-West, where it sets out to evolve indigenous ways of being.

The equation of styles of theater with modernity as it is understood above is entangled in the very problems that Chakrabarty identifies. Theater, as it was fostered as part of the colonial cultural project, encouraged Indian theater to “evolve” toward those form of expression valued in the West. Tanvir hoped to restore faith and value in indigenous folk practices both as a means of demonstrating their validity and sophistication as theatrical forms and also to uphold a romantic ideal of the power of practices that were untouched by

⁴² *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination*. By Gurminder K. Bhambra. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Dilip Gaonkar, ‘On Alternative Modernities’ in Dilip Gaonkar (ed.) *Alternative Modernities*. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁴³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, . *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000: 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

the colonial encounter. Yet, in doing so Tanvir managed to challenge and redefine the very dichotomy through which “modernity” and “tradition” had come to constrain Indian theater.

In her book, *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian State* (2008), theater scholar Erin B. Mee writes about this redefinition of cultural modernism through theater practices in the post-independence era (roughly, 1947-80). She refers to work by Tanvir, and other modern theater practitioners from this time as cultivating a “theater of roots” practice, in that they sought to identify the roots of Indian theater and “synthesize modern European theater and traditional Indian performance, creating a new hybrid theatrical form.” Mee argues that in doing so, the theater roots movement “enacted an alternative definition of cultural modernism--one that was not simply in opposition to the colonial definition, but challenged the very terms of those definitions, thereby challenging colonial notions of cultural supremacy.”⁴⁵ Thus, as the theater of roots movement both contested and drew from theatrical forms that began during the colonial period, it expanded these practices and challenged the very premises of cultural authority imbedded in their claim for dominance on the Indian stage.

This type of critical hybridization is evident in Tanvir’s first major production entitled *Agra Bazaar*, which took place in Delhi in 1954. The production was directly staged in the actual Agra Bazaar, a public marketplace in the heart of Delhi, which also served as the inspiration of the work (fig. 1). Tanvir was interested in playing the architectural setting and cultural significance of the space against the movement and dynamism of the actual sounds and smells of a bustling marketplace. Moreover, he was interested in the social relationships and economic dynamics that are shaped through the bazaar, and the ways in

⁴⁵ Mee, *Theatre of Roots*, 5.

which people in this space are divided along class lines. The story was based on the life of the eighteenth century poet Nazir Akbaarabadi, who was known for writing about the lives of everyday people and events as well as for criticizing the conventions of privilege and elitism. The play incorporated elements of Nacha by interspersing performances of Nacha actors, who used song and dance and engaged directly with the audience, with more expository elements of the narrative.

Agra Bazaar is an important moment for the “theater of roots” movement because of the way that Tanvir chose to incorporate a folk practice into a drama that took place in an open public space. As in a traditional Nacha performance, the actors directly addressed the audience, narrated portions of the story through song and, instead of using blocking, adjusted their bodies in relation to the movement of the audience. In this way, Tanvir foregrounded a type of practice that challenged the colonial standards from within the boundaries of its own structure. While he drew upon a structure of narrative associated with the West, he also contested it by unsettling the conventional formulas that one aspires to perfect in this style by integrating elements that are expository and interactive.

Yet, synthesizing elements across a colonial school of theater and rural folk traditions proved to be a challenging task. As Mee notes, Tanvir had a complex and troubling relationship to his Nacha actors. She challenges the way that imposed ideas on his actors and fetishized their traditionalism within the context of a modern production.⁴⁶ These problems are exemplary of the internal troubles that marked the Indian theater as it sought to redefine its terms amidst the dominance of colonial theater styles in urban centers and a desire to carve out new theatrical modalities in an era of independence. Nacha and urban

⁴⁶ Ibid, 89.

theater both required different modes of rehearsal and production, and therefore demanded a great deal of negotiation, confrontation and reconciliation.

Mee argues that these inherently irreconcilable differences gave rise to the productive paradox that produced the critical developments of modern Indian theater. Modern Indian theater was never an extension of Western practices, nor was it a revision of Indian forms; instead, as Mee shows, it was a critical redefinition of the premises of Western cultural modernism and the production of another mode of modernist expression. In *Theatre of Roots*, she aims to demonstrate:

How the theatre of roots movement (which is one manifestation or aspect of modern Indian theatre) is *different* from modern Western theatre, and to illuminate the ways in which its particularities challenge our definitions of, and approaches to, modern theatre by demonstrating the ways in which the theatre of roots makes itself modern on its own terms, within the specificities of its own culture. Colonial culture valued literary merit, secularism, commercialism, the ability to directly address social issues and naturalism. The roots movement offered an alternative based on ideas of community participation, multiplicity and multiple modes of engagement.⁴⁷

In her discussion of how theater of roots created a “modern” practice, Mee draws upon the theories of thinkers such as Dilip Gaonkar, scholar of rhetoric and communications, who provide models of alternative modernity in relation to colonialism and “creative adaptation.” Colonial adaptation refers to the ways in which cultural practitioners draw upon cultural resources both indigenous and colonial while resisting a sheer duplication of the West. Gaonkar is interested in deploying a model of modernity that does not abandon recognition of the western discourse of modernity, but also does not produce the notion of a passive

⁴⁷ Ibid.,5.

colony modeled in its image. He argues that “creative adaptation” through the colonial encounter is “the site where a people ‘make themselves modern’ as opposed to being ‘made’ modern by alien impersonal forces, and where they give themselves an identity and destiny.”⁴⁸

The significance of Gaonkar’s argument for Mee is that she aims to demonstrate the alternative modernity that arose from the “creative adaptation” of the colonial theater through the roots movement. She believes the role of modern Indian theater was to articulate a new model of modernity that both drew from Western discourse and, at the same time, challenged its limitations and found holes in its claims. Mee is very specific about the ways in which this critical gesture took shape through the ideologies and approaches she sees as shaping modern theater, arguing that while western theater foregrounds a practice that relied on commodification, literary sources, notions of secularism and the “ability to directly address social issues,” the roots movement established a practice that valued community participation, multiplicity and multiple modes of engagement.⁴⁹ Thus when modern Indian theater drew from traditional practices, it was not simply integrating indigenous stylistic forms into a western theatrical framework (in other words, it was not simply dressing western theatre in exoticism), but rather, envisioning the modalities of thinking that these practices offered, and the ways in which they unsettled the very claims of colonial modernity embedded in the British drama. These attributes go beyond mere stylistic differences and point to deeper conceptual and theoretical differences in the way theater addresses the role of art and society, how it understands the relationship between the actors and audience/public,

⁴⁸ Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, “On Alternative Modernities,” *Public Culture* 11 (1999): 18.

⁴⁹ Mee, *Theater of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*, 11.

and the extent to which it can incorporate multiple conceptual frameworks into performance methodologies.

Mee's analysis is fundamental to the history of contemporary performance art because these major methods, which she attributes to the roots movement, have an uncanny resonance with the key philosophies expressed by a large number of contemporary performance art projects. As I will demonstrate, contemporary performance art in India has often put great stock in the value of community participation, multiplicity and multiple modes of engagement and the artists who trained in a number of artistic media (painting, sculpture, dance) have frequently chosen to work in performance when trying to create projects that aspire to these models of multifarious social engagement. Moreover, as is evident in the scholarship of Bhatia, Soloman, Mee, and others, modern Indian theater was born out of a desire to creatively critique the state. This was true for practitioners who had a specifically anti-colonial mission in the later part of the nineteenth century as well as for those projects backed by the CPI with the rise of the left movement and nearing the movement of independence. While Tanvir and others associated with the roots movement in the latter half of the twentieth century were less explicit in their critique of the state, they did, through a critical renegotiation of colonial models and indigenous forms, carry on the spirit of criticism by arguing for the validity of multiplicity, the necessity of creatively identifying systems of power, and a need for direct engagement with the city and its inhabitants through participation and expository interactivity. Performance art continues to renegotiate these understandings of art and society that first arose in the paradoxes of Indian modernity.

While western histories of performance art have largely argued it arose not out of theater but out of a critique of the visual arts and a reimagining of theatrical temporality, in the Indian context, art, activism and theater are undeniably intertwined.⁵⁰ Modern Indian theater helped to shape the relationship between performance art, political criticism and social engagement. While the specific goals and methods of Indian performance art are diverse, theater's struggle with the postcolonial problem of modernity gave rise to a practice that associated body-based expression with activist endeavors. In addition, these practices expressed a desire to interact at the local level with a wide range of participants who carry complex and sometimes conflicting social positions and ways of being.⁵¹ This became particularly evident in the 1980s and '90s as artists from diverse creative backgrounds directly collaborated together through participatory and performative modes of expression.

After 1989: Safdar Hashmi and the Sahmat Collective

The most significant example of the bridge between theater, art and activism in India can be found in the work of the street theater artist Safdar Hashmi. Hashmi was one of the founding members of Jana Natya Manch (People's Theater Front, Janam for short), a leftist Delhi theater group, which grew out of the IPTA and was established in 1973. Janam did many performances in open-spaces throughout Delhi, and following the ideals of the

⁵⁰ For example, Goldberg describes performance art as arising from among poets, painters, designers and visual artists, especially in her chapter on 60s performance, where all her examples are painters turned performers such as Jim Dine, Vito Acconci (who started as a poet), Allan Kaprow, John Cage (who worked in music and technology), and Red Grooms. In other words, Goldberg does not begin her history with a history of 19th or early twentieth century theatre. Nowhere does she discuss naturalism, or Samuel Beckett, Ionesco or other major figures in modern theatre.

⁵¹ Theater was not the only form of art that had a nationalist cause or critiqued the state. Painting, sculpture and literature obviously shared these interests. What I am interested in about theatre and its legacy on performance art is the way in which "participation" and "social engagement" became major ideologies that carry over into ideas at play in contemporary performance art.

IPTA, they sought to bring theater to the people. Janam, meaning birth in Hindi, was specifically invested in addressing social and political injustices and in voicing the concerns of working class populations. Like the earlier IPTA, it was a partisan group with financial ties to the CPI.⁵²

In 1989, Safdar Hashmi's violent death became forever inscribed in Indian theater history after he was brutally beaten during a performance of the play *Halla Bol!* Hashmi was not even directly acting in the play, but was there to support the production, in Jhandapur, Shahibabad, a semi-rural, semi-industrial area on the outskirts of Delhi in 1988. The play was being staged in support of a Communist Party of India (Marxist) candidate. Following a procession for the rival candidate, which had come down the narrow road to pass the crowd, a confrontation began. Janam accounts of the event report that after the actors ran to the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (the safest nearby location) to avoid further confrontation, Hashmi tried to hold the door shut and speak with his assailants, who then dragged him out in the street and beat him with iron rods in the middle of the road. After suffering severe blows to the head and consequential brain and organ damage, Hashmi died in the hospital on January 1, 1989 at the age of thirty-four.

In his book, which chronicles the history of Janam, *A History of the Jana Natya Manch: Plays for the People* (2012), Arjun Ghosh writes of the symbolism involved in Hashmi's gruesome death. He argues that Hashmi's death was more than a casualty of unforeseen conflict that spiraled out of control. Instead, Janam had become a symbol of a

⁵² The name Janam is also a play on words. In addition to being an abbreviation for Jana Natya Manch, Janam also means "birth" in Hindi.

growing body of political resistance through radical theater, which threatened those in opposition to it. He writes:

Their desire to kill brutally, in broad daylight, and in the presence of a huge number of workers and their families, was more than a spur of the moment reaction to their procession being blocked. It was a warning to all present--actors and spectators--that they dare not be participants of street plays celebrating and equipping the working class for struggle. Their desire to kill was a desire to silence.⁵³

The desire to silence about which Ghosh writes, indicates the anxieties raised in response to the great deal of public unrest for which Janam was providing a platform. Hashmi and Janam had built a stage for a critical mass of the laboring class to demand specific land rights and to protest against clerical injustice, unemployment, inflation and violence against women. The early 1970s, following the Indo-Pakistani conflict in 1971, saw an increase in political resistance and led up to the Emergency (1975-77), which included student protests against the education minister in Gujarat and student support of Gandhian socialist Jayaprakash Narayan against the state government in Bihar. There were also major acts of resistance on the part of the working class populations, which were met by a government backlash. In May 1974 the national railway system went on strike and several thousand employees were driven out of their homes.

In the midst of these events, Hashmi was producing plays, and often creating work that directly critiqued the state. For example, in 1974, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi refused to resign after the rigged elections of Uttar Pradesh, Hashmi wrote a small play called *Kursi, Kursi, Kursi* (Chair, Chair, Chair) in which a king is asked to get off of his throne to make way for the newly elected leader but finds that the chair is stuck to him as he

⁵³ Arjun Ghosh, *A History of the Jana Natya Manch: Plays for the People*. (New Delhi: Sage, 2012), 3.

rises. His message was clear: no matter how the state tries to separate itself from its power, it is never truly able to be in service to the people and not itself.

In the post-emergency years, as unions had limited resources, Hashmi aimed to find a way for working class populations to mobilize around specific causes through a theater practice that was inexpensive and portable. In 1978 Janam performed *Machine* for over 200,000 workers at a trade union meeting (fig 2). The play was based on the real story of the factory workers who were killed by guards at Herig-India during a strike after their demands were not being met by the management. While earlier theater practitioners had taken up the issues of the working class in their plays, Hashmi became a cultural icon solidifying the association between performance and activism. As Ghosh notes in his discussion of Hashmi's death, the mass attendance at Hashmi's funeral was unprecedented; "never in Delhi had the working class grieved for a theater artist in this manner."⁵⁴ His brutal and politically motivated death shook the nation with anger, grief and a sense of urgency to transform that tragedy into a lasting symbol of activist-based artistic freedom (fig. 3).

In the devastating aftermath of Hashmi's death in 1989, a group of artists, writers, scholars, filmmakers and theater practitioners founded the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (Sahmat), an artistic collective that supports the production and exhibition of art in the name of artistic freedom, critique and experimentation, and that advocates "the essentially pluralist and democratic spirit of creative expression."⁵⁵ While activist-based theater and art organizations, such as Janam and the IPTA and PWA, had largely been funded directly by the Communist Party of India (CPI), from the beginning Sahmat sought not to be a CPI

⁵⁴ Ibid.,1.

⁵⁵ Jessica Moss and Ram Rahman. *The Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism in India since 1989*. Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago Press: 2013, 11.

affiliate, but rather an independent and autonomous artist-run collective. While the group did receive some CPI funding and support, ultimately, the organizers believed that Sahmat should strive to be a place that fosters multiplicity, plurality and the participation of a wide range of viewpoints.

Jessica Moss and Ram Rahman's recent exhibition at the Smart Museum, entitled *The Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism in Indian since 1989* (2013), offers a valuable visual and historical survey of the organization, starting with its first major program, *Safdar Samaroh* (Safdar Festival) and *Artist Alert*, which took place in New Delhi on April 12-16, 1989. The event involved a five-day public cultural festival, which included choreographed dances for the event by Durga Lal, Madhavi Mudgal and Astad Deboo, alongside a theater production with life-size puppets by Dadi Pudumjee. The event also included poetry readings, the screening of a documentary on Hashmi by Sashi Kumar, and a public seminar on the beginnings of theater. The event was funded by a five-day art exhibition entitled *Artist's Alert*, in which artists donated pieces to be auctioned off in support of Sahmat. The festival marked the beginning of Sahmat's multi-media collaboration, which included theater practitioners, dancers, filmmakers and visual artists, and sought to foster the idea of collective action inspired by Hashmi's commitment to multiplicity, participation and critical dialogue.

Sahmat was founded on the principle of multi-media and multi-experiential practice. Its first trustees came from a number of diverse artistic backgrounds and included Habib Tanveer (who became chairman in 2003), the writer Bhisham Sahni, the playwright G.P. Deshpande, the visual artist (in photography and multi-media) Vivan Sundaram, actor

and director M.K. Raina, as well as Hashmi's wife, actress Moloyashree Hashmi and his son Sohail Hashmi. There were also wide range of participant-founding members with eclectic interests, including the art historian Geeta Kapur and photographer Ram Rahman (co-curator of the Smart Exhibit).

The collective action of artists and thinkers from across these diverse backgrounds allowed Sahmat creatively to join forces in order to target specific causes. While the politics across the group ultimately differed, as Moss and Rahman note, the collective "shared a broad political perspective best described as politically Left." Moreover, Moss and Rahman argue that the primary concern connecting the collective was the rise of communalism, that is, "conflicts between extremist of religious communities" especially the conservative fractions of the Hindu-right and Hindu fundamentalism. On New Year's Day 1991, Sahmat organized a campaign called *Artists Against Communalism*, which involved a seventeen-hour sit-in on Safdar Hashmi Marg, a busy Delhi road posthumously named after the actor himself. The street, originally College Street at Mandi house in New Delhi, was renamed in honor of Hashmi on January 2, 1990 after a series of public protests. The event was a public protest against communalism, but instead of organizing through a more common form of public demonstration such as marching, striking and/or call-and-response chanting, Sahmat filled the road with interactive music, dance and theater (fig. 4). This type of multiplicity and inclusivity in expression countered what the group felt were the restrictive and exclusive ideologies of communalism. As Moss and Rahman state, "they asserted the plural and composite nature of India's cultural traditions by providing a shared platform for a

rich variety of India's performing arts." The group issued this statement at the launch of the campaign:

We, the artists' community of India, are deeply pained by the growth of communalism which has assumed unprecedented proportions in recent days. All artistic endeavors in India, both traditionally and in contemporary times have been exemplary in upholding the values of secularism and cultural pluralism. We increasingly feel that we can no longer be silent spectators to the destruction of these values which have sustained our thoughts and endeavor. We wish to emphasize the paramount importance of peace, and appeal to the nation's conscience to rise above the tied of hatred and violence.⁵⁶

As the statement demonstrates, Sahmat's desire to create a multi-media arts experience for public bystanders walking through Safdar Hashmi Marg on New Year's Day was an attempt to visualize the qualities of "cultural pluralism" in Indian artistic culture as a counterpoint to the rigid discourses of difference and opposition within a conservative communalist framework. Performative practices were key to this project not only because they were live, embodied actions in the street, bearing resemblance to acts of live protest, but also because this wide range of body-based expression (from classical dance to experimental theater) cultivated Sahmat's ideals of participation and advocated for a multiplicity that resisted the disaggregation of communalism.

Sahmat increasingly fostered this model of interactivity and participation in later initiatives, such as in its 1992 project *Slogans for Communal Harmony* (fig. 5). Here Sahmat invited auto-rickshaw drivers to participate in a competition on Safdar Hashmi Marg in which they would create or select poems about brotherhood and communal harmony that were then painted on the backs of their vehicles. Hundreds of drivers from diverse religious backgrounds including Sikhs, Muslim, and Hindus attended the event and contributed words

⁵⁶ Ibid., 69.

promoting non-violence. The winners included Ramesh Kumar, whose vehicle poem stated, “Deeds and not birth make a man great.” This statement countered the narratives of god-given birthright that operate in both religious and class contexts. The drivers proceeded to carry on with their routes throughout the city with these slogans moving through Delhi’s streets. In 1992 Sahmat repeated the same project in Mumbai.⁵⁷

On December 6th, 1992 the urgency to address the communalism issue increased, as Sahmat bore witness to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. On this date a group of Hindutva supporters destroyed the sixteenth century Islamic mosque, a famous cultural landmark built during the time of the Mughul emperor Babur. The destruction of the mosque was fueled by allegations coming from the Hindu Right that the mosque had been built over the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram (or Rama). Sahmat responded with a series of events, including a large public poster campaign with signs stating, “*Aaj koi naara na hoga, sirf desh bachanna hoga*” (There shall be no slogans today, our only task is to save the nation).⁵⁸ Moreover, the group created an educational exhibit entitled *Hum Sab Ayodhya*, (We Are All Ayodhya), which was first shown in New Delhi’s Nehru Memorial Museum and Library and then traveled nationally and internationally. The exhibition included a portable kit of educational charts, photographs, pamphlets and diagrams disputing dominant interpretations of Indian political and religious history (fig. 6). The show was shut down with police action on a number of occasions after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and right-wing activist groups organized protests.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 82.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 92.

On the first anniversary of the destruction of Babri Mosque, trustee Ram Rahman was invited to take *Hum Sab Ayodhya* to Columbia University in New York, and from there, to Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Massachusetts. In Los Angeles, at the Buena Park Convention Center, a group of 150 conservative Hindus made local news after they stood outside the center holding signs saying, “Sahmat is anti-god, anti-Ram, anti-Christ” and “Boycott Sahmat and False Propaganda.” The protesters were especially concerned with the way the exhibit represented the story of Ram. This response, which was part of the international debate around the show, speaks to the important role Sahmat played in building dialogue around Indian politics not only at the national level, but in the United States as well. As the exhibit traveled, it was accompanied by symposia, publication materials and public forums that foregrounded a pedagogical approach to art making at the global level. The value of *Hum Sam Ayodhya* was that it provided an easily mobile and adaptable platform enabling participation in and discussion around sensitive and confusing issues that impact the everyday lives of Indians both at home and in the broader context of the North American South Asian Diaspora.⁵⁹

Involved in the production of belonging for the Indian nation is a “naturalness” in which Hindus stand in as the original and natural inhabitants of the Indian nation. Rahman reviews and historically tracks the makings of a dangerously familiar trope within Right-wing Hindu discourse that attributes the spirit of nationalism to a history of Hinduism, which

⁵⁹ For a more extensive analysis of the production of minority and majority citizens in the making of the Indian nation around religious identities see Gyanendra Pandey’s book *Routine Violence* in which he writes of the “routine violence” involved in the production of these identities, both in the naturalization of conditions that make possible acts of corporeal violence, as well as the way in which such categories are “themselves shot through with violence” in historical and political discourses. Gyanendra Pandey, *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006: 1.

is thought to be rooted in the beginning of history itself, enduring years of invasion and contamination from unwanted outsiders. Pandey weaves critically through various narratives of nationalism from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that strive to articulate and section off a community of belonging in regards to attributes of national primacy, commitment to preservation, and political determination. Such narratives wrestled with how various religious identities can be considered Hindu, and to what level and end. This insistence on the “truth” of national culture is voiced in part through the national archive as well as the monument. Pandey focuses a portion of his text on the conflict over the Babari Masjid in Ayodha, which he reads as “part of a larger Hindu drive to reclaim the national culture from its enemies” most pronouncedly Muslims, and more broadly other so-called migrants who don’t belong to the land.⁶⁰ Such processes aid in the construction of the “unmarked national, the real, the obvious, axiomatically natural citizen” that depends on “effacing marks of internal division and domination.”⁶¹

By the early 2000s, Sahmat enhanced its mission of creating work that was participatory, performative, and directly integrated in the city and its inhabitants. In 2001, photographer, multi-media artists and founding trustee Vivan Sundaram organized a project entitled *Art on the Move*, which invited artists to create art that played-off Delhi’s visual culture and moved directly through urban space. Sahmat asked young Delhi artists to create mobile artworks inspired by Delhi’s various modes of transportation (mainly rickshaws, pushcarts and bicycles). These modes of transport are used everyday by vendors selling goods on the street, laborers carrying materials through the city, and rickshaw drivers

⁶⁰ Ibid., 129

⁶¹ Ibid., 130.

carrying people through the city. The project was inspired by the intersection of art, mobility and public space, as artists were given three thematic prompts with which to work: “the city-- a site and space for collective identity, imagine shelter/home in the metropolis, and goods and globalization.”⁶²

After India’s economic liberalization policies of 1991, and with the increased mobility of global capital enabled by the shifting economy of the digital area and the nascent rise of the Information Technology industry, Indian cities such as Delhi began to see the visual impact of globalization in urban spaces. Sahmat issued a call for artwork and urged artists to think about the ways

India is now open to an uninterrupted flow of goods from across the world produced and traded by multinational corporations, which satisfy the needs of a growing consumerist middle class. Indigenously produced goods move along other routes, fulfilling the needs of the majority of people.⁶³

As this open-call for art suggests, *Art on the Move* built a platform for artists to intersect their art-making with the networks of circulation that spatially and economically construct the city. In doing so, the work traces the actual on-the-ground transport of goods and people, and creatively mimics the national and international networks of capital that constantly produce Delhi’s ever-changing urban identity. Sixty artists sent in proposals for the project and sixteen were chosen by the Sahmat selection committee.

The selected works included a piece by the artist M. Sovan Kumar entitled *Mobile Shelter* (2001), which involved a bicycle rickshaw pulling a bedroom (fig. 7). The bedroom was composed of a canopy bed, which had a porcelain toilet at its foot. The canopy was created by hand through a traditional woodcarving form that originated in the state of Odisha

⁶² Ibid, 152.

⁶³ Ibid.,153.

(Orissa), whereas the bed cushions and toilet, as Sovan Kumar suggested, made reference to the household items of the middle class. The work also included an interactive public performance element. Sovan Kumar asked middle-class city dwellers to bring bags of consumer goods from home to his bed cart at a designated time. These goods were then displayed on the cart in the street for the public to see.

Kumar's work serves as an example of the fundamental role arts, theater and activism played in the turn towards performance-based art practice in India. His work performatively mimics the very economies he aims to critique. By placing consumer goods in circulation and on display through audience participation in a manner that reproduces the trans-mobile economy of consumers in an era of post-liberalization globalization, Kumar's work highlights its impact on social and domestic experience. Moreover, Kumar's interrogation of the effects of a changing global economy foreshadows the significant role that globalization would come to play in the trajectory of contemporary art and performative art practices. Put differently, globalization names a problem that both conditions the development of these practices and becomes the subject of their critique.

Economies of Place: Indian Performance Art, Globalization and the Global Art World

Works such as *Mobile Shelter*, nurtured by an initiative to honor the critical discourse of Safdar Hashmi's street theater, exemplifies the close historical and institutional ties between theater and arts practices – ties that ultimately paved the way for performative and participatory approaches in the contemporary art world. As the Sahmat Collective's work from 1989 through the early 2000s demonstrates, theater foregrounded the possibility of

creative social and political critique and gave value to the concepts of participation and pluralism in the arts. This connection to modern theater is fundamental to an understanding of Indian performance art today, because it points to the longer historical development of activism and social critique through body-based, live and participatory forms of creative expression. Nevertheless, while contemporary “performance art” owes a great debt to the methodological and political ideologies foregrounded in modern Indian theater, it would be shortsighted to refer to performance art as a form of theater, or to suggest that it is simply an extension of primarily theatrical practices.

Contemporary performance art in India intimately intersects with the economic and stylistic dynamics of the global art world. However, its development, as previously noted, is neither reducible to a derivative, localized version of western performance art practices, nor to an isolated, self-contained art form. Rather, contemporary performance art in India names a complex category of body-based and participatory expression, one that draws from the philosophies and methodologies of both theater and visual art. Globalization in particular has shaped the institutional and stylistic trajectory of the contemporary art world in India in a way that has dovetailed with the developments of what, within a western framework, might be recognized as increasingly “performative art” practices in India. Nevertheless, Indian visual artists, not unlike those working in theater, continued to wrestle with the role the arts might play in the critique of the nation-state in the context of an ever-shifting global economy.

In her 2009 book *Art for a Modern India: 1947-1980*, Rebecca Brown argues that Indian artists from the post-independent period wrestled with the paradox of creating work

that was neither “impaled on the horn of indigenism nor the horn of universalism.”⁶⁴ As an art historian who studies South Asian visual culture and politics, Brown examines how Indian artists working across painting, photography, architecture, sculpture and cinema strove to articulate a national identity on the heels of Indian’s independence in 1947, and later, during the period of nation-building and industrial modernization initiatives in the second half of the twentieth century. This period was rife with paradoxes very similar to those faced by practitioners of Indian theater. Brown contends that while Indian artists valorized a type of universal modernity associated with the West, they simultaneously looked towards a “pure” pre-colonial India (a romantic ideal of a nation once un-touched by Western influence) as part of a nationalist critique. This paradox was entangled in a myth inherited from narratives of progress and development that were essential to the colonialist enterprise that claimed India was “behind” on the path to modernity. Post-independence artists thus sought to establish an exclusively authentic Indian identity while tending to the demands of the universal. Ultimately, Brown makes a claim towards a type of postcolonial reflexivity, suggesting that, “by their very attention to the question of how to be modern and Indian simultaneously, they produced varied strategies for negotiating postcoloniality in all its complexity.”⁶⁵

In the epilogue to *Art for a Modern India* entitled “The 1980s and After,” Brown contends that this same paradox, which underscored art-making from 1947-1980, fully actualizes itself in post-80s work, “not because it has been resolved but simply because it

⁶⁴ Rebecca M. Brown, *Art for a Modern India: 1947-1980*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009, 157.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

grows increasingly relevant.”⁶⁶ By this, Brown suggests that as contemporary Indian artists take stock of the rise of Hindutva, acts of communal violence, and the impact of liberalization on India’s economy, they continue to grapple with “what it means to be Indian” in the postcolonial context and the political and economic demands of a Euro-American driven art market.⁶⁷ Artists continue to be confronted with what the nation means in the context of a so-called universal modernity, or in the more recent context, “contemporaneity” as they face the impact and demands of a globalized art world.

Globalization and India’s post-liberalization economy opened up a new series of concerns in the early 1990s around the way that art was produced, exhibited and exchanged both nationally and abroad. In 1991, Manmohan Singh, then Finance Minister of India, announced a number of measures that have today come to be known as the economic liberalization policies. Singh’s measures included removing the strong restrictions on international trade that had been enforced since the early 1950s (e.g. devaluing the rupee, reducing tariffs, removing quotas for imports, encouraging exports and welcoming foreign investment).⁶⁸ This liberalization process was influenced by a complex set of economic and political circumstances, which included Singh’s belief that the Indian economy was in a position to compete with foreign companies as well as an attempt to address a debt crisis. In the summer of 1991, the Indian government had a growing external debt of seventy billion dollars that was owed both to the World Bank and to private creditors. The reforms of

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World’s Largest Democracy* (New York: HarpersCollins, 2007) 684.

liberalization sought to mend this economic deficiency, and “the changes introduced under the new regime constituted a major departure of past policies.”⁶⁹

Liberalization brought more foreign currency into the country and further stimulated urban research centers as well as private industries. It also allowed fledging computer and information technology companies to grow and compete with large multinational corporations which, perceiving a large market for their goods, were eager to get a foothold in India. In the mid 1990s several software companies including Wipro and Infosys seized the opportunity to rapidly expand their operations and their ambitions. This economic shift had a significant impact on the arts, as more money moved in and out of the privileged sector of urban centers in India, and more private galleries and arts organizations began to sprout up in New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore and Chennai.

Moreover, it was during this same period that the international art world began to see the impact of a globalized economy on arts institutions, arts events and visual culture at large. As art historian Hans Belting and curator Peter Weibel state, “globalization is the most important phenomenon in the history of recent art.”⁷⁰ Belting, a German art historian, and Weibel, an Austrian curator and cultural theorist, began their collaboration in 2006 to provide research and documentation on the impact of globalization on recent art. Working initially through the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, their project eventually developed into an initiative called Global Art and the Museum (GAM), which built a network of scholars, artists and activists who aim to analyze the relationship between globalization and

⁶⁹ Ibid., 685.

⁷⁰ Andrea Buddenseig *Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, Cambridge: The MIT Press (2013).

contemporary art through publications, exhibitions, documentation, lectures, and grants.⁷¹ Belting and Weibel contend that Biennials and landmark exhibitions initiated a global turn after Cold War restrictions were lifted and allowed for increased international free trade in art. Moreover, after 1989, the art world began to value, at least in theory, ideals of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism.

As the GAM initiative suggests, the relationship between art and globalization has proven so significant that it has itself become a recognized sub-area of scholarly and curatorial inquiry.⁷² Moreover, through globalization in a number of countries like India, contemporary art, including performance art, has been driven by a new economic engine brought in through arts districts, contemporary museums and art fairs. As cultural theorist and scholar of Latin American and Caribbean culture George Yúdice argues in his book *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in a Global Era*, culture itself has become, in the last quarter-century, an expedient commodity. By looking at a number of case studies across

⁷¹ The network of scholars included, among others, art historian Charlotte Bydler, art historian James Elkins, theater practitioner and political activist Jahman Oladejo Anikulapo and artist and curator Emanuel Araújo.

⁷² See for example: Roy Ascott, *Telematic Embrace. Visionary Theories of Art, Technology, and Consciousness*. Shanken, Edward A. (ed.) (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2003), Bydler, Charlotte. *The Global Artworld Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art*. (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2004). Luis Camnitzer and Jane Farver (eds.). *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s–1980s*. Ex. Cat. (New York: The Queens Museum of Art, 1999), Salah M. Hassan and Olu Oguibe. *Authentic/Ex-Centric: African Conceptualism in Global Context*. exhib. cat., 49th Biennale di Venezia. (Eindhoven: Forum for African Arts, 2001)., Amelia Jones (ed.). *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*. Blackwell Companions to Art History (Malden/Oxford/Victoria: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), Çağlar Keyder *Istanbul: Between the Global and the Local*. (Lanham/Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), Pamela M. Lee *Boundary Issues. The Art world under the Sign of Globalism*, in: *Artforum International*, vol. 42, November 2003, p. 164-167, Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), Ayşe Öncü and Petra Weyland (eds.). *Space Culture and Power: New Identities in Globalizing Cities*. (London: Zed Books, 1997), Gilane Tawadros (ed.). *Changing States. Contemporary Art and Ideas in an Era of Globalisation* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), 2004) and Chin-Tao Wu *Worlds Apart. Problems of Interpreting Globalised Art*, in: *Third Text*, Vol. 21, Issue 6, November 2007 (London/New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 719-731.

Latin America and Spain, Yúdice describes the way art is utilized in development projects that foster “nation-building” and international tourism. He sites examples of arts institutions such as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao Spain, which serve as a tool of urban development initiatives in the city (now commonly called the “Bilbao Effect”). Moreover, he examines how everyday artistic practices and forms of popular music are mobilized to promote the tourist industry in Brazil.⁷³

Similar examples of the effects of globalization are visible in the Indian context, where arts institutions have played a significant role in constructing the public face of the shifting urban Indian metropolis. For instance, a new branch of the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) recently opened in Bangalore in 2009.⁷⁴ Prior to the dramatic post-liberalization economic shift and population growth brought on by the Information Technology industry, the city that had chiefly been known for its science-based education and research become entangled in a number of government endorsed development that sought to turn it into a “global city” and a key player in India’s national ties to the global economy – did it see the arrival of the NGMA.

One need look no further than the India Art Fair’s website to understand the opportunities that the fair provides for tourism, urban development and economic stimulation. The fair was designed as a contemporary art event that would showcase the work of Indian artists and contemporary galleries for collectors, private buyers and interested

⁷³ George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Use of Culture in the Global Era*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003.

⁷⁴ The National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) is the premier modern art institution in India and is funded by the Indian Government’s Ministry of Culture. The first NGMA opened in New Delhi in 1954, which was followed by the opening of the second branch in Mumbai in 1996. The Bangalore branch of the NGMA is now the third site for the institution.

attendees from all over the world. The fair's site boasts of the 400,000 people it has attracted to Delhi since its inception in 2008 (previously called the Indian Art Summit), and urges visitors to attend the event, which includes curated walks and customized tours:

The India Art Fair continues to be one of the worlds most attended events of its kind, attracting over 400,000 people since its inception. In the 6th edition we present 91 exhibiting booths and 1000 artist from around the world comprising of 50% international and 50% Indian galleries, a line up of 24 unique art projects, a wide range of curated walks, the first edition of Mentor and Protégé Program, Museums showcasing at the fair, influential voices to cater to varied audiences of art enthusiasts at the Speakers' Forum and an extensive VIP programme across Delhi to provide a holistic cultural experience.⁷⁵

To borrow from Yúdice, it is not hard to see in this description the ways in which culture itself is presented as a desirable and “expedient” commodity. Not only does the Art Fair promise to show the work of 1000 artists, it also claims to provide a “holistic cultural experience” for VIPs in Delhi. The fair seeks to wed the promotion of contemporary Indian artists with the promotion of the city, in an effort to enhance Delhi's role on the cultural, as well as economic, global stage. Considering the increasing move toward a global “experience economy,” it is not surprising that the role of the Indian Art Fair in the promotion of Delhi's cultural success has a direct impact on the development and visibility of performance art practices. Several panels and events hosted by the fair, and a number auxiliary events that attracted attendees, were devoted to the showcasing performance art.

The success of the Indian Art Fair, and its promotion of performance art as a hot “cutting edge” art form, has been seen as especially necessary as the value of Indian art continues to ebb and flow on the global market. Its establishment in 2008 came at a perfect moment since at that time a struggling industry was seeking to mask its weakness. What

⁷⁵ “India Art Fair,” accessed Nov. 1, 2013, <http://www.indiaartfair.in/>

initially appeared as a promising future with great economic pull within the industry was by 2008 struggling to maintain continued success. Between 2005 and 2007 the market for modern and contemporary art had seemed to be flourishing. Buyers were largely Non-Resident Indian's (NRIs), auction houses and private collectors in the U.S. and UK who deemed modern and contemporary Indian art as an attractive and wise investment. Works by modern Indian painters Tyeb Mehta, FN Souza, MF Husain and SH Raza became highly sought-after commodities (Mehta's *Bulls* later sold through Christies for \$2.8 million in 2011). In the contemporary sector, the wealthy British collectors Charles Saatchi and Frank Cohen began to collect and promote the work of Jitish Kallat, Bharti Kher and her husband Subodh Gupta, who was deemed by western critics, "the Damien Hirst of India." As *The Telegraph* arts columnist Colin Gleadell aptly notes, around 2006 and 2007 it "seemed that every financial column in the Indian press and on the Internet was releasing emphatic statistics about the boom of Indian art."⁷⁶ Yet, following the credit crisis and worldwide bank collapse of 2008 this heyday came to a crash as values plummeted and the broader investment structure ultimately crumbled. While the market for Indian art today ultimately offers much more value than it did in 1990, it is not nearly as exciting or promising as it appeared in 2007.

Sometime during the frenzied excitement over the promise of Indian art between 2000-2007, a number of Indian artists began appearing on the international scene and showing at museums and galleries in the U.S. and Europe. Aside from a few group shows in Europe, the first major international traveling group exhibition of contemporary Indian art

⁷⁶ "Art Sales: Christie's Rekindles the Indian Art Market," Colin Gleadell, *The Telegraph*, December 3, 2013.

from this period, *Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India* (2005), was organized by the Asia Society, a major intellectual center and museum in New York, and curated by Chaitanya Sambrani. The show was exhibited in India, Australia, Mexico, Canada and the United States and included work by artists such as Pushpamala N. and Subodh Gupta, who would ultimately become household names on the global art scene. The show focused on art from 1995-2005 and included both established artists and those just beginning their careers. Given that this was a period of Indian art dominated by painting, there were a number of paintings in the exhibit, but the show also showcased a number works in photography, mix-media and video.

Sambrani contended that the exhibition's title *Edge of Desire* was a reflection on the relationship between location, desire and art during a time of globalization and fundamentalist politics in India. He grounded the mission of the show through two theoretical axes, "historical processes of globalization and fundamentalism and ideational forces of place and desire."⁷⁷ He writes:

Fundamentalist claims to place are fed by insecurities wrought by globalization and its accompanying exposure to other forms. Concurrently internal tensions generated by rising inequalities and perceptions of inequalities enroute to economic restructuring have led to a retreat into racial religious and regionalist specificities in an expression of a desire for cultural security and purity.⁷⁸

Here, Sambrani points out the mutually generative relationship between globalization and fundamentalism, suggesting that the economic consequences of globalization, as well as its high visibility in culture, heightened a desire for security entangled in claims over rightful place-hood. As historical processes, both globalization and fundamentalism "operate on the

⁷⁷ Chaitanya Sambrani, *Edge of Desire: Recent Art from India* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2005).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

emotional economies of place.”⁷⁹ Moreover, both increased in India in the 1990s with the rise of the Hindu-right in electoral politics alongside the economic changes brought on by India’s liberalization policies. Accordingly, Sambrani foregrounds the way that such dynamics fueled contemporary art-making in India. Not only did globalization stimulate the economy for contemporary art, but it also, in conjunction with communalism and fundamentalism, became a focus and fuel for artistic critique.

Sambrani’s argument is relevant to the study of the history of performance art, not only because it is a branch of the history of contemporary art in India, but also because of the way in which performance art serves as a critical tool to examine both globalization and communalism. It was during this same period, at the beginning of the 1990s, that the first independent performance artists began to appear on the contemporary art scene. Often the work of these artists was fueled by a similar desire directly to critique fundamentalism and ethnic and religious claims over place-hood and homeland. Among the first working in this vein was the Delhi-based Kashmiri-born artist who, in what he considers to be his first performance of the late 1980s, renamed himself Inder Salim. This self crafted alias arose as a subversion of the repeated question, “So, are you Hindu or are you Muslim?” posed by those trying to locate the artist’s identity in relation to religious and political tensions in Kashmir, a region familiar to the world through the global media as the site of “territorial dispute” between India and Pakistan. Since Inder is a Hindu first name and Salim is a Muslim family name, the artist cannot be easily identified as having allegiance to either community. Moreover, seeing as the Kashmir conflict is in part a legacy of British colonial geo-politics, this performative act of renaming highlighted the way in whom Partition, and its relationship

⁷⁹ Ibid., 15.

to British colonial history, is still embedded in contemporary political and personal life. Such religious and cultural divisions, as his hybrid name suggests, not only have powerful social and material ramifications at the level of daily existence, but also are not as clearly delineated as the state might suggest in an era of Hindu fundamentalism.

Salim continued to mobilize his performative identity through a series of projects such as his 2002 work *INDER-SALIM* (fig. 8). The work involved a large-scale poster installation and public art project funded by Sahmat. Salim used low-cost materials to create cheap posters of his two identities that would be plastered around town and on the gallery wall. The work juxtaposed two images of the artist: a first Inder Salim shown with a *bindi* on his forehead (associated with Hinduism), and a second Inder Salim shown wearing a cap (associated with Islam). His first name Inder was written in Hindi script and his last name Salim was written in Urdu. By using posters that addressed a wider public audience that would not typically attend arts institution openings, the artist transgressed the exclusive realm of the gallery system. By representing a subject identity that is simultaneously Muslim and Hindu, the work places two seemingly oppositional identities in an ambivalent intimacy with one another.

In the context of Sambrani's argument in *Edge of Desire*, Salim's work might be seen as operating in a critical relationship with "the emotional economies of place" of globalization and fundamentalism. Globalization often makes itself perceptible through visual culture on the city street, such as a poster at a bus stop or advertisement plastered over a billboard, in order to harness public interest around an object of consumer desire. Salim's poster promotes an alternative visual representation of identity for public consumption.

Moreover, like an election poster, which promotes a certain political, and often ethnic or religious identity, *INDER-SALIM* asserts a type of failure to separate the categories of difference upon which this narrative so readily relies.

Moreover, funding for early performance art practices such as the one described above was also linked to the economic changes brought on by globalization. Given that performance art holds a tenuous relationship to the system of capital, as the “object” being sold on the international market is less tangible, it never held great financial promise on the global art scene during the “golden era” of modern and contemporary Indian art. The market for selling Inder Salim’s act of changing his name was far more complicated than selling a Mehta painting at Christies Auction House. Nevertheless, with an increase in capital-flow through the urban center, particularly through the arts, a number of institutions began to form with the aim of providing funding for experimental and performative art practices even at the more ephemeral level. One of the most significant of these in the development of Indian performance art was the Khoj International Artists Association. Khoj began as a humble artist’s association in 1997 and aimed, similar to the Sahmat collective, to be an artist-run space that would hold an annual workshop. Located in Delhi, the association sought to be a space for experimentation, collaboration and cross-disciplinary alternatives to contemporary art. The value of Khoj for performance artists, such as Salim, was that it sponsored an artist’s residency program, which funded artists to make projects in an experimental fashion, and thus to create works that could exist outside of the bounds of traditional media.

Salim was among a broader group of Indian artists working in a more performative or experimental form of art-making who took part in the Khoj residency program, the most

well-known being Subodh Gupta. Initially, it started as a two-week winter workshop for 20-24 young artists at an estate donated by the family of Dayawati Modi in Sikribagh just outside of New Delhi. While the two-week program workshop continued to run, the family eventually gave over the estate to host year-long programs for visiting artists, which ran from 1997-2001. As the contemporary Indian art critic Geeta Kapur notes, the Khoj residency "began with the concept and desire to work with perishable materials, with erasable sins and the artist's own body, which had just surfaced on the Indian art scene."⁸⁰

While obviously, as this chapter has discussed, the body had been a central component in the history of Indian theatre. However, the concept of body as a tool within the context of the art gallery was still rather unusual, and Khoj sought to promote this type of work. This use of the artist's body took form through live-performances, as well as video art, in which artists experiment with the various ways and forms the body could be presented and manipulated through digital technologies in malleable time. Such is evident in Gupta's 2000 video *Pure* in which the artist appears to be taking a shower in cow-dung (fig. 9). To create this effect, Gupta took a shower in which he rinsed off cow-dung, but altered the way his performance was documented by reversing video footage to create the effect that he is slowly showering himself with cow-dung. The dung accumulates until it covers his entire body at which point the viewer can only see his eyes peaking through a thick mask of dung. In parts of India, cow-dung is used for building solid house structures, for repairing the fissures in weak walls, and fueling cooking fires. Considering its various employment in daily life, cow-

⁸⁰ Geeta Kapur "A Phenomenology of Encounters at Khoj" *The Khoj Book, Edited by Pooja Sood*. Khoj: New Delhi, 2010.

dung does not fit easily within categories of dirtiness or contamination, making Gupta's reversed shower a confusing disruption of processes of cleanliness.

Moreover, the utility of cow-dung in this video has a certain economy and function within the American context in which it is often exhibited. It acts as a stylized marker of the artist's arrival from a Third World country, which is thought to house fascinating "primitive" practices essential to the developed world. This imagining is complicated in *Pure* as it becomes entangled with the unsettling dual staging of the seemingly "modern" and "rural" as Gupta washes himself under the forceful water pressure of a modern showerhead. The event of showering is only accessible to the viewer through its video documentation, and this event is distorted through reversal and repeated looping, making the beginning and end of his washing impossible to locate. In this sense *Pure* creates loops that reiterate the paradox of representation for Indian artists within the context of a globalized art world, in which difference and sameness are in a constant process of articulation as cultural commodities.

While works such as Gupta's seek to reframe the body's representation in the context of national and global economies of place and identity through the format of video, other artists involved with Khoj explore similar concerns directly through live performance. In 1998, Khoj held its first live performance art event, *Khoj Live*, which would become an annual gathering. Over a series of several days, Khoj works with local cultural institutions and arts spaces in Delhi such as the Alliance Française, Goethe Institut Max Mueller Bhavan, Gallery ESPACE and Palette Gallery to animate the city with "live art" practices, which it

refers to as “an umbrella term encompassing a range of performance, performative and time based practices that are unrestricted by art form boundaries.”⁸¹

The event helped to promote Delhi’s fledging performance art scene, and brought together a number of artists working across varied experimental practices. Among the artists most devoted to the development of performance art was the Delhi artist Sushil Kumar. Kumar was among the Khoj residents and participated annually in *Khoj Live* from its inception in 1998, often doing one-man performance pieces in the nude with the use of mundane every day objects. His piece *28-03-08*, performed at Palette Gallery for *Khoj Live*’s tenth anniversary (2008), is exemplary of this type of work (fig. 10). Here, Kumar stands in front of the audience, strips down to the nude, and places a long stemmed candle in his mouth, lighting it as though it were a cigarette. A video camera recording Kumar’s image with the lens pointing up from the base of his feet projects an abstracted image of his figure from this distorted angle on the gallery wall. The audience is invited to come up to the wall and write words across the projection; words that the artist is forced to speak out loud. When he opens his mouth to sound out a word, the lit candle in his mouth falls to the ground, smothering the flame. Each time, an assistant from the audience places the candle again in Kumar’s mouth and lights it again.

Similar to Gupta’s *Pure*, Kumar’s work uses repetition as a technique to disrupt and unsettle time. Every time Kumar is forced to pronounce a word the candle drops to the floor again, and must be lit again. Moreover, the length of the performance determines the duration of time itself. As the wax burns down and the candle’s flame gets closer and closer

⁸¹ “Khoj Live: Celebrating 10 Years.” Accessed on Dec 2, 2013. <http://www.khojworkshop.org/node/6068>

to the artist's face, the performance is closer to an end. The work reiterates a piece by the Japanese artist Yoko Ono entitled, *Lighting Piece*, which she performed in 1962 at Sogetsu Art Centre in Tokyo (fig. 11). In *Lighting Piece*, the artist walks out on stage, sits in front of a piano, but instead of playing for the audience, simply holds up a match in front of an unlit cigarette. Similar to the candlewick in Kumar's *28-03-08*, Ono's performance lasted the length of the time it took for the match to burn.

Ono's piece plays with the anticipation of the audience, which not only waits anxiously to see if a performance on the piano will ever begin, or if the cigarette will ever get lit, but also if the flame might touch her skin and burn her hand. This waiting for the actualization of an event, turns the event itself into an object of desire. Similarly, in Kumar's *28-03-08* the candle itself becomes an eroticized object of desire, not only because of its placement in Kumar's mouth, but because the unsettling process of waiting for it to fall sustains a constant desire to keep the wick lit, which pushes up against a desire to force the artist to speak out loud and let the candle fall. If the audience chose to make the artist verbal by writing dictations on the wall, then they must watch anxiously as this progress towards completion continues to be interrupted.

Kumar's piece gives value to the role of participation and dissent by pushing up and against the possibilities and limitations of both language and representation. In doing so, it draws on the broader collective desires of the community. The artist is forced to stop and speak each word the audience dictates in instructional writings on the wall: "love," "hate," "violence," "stop," or "language." In this sense, he submits himself, and the object of his desire, over to the power of the group at large.

Such dynamics exemplify the way the valuing of participation and multiplicity, previously cultivated through the social praxis of modern theater, continued to undergird much of contemporary performance art practice in India through the 2000s, even at the level of one-person performances such as *28-03-08*. Moreover, the work's critical interplay with Ono's 1955 *Lighting Piece* demonstrates the way in which artists concurrently engaged global histories of performance art. Kumar consciously aligns himself with one of the most prominent figures in a broader global movement of performance art and locates his practice within the international lineage of that history. In this sense, Kumar's work actualizes the significance of the already inextricably intertwined methods and approaches deriving both from a history of Indian theater practices and from a globalized art world. It re-appropriates Ono's performative engagement with the varied temporalities of desire, and reasserts the value of the participation of multiple voices, which were so central to the socially invested methodologies of activist theater.⁸²

This type of globalized engagement with performance art through the Indian context is further exemplified in the work of another Khoj residency artist Tejal Shah. Shah's 2006 piece *Encounter(s)*, performed live at the Tate Modern, explores the use of communication technology in the context of globalization through the ambient intimacy of the World Wide Web (fig. 12). In *Encounter(s)*, Shah collaborated with the Thai artist Varsha Nair to create a work that would think about bodies moving directly through urban

⁸² This is not to say that participation is not a fundamental trait in the history of Euro-American performance art. I do not mean to suggest that "participation" is exclusively India, or that there are essentially different traits from various geographies. I rather aim to show how participation was so central to history of Modern Indian theatre through a critique of both colonial histories and fundamentalist histories, that this becomes an important method in contemporary Indian art. This points not to inherently different traits derived from specific geo-political contexts, but rather to their already inherent inner-connectivity.

space and ones that also move through the transitory networks of cyberspace. For months Nair (based in Bangkok) and Shah (based in Mumbai) sent emails long distance discussing the mundane aspects of quotidian life in their respective cities and the sense of isolation and loneliness they often feel even in the midst of a bustling metropolis. The two ultimately met in person at the Tate Modern in London for their performance, in which they were each swathed in a shell of white embroidered fabric and connected through a long line of the same fabric extending from their arms that spread across the enormous modern industrial stone floor of the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. The process created a type of exoskeleton of two interconnected organisms conjoined together through a long vein.

Shah and Nair's work explores the intimacy of social relationships within urban space considered within the contemporary context of the shifting global landscape of power and communication. They later restaged *Encounter(s)* in other arts institutions internationally, most recently the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco in 2012. In each context the artists' shared exoskeleton takes on a new form against an architectural backdrop. To borrow once again Sambrani's phrasing, Shah and Nair's work wrestles with the "emotional economies of place" formed through the global art world. It imagines an embodied visualization of the paradox of distance and close intimacy achieved through a shifting techno-sphere and the emotional ties formed through locations both real and imagined.

Encounter(s) ultimately resonates with the broader cross-articulation of influences from both India's theater histories and the concerns of the globalized contemporary art world. Modern Indian theater, in the most concentrated sense, was concerned with the encounter:

encounters between the British and India, between the subject and the state, between ethnic and religious others, and between the artist, the city and its publics. Similarly, globalization, and the economic consequences of liberalization have forced artists critically to intervene in the shaping the dialogues and demands of a changing global art world. Ultimately, performance art provides a useful tool to examine the paradoxical embodiments of encounter through the postcolonial landscape of the Indian metropolis.

The remainder of this dissertation focuses on a closer reading of specific performances in India that speak to the complex encounter between the activist roots of Indian street theater and the ever-changing dynamics of the global art world. In the following chapter I will turn to the work of performance artist Sumudra Kajal Saikia, and analyze the ways in which he combines theories of the body derived from mystical poetry with the socially invested philosophies of in twentieth century theater practices to create a complex contemporary form of performance art he deems “disposable theatre.” As I will discuss, Saikia’s practice demonstrates how body-based performance art practices serve as a viable means for analyzing the encounter between “others” in the Indian urban metropolis.

Chapter 2-Cohabitant Bodies: Samudra Kajal Saikia's *Disposable House* Project in Guwahati, Assam

The roof of Kankhowa's house leaks
Thousands of eyes from the evening sky
Keep staring at me
I cannot go out
I cannot stay in
-Kankhowa, *The Body House of the Actor*

Kankhowa's illustrated poem, *The Body House of the Actor* (2011), begins with a leaking rooftop (fig. 13). The ceiling of the artist's house is profusely dripping, pooling on the floor and filling the space to the brim with elements from outside. It is not simply rain that leaks into the house; rather, it is "thousands of eyes from the evening sky." Moreover, the house in this poem is also the artist's body. It is this house – the "body house of the actor" – into which the spectator/reader begins to seep. Across sixteen pages of watercolor illustrations accompanied by poetic verse, this porous body-house of the actor is saturated with the bodies of spectators. The body appears and reappears in various forms throughout the text: once, as a long leg wrapped around two figures shaking hands at a doorway; once, as a faceless figure tightly embracing the ten wide-eyed faces in its torso; later, as two legs on a chair with a long thin neck attached to ten hovering heads; and still later as two brachiosaurus-like creatures sticking their long necks through the open doors in each other's bodies (figs. 14-17) As the watercolors soak into and across the paper, so this body drips outside of its own contours and off the edges of the frame.

Even the name of the author of the text, Kankowa, acts as an identifier for a number of bodies. The attribution, Kankowa, is the *nom de plume* of the Delhi-based Guwahati born artist Samudra Kajal Saikia, but it also refers to an interdisciplinary collective of artists, writers, and actors that Saikia helped organize in 2006. In a 2010 article in the Kolkata-based magazine, *ArtEtc*, Saikia described this group's artistic process as "Disposable Theatre" which promotes a type of performance-based art practice rooted in an interdependent relationship between the actor and spectator that opens up a space for connectivity as well as dissent.⁸³ Kankowa's practice takes the spectator as an integral part of the performance, thereby opening a radical exploration of spatial experience that disrupts the concentration of power and voice so often given solely to the actor. As Saikia puts it, "where the spectator is privileged over the actor's side, the spatial experience is counted over the pre-designed text and the linearity of experience is deliberately hampered, their power is not concentrated any more."⁸⁴

In my first chapter I looked at the way in which Indian performance art arose out of the activist-based roots of modern Indian theatre and its historical intersection with the art world's complex encounter with the global contemporary art world. In this chapter I examine the ways in which the very definition of spectatorship, in the work of Sumudra Kajal Saikia, is structured through a conceptual reformulation of the actor/spectator relationship foreground through the socially invested activist-based mission of modern Indian theatre. As I will discuss, Saikia looks back to the work of the late twentieth century playwright and theater activist Badal Sircar to think about how to address issues

⁸³ Samudra Kajal Saikia, "Disposable Theatre: Conceptualizing the Spectator in Shifting Space," *ArtEtc* 2.3 (2010): 1-4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

of audience experience and participation within the context of subnationalism and immigration in his home state of Assam. As illustrated in his poem *The Body House of the Actor*, Saikia is interested in a type of cohabitation by cultural/ethnic “others,” which is mirrored in the cohabitant relationship between the actor and the audience that arises in performance art.⁸⁵

My theorization of cohabitation is informed by the artist’s own methodology of performative interconnectivity, which he describes through this metaphor of a body that functions also as a house. This body-house, for Saikia, is constantly bustling with new and returning visitors, some of whom are strangers to each other. This metaphor speaks to the concept that the actor and spectator may not “know” each other directly, but are deeply connected through a mutual investment in viewing and interpreting one another. Similarly cultural/ethnic “others” in the Indian metropolis (i.e. the Muslim, Hindu, Tribal or Recent Immigrant communities) are unified by the same desire for place-hood in a shared space, despite the ideological tenuous, which separate them. For Saikia, the theorization, visualization, and performance of the body house is an aestheticization of this inevitable cohabitation.

In cultivating his theory of the body-house Saikia draws from interpretations of the body found in the writing of mystic poets. Poets such as Kabir and Lalon Fakir often describe the body as a house, and Saikia uses this concept, as in *The Body House of the Actor*, to illustrate the submission of the actor’s fixed body to a body that extends outside of itself, becoming part performer, part spectator. These philosophies visualized in

⁸⁵ Ibid., 3.

Saikia's illustrations reiterate the methodologies of the artist's broader body of work, which aims to implicate both actor and spectator in shared public space. Since 2010, Saikia has utilized the text of *The Body House of the Actor* to explore this interrelationship in a series of performance-based works that reflect on the concept of home. Most recently the text was part of a large public performance, funded by a Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art Public Art Grant, entitled *Disposable House* (2012), which was one of the primary works at a month long series of site-specific projects in Guwahati under the auspices of Regional Arts Performance and Events Assam (RAPEA).

The *Disposable House* project took place on February 20th 2012, when five life-size houses hoisted on top of auto-rickshaws moved through the central city streets of Guwahati in the state of Assam (figs. 18-26). The mobile houses were accompanied by a large public procession of artists involved in the Regional Arts Performance and Events led by Saikia. They started at the Jyoti Chitran Film and Television Institute, moved through the main commercial corridor of the city (Ujan Bazaar), and ended at the banks of the Brahmaputra River, where the group initially intended to set the homes afloat on the water. Instead, as I will discuss, the cohabitant relationship between the actor and the audience altered the outcome of the performance. The materials were given instead to local homeless residents near the riverbank who were displeased with fact that housing materials would be wasted if they were left to drift away in the water. During this final portion of the performance, before the houses were initially gifted to the Brahmaputra,

and ultimately to those residing on its banks, Saikia read aloud *The Body House of the Actor* text.

The body-house is a metaphor for the fundamental philosophy at the heart of Saikia's performance-based art practices, as well as the activist underpinnings of his work. These inseparable, amalgamated body-houses express the artist's interest in the profoundly paradoxical relationship between the artist and spectator, as well as that between the self and other in society. The artist's gaze is fixed on both the shifting and intransigent ethnic, religious, racial and class tensions in India, which have been spawned by its recent economic ascendancy and enduring colonial legacy. The body-house offers a site of critical interconnectivity in which the many faces of power and dissent meld together and break apart. Such interconnectivity produces an intangible and fluctuating architectural corporality that contains conflicting desires for belonging.

This chapter examines Saikia's work in relation to the political theories foregrounded by modern Indian theatre practitioners such as those of Safdar Hashmi discussed in the previous chapter, and the work of Bidal Sircar. In addition, by considering the body as depicted by mystic poets Lalon Fakir and Kabir, I want to give an indication of what is at stake in Saikia's work as it attempts to maintain and perform a contested notion of belonging.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ It should be noted that Saikia's body-house is not like a Hobbesian body, which aspires towards a shared social contract binding together the fundamental tenets of liberal democracy. Rather, the body-house is more akin to the type of the unfixed antagonism described by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985). Laclau and Mouffe sought to unsettle and expand the concept of unity and group formation in the face of the pitfalls of liberal democracy. By providing a theoretical framework for post-Marxist thought that questions ideals of a subsuming unification, Laclau and Mouffe offer a radical model of democracy in which antagonism and conflict is sustained instead of squashed. See: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985) 184. More directly relevant in this

Saikia's work and his theory of Disposable Theater underscore how contemporary performance art practices in India did not arise exclusively from either theatre or visual arts. Rather, these practices can best be understood as emerging out of the interface between these two – already *mutually constitutive* – art forms. In chapter one, I argued that contemporary performance art in India unsettles the dichotomy between visual arts and theatre, and showed how this untenable demarcation, carried over from the Euro-American context (where it is arguably already untenable), cannot be simply mapped across the complex histories of Indian art and theatre. Consider, for example, the slippage between Saikia's self-identification as an actor and as an artist, and the way this slippage (which this essay further enacts) self-consciously fails to resolve semantic complexity. It is important to acknowledge the significance of this semantic complexity because it works to undermine the authorial legitimacy given to "the actor" alone. While the word *theatre* naturally situates Disposable Theatre within the history of theatre, *disposable* equally suggests that this is a radical form of theatre that disposes of its own structures and practices. Kankowa cites the seeming cleavage between theatre and visual art as among the various dichotomies it aims to reactivate (the public and the private, the individual and the collective, the conventional and the radical, and the mainstream and the alternative, to name just a few).

context is Claire Bishop's frequently cited essay "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," which uses Laclau and Mouffe to challenge Nicolas Bourriaud's arguments in his 1998 book *Relational Aesthetics*. Bishop examines the work of Liam Gillick and Rirkrit Tiravanija alongside Laclau and Mouffe's notion of radical democracy in order to argue that these works are not simple relational but *antagonistic* in the sense that they are not "intrinsically democratic." See: Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (2004). I take a similar position in relation to Samudra Kajal Saikia's work insofar as that work, while interested in building unity across communities in Guwahati, is equally interested in cultivating a space in which dissent and belonging coexist.

The concept of the body-house and the theory of disposable theater expands and critically reworks philosophies of theatre and spectatorship such as those articulated by the Bengali dramatist, theatre director, and performance theorist Badal Sircar (also known as Badal Sarkar). Sircar began his career as an actor and director in the early 1950s and later became a writer of proscenium plays in the late 1960s. In the 1970s, however, during the Naxalite movement, Sircar began to foreground a concept of non-proscenium theatre through his model of “The Third Theatre.” Saikia, who graduated from Kala Bhavana Institute of Fine Arts in Shantinekatan in 2005, was part of the Shantinekatan theatre group *Sanko* (meaning small bridge or canal in Bengali), encountered Sircar’s theories as a student. The group, later renamed *Samakal* (meaning current time or contemporary in Bengali) was established in 1997 and was based around Sircar’s theories of performance.

In his 1978 essay, “The Third Theatre,” Sircar argued for a theatre that addresses what he describes as the dichotomy between rural and urban culture resulting from colonialism. Indian cities had acquired a colonial character under British imperial rule, particularly through its educational system, to such an extent that culture in these urban areas is understood to be rooted in English ideologies and interests. By contrast, Sircar saw the culture of the countryside as less contaminated by this colonial imposition, and thus as having maintained its indigenous cultural and artistic roots. For Sircar, theatre is one of the primary cultural fields through which this cultural dichotomy took shape. City theatre, in the form of proscenium theatre, is based on styles and forms originating in the West, whereas rural theatre continues to work in traditional folk-based forms.

Accordingly, Sircar proposes a “Third Theater” that would work between these two forms. He writes, “In such a situation, if we want to revitalize the city theatre or the village theatre, we have to hit at the root of this dichotomy and attempt to create a link between the two through a Third Theatre which synthesizes the two.”⁸⁷

For Sircar, a large part of achieving this synthesis depends on dismantling proscenium theatre. The very architecture of the proscenium auditorium, as well as its stage, lighting system, and set design, are all modeled after forms rooted in the traditions of the West. At a practical level, Sircar was concerned with connecting theatre with a wider audience and, for this reason, wanted to reduce the exorbitant costs involved in maintaining the upkeep of a proscenium theatre. Comparing theatre to the more widely popular art of cinema, he argued that theatre should draw upon its unique advantage of facilitating live, direct communication between the actors and audience – the very advantage he saw inhibited by the alienating structure of the proscenium auditorium. In proscenium theatre the performer is elevated on a stage above the audience, engrossed in elaborate sets and designs, and forced to shout to the back row to be heard. Moreover, through the eyes of the actor, blinded by oppressively bright stage lights, the audience appears as nothing more than a faceless mass consumed in darkness. Thus, in addition to its colonial legacy, proscenium theatre renders a disinterested spectator.

Sircar promoted a non-proscenium theatre for its potential to dismantle the alienation between actors and audience members produced by the dominant form. Such a theater could cultivate a more direct form of engagement between performers and active

⁸⁷ Bidal Sircar, *The Third Theatre* (Calcutta: Naba Grantha Kutir, 1978) 3.

spectators. In 1967, Sincar had already formed the theatre group *Satabdi*, which worked in open space without costume, make-up, lighting or props. By 1976, Satabdi started doing open-air, free performances at Surendranath Park (then Curzon Park) in Kolkata and the group travelled on weekends to nearby villages. These non-conventional performances entirely rejected the use of characters, plot or storyline. For example, the 1974 performance, *Micchil*, moved largely away from narrative in favor of situation. It began with actors sitting among the audience outdoors in urban space, directly engaging them in the performance and ultimately inviting them to join it in a procession to end all processions.

Earlier works such as these resonate strongly with the structure and rhythm of *Disposable House*. Like *Micchil*, *Disposable House* involves a procession through the city streets that involves the public in the realization of the performance. The organizational framework of the piece simultaneously plays with elements of chance and uncertainty, and like Sincar's "third theater," the performance itself is ultimately subject to the unpredictable pulse of the city in space and time. Yet, *Disposable House* is different in important ways. Saikia argues that while Sincar's articulation of the actor-spectator relationship "brought immense possibilities for us to *disturb*," this work is also interested in the limitations of disruption and therefore strives to "search for some other *language*." Thus, the practice of Disposable Theatre both looks back at Sincar's work for inspiration and critically re-envisioned the interconnected spectator/actor relationship foregrounded by Sincar.

Saikia is especially critical of the current state of Third Theatre. Citing a 2009 performance of *Raktakarabi* at the National School of Drama in Delhi, Saikia describes a situation in which audience members were asked to first buy tickets and, only after passing multiple checkpoints, entered into an “open-air” performance space, to find actors on an elevated stage lit by bright spotlights. Although the space was technically open-air theatre, Saikia describes how the situation cultivated by this staging of the environment rendered the audience unable to speak. The audience, sitting silently amongst each other in darkness, look up towards the performative power of the actors. According to Saikia, “What went wrong with Badal Sircar is, he took the ‘proscenium’ as the central object for objection where his critique has larger promise.”⁸⁸ The mere physical removal of the play from the proscenium stage does not open up the performance to a revision of the alienated spectator/actor relationship; rather, dialogue happens when the actor’s body is inextricably intertwined with that of the spectator through the articulation of shared ideological and physical space.

The organization of the Regional Arts Performance and Events in 2012 arose largely out of this desire to re-imagine the role of a mutually constitutive artist, place, and public within contemporary art practices in India. Saikia, who co-organized the event with the curator Rahul Bhattacharya, and the support of the BlackRice and Kankowa collectives, aimed specifically to address the problem of “defining the ‘public’ within the existing public art practices.”⁸⁹ In previous ventures, Bhattacharya had expressed concern about the limitations of space as it is regulated through the contemporary art scene in

⁸⁸ Saikia, “Disposable Theatre: Conceptualizing the Spectator in Shifting Space,” 4.

⁸⁹ Sumudra Kajal Saikia, *Regional Art Performance and Events Final Report* (New Delhi: Sumudra Kajal Saikia, 2012).

Delhi, including those practices that describe themselves as “performative.” As performance art was becoming more visible within the art scene through the Khoj international performance art festivals in 2007, Bhattacharya responded by organizing a series of events and a blog entitled *Can it Be Done in Any Corner You Like?* With Kankowa’s participation, these actions aimed to make an intervention into performance art practice by bringing space and public engagement to the forefront. The Regional Arts Performance and Events acted as an extension of these aims, and furthermore articulated the imperatives of Disposable Theatre to reshape the performer-spectator relationship. Put differently, performance should not only take place within public space, it should produce a *conversation* within and *with* the space.

When the *Disposable House* project took to the streets of Guwahati the above notion of shared space was pronounced largely through the concept of home. Saikia presented “home” not as a private space or family-owned, static and insular property, but instead as a mobile, malleable, entity offered up to the public. The performance began at Jyoti Chitaban accompanied by the auspicious undertones of a *hariddhwani* prayer. Following the prayer, Saikia, alongside the Baroda-based painter and multi-media artist Anuradha Upadhyaya, started the procession through the city towards the Bramaputra with blooming lotus flowers in hand “to purify the space”⁹⁰. A group of artists involved in the Regional Arts Performance Events, themselves followed by a truck carrying a group of local musicians, joined the procession next as the musicians in the truck began playing *dotara* and singing *dehatatwa* songs (Bengali songs that deal with themes of the

⁹⁰ Ibid.

body). Finally, the five homes on auto rickshaws made of mixed materials, including timber, clay and hay, joined in the procession. Each house invoked a concept: sufi house, urban house, house of displacement, house of social norms and Kankhowa's House (or the body house of an Actor). And each house was covered by paintings suggestive of its respective theme, which were made collaboratively by artists from across Delhi, Baroda and Guwahati.

The procession of these transient, communal, and pliable homes through the heart of Guwahati situated both artists and unexpected spectators within a complicated and multilayered engagement with history and memory in the public space of the city. Guwahati, which is the major metropolis as well as the primary commercial and transit corridor of the Northeastern State of Assam, reverberates with complex layers of social and political history. Assam, which shares international borders with Bhutan and Bangladesh, makes up the core of Northeastern India, a region geographically connected to the rest of the country only by a narrow twenty-kilometer-wide passage. This tenuous geographical location in relation to the rest of the nation was underscored by the "subnational" politics that took shape during the Assamese insurgency movement, which reached its height in the late 1980s and was largely suppressed through the often-violent counter-insurgency of the Indian army.⁹¹

Thus, the notion of who is "at home" in Assam is fraught with historical and geographical tensions. Interlinked with the politics of Assam's position in relation to the Indian nation-state, and claims over who has rights to this "homeland," there are also

⁹¹ Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), xiii.

various tensions regarding immigration. From 1979-85 the “Assam Movement” campaigned against the Indian government’s alleged policy of admitting “foreigners” to the area. The campaign leaders argued that immigrants from foreign countries, mostly from Bangladesh (Formerly East Pakistan) and Nepal, were illegal aliens unless given citizen status by the state. These accusations led to ethnic violence and ultimately to the acquired citizenship and systematic deportation. In his book, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Sanjib Baruah offers a critical analysis of the interconnectedness between Assamese subnationalism, immigration and colonial history. Not only did Assam’s immigration politics sustain a crisis in governmental legitimacy (linked to the perceived failure of Assam to resolve its immigration policies), it also further perpetuated tension between so-called “indigenous” and “immigrant groups.”⁹² Moreover, through the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958 (AFSPA), which granted special power to the army in so-called “disturbed” areas of India, surveillance and control methods began to be used that were based on ethnic profiling to distinguish between “ethnic,” “immigrant” or “tribal” communities.

Baruah’s larger argument situates these more recent politics of immigration (as well as the Assamese subnational narrative and its counter-narratives) within Assam’s colonial history by demonstrating the ways in which colonial geography shaped projects of personhood in Assam. Once Assam became a part of British India and the pan-Indian economic sphere, colonial policymakers encouraged immigration to increase settlement. Moreover, the immigration issue wrestles with unavoidable historical problems: the treatment of India’s Muslim minority population and what many see as an unavoidable

⁹²Ibid, 117.

legacy of India's partition in 1947, and India's de facto obligation to allow Hindu refugees from Pakistan to settle in India. As Baruah notes, "India's policy on immigration is framed by a pan-Indian formulation problem."⁹³

Moreover, Baruah's analysis of the way the legacies of colonialism persist in contemporary politics of place in Assam challenges misreadings of Assam within the global media where violence is all too often presented as some type of failure of the "Third-World" to achieve democracy, or, in India in particular, as problems relegated to "troubled" areas such as the Northeast. Baruah's historical account demonstrates how in this region "violence is about the contradictions of the many worlds created by modernity rather than about a place or a people being left behind of modernity."⁹⁴ To that end, narratives that construct Assam as a place and people "left behind" efface a more nuanced understanding of the plurality of place and people in the regions – that is, Assam's many *homes*.

This survey of Assam's recent socio-political history should not lead us to view Guwahati through a simplistic frame that reduces the character of the city to a violent or tumultuous political history. At the same time, however, an understanding of the politics of immigration and subnationalism in Assam remain necessary for responding to *Disposable House's* call to think about the concept of home. Tending to this recent past enables a perspective that implicates actor, spectator, critic, city and state in shared social space and contests the frequent effacement of these public histories.

⁹³ Ibid, 15.

⁹⁴ Ibid, xx.

Disposable House enters the public space of Guwahati and its histories by simultaneously aestheticizing and politicizing the concept of home. “Home” becomes part-protest, part-ritual, part-celebration and, as such, it is offered up to the space of the city and its “public,” which includes all parties participating in the performance as well as any person on the street who encounters the procession. The body-house becomes a metaphor not only for the actor’s body but the social body as well. Of the five houses, the body-house of the actor (or Kankowa’s house) is the last in the procession. The concept of the body-house unfolds largely through the conceptual foil of *The Body House of the Actor* text, which, as I said, is read near the procession’s end at the edge of the Bramaputra. In the text the notion of an interconnected actor and spectator are illustrated through the concept of cohabitation. Through cohabitation the actor and spectator are merged into one indistinguishable entity. By describing the body as a house within which many inhabitants reside, Kankowa suggests that this body-house is so full one cannot enter it. This shared space is foregrounded by a shared act of seeing:

I am an actor. Before and after being an actor, I am a spectator.
I see, I can see,
It is important that I should see.
I have to see other people looking at me.
Therefore, if I am an actor,
there are many spectators inside me. They share the house with me.
That is why I am confused, how many people live in my house.
I lose myself in my own house.
My house is so full of people that I cannot enter my own house.
I remember Lalon Fakir. I remember Kabir.

If the actor defines his own body by the act of being seen by the other, then this same body takes form and is defined by the gaze of the spectator. As previously noted, the

printed version of this text is accompanied by illustrations. Juxtaposed against these lines, there is an image of a blue figure sitting on a simple black chair in the corner of the frame. The figure's tall thin neck reaches up to the top of the page and connects to a kite-like string of heads. The heads are faceless abstract smudges of blue watercolor paint that faintly bleed into the paper. Interestingly, vision does not belong to any one of the single heads; the figure has no discernible eyes and neither do any of the individual heads. This lack of a divided gaze underscores how the figure itself is comprised of a shared act of seeing. The combined actor-spectator is grounded, and ultimately formed, by its two legs that touch the floor. This image illustrates a fundamental relational formation for Disposable Theatre: performer, public, and space are presented as mutually constitutive.

The postcolonial politics of immigration and subnationalism in Assam foreground the significance of shared and *unshared* social and civic space (shared in the sense of coexistence, and unshared in the sense of unequal distributions of power). Disposable Theatre's desire to articulate a notion of shared space does not imply that social space is a vacuum in which power does not exist, but rather that both actor and spectator are implicated in the politics of power. Thus, to return to the earlier discussion of the power dynamics of theater, while a conventional proscenium theatre places the actor in the authorial seat of power in a performance, *The Body House of the Actor* aims to unsettle this dynamic by demonstrating how it is the spectator's gaze that forms the very existence of the actor's body. In this way, Disposable Theatre cultivates shared space through the contestatory possibilities of performance as a form of radical dissent. It contests both the logic of social control and surveillance through which the state renders space unshared

and a model of theatre that reproduces this logic. To that end, the *Disposable House* performance enacts an encounter with difference in a space that is shared between ethnic or religious “others.” This dimension of the work is underscored through naming two well-known poets (“I remember Lalon Fakir. I remember Kabir”) who are both associated with nonsectarian beliefs. In a sense, the structure of *The Body House of the Actor* text, as well as the ambiguity of the name Kankowa (which, as previously noted, both names the artists’ collective and Saikia’s *nom de plume*), function as a critical reenactment of Kabir and Lalon’s work.

As noted in my introduction, Kabir was a fifteenth-century poet born in Varanasi. While there are many divergent biographies about the legendary poet and his life, it is commonly understood that during his lifetime he studied with an unknown powerful Hindu guru, and later became a poet and teacher in his own right (although he did not achieve wide acceptance or veneration until after his death).⁹⁵ He is now famous for his rough powerful voice and his critique of rigid orthodoxies. Several religious sects have produced collections of his works and his poems have been sung and recited throughout North India for over 500 years.⁹⁶

In the *Disposable House* performance, Saikia announces, “Kabir stands at the market place, a burning torch in his hand, one who has put fire to house may come and walk with me.” Before reading from the *The Body House of the Actor* at the *Disposable House* performance, Saikia first recites lines of a famous poem attributed to Kabir,

I’ve burned my own house down
the torch is in my hand.

⁹⁵ Linda Hess and Shujdev Singh. *The Bijak of Kabir*. (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983) 3.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, xi.

Now I'll burn down the house of anyone
who wants to follow me.

This text appears translated into both English and Hindi at the beginning of the video documentation of the performance, which Saikia posted on YouTube to extend its public reception. And, as Linda Hess has noted in the introduction to her translation of Kabir's poetry (with Shukdev Singh), this famous couplet expressed Kabir's emphatic independence from both of the major religions of his time, Hinduism and Islam, and his "penetration of everything inessential."⁹⁷ Hess explains that for Kabir, "the individual must find the truth in his own mind and body so that the line between 'him' and 'it' disappears."⁹⁸ To the extent that the burned house represents Kabir's denouncement of a worldly and sectarian identity, *Disposable House* invites others to do the same. Telling the crowd that Kabir "stands in the marketplace," as Saikia himself similarly stands in the street, the artist invites others to walk with him as they begin their procession through the marketplace and towards the river to dispose of the houses.

A famous story about Kabir is worth noting here. It tells of his Hindu and Muslim followers fighting over the ownership of the poet's body after his death. Before any real violence ensues, however, someone takes off the shroud to discover that a heap of flowers has replaced the cadaver. The two groups agree to divide the flowers and each group goes off to burn or bury them according to their respective ritual. The story, considered inter-textually alongside *Disposable House*, offers neither a synthesis nor transcendence of religious identity, but rather a foregrounding of the necessity, urgency, and efficacy of performative practice. It is the diffusiveness of Kabir's body that

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 5.

precludes exclusive ownership by either community. As such, it enables each group to enact a sense of belonging and attachment through the performance of religious ritual. As is the case with Kankowa's body and the actor's body in *The Body House of the Actor*, Kabir's body belongs to many people and inhabits many places.

The very notion of the body-house resonates with poetic metaphors used by the second poet mentioned in the text of *The Body House of the Actor*, Lalon Fakir (also known as Lalon Shah). Lalon was a nineteenth-century poet who was thought to have lived in what is the present-day Kushtia District of Bangladesh (formerly part of Nadiya District, India) where he died in 1890. No other Baul poet is as famous as Lalon in Bangladesh and India, and he is one of the most well-known in the West as well.⁹⁹ His fame is partly due to Rabindranath Tagore, whose thoughts and writing during the *Swadeshi* movement were largely influenced by the Bauls. In 1915-1916 Tagore published twenty poems of Lalon in the literary journal *Prabasi* bringing them to the attention of middle-class, Bengali society. Lalon's status as a cultural symbol was tied in part to his strictly nonsectarian belief that eschewed any birth religion, believing, in Tagore's words, that the only religion is "the religion of man."¹⁰⁰

Lalon's poems were composed in colloquial Bengali and used imagery from everyday activities such as farming, fishing, and even home foreclosure, as metaphors for one's spiritual life. Often, his poems used the metaphor of a house for the body. As scholar of Lalon, Carol Salomon, notes,

⁹⁹ Baul refers to a group of mystic artists/writers/musicians from Bengal (India's West Bengal and Bangladesh). Baul's are a heterogeneous group with a number of diverse sects that practice similar mystical beliefs expressed through religion and/or music.

¹⁰⁰ Carol Salomon, *Baul Songs*. (Princeton University Press, 1995), 187-188.

This is often the case with *dehatattva* songs. The body may be depicted as a house with two pillars (legs), nine rooms the cakras; although the standard Hindu tantric system lists seven, they can vary in number depending on the tradition, a basement (*muladhar*), and an attic (*sahasrar*) in which a madman who is the Lord sits; or a bird cage with nine doors, housing an unknown bird (the soul); or a broken-down boat constantly leaking water (semen); or a tree of beauty that produces moon fruit (offspring). Everything from a watch to the city Mecca has been used in Baul songs to symbolize the body.¹⁰¹

This is evident in works such as *Dhanya dhanya boli tare*, which Salomon interprets as nine or ten modifying doors that stand in for the nine or ten openings of the body. Lalou writes:

I've got to hand it to the fellow
who built a house like this,
with its foundation up in the sky!

The house has just two pillars, no more,
and their bases aren't attached to the floor.
How will this house stay in one piece,
when it's battered by a raging storm?

It has a basement and nine rooms,
even an attic at the very top.
There a madman sits,
in solitude, the sole Lord.

Upstairs and downstairs,
one after the other,
are nine and a half doors.

The conceptual layer of this poem that is particularly relevant to the *Body House of the Actor* is the composite and porous nature of the body illustrated through the home's multiple levels and doors. Saikia reenacts Lalou's notion of the body-house to illustrate a model of an actor who is made of many parts that are open to, and composed of, the spectator. This multiplicity undermines the notion of an insular and fixed actor who

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

opens up his mouth to deposit knowledge into others. The entryways and doors of these bodies not only invite the other to enter, but suggest that he/she is already inside. Such co-mingling of bodies suggests that dialogue and narrative is not transmitted by the actors to the public, but activated through an already interconnected relationship. The body-house acts as a theoretical model for participation, which also allows for the subversion of dominant relational dynamics. It argues, paradoxically, that while a passerby on the street encountering the performance may appear “passive,” he/she is fundamentally intertwined through the very act of spectatorship, and thus, invited into the performance and its critique.

This invitation for others to enter into the “body-house” of critique – or rather to recognize that they are *already* a part of it – is illustrated in elaborate detail in the watercolor images in the *Body House of the Actor* text. The watercolors depict porous bodies, melded with others, reappearing in various forms of intimate interconnectivity. One image in particular shows a multi-part figure, drawn with overlapping lines, that has two eyes shared between three mouths. The figure’s hands grasp a torso composed of a framed image of a house. Residing in the background are a cityscape and a tree, whose branches house an abundance of birds. Here the actor, made of many people, offers up his/her own body, the body-house, to the city and its inhabitants. This “offering up” of the body-house to others is further underscored by the collaborative nature of *Disposable House*, which Saikia attempts to realize through the collaborative paintings on the houses and the participation of the auto-rickshaw drivers, local musicians, the various artists and

interested spectators who walk along the streets in the procession, and ultimately the homeless Guwahati residents who repossess the house structures.

Interpreted from a politicized standpoint, this collaborative, non-individualistic approach to performance and art-making resonates strongly with the theories of the Communist playwright, actor, and performance theorist Safdar Hashmi (as discussed in the previous chapter). As we have seen, Hashmi became famous as a powerful advocate of Street Theatre in India, was part of the Indian People's Theatre Association, and became one of the founder members of the Jana Natya Manch (JANAM) in Delhi in 1973. More relevant in this context, Hashmi's work involved activist-based performances that were done in the streets in front of large public audiences that addressed a variety of social and political concerns. JANAM famously performed *Machine* for a trade union meeting of over 200,000 workers in 1978. This performance was followed by series of public performances through the late 1970s and 1980s that sought to raise awareness of the position of marginalized communities with respect to topics such as violence against women (in *Aurat*, 1973), the poverty of peasant communities (in *Gaon Se Shahar Tak*, 1978), and unemployment (*Teen Crore*, 1979).¹⁰² When Hashmi was brutally assassinated in 1989 during the performance of his public street play *Halla Bol*, he became a powerful cultural symbol of artistic resistance against the state. The Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT) was founded the same year in his name and continues this day to serve as a space of support for a young generation of performance artists.

¹⁰² The play titles translate as follows: *Aurat* meaning "Woman," *Gaon Se Shahar Tak* meaning "From the Village to the City," and *Teen Crore* meaning "30 Million."

During his lifetime, Hashmi also wrote prolifically on street theatre, outlining his theoretical and political understandings of the stakes of public performance. His critique of a self-contained, individualistic notion of the actor and artist is most clearly articulated in his 1983 essay “The Enchanted Arch: On the Individual and Collective Views of Art.” Like Sircar, Hashmi was critical of the notion of proscenium theatre, but for different reasons. While Hashmi himself was known to participate in proscenium plays, he was constantly forced to defend the artistic legitimacy of street theatre, and was highly critical of the mythical power given to the stage. For Hashmi, the notion of the individual actor thought to contain coveted insights on existence was linked with a selective sanctification of the proscenium theatre. “Here the proscenium is being seen as a kind of *enchanted archway* to the region of divine inspiration, creativity or the wherewithal in which the drama of profound analysis of man, love and death is born. The proscenium becomes, as it were, the tree of wisdom under which every Gautam becomes a Buddha.”¹⁰³ To counter this notion, Hashmi challenged the valorization of the proscenium space, suggesting that it, like any space, is “empty” until it is brought to life by performance. By empty, of course Hashmi does not mean emptied from socio-political dynamics, but empty in the sense that the space is inert until artistic movement reactivates it. But space is truly activated only through collective action. In that same essay, Hashmi identified what he saw as a “definite and irresolvable contradiction between the bourgeois individualist view of art and the people’s view of art.”¹⁰⁴ Such commitment to the

¹⁰³ In the following line Hashmi writes, “This is of course, pure drive!” to underscore how strong he contests these claims. “The Enchanted Arch: On the Individual and Collective Views of Art” in *The Right to Perform: Selected Writings of Safdar Hashmi* (New Delhi: SAHMAT, 1989). 26.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 29.

individual, and consequent anxiety about collaboration, makes the artist unable to offer-up a real critique of the state. Because the bourgeois artist/actor places faith in the individual and fears collective voice, he/she ultimately falls victim to the “mythic power of the instrument of production.”¹⁰⁵ The instrument of production, here being, the artist or actor himself as expressed directly through his chosen medium.

The notion of the body-house offered by Saikia provides a contemporary architectural and corporeal metaphor, which undermines the mythic valorization of the individual actor and the proscenium stage. Instead of limiting artistic production to the space of the illusionistic stage, the body itself is understood as a house that carries with it every possibility of performance. Moreover, this porous and mobile body-house, with its many open doors and windows, is formed through its dependence on elements from the outside, which paradoxically build-up the structure from within. This interconnected relationship between the inside and the outside, the actor and spectator, forms the very basis of Disposable Theatre. Through a collaborative model, it allows for conflicting positionalities and dissenting voices.

As *Disposable House* and the theories on which it is based suggest, this collaboration is possible because both the body and the theatre are disposable. They do not *belong* to any space, group or individual. They come alive only through the process of disposal. This evokes religious practices from both Islam and Hinduism. In the Islamic tradition *ta'zīya*, mobile mausoleums built as replicas of Imam Hussein's mausoleum in Karbala, are used in ritual processions by Shi'a Muslims during the mourning month of Muharram. Similar to the *Disposable House* project, *ta'zīyas* vary in shape and size, and

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 28.

carried in a procession through the streets. Although some *ta'zīyas* were originally made of precious materials for royal and wealthy patrons, to be housed permanently, the majority of *ta'zīyas* are of kind of disposable art made of wood and bamboo for the frame and tin foil, colored paper, mica and glass for the ornament on the exterior. This *Disposable House* also resonates with Hindu ritual during *Durga Pooja* in which the goddess Durga is processed through the street and ultimately placed in the river to float away. Both practices include a component of public process that ultimately leads to a ephemeral sacrifice.

This intersection of disposability and collectivity is further reiterated through the work's engagement with performance-based rituals in Assam, particularly those that take place during the harvest festival of Bhogali (or Magh Bihu). During Bhogali, temporary houses called *bhela-ghor* are built for the harvest celebration. On the night of the community feast, *uruka*, people gather together for a collectively prepared meal and everyone spends the night inside the *bhela-ghor*. At dawn, as community members offer prayers for a bountiful harvest the following year, these “disposable houses” are burned down and their ashes are scattered on the earth, either on the edge of the city, or in the open space of the rural country.

In these festivals, the disposal of the home becomes the generative possibility of the following year's abundance. The *bhela-ghor* homes underscore Saikia's aim to create a cultural symbol for the public linked to community-based and collective practices that express a desire for regeneration. Appropriately than, even though the homes were originally intended to be released into the Bramaputra (similar to the procession and

immersion of Durga during *Durga Pooja*), the houses in the 2012 performance were given to local residents, who live near the river and had inquired after the homes and their materials. Instead of being submerged into the river, they were instead submerged into the environment and re-appropriated as domestic structures by the people of Guwahati. Thus, the materials of the homes, like the ashes of *bhela-ghor*, are scattered through the land and given over to the community.

The second lives of these homes, made possible only after their disposal, speaks also to Disposable Theatre's commitment to radical critique. Both ritual invocations—the harvest festival and the *Disposable House Project*—emphasize the disposable, ephemeral nature of the body-houses, which are moved through the city, and later turned over at the banks of the river to make way for something greater expressed by the work's underlying non-sectarian message and its critique of the state's role in intolerance. At the edge of the river when Saikia reads Kabir's line, "one who has put fire to their house, may come and walk with me" he underscores this message of both subversion and unification. The idea being that whoever is able to let go of attachment to his or her own identity, religion or ethnicity ("who has put fire to their house") may come and walk in solidarity. These lines echo the act of offering-up homes to the river in *Disposable House*, which performatively suspends classification, regulation and intolerance on the basis of identity in favor of a fleeting moment in which the city both venerates and turns over its conflicting desires for home. The complexity involved in Saikia's work is that one sets fire to one's own home *not* to obliterate or subsume difference, but rather to challenge the ways power depends on these categories and to demonstrate a relinquishment of them.

While Saikia's work ultimately aims to promote tolerance, it would be reductive and naïve to suggest the underlying message of *Disposable House* is for everyone in Guwahati to simply transcend their differences, and see that they belong to the same spiritual home. Instead, *Disposable House*, as an activist intervention, offers a much more complex model of pluralism in its critique of state power, one, which I believe, harkens back to a model of interconnected habitation offered by Saikia's poetic description of a body-house as a space of both belonging and difference.

It is valuable to note also the ways in which Saikia's performance perhaps "failed" to project the cultural inclusivity and pluralism of his own philosophy. Saikia, who walked through the streets with a bare chest, wore only a *lungi*, and performed devotional rituals at the start of the procession, took on the character of a Brahman priest or holy man, which evoked the presence of a figure who is ultimately upper caste and Hindu. This important to consider not to disparage Saikia's work, but to think of the limitations of the body as a text in the socio-political public sphere, and the complex reception of the artist's body. Saikia chose to present himself as a figure according to his own religious background, and utilized an ethnic and religious subject-position that maintains a level of acceptance and privilege within Guwahati's socio-political landscape. In this sense, even Saikia's own intention of inclusivity, which he aimed to evoke through the reading of Kabir, was perhaps less visible through the representational presentation of the body itself.

To that end, the expository and site-specific nature of "disposable theater" managed to produce unexpected elements that transcended its own representational

failings. In the final stage of the performance, near the banks of the river, as Saikia read his “Body House of the Actor” poem out-loud in preparation for the immersion of the body-houses into the water, local homeless residents expressed their sense that it was wasteful for the artists to simply dispose of stable housing materials in a purely symbolic gesture. The group of residents who approached Saikia was of a mixed ethnic and religious demographic, both Hindu, Muslim.¹⁰⁶ Both individually, and as a group, the residents rearticulated finale of the performance, as well as the significance of the body-house itself. While the initial aim of performance was to dispose of the body-house in the river as a spiritual expression of a unified tolerance critical of the state’s insistence on ethnic differentiation, this untenable ideal was rewritten in the midst of the performance as dissenting residents envisioned the work as having an entirely different value, despite the potentially less religiously inclusive role projected by the artist himself. The body-house was reworked within its own framework of dissent and ultimately reformulated through the critique offered by the homeless residents.

The ultimately goal was not to achieve an ideal of cultural harmony, but rather, to give the performance up to the body-house of the city so that it might foster critical dialogue. While it was initially conceived symbolically to express the connectivity of people in Guwahati through an ephemeral act that expresses a relinquishment of the homes of identity, religion, nationality, and political allegiance, the intervention of local residents instead restructured its symbolic and material value in the construction of actual new homes in the city. When the performance shifted after its direct encounter with an

¹⁰⁶ Syed Taufik Ryaz, interviewed by the author, Kolkata, May 2, 2012; Samudra Kajal Saikia interviewed by the author, New Delhi, April 13, 2012.

unsuspecting critical audience, the body-house redefined cohabitation through an ever-malleable notion of home.

In the chapter that follows I will turn towards one of Saikia's predecessors, Ratnabali Kant, a performance artist who was primarily active in the 1980s-90s. Kant's practice of "installation performance" further demonstrates a similar value given to the continuous process of destruction, disposal and rebuilding, as fostered in Saikia's *Disposable House Project*. While Kant and Saikia have met at events in Delhi, and are aware of each other's work, they have never directly collaborated.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, as we will see, both artists are committed to interrogating dominant paradigms of difference and othering, and turned towards body-based practices in search of a malleable form of dissent that gives way to the creative potential of destruction and renewal.

¹⁰⁷ Samudra Kajal Saikia, interviewed by the author, New Delhi, April 13, 2012; Ratnabali Kant, interviewed by the author, New Delhi, April 5, 2012.

Chapter 3-Gendered Bodies: Nature, Reproduction and Representation in Ratnabali Kant’s Ritual Installation Performances

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Samudra Kajal Saikia used body-based metaphors and performance art practices to creatively examine the politics of subnationalism and immigration in his native state of Assam. I discussed how Saikia engaged with the discourses of modern theater practitioners such as Badal Sircar to think about the political possibilities of body-based, live, public art and reformulated these concepts through the philosophies of mystical poets from the fourteenth century to link the corporeal body with the larger the social body in Assam. In this chapter, I turn to the work of Ratnabali Kant, a predecessor of Saikia who also used her own body to critically examine its position in relation the larger social body and its role in gender inequality.

While we have seen the impact of modern Indian theater on the cementation of the conceptual link between the body and political resistance, Kant was among the first artists in India to posit the body as an artistic medium from directly *within* the visual arts institution. Starting in the late ‘80s, and continuing through the 1990s and early 2000s, Kant developed a method of artistic practice she refers to as “ritual installation performance,” which integrates performance-based methods into gallery and museum spaces by activating—and interacting with— her own art objects.

Despite this significant contribution to the field of contemporary Indian art, there has been to date very limited critical or scholarly response to Kant’s work. This lack of attention may be due, in part, to the fact that during the formative years of Kant’s career

(1980-2005) performance art had not yet become the fashionable commodity for India within the context of the global art market that it has in the last decade (2005-2014).¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, Kant has received recognition from several noteworthy arts institutions. In 2005, the Paris-based Raza Foundation (founded by the well-known modernist painter, S.H. Raza, in 2001 to provide funding for and highlight the work of young and upcoming artists in India) published the first and only catalogue on Kant's work entitled *Ephemeral Steps Enduring Imprints: Installation Performance 1985-2005*, which provides a general overview of her career through photographs of her work accompanied by brief descriptions of the performances. More recently, in 2010, the cinematographer and filmmaker Adri Thakur debuted a documentary film under the same title, which examines Kant's life and career and includes videos of her performances as well as interviews with her family, teachers and contemporaries.

The 2005 catalogue opens with an epigraph by the legendary modernist Indian painter K. G. Subramanyan praising Kant's practice. Having been one of Kant's teachers at the renowned Vishva Bharati University in Santiniketan in West Bengal, Subramanyan describes the artist in the following way: "Ratnabali is one of our few young artists who dare to step out of the enchanted circle."¹⁰⁹ The placement of this quote at the beginning of Kant's catalogue is interesting for a number of reasons. Subramanyan's statement highlights the dissident nature of Kant's practice by celebrating her ability to step outside of "the enchanted circle." This statement not only emphasizes the ways Kant's practice

¹⁰⁸ In my first chapter I discuss the rise in interest in Indian performance art in the '00s, especially in 2011-2012.

¹⁰⁹ Ratnabali Kant, *Ratnabali Kant: Ephemeral Steps Enduring Imprints 1985-2005* (Paris: Raza Foundation, 2005).

unsettled the boundaries of convention but also how it moved outside of the more comfortable spaces of artistic expression. The “enchanted circle” to which Subramanyan refers likely aimed to call to mind the state of the Indian “high” art academy in the mid-1990s, where painting and sculpture were the dominant art forms. Whereas artists at the nation’s premier art college, Shantinekatan, sought to perfect artistic representation along pictorial lines, Kant instead chose to integrate her own body within the art gallery space by interacting with her paintings and sculptures in real time as part of the exhibition.

On another level, it is worth noting the authority this quote brings to bear on the catalogue. The fact that Kant’s work is celebrated by one of the canonical male figures in the history of Indian modernism helped legitimize her experimental and performative art practice within the context of the more established Indian art academy. In addition, such recognition points to the value and significance of her work within the institutional and historical context from which it emerged. At the same time, however, this statement—a kind of “stamp of approval” at the front of her catalogue—indexes the very politicized and gendered frameworks of authority that Kant creatively navigates and interrogates in her own artistic career. The strategic placement of this quotation at the beginning of her catalogue highlights the extent to which Kant’s own artistic career is marked by a tactical awareness of the relationship between power, legitimacy and gender in India.

This chapter focuses on the development of Kant’s career as it coincided with feminist debates and “woman-centered” activist movements in India in the 1980s and 90s. In doing so, I wish to highlight the ways she creatively mirrored the inherent paradoxes and struggles of these movements. Following an analysis of the theoretical

resonance between Kant's performances and the discourse of ecofeminism (which gained momentum in India in the 1970s-90s), I turn to the specificity of the cultural symbol of the womb as it emerges in Kant's work and the way it engaged debates on women's reproductive rights in India in the 1980s and '90s. These debates, which concerned both ecofeminism and reproductive rights, questioned the way in which "woman" as a subject position was constructed as an essentialist and self-contained category. While the category of "womanhood" was fundamental to the activist project for political mobilization, it also contained problematic reductions and effacements. Kant uses the figure of "woman" as a symbol of shared strength, unity and struggle. At the same time, because her complex performance-based practice intentionally sought to highlight the limitations and pitfalls of representation, I analyze how Kant's depictions of "womanhood" are ultimately structured through a framework of strategic ambivalence and contradiction. Through this approach, I seek, first of all, to bring attention to an enormously influential but under-recognized artist. Second, my examination of Kant's work and practice will serve to advance a key argument of this dissertation, which is how the body acts as a viable tool for discourse of dissent within the Indian socio-political sphere. As, I discussed in my first chapter, this conceptual link between the body and creative political critique, was emphasized through the philosophies of India political theater, and ultimately aided in the cultivation of the body as a medium for artists coming from of a visual arts tradition, looking for a tool through which to actively address social concerns. Moreover, the body is highly accessible and representational-meaning, it h

In what follows, I use the term “representation” in a specific sense to refer to visual depictions such as in painting, sculpture, new media (such as photography and video) and performances. In addition, I use the term in reference to the vexed notion of political representation – both as it relates to specific women’s activist movements in India that argue for visibility and rights within a system of state government and to the broader, theoretical problem of speaking for oneself or others. As Kant’s complex performances demonstrate, all of these meanings of representation are ultimately interconnected.

The critique of representation has been fundamental to postcolonial studies, which emphasizes the need to situate representation in relation to its historical and socio-political uses as well as to its ideological function. In his well-known critique of textual representations of the Middle East, *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said argued that, “there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation,” and showed how Western literary representations of Islamic civilizations, which depend upon the mythical construct of “the Orient,” were politically informed by European self-affirmation.¹¹⁰ Said’s critique was interested in undermining the value of these representations and their claims for veracity. He demonstrated the ways in which this myth of a “delivered presence” ultimately displaced “any such real thing as the Orient.”¹¹¹ Along similar lines, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasizes a key distinction between the German terms *Vertretung* and *Darstellung* to suss out the underlining significance of representation within a Marxian framework. *Vertretung*

¹¹⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978) 21.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

should be understood as representation in the sense of political representation (i.e., speaking for the needs or desires or someone else), which Spivak describes as “stepping in someone’s place ... to tread in someone’s shoes.”¹¹² *Darstellung*, however, should be understood as re-presentation, referring to the notion of portrayal, which Spivak describes as a type of “placing there.”¹¹³ Concerned with the complicity between these two types of representation that “speak for” and “portray” others, Spivak argues for “persistent critique” to guard against “constructing the Other simply as an object of knowledge, leaving out the real Others.”¹¹⁴¹¹⁵

Ratnabali Kant’s performance practice examines the profound significance and limitations of representation in ways that resonate with the above-mentioned theoretical accounts. Along the lines of Spivak’s argument, Kant’s performances investigated these two complicit forms of representation: portrayal and political agency. Specifically, Kant was concerned with the ways in which women’s bodies were read as social texts, and how these bodies were inscribed with the very real material realities of violence and disenfranchisement in the Indian nation-state within a global geo-political framework. As I will demonstrate, the womb in particular served as a site through which Kant could

¹¹² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. Ed. Sarah Harasym. (New York: Routledge, 1990) 109.

¹¹³ Ibid., 109.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 63.

¹¹⁵ Spivak also argues for the futility of “speaking in the name of” others. She contends, “It is not a solution, the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, or the radical critics speaking for them; this question of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem”(63). Here she is referring to the issue of the “radical critique,” i.e. the intellectual, speaking for the subaltern “Other.” Kant, in this sense, could be understood as the intellectual that Spivak argues must be conscious of “persistence critique.” As I will demonstrate Kant herself walks the tenuous line of “speaking for others” particularly in her performance *Way of the Warrior* that deals with commercial surrogacy. Here she discusses the controversy of women who choose to go into this field of employment. I suggest that her critical ambivalence around commercial surrogacy challenges the audience, and herself, to a “persistent critique” that avoids making ethical judgments about whether others are “right” or “wrong,” but challenges societal anxieties around this issue.

explore the ties between conceptual and aesthetic representation and systemic forms of marginalization and misrepresentation. Kant drew thematic links between women's bodies and nature to think about concurrent forms of violence against both subjects and their environments and also saw this connection to nature as a source for resistance.¹¹⁶ In questioning representations of women in post-colonial visual culture and political society in India, Kant's work foregrounds the problem of how to situate her own body in relation to these histories. Ultimately, Kant understood her own body to be the most effective tool for critiquing these various realms of representation. Because her own body would be read as a highly loaded representational site, she could draw upon it as a viable resource to foreground a feminist performance art practice.¹¹⁷

Kant describes her practice as oriented through the broader political and philosophical framework of feminism, but it is also "feminist" in the sense that it intersects with the historical specificity of a wider set of concerns targeted by feminist groups in India in the 1980s and '90s, which helped to form the methodological impetus for her art-making.¹¹⁸ Keeping in mind that feminism is "itself a constitutively multi-voiced arena of struggle," and that the words "feminist" and "women" are both fraught with contentious and contradictory meanings, it is important to avoid reductive definitions of these terms, especially when employed from within the context of the U.S. academy.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Ratnabali Kant, interviewed by the author, New Delhi, April 5, 2012.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ella Shohat in the introduction to her edited volume, *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Mass.:MIT Press, 1998), 16.

Transnational feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty's 1986 essay, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," provides a useful framework for approaching Kant's work. Mohanty writes, "what is problematic, then, about this type of use of the term 'women' as a group, as a stable category of analysis, is that it assumes an ahistorical universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of subordination."¹²⁰ Mohanty's essay was one of the first to challenge a number of Western feminist studies that constructed the so-called Third World woman as a cultural and ideological Other through the "implicit assumption of the West as the primary referent in theory and praxis." These studies, she argued, failed to account for how the particular is also universally significant, in that they erased global frameworks of power by ignoring the specificity of difference. Her argument, which she revised and defended in her 2003 essay "Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggle," highlights the necessity for the term feminism itself to be historicized through analysis that is "attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity and struggle as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes."¹²¹

With Mohanty's argument in mind, Kant's performance art practices offer a complex examination of the various ways "particularity" intersects with broader networks of power and resistance within local, national, and even global contexts. As previously noted, from the beginning of her career onward, Kant used the body as a tool both to

¹²⁰ Chandra Talpade Mohanty "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 344.

¹²¹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Struggle through Anticapitalist Struggles," *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28 (2008): 501.

draw from and unsettle universalist representations of women. To that end, as I will demonstrate, Kant's performances address very specific socio-political realities of women's lives within India, and in the world at large, which link to broader global structures of power and oppression.

Kant's Early Work: Kathakali Dance and "Body-Art" Performance

Kant was born to a middle-class Bengali family in Kolkata in 1956 as Ratnabali Ghosh.¹²² At seventeen, against the wishes of her mother, Kant solicited the help of her sister and brother-in-law to gain admission into Vishva Bharati University in Santiniketan in order to pursue training in Kathakali, a form of classical Indian dance. Kant spent her days working in the visual arts studio in sculpture and painting and her evenings training as a dancer. In 1975 she received a certificate in Kathakali from the school's Sangeet Bhavan (College of Dance), and subsequently transferred to the University's Kala Bhavan (College of Arts) to pursue a Bachelor's of Fine Arts degree specializing in sculpture and the history of arts and aesthetics, where she studied under the renowned sculptor Ramkinkar Baij.

Kant continued to develop her expertise in both sculpture and art history, and received an M.F.A. from the equally renowned Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda in Gujarat in 1979, where she wrote a thesis on "Zoomorphic motifs in Ancient Indian Sculpture." In 1983, she received a Greek Government Scholarship to pursue doctoral research on the "Dynamic Elements in Ancient Greek Sculpture" at Athens University in

¹²² She became Ratnabali Kant in 1983 when she married the painter Awani Kant Deo.

Greece. While in Greece, Kant's performance-based art practice emerged from an unexpected critical interrogation of the Western art canon. As I have discussed in chapter one, the conventional narrative of performance art, epitomized by art historian RoseLee Goldberg's commonly referenced history, generally traces a history from the European avant-garde movements in the early 20th century to the "happenings" and performances in New York in the 1960s and '70s. Kant's personal development of a performance art practice, however, is not derived from any of these avant-garde predecessors. Nor is it derived from the western feminist performance art that emerged in the 1970s. Rather, Kant's practice comes out of a critical engagement with the so-called "origin" of western art, specifically, the history of ancient Greek sculpture, which she placed in inter-textual dialogue with philosophies of dance acquired through her training as a classical Indian dancer.

Kant's study, "Dynamic Elements in Ancient Greek Sculpture" examined the ways in which ancient Greek monumental marble and bronze sculpture contained "dynamic elements" of movement, which she found surprisingly performative.¹²³ Her study emphasizes an unexpected sense of motion in the gestures of the *caryatids* of the fourth century BCE, which are sculpted statues of female figures that serve as architectural support in the place of a column to hold large monumental structures. Drawing on her knowledge and training in Kathakali, Kant showed how these seemingly static forms exhibit dance-like movements. Using Kathakali's theoretical framework,

¹²³ Kant's dissertation is not formally published. All descriptions of the project are derived from email exchange with the artist and the author. Ratnabali Kant, email message to the author, September 10, 2013.

Kant's study unsettled a traditionally ocular-centric art historical approach to reading art objects and provided a more performance-based methodology.

Kathakali, which is thought to have originated in Kerala India in the seventeenth century, is a stylized form of dance in which performers, wearing intricate costumes and face paint, follow precise movements that shift in sync with *Sopana* music, singing and percussion.¹²⁴ The dances were originally based on stories often adapted from historical epics, such as the Ramayana, and were intended to last all night. Kathakali is commonly performed in front of a *kalivilakku* (a large candle with a thick wick lit by coconut oil). Traditionally, the lamp was used as a primary light source when Kathakali was performed inside temples, palaces, or the homes of nobility, but the candlelight also adds to the dramatic contrast of the dancer's vivid costumes and make-up, dynamic facial expressions and precisely executed gestures against a dark background. The performers usually do not speak, but instead use body and hand gestures and controlled facial and eye movements to express emotion and further the narrative. What Kant drew conceptually from her training in Kathakali was not only the ability to think of narrative development and aesthetic paradigms in performative terms, but also to resituate art objects within a broader spatial and temporal framework of motion and dynamism. She re-imagined Greek sculptures, such as the *caryatid*, as a materialization of a moment frozen in time across a wider series of gestures that narrate the story of a character from a classic epic.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ “*Sopana*” refers to *Sopana Sangeetham*, a form of classical Indian music that is thought to have developed in the temples of Kerala in South India around 1200 AD.

¹²⁵ In the western art historical paradigm, a paradigm that was emphasized also in the Indian art academy since the arrival of the colonial art school in the nineteenth century, Greece is the “origin” of western art and

While still in Athens, Kant expanded her critical analysis of sculpture and dance in the development of her first performance art pieces. Kant's performances drew from the Kathakali technique of body painting and she painted her own body and hair with bronze to take on the form of a bronze sculpture. This allowed for Kant both to embody and activate the art object. The performance became, in a sense, a critical historicization of the art historical material she had been studying. Instead of taking on the role of the disinterested spectator/historian and examining sculpture from a safe distance, she presented her own body as simultaneously sculpture, performer, and politicized site of inquiry – what she called “body-art” performances.

The photo-performance piece that arose out of this exploration, entitled *Voices from Within* (1986), presents the artist as sculpture staged within the frame of a photographic document. The artist's face is masked with bronze paint, so that her shimmering eyelids, eyelashes, eyebrows, lips and hair glisten with light reflecting the natural sunlight streaming in from a nearby window in her studio. The rest of the artist's body is cropped in the image, showing only her face, neck, shoulders and one of her hands, which reaches up to grasp the branch of a small tree that frames Kant against a backdrop of foliage.

Kant describes the bronze paint on her skin as a reference to the earthen and metallic tones of the natural minerals of the earth.¹²⁶ Utilizing this intimate association of her body with the environment Kant brought to the forefront the resonance between the

civilization. Kant does not describe the work as having a direct critique of this narrative of original, but rather she is interested in the way in which a woman's body is connect to the earth, just as a sculpture of a woman's body made out of the earth. Ratnabali Kant, interviewed by the author, New Delhi, April 5, 2012.

¹²⁶ Ratnabali Kant, interviewed by the author, New Delhi, April 5, 2012.

earth, its suffering, and the suffering of all women. In a 1985 statement, Kant described *Voices from Within* (1986) as the beginning of an exploration of the ways in which a woman's body acts as a conduit for the vibrations of the earth and its suffering (fig. 27).

She states:

As a woman and artist I feel that the natural calamities, political disasters and man's betrayal of man not only causes suffering to society, country or mother earth, their vibrations extend to the body of the artist also. Hence my body becomes a part of my artwork.¹²⁷

Here, Kant expresses how natural disasters and systems of oppression have a visceral resonance that form the urgent impetus for her art making. Her body is a direct extension of the earth and its inhabitants; social and spiritual pain rise up inside of this body and demand to be expressed through movement. Kant's assertion "as a woman and an artist" makes clear that for her the connection between environmental destruction and human oppression has a direct link to womanhood. As a woman she suffers at the hands of systemic structures of power and marginalization and as a result, the statement suggests, she has a distinct awareness of these burdens. At the same time, the statement posits her womanhood as inseparable from her artistic identity, in the sense that it grants her a type of unique insight. As a direct extension of the earth, her performances are not merely personal expressions, but ritual-like manifestations of something greater.

Ritual/Politics of Appropriation

Kant's use of ritual and nature-centered spirituality calls to mind a common theme across North American feminist artist practices from the 1970s, most notably in the work

¹²⁷ Ratnabali Kant, *Ratnabali Kant: Ephemeral Steps Enduring Imprints 1985-2005* (Paris: Raza Foundation, 2005).

of Ana Mendieta, Betsy Damon, Mary Beth Edelson and Jane Ellen Gilmore. In works such as Edelson's *Woman Rising/Spirit* (1973), the artist used a similar photo-performance technique to document her own image and illustrate its primordial goddess-like relationship with the earth. In the photograph Edelson stands topless against a sandy beach backdrop (fig. 28). Similar to Kant's "body-art" performances, Edelson utilized tribal face markings to present herself as aligned with a type of ancient celestial energy; paint and marker create bolt-like lines of energy emanating from her head (though in this work the paint is not directly applied to the artist's face, but instead layered on top of the photograph itself with the use of oil paint and china marker). In the center of her forehead Edelson drew a third-eye, not unlike those often painted on the face of Kathakali dancers to depict the third-eye of the god Siva.¹²⁸

Importantly, Edelson's depiction of herself with a third-eye does not make direct reference to any specific Asian religious or cultural tradition. Instead her appropriation of both the third-eye and the tribal markings on her body, are generalized symbols of "primordial" goddess-hood, which links the artist as a woman to an endowed sense of earthly connectedness and awareness. In Edelson's use, the third eye is de-historicized and removed from any specific religious and cultural meaning; it is a vague symbol marking the artist as a goddess-like figure with the abilities to absorb and transmit naturally acquired insight and expression.

¹²⁸ The third-eye is also commonly a reference to the *anja chakra* prominent in physiological theories found in certain forms of Hinduism and Tantric Buddhism where it is considered to be a site of activation that resides directly behind the center of the eyebrow, and in Taoism and other Chinese religious practices such as Chan it is used as a site of focus in the practice of meditation.

Art historian Jane Blocker's *Where is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Peformativity, and Exile* (1999), provides a useful framework for analyzing these types of ritual and nature-centered feminist art practices in the U.S. Focused on how race, ethnicity and national identities intersect with the politics of cultural production and appropriation, Blocker examines the Cuban-born North American artist Ana Mendieta's performance-based art practices in relation to developments in feminist and post-modernist critical practice in the latter part of the twentieth century. Insofar as Mendieta's work shares conceptual layers of resonance with both Kant and Edelson – she too often photographed bodies in intimate connection with the natural environment through processes that had ritualistic and “primitive” undertones – it provides a useful resource for thinking about the complexities in the function of culture and identity in such practices. This is evident in works such as Mendieta's *Fetish* series in which she molded bodily forms into the earth, pierced them with sticks, marked them with blood, or branded them with iron to enact what Blocker describes as a performative transformation that drew from the artist's knowledge of the Afro-Cuban ritual practice of Santería in which “blood, hair, gunpowder, or candles are used to divine answers to specific questions or bring about desired events” (fig. 29).¹²⁹ Blocker examines the ways Mendieta's work “troubled her colleagues undifferentiated notion of the feminine” and demonstrates the difference between this work and the kinds of appropriation of otherness that white artists such as Edelson utilized in their vague and generalized references to an exotic notion of tribal and

¹²⁹ Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Peformativity, and Exile* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 18.

magical spiritual energy.¹³⁰ Unlike some western feminists' use of the goddess, Kant's use of Kathakali was not a generalized appropriation, but a complex application of an artistic tradition, tied to intricate cultural and religious histories, in which she was formally trained and knew intimately.

When Kant enacted her *Voices from Within* in 1986 she did not have a direct awareness of either Mendieta or Edelson's work.¹³¹ As previously noted, her work emerged out of a different geographic and historical context and was therefore not engaged with the feminist performance art movement in the U.S. from this period. Nevertheless, Blocker's complex reading of Mendieta's work provides a sophisticated framework through which to examine the ways in which nationality, gender, and representation intersect in the transnational context of performance art. It is important that Kant's and Mendieta's work not be subsumed within the scaffold of white Euro-American feminist art practices, but at the same time, the discourse of ritual and nature-centered performance art practices can be situated within a larger global frameworks in a multifaceted feminist critique of power, representation and appropriation. As Blocker aptly notes in relation to Mendieta's identity as a Cuban-born artist living in exile in the United States, and the ways in which this subjectivity was read in various interpretations and exhibitions of her work, "while the *feminist* and *ethnic* labels are to some extent

¹³⁰ Ibid.,19

¹³¹ Ratnabali Kant, interviewed by the author, New Delhi, April 5, 2012.

useful, they are often a means by which critics and audiences can distance themselves from the more important, or perhaps threatening, implications of her work.”¹³²

Here, Blocker suggests that the label of *ethnic* or *feminist* is merely a means of flattening or reducing the work, and thus avoiding the complex and unsettling conceptual layers at play, which might speak more directly to systems of power or marginalization. With Blocker’s critique in mind, it seems necessary to move past the simple labeling of Kant as a “Third-World feminist artist” and examine the perhaps more “threatening” layers of her work. Kant’s use of ritual and nature is in fact more critical than a simple celebration of woman’s primordial connection to the earth. Her performances, through complex layers of metaphor, addresses greater complexities at stake through gender inequalities that are strategically avoided and disavowed. Kant constantly kept an eye on activist movements in India, particularly environmental movements that addressed the wider problem of gender inequality, and her performances often examined the “woman’s issue” through a complex, conceptual and creative form of dissent.¹³³

Ecofeminism and/or Feminist Environmentalism

The social, political and philosophical aspects of environmentalism and feminism in India have historically intersected in complex ways. For example, in the late 1970s and early 1980s the Chipko Resistance Movement became a major environmental and social movement in India that combatted deforestation through non-violent civil disobedience. Originating in the early 1970s in the Garhwal region of the Himalayas, Chipko became a

¹³² Ibid.,22

¹³³ Ratnabali Kant, interviewed by the author, New Delhi, April 5, 2012.

symbol of grassroots activism.¹³⁴ The most significant event in this history took place in 1974 in Reni village in the state of Uttarakand when a group of local peasant women clung to trees and held hands to create rings around them with their own bodies to prevent the Forest Department from cutting them down. Although Chipko was a small and localized movement, the story of this unexpected victory became national legend. The link between women, nature, and state critique cultivated by the national attention given to the Chipko movement, was a central part of feminist-based ideology in the 1980s and '90s as Kant developed her performance-based art practice. While Kant was in Greece from 1983-1988 she was aware of Chipko's early developments in the '70s and returned home to India in 1988 during a moment in which environmentalism and women's rights were closely intertwined.¹³⁵ One might even interpret Chipko as a type of predecessor to ritual and nature-based performative interventions such as Kant's insofar as it is was the pivotal moment in India when women began creatively to politicize their own bodies in conjunction with the natural environment in order to subvert state authority.

As geographer Haripriya Rangan notes in her book *Of Myth and Marginalization: Rewriting Chipko into Himalayan History*, Chipko was primarily a movement to protect the livelihood of communities that depended on the forests for shelter and resources. However, because it was mobilized by women and “emerged from a region of India that is commonly regarded as ‘backward’ and primitive,” it spoke to the heart of both the economic exploitation of nature and feminism. In doing so, it produced a mythology that

¹³⁴ Haripriya Rangan, *Of Myth and Marginalization: Rewriting Chipko into Himalayan History*, (London: Verso, 2000) 3.

¹³⁵ Ratnabali Kant, interviewed by the author, New Delhi, April 11, 2012.

has had enduring cultural reverberations for both environmentalism and women's rights at the national level. As Rangan writes, "It provides the symbolic weapons, the small ammunition, that fire the spirits of those who seek to save the earth, and who perhaps, also inhabit the romantic desire to see the meek inherent the earth one day."¹³⁶ By the 1980s, a series of similar deforestation initiatives that spread as far as the Western Ghat mountain range in Southern India, gained national attention.

While there is some debate as to whether the term "ecofeminism," as opposed to the term "feminist environmentalism," should be used in the Indian context, and also whether ecofeminism is an actual social movement or merely a set of disconnected abstract philosophical tenets, it is valuable to look at the conceptual debates foregrounded in this theory and consider their historical relationship to the Chipko movement and other feminist movements across India from the 1970s to present.¹³⁷ Ecofeminism is commonly associated with the work of Indian environmental activist and philosopher Vandana Shiva who worked with Chipko activists and published various writings on ecology and feminism since the early 1980s.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Ibid.,2.

¹³⁷ Kirkpatrick Sale and Aneel Salman argue that ecofeminism is not a social movement, but only as a theoretical philosophy. See: Kirkpatrick Sale, "Ecofeminism-A New Perspective," *The Nation* 26 (1987): 302-306 and Aneel Salman and Nuzhat Iqbal "Ecofeminist Movements-From North to South," *The Pakistan Development Review* 46.4 (2008): 853-864. Alternately, for an example of ecofeminism cited as a broader movement in India see: Sarbani Guha Ghosal, "Major Trends of Feminism in India," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 66.4 (2005): 803-804

¹³⁸ The term ecofeminism was coined in 1974 by French feminist Francois d' Eaubonne but is now employed in a number of contexts, and often used to refer to a scattering of global movements and philosophies post-1970 that see the "twin subordination" of women and the environment as inextricably intertwined. In its most basic sense, ecofeminism arose out of a union between strands of feminist and ecological thinking, which contend that patriarchy depends on dualistic constructs that separate the body from the mind, men from women and humans from nature.¹³⁸ Thus, ecofeminism is concerned with critiquing and mobilizing the construction of differences through conceptual binaries that create ideological hierarchies and allow for a systematic justification of domination by subjects placed into higher-ranking

In 1993 Shiva co-authored the book *Ecofeminism* with the German sociologist Maria Mies, which outlined the fundamental premises that structure this philosophy. Mies and Shiva argue that ecofeminism offers a critique of capitalist and patriarchal world system that colonizes foreign people and lands and gradually destroys the environment through these processes.¹³⁹ They see modernization and the development of new technologies and their attendant paradigms of technological advancement and “progress,” cultivated by reductionist modernist science since the sixteenth century, as responsible for the denigration of the natural world and its inhabitants. In short, ecofeminism seeks to examine the ways the North dominates the South as well as the ways men dominate women through the unequal and violent use and distribution of the earth’s resources. Moreover, they believe that these processes of environmental plundering and destruction have greater impact on women, and thus women are often the first to protest against acts of environmental injustice.¹⁴⁰ The authors define ecofeminism as “a women identified movement” and assert:

We believe we have special work to do in these imperiled times. It (ecofeminism) believes that the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors, as feminist concerns. It is the masculinist mentality depending upon the multiple systems of dominance and state power which denies women’s rights to their own bodies and own sexuality.¹⁴¹

As evident in this statement, for Mies and Shiva environmental injustice refers not only to obvious ecological calamities, but also to the broader forms of domination displayed

categories over objects thought to reside in lower-ranking categories (such as man over woman, industry over nature, white over non-white). Salman and Iqbal, “Ecofeminist Movements.”

¹³⁹ Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London and New Jersey: Zed, 1993), 2.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 2-3.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 19.

by the military industrial complex – specifically, the way state power is asserted over both the environment and women’s bodies. Ecofeminist thought sees women’s bodies as sites of exploitation but also as sources of strength linked to spirituality.¹⁴²

Shiva articulated the spiritual dimension of ecofeminism in greater detail in her *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* which she published in 1988, the same year that Kant returned from Greece to India. Shiva argues that an ideological shift took place with the arrival of colonialism, when Indian society adopted a model of modern development, as opposed to the traditional Indian cosmological view of animate and inanimate nature known as *prakrati*. Through this, she argues that Indian lost its nurturing relationship between mother earth and humankind. According to Shiva, *prakrati* is linked to the notion of *shakti*, a feminine creative principle of the cosmos that creates the universe alongside the masculine energy of *purusha*.¹⁴³ When this more harmonious paradigm was obliterated with the arrival of colonialism, Shiva contends, the focus was turned towards man’s ability to develop and control the environment. Women were thus stripped of their powerful connection to the land. Shiva’s work attempts to resuscitate this spiritual model to mobilize the ecofeminist project and aims to critique forms of development that impact what for her are the innate connections between women’s bodies and the environment.

Although she revised some of these claims in her collaboration with Mies five years later, various scholars have convincingly critiqued Shiva’s essentialist

¹⁴² Inga Tøllefsen, “Ecofeminism, Religion and Nature in an Indian and Global Perspective,” *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 2.1 (2011): 4-16.

¹⁴³ Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988).

representation of women, nature, and spiritually. For instance, economist Bina Agarwal, challenges Shiva's reductive and uncritical use of Hindusim as a central spiritual and philosophical framework. She questions the ways Shiva's ecofeminism fails to account for the complexities of various religious, ethnic, class and caste backgrounds in India. While Agarwal honors the contribution that Shiva's work made to the fields of feminism and environmental studies, she remains skeptical of Shiva's view of pre-colonial India to the extent that it fails to account for pre-existing structures of inequality. Agarwal contends that the broader theory of ecofeminism is itself based on an abstract and vague notion of the spiritual connection between women and nature which, for her, is more "ideological" than material, and rooted in a "a system of signs and representations."¹⁴⁴ Against "ecofeminism," Agarwal argues for a theory of "feminist environmentalism" in which *both* women and men's lives are rooted in their material relationship to the environment and understood through structures of gender, class, caste and race-based divisions.¹⁴⁵

While the use of the term "ecofeminism" as opposed to "environmental feminism" itself is not specifically relevant to Kant's performances, the issues that this debate raises in relation to women, nature and representation are. It is not difficult to see the resonance between Kant's statement that as a "woman and artist" she feels reverberations of the earth's suffering within her own body and the philosophical framework of ecofeminism discussed above. Kant articulates a profound connection between women and nature, one that can be said to foreground an almost spiritual

¹⁴⁴ Bina Agarwal, "The Gender and Environment Debate," *Feminist Studies* 18.1 (1992), 120.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

relationship binding her own body with the suffering of the earth. Agarwal's concerns regarding essentialism provide a lens through which to critically analyze the way women and nature are depicted in feminist performance-based such as Kant's. Just as Agarwal troubles textual representations of womanhood formed through the discourse of ecofeminism, we should consider also how feminist performance practices must attend to the complexities of essentialism in relation to gender representation.

Feminist Performance Practices in India

The problematics of essentialism identified by scholars such as Agarwal in the debates surrounding ecofeminism resonate with concerns that are central to Kant's practice and performance-based feminist projects in India more generally. Similar to the ways, discussed in chapter one, that modern political theatre in India took shape against the backdrop of the anti-colonial struggle in the twentieth century, performance-based feminist projects have close ties to the theoretical concerns in broader political struggles around gender inequality. As we have seen, groups such the communist aligned Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), and later artist collectives such as Sahmat have carried on this leftist legacy of civic engagement through street-based theatre and arts projects that directly challenge official state narratives. Feminist-based street theatre movements also used theatre as a tool for dissent and public engagement as evidenced by the work of activists such as Vibhuti Patel and Malini Bhattacharya, and the collaborations with women's groups such as the Bombay Feminist Workshop and

Baroda-based Sahiyar. These practices aim to utilize performance as a tool to interrogate the position and representation of women at home and in society at large. While Kant's performance art practice differs from street theatre in important ways, especially in that it arose out of the context of the visual arts academy (an entity which itself did not escape her gaze as an object of critique), the activist legacy of street theatre – and feminist theatre in particular – helped to cement Kant's use of the body as a viable locus for critiquing both civil society and the state apparatus and, more specifically, for examining the position of women in relation to these systems.¹⁴⁶

One particularly relevant example of feminist theater in this context is the 1990 play *Nari Itihas Ki Talash* (Women in Search of Their History), written by Vibtui Patel with the participation of women at the Bombay Feminist Workshop. In the 1990s *Women in Search of Their History* was widely distributed and used repeatedly by feminist groups at women's events and protest gatherings across India. In her essay, "On the Political Uses of Folklore: Performance and Grassroots Feminist Activism in India," Christine Lynn Garlough, looks at the politics of essentialism in relation to this production. Garlough examines the ways *Women in Search of Their History* incorporates both revised depictions of female folk figures and elements of the traditional women's dance form *garba* in order to address social injustices identified by the Indian women's movement in the 1970s and '80s. The play explores issues of gender inequality in relation the environment, rape, property rights and domestic violence, with reference to real life events such as the Chipko Movement, the notorious Mathura rape, Lata Mittal's

¹⁴⁶ Ratnabali Kant, interviewed by the author, New Delhi, April 11, 2012.

challenge of the Hindu Code for property rights, and Shahnaz Sheik's rally against Sharia Law.¹⁴⁷ Garlough is particularly interested in the way *Women in Search of Their History* troubles the construct of the Indian folk heroine *virangana*, or "exceptional woman." This figure serves as a model of exemplary female leadership in the political sphere, and has been used in a number of contexts by various groups, including the Indian nationalist movement and, more recently, the conservative Bharatiya Janata Party. In the 1970s various feminist groups also began to employ the figure of *virangana*, but this was critiqued by tribal communities and other marginalized groups of women, including many Dalits, across India who felt excluded by a depiction of a woman who is typically high caste and Hindu.¹⁴⁸ Within this context, as Garlough notes, *Women in Search of Their History* worked to unsettle the homogenous representation of women in mainstream discourse by examining how "the social and cultural contributions made by women consistently have been overlooked, and when they are not, women are most often portrayed in terms of the *virangana* in Indian folk tradition--a heroic and patriotic woman who is Hindu, upper caste, atypically educated, or in some other way exemplary."¹⁴⁹ In the play the image of the *viragana* is subverted through personal narratives about women

¹⁴⁷ The Mathura Rape case took place in India on 26 March 1972, where in Mathura, a young tribal girl, was raped by two policemen on the compound of Desai Ganj Police Station in Chandrapur. After the Supreme Court acquitted the accused, there were many public outcry and protests, which eventually led to amendments in India rape law through the 1983 Criminal Law Second Amendment Act. Christine Lynn Garlough, "On the Political Uses of Folklore: Performance and Grassroots Feminist Activism in India," *Journal of American Folklore* 121 (2008), 168.

¹⁴⁸ The term "dalit" refers to a social group of people traditional referred to as "untouchables" through the Indian caste system. The term "tribal communities" refers to a group also known as Adivasi, which refers to a heterogeneous population of ethnic groups thought to be the aboriginal to India. In the Constitution of India this group is Dalit group referred to as a "Scheduled Caste," and the tribal group is referred to as "Scheduled Tribe" which means that these communities are recognized as historically disenfranchised and entitled to systems of affirmative action.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

from a number of diverse backgrounds. Similar to Kant's use of Kathakali, the play is interspersed with elements of *garba*, a traditional form of women's dance.

Garlough interprets the plays as enacting a type of what Gayatri Spivak has called "strategic essentialism" that binds women together by a shared history in order to form political unity alongside the realities of difference. Spivak contends that the goal of essentialist critique is not the exposure of error, but the interrogation of the essentialist terms. The uncritical deployment of essentialism is dangerous and allows for the effacement of difference. However, essentialism can also be used strategically to dismantle unwanted structures or to alleviate suffering by identifying forms of oppression and organizing political parties around this cause. Garlough borrows from Spivak's argument in her analysis of *Women in Search of Their History* stating, "Even as individuals recognize that they are positioned and identified reductively by a term, they may also engage in 'strategic essentialism' in order to simultaneously mobilize groups and interrogate the totalization's exclusions and power dynamics."¹⁵⁰ Thus, the figure of the *virangana* is destabilized in order to make way for a new figure of a woman who constantly examines her own complex history.

While Kant's work as a single performance artist operating in the context of art galleries and museums was not grounded in the same frameworks of cultural multiplicity and inclusion as *Women in Search of Their History*, her performances share a similar effort simultaneously to make strategic use of and critique essentialist paradigms. At the very heart of her practice of "ritual installation performance" is an attempt creatively to

¹⁵⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. Ed. Sarah Harasym. (New York: Routledge, 1990) 101.

trouble gender representation as it appears in histories of visual culture and society. Moreover, drawing upon an ecofeminist inspired theoretical frame, Kant employs a strategic essentialism in her marriage of the concepts woman and nature. Not only does the link between women and nature demonstrate their shared experience of violence against the earth and its marginalized inhabitants, but it also strategically aligns bodies and environments as shared sites of resistance. This is significant for the history of performance art, of course, because it aligns with performance's inherent interest in bodies and the spaces they occupy.

Ritual Installation Performance / *Death of Desire*

The debates around essentialism, which frame both ecofeminism and feminist performance practices, highlight concerns central to Kant's work. In particular, these debates indicate the limitations of representation across the political and theoretical field of "womanhood" that is so important to her practice. While some of Kant's statements may at first appear to uphold an essentialist notion of woman (for example, as a type of spiritual warrior against broader structures of power and oppression), it is difficult to locate this essentialist female subject in her art practice. Agarwal's critique of the ways in which ecofeminism is "rooted in a system of signs and representations" seems to lie in the fact that essentialism produces a problematic erasure of material and societal difference, which produces an abstract notion of "woman" as a stable and contained subject.¹⁵¹ Kant's relationship to this essentialist construct of womanhood is ultimately

¹⁵¹ Bina Agarwal, "The Gender and Environment Debate," *Feminist Studies* 18.1 (1992), 120.

much more ambivalent. On one level, she does use natural materials and ritual practices, often based in Hindu traditions, to foreground a connection between women and the earth that draws from what may be recognized “essentialist” tropes, but on another level her performance-based practice directly examines the very limitations and failures of those representations. Often, Kant builds up a “system of signs and representations” only to take it apart and tear it down again.

When Kant returned from Greece to Delhi in 1988 she expanded her practice away from “body-art” and moved towards what she deemed “ritual installation performance.” She constructed large-scale installations in galleries, on stage, and in the street that incorporated ritual-based practices into her performance work. Frequently, the construction would halt and the artist would shift towards a process of destruction in which she would demolish what she had created. This process of construction and destruction is particularly evident in Kant’s 1996 work *Death of Desire*, which took place in the “no parking zone” in the parking lot of Kamanini Auditorium in Delhi (figs. 30-33). Alongside her then seven-year-old daughter Priyamvada, Kant tenderly placed a series of earthenware pots, *gharha*, upside-down and on top of each other to form a small tower on the parking lot floor. *Gharha* are typically used for cooking, for carrying water, and in a different iteration as a percussion instrument also known as a *ghatam*. Moreover, *gharha*, appear as part of various forms of Indian dance, such as the Rajastani folk dance of Bhavai, in which dancers balance pots on their heads while precariously standing on a sword, bed of nails, or other dangerous material. Kant was interested in the connection

gharha suggest between domestic and performative realms as well as their cultural associations with wombs and fertility.¹⁵² In particular, Kant was drawn towards the South Indian tradition of *paalikai thelikkal*, known as “seed throwing” in which earthen pots are filled with grass, bael leaves and various kinds of pre-soaked grains during a couple’s engagement. The seeds are intended to grow inside the pot and sprout on the day of the wedding. After the marriage, the sprouted seedlings are released into a river or pool to invoke blessings for health and fertility. In this tradition the *gharha* takes on the form of a womb, which grows and generates life in its basin.

After she built the pyramid of *gharha*, Kant began to prostrate herself in front of the shrine-like installation, which recalled the acts of *ashtanga dand’vat*, (also known colloquially in North India as *bhuinpari*), performed by Hindu devotees near sacred temples. *Bhuinpari*, which means, “falling to the ground,” involves the prostration of the eight members, i.e. the forehead, chest, knees, feet and hands. Kant lay prostrate, with arms fully extended, and then rose for a moment, only to drop her body again to the ground. In-between each prostration, Kant stopped for a brief moment to dump buckets of *holi*-powder dyed water on herself, so that when she fell again her body left wet imprints of color on the cement floor. *Holi*-powder is a colored powder left outside or temples or in spice markets. The powder is a central element to the spring festival, *Holi*, known as “the festival of colors” in which celebrants chase each other and throw dry powder and colored water on each other’s bodies to rejoice in the approach of the vernal equinox on the night of a full moon. Here, Kant dumps the bucket directly on herself.

¹⁵² Ratnabali Kant, interviewed by the author, New Delhi, April 11, 2012.

While she lay flat on the floor in full prostration, Kant's daughter Priyamvada, with a bucket of white paint, also outlined her mother's body on the ground with a paintbrush so that each space she physically encountered was marked with her presence. Moreover, in her standing moments Kant shouted lines of poetry, one at a time:

If you cannot shape your life the way you want, at least try as much as you can.

Good is this earth if it suits us.

But don't be too sure that in your life— restricted, regulated, prosaic, spectacular horrible things don't happen.

While the artist references the earth in her statement, through each prostration in the act of *bhuinpari*, the whole surface of her body touches “the earth” (or more literally the cement floor of the gallery parking lot). Here, the earth refers simultaneously to both the natural earth and the societies/civilizations of the earth.¹⁵³ Kant celebrates the “goodness” of the earth beneath and around her, but also cautions that even though the earth is good, it is also full of “restricted, regulated, prosaic, spectacular, horrible things.” Her statements express a type of critical ambivalence towards an earth and society that she contradictorily disdains and also venerates. Her associations with the festival of *Holi*, which honors the path the earth makes around the moon each year, suggests a celebratory relationship to the earth itself, but at the same time Ratnabali also mourns the violence and oppression that have arisen with earth's societies.

With her white *kameez* drenched in wet *holi* powder, Kant finally rose from the floor to take on the role of a “painter,” by painting the contours of a *linga* on the

¹⁵³ Ratnabali Kant, interviewed by the author, New Delhi, April 11, 2012.

terracotta tower she built, and making loose, childlike brushstrokes to mark the *linga* with two eyes and a mouth. Importantly, the *linga* is a representation of one of the manifestations of the god Shiva used for worship at Hindu temples, which devotees often bathe and cover with flowers and water as a sign of care and offering. *Lingas* are typically composed of stone that is carved, or shaped naturally by the currents of a river, and sometimes depicted in metal, precious stone, wood or earth. The *linga* has complex associations with the phallus, and is often depicted protruding out of a vulva-like *yoni* at Shaivite temples. In *Death of Desire* Kant did not depict the *yoni* but simply painted the *linga* on top of the womb-like *ghara*, which acted as an extended reference to the female sex organ.¹⁵⁴

The broader mythology surrounding the *linga* and *yoni*, and their associations with desire, are worth noting here. In the *Mahapuranas*, ancient Sanskrit texts that eulogize the lives of Hindu deities, the god Kama is said to have aroused Śiva by shooting him with the arrow of fascination. As a result Shiva falls madly in love with the goddess Parvati.¹⁵⁵ As scholar of Sanskrit texts Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty writes in *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Śiva* (1973), Shiva thus “resolves to marry Parvati in order to cure himself from the disease born of desire” which “burns all day and night.”¹⁵⁶ When sages castrate Shiva, his fiery *linga* races madly through the heavens and underworld burning everything in his path until finally Parvati agrees to receive the

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ *Brahmanda* 4.30.84.

¹⁵⁶ O’Flaherty larger argument deals with as the mutually constitutive presence of both *tapas* (asceticism) and *kama* (desire) in seemingly contradictory strains of Śiva. She reads *tapas* and *kama* not as two diametric opposites, but as two forms of heat that are “closely related in human terms, opposed in the sense that love and hate are opposed but not mutually exclusive.” Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, “Asceticism and Sexuality in the Mythology of Śiva,” *History of Religions* 8.4 (1963): 332.

linga in her *yonis* form. O’Flaherty reads this as a moment in which Shiva’s destructive desires are released only through satiety. “The solution to Shiva’s dangerous sexuality is not to impose chastity upon him--as the sages attempt to do...but to satisfy him; in certain extreme situations the only possible control of desire is release”¹⁵⁷

Similarly, Kant performed the “death of desire” through a process of destruction and release. This release happened at a moment in which the artist stopped her construction and began to smash the structure she built. After the construction and veneration of her shrine were complete, Kant proceeded to take two long, thin sticks and tap on the bottom of the empty *gharha* so that the audience could hear their hollow sound. From this moment, the destructive part of the performance began. After a few more taps, Kant took a large stick from the ground in order to smash the same structure she had so meticulously constructed and venerated. The painted *linga* with a face was obliterated as bits of terracotta flew through the air and shattered on the ground. She then looked to the audience and shouted, “From these alone I will be understood.”

The act of careful construction in the first part of the performance functions to build an attachment to the structure the artist destroyed. With each step the audience bore witness to the process of the structure’s development and adoration, and by this very act of witnessing, through their own ocular participation in its realization, they became more and more invested in watching the materials become form. This attachment is formed not only by the fact that the audience is present for the artist’s labored construction of the structure through a series of calculated steps, but also through the fact that she built-up a

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 332.

type of shrine. By creating a structure with associations to the *shiva linga*, and then prostrating herself in front of it through *ashtanga dand'vat*, she not only foregrounds associations with desire, sexuality and gender, but also performs a ritual-like love for her work. The ritual enacts a desire for representational forms created by the artist's hands as the audience bears witness to her veneration and adoration of this beloved art object she then turns to destroy.

Death of Desire raises questions about representation, and our desires for it, on multiple complex levels. On one level, the performance offers a critique of painting and sculpture by destroying the large-scale sculpture Kant previously constructed and painted in front of the audience. Moreover, moving into the gallery parking lot, outside of the reified modern gallery space, and drawing upon the knowledge of her own body as a representation tool derived from her training in Kathakali, the performance challenged the valorization of the modern arts institution as a site of venerated artistic representation. In *Death of Desire* Kant also built-up a tower of entwined representational signs associated with gender and sexuality (the fertile womb-like *ghara*, the phallic *linga*, and the face with no name).

The synthesis of these complex symbols and meanings created a structure that provoked a violent eruption in the artist's simultaneously controlled and uninhibited act of destruction. To borrow from the artist's (previously mentioned) statement to the audience during her performance, Kant stood up and smashed the "restricted, regulated, prosaic, spectacular, horrible" ways in which power depends on articulating difference and sameness through gender. The installation itself built up a tower of representational

symbols marking sexual difference, which have continuously changed through ancient, colonial and post-colonial visual culture. This veneration, and subsequent destruction, seems to celebrate the ambivalent interconnectivity between such forms as well as disdain for what these symbols represent in the history of gender inequality and violence against women.

Kant notes that during the development of the performance, which took place in 1996, she was in part inspired by the media converge around the U.S. court case and public controversy surrounding John and Lorena Bobbitt.¹⁵⁸ In 1993, Lorena Bobbitt famously severed her husband John's penis with a knife and called 911 after throwing it into a field from her car window. Lorena Bobbitt claimed that the night of the incident her husband had returned home to their house and forced her to have sexual intercourse with him. The case brought international attention to the issue of spousal rape and domestic abuse, and acts of self-defense or retribution taken by abused women.¹⁵⁹ In a sense, in *Death of Desire*, Kant smashes the phallic *linga* as if severing it from the body of the installation. This referential component of the performance not only situates *Death of Desire* in relation to international debates around gender and violence in the early 1990s, but also performs the emotional explosion of an oppressed subject who endures a long history of violence until she finally erupts in a violent attempt for release.

Moreover, Kant's presentation of the *gharha* as symbols of fertility, also invites the audience to witness the shattering of wombs that could no longer contain water or serve as sites of growth or sustenance. In doing so, Kant's critical intervention into

¹⁵⁸ Ratnabali Kant, interviewed by the author, New Delhi, April 11, 2012

¹⁵⁹ "John Bobbitt Acquitted in a Case that is a Bizarre Symbol of '90s Sexual Tension," *Chicago Tribune*, November 11, 1993.

representations of fertility also engaged debates around pregnancy and reproduction in India that were very much in the forefront during the mid-1990s when the piece was performed. As Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Nirajana discuss in their 1994 article, “Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender” the ‘80s and ‘90s in India saw a rise in national family welfare and population programs. These programs promoted the use of birth control, long acting hormonal implants, and abortion pills that frequently targeted rural communities and the urban poor, a majority of whom were Dalits or Muslim. Such initiatives were linked to state-run networks and supported by international organizations such as Planned Parenthood and the Population Council. Women’s groups in India opposed the aggressive push for contraceptives for a number of reasons, including the high number of health-related side effects, the fact that they required well-equipped health institutions and services where they could be safely administered, and also that these drugs were not designed for women in India and therefore not tested in relation to particulars such as weight, diet, lifestyle and climate.¹⁶⁰ Groups such as the U.S. Feminist Majority and multinational corporations including Norplant and Net-Oen, which stood to profit from the expansive use of their products, launched campaigns insisting that access to these drugs would give women access to their own fertility rights. Ironically these organizations often situated their arguments in relation to notions of “self-determination” and “personal freedom.”

In their article, Tharu and Nirajana provide an important critique of the ways the production and marketing of these products are premised on the “the rights of the liberal

¹⁶⁰ Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Nirajana, “Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender” *Social Scientist* 22 (1994): 101.

body.”¹⁶¹ To the extent that fertility rights were “seen as enabling or empowering women in conservative or religion-bound contexts” they construct an abstract “figure of the woman who is being liberated/endowed with rights.”¹⁶² The “liberal body” so produced connects to the authors’ broader argument, which critiques the way in which discourses around women’s rights continue to depend on essentialist secular-humanist notions of subjecthood. Such notions, they further contend, structure “the humanist premises that not only underwrite the politics of dominance, but also configure the subject of feminism.”¹⁶³

Tharu and Nirajana’s complex analysis of the family welfare debate in the 1990s, further underscores the political significance of Kant’s 1995 shattering of the womb-like *gharha*. In this historical context, the building up and breaking down of signs and symbols of fertility was loaded with complex socio-political meaning. The womb was not only a symbol associated with womanhood, but also a real and discursive repository for a national and international debate that attempted to “speak for” the women it affected the most.

Way of a Warrior / Commercial Surrogacy

The image of the womb reappeared in Kant’s installation performance piece entitled, *Way of a Warrior*, which took place at CIMA gallery in Kolkata in 1997 (figs. 34-37). Here, the artist politicized space along gendered lines by exploring the ways patriarchy produces, regulates and occupies space, as well as the ways marginalized

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 105

¹⁶² Ibid., 102-103

¹⁶³ Ibid., 95

subjects in this system manage to navigate that space, having no choice but to pull from some impenetrable inner strength and assume the “way of a warrior.” In the performance, Kant designated two spaces on the gallery floor, which she referred to as “home space” and “neutral space ” by painting circles on the ground with her own hands. These spaces were gradually added to over the course of the performance. In home space the artist placed a *sari*, a male torso made out of *papier-mâché*, and an object in the shape of a womb with a fetus painted on it.

As the performance began, the artist unwound herself from her *sari*, tied the womb and torso to her own body, and used the male torso as a warrior’s shield. During this process of shedding her layers and re-costuming herself, the artist read from a newspaper story about commercial surrogacy that discussed a woman named Nirmala who rented her womb to a wealthy infertile woman so that she could pay for her terminally ill husband’s medical treatment. Kant then asked of the crowd:

Should we fear the destruction of our culture, because a 30-year-old woman from Chandigarh plans to ‘rent’ her womb? Nirmala intends to bear a child for an infertile couple--in exchange for Rs. 50,000. Nirmala’s unconventional plans to raise money for her invalid husband’s medical bills seem to have woken everyone up to all the possible social, ethical, moral and legal implications of the new reproductive technologies in India. Artificial insemination is quite old. Surrogacy is as old as the Mahabharata and the Bible. So what’s all the fuss about Nirmala? It’s just that she’s the first to have made public her desire to rent her womb.

In this statement, Kant draws attention to the controversy around commercial surrogacy in India. Nirmala’s submission of her womb spawned a public debate about the threat to tradition, the conventional family, and the seemingly private domains of sexuality and

reproduction.¹⁶⁴ But Kant identified an irony in the situation when she asked, why is there so much anxiety when Nirmala was not the first to rent her womb, but “the first to have *made public* her desire to rent” it? Kant then made reference to culturally accepted examples of this practice from the Mahabharata and the Bible, in which the womb acts as a surrogate for the divine, a concept that is not only tolerated but also venerated. The emphasis on the fact that Nirmala’s desire was “made public” points to the presence of cultural anxieties around reproduction.

Commercial surrogacy started to surface in public debate in India in the 1990s as various clinics in large cities such as Mumbai, as well as smaller ones including Anand, began to open their doors to couples who could not conceive. These clinics employed local women to “rent” their wombs to childless foreigners (generally from North America and Europe). As of 2010 there is a bill in draft to regulate commercial surrogacy in India, titled the Assisted Reproductive Technology (Regulation) Bill and Rules Act; however, during the time of Kant’s performance there were no laws governing this practice. Clinics were overseen by private commercial agencies that managed screenings and matches, and also regulated contracts without government interference.¹⁶⁵ During this period, commercial surrogacy became a multi-billion dollar global industry and India became known as the “capital of reproductive tourism.”¹⁶⁶

In “Reorienting the Ethics of Transnational Surrogacy as a Feminist Pragmatist” philosopher Amrita Banerjee looks critically at the Western philosophical literature on

¹⁶⁴ Amrita Pande, “Commercial Surrogacy in India: Manufacturing a Perfect Mother-Worker” *The University of Chicago Press* 35.4 (2010).

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 973.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

commercial surrogacy, which she sees as limited by its insistence on examining the practice through ethical frameworks of right or wrong. One side of the debate views impoverished women as victims of exploitation and commoditization, while the other side sees surrogacy as an act of empowerment in which women actively make use of their own bodies. Both sides, however, help to construct a hegemonic notion of the “Third World Woman” as either docile or desperate. Similar to Tharu and Nirajana, Banerjee is concerned with the ways an essentializing liberal-humanist paradigm structures both sides of the debate. As she notes, “using reproductive liberalism as the framework for ethical analysis in this context has the danger of normalizing or naturalizing power imbalances and the exploitation of the less powerful by the more powerful players” in a global context.¹⁶⁷ Instead, Banerjee argues for a “feminist pragmatist logical-ontological framework” by which she means an approach that takes into account the systems of relations that form around the practice of surrogacy, including both the social and political structures that frame the daily lives of the surrogates as well as the lives of Western couples who create the demand for these clinics.¹⁶⁸

I would argue that Kant’s *Way of a Warrior* effectively avoids situating commercial surrogacy in relation to the ethical framework of right or wrong critiqued by Banerjee. In contrast to that framework, Kant challenged the audience to consider why commercial surrogacy created so much cultural anxiety in the first place. When she asked, “what is all this fuss about Nirmala” who made her demands “public,” she gestures towards the broader societal constructs that framed this debate – namely, ideals

¹⁶⁷ Amrita Banerjee “Reorienting the Ethics of Transnational Surrogacy as a Feminist Pragmatist” *The Pluralist* 5.3 (2010), 109.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 107

of virtue, nationhood, motherhood, and labor. Rather than drawing on liberal notions of choice, autonomy and agency (or conversely depicting Nirmala as a passive victim), Kant stages a performative exploration of the social, ethical, moral and legal implications of new reproductive technologies.

In the second half of *Way of a Warrior* Kant proceeded to take off the *sari* (under which she was fully dressed), the male torso, and the womb and placed them quietly on the floor inside of the “home space.” She then created another circle on the floor of the gallery referred to as “neutral space.” Here the artist painted with her fingers within the circle on the gallery floor, and made circles in red, blue and green to represent the sun, the rain and the earth in its natural state. Kant told the audience that even in this seemingly vast, open and “neutral” space of the natural earth, “woman still did not find a corner of the world where she felt safe and secure.” Kant then tenderly moved the paint on her palms and fingers in a rhythmic circular motion across the floor in a way that suggested a gentle lamentation of the sadness of this reality for both women and the earth. In this she performed a perpetual wandering as if there was no safe place for her hand ever to stop and rest. Woman similarly looks for a place to rest and feel safe, but is in constant fear of sexual assault, abuse and other forms of violence both domestically and in public space. Because there is no safe place for a woman to rest in the world, she must always navigate the terrain through “the way of the warrior.”

Destruction-Production / Birth of Civilization?

In her 1996 work, *Birth of a Civilization?* Kant reflects on the role of the artist in relation to the history and future of artistic production (figures 38-42). In this performance, Kant constructs and performs a global history of art from antiquity through the digital era. She filled Delhi's Shridharani Gallery with sculptures, newspaper clippings, postcards, photographs, and hand-painted scrolls, and drew from this archive of objects in an elaborate multi-part performance. The photographs included images of violence, famine, death, starvation and protest. The objects included hand-made replicas of canonical artifacts from global art history, which Kant used to reference various stages in an imagined history of time. This historical narrative was divided in three periods: "excavated civilization," "discarded civilization" and "digital civilization."

In the first stage, "excavated civilization," Kant made piles of sand on the floor, and retrieved sculptural artifacts from the mound of earth she built. She pulled out the head of the Buddha, the famous "dancing girl" figure from Mohenjo-daro, and a Greek caryatid (the same subject Kant analyzed in her previously mentioned dissertation in art history). The art object became more intimately tied to the artist herself in the second stage of the performance, "discarded civilization," in which the relic became a repository for the artist's own body. Here, the artist presented a life-size replica of a mummy with a face painted in her own likeness to the audience and explained that, "the mummy is an extended representation" of her own body. At first, the mummy lay in stillness on a platform, recalling an inert display one might encounter at a museum. Then, the artist

picked the mummy up in her own arms, carried it through the gallery and placed it on the ground where it was brought back to rest. Placing this proxy of her own body on the floor, Kant finally covered the mummy with soil as if burying it in the earth. She then draped the mound of soil with a white blanket similar to the way in which one enshrouds the body of the deceased with white cotton or linen in Islamic funerary practice, or the way in which a pall is placed over a casket or coffin in Christian funerary traditions.

These first two stages articulated two periods in an imagined history of representation that blurred the lines between artistic representation and the human body in its corporeal form. The first period exhibited replicas of artifacts from the past, made by the artist, in which materials extracted from the earth, such as stone or bronze, were manipulated to represent the bodies of humans and gods. In the second stage, however, a representation of the artist's own body (in the form of the mummy) became the artifact when carried in the living artist's own hands. Moreover, the mummy, a vessel, which is part artifact and part remains of a once living being, underscores this slippage between artistic representation and the live body as a representation.

This tension between live bodies and aesthetic representations of bodies, linked to an additional conceptual foil in *Birth of a Civilization?*, which addressed the influence of digital culture and media on art and society. In 1996, Kant's performance reflected on how interactions between distant bodies would move through space and time differently with the expansion of the World Wide Web, and how art would also play a new role in this era. She suggested that in this changing world of art, the artist of the future civilization will no longer make forms from tangible malleable materials from the earth,

but rather, from more elusive digital forms. In this sense, the artist of 1996 will become like a mummy buried in the ground and excavated by future generations.¹⁶⁹

By burying the mummy in earth, Kant began the final stage of her performance, “digital civilization,” in which the body exists within an entirely new representational realm.¹⁷⁰ In this final stage, the artist reached into a structure depicting Pandora’s box and pulled out a large white ceramic egg, which evoked notions of fertility and reproduction as in her earlier performances. The shell of the white egg was covered with a plaster mold of a computer keyboard, suggesting that the egg would give birth to a digital era. Kant then carried the egg through the gallery and placed it in a shrine-like mound of red *holi* powder in the center of the room. She offered the egg up to the audience and to a Mother Goddess referenced in a trailing scroll leading up towards the egg-shrine. The careful eye of the Mother Goddess seemed to bear witness to the unfolding of time and civilization, which produced this latent egg that was finally brought to the surface of it all.

When *Birth of a Civilization?* was performed in 1996, the World Wide Web was in its nascent stages. The reality of the digital era was just beginning to alter the shape of global capital, representation, and power. It was a shift that would forever change India’s labor economy, popular media, and visual culture. In *Birth of a Civilization?* Kant posed the question of what role the artist will play in this moment of profound structural, cultural, and aesthetic change. For example, on one of the scrolls hanging from the

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ratnabali Kant, interviewed by the author, New Delhi, April 11, 2012

gallery wall, Kant wrote in large visible numbers the paradoxical formula: $1 + 1 = 0$. This formula evokes the binary code used for the computer systems that form the very basis of the digital era. One could argue that computer networks at their lowest level are simply reduced to a series of 1s and 0s. This suggests a certain emptiness that accompanies the buzzing accumulation of visual media and text that would increasingly characterize the World Wide Web. This formula also suggests that addition and accretion have the potential to produce excessive nothingness. It is as if the build-up, proliferation and excess of all of the culture of civilization, now evident only in artifacts like those in Kant's installation, produced a visual and representational field so ubiquitous that it consumed itself and was swallowed into a sum of zero.

The coexistence of prolific production and obliteration also recalls the continuous creation and destruction of the earth described in the ancient Sanskrit texts the *Puranas*, which depict the Hindu god Mahavishnu as taking the universe inwards and outwards through the power of his own breath.¹⁷¹ In a sense, the first stages of Kant's *Birth of a Civilization?* were devoted to a type of "inhalation" or "taking-in" of representation. The artist brought in an excess of objects and imagery that she appropriated from a vast history of global civilization for visual consumption within the gallery. Then she began to bring objects forth and spread the materials around the room. In this continuous construction, installation, and building up, she also made for a type of clearing out, or "exhalation" through destruction. This is evident in the way she exhibited the mummy, bringing it forth into open space, only to bury it again under the earth. Even the egg

¹⁷¹ Ratnabali Kant, interviewed by the author, New Delhi, April 5, 2012.

representing the birth of the digital era would theoretically crack and destroy the keyboard on its shell if it hatched to make way for new life.

On the gallery floor Kant placed painted boxes covered with words referencing various dimensions of human suffering and societal self-destruction: plague, famine, old age, insanity, spite and anger. Thus, the performance traced not only the visual histories of the three imagined civilizations but also the concomitant histories of destruction and violence through which culture has been formed. Similarly, the performance artist is always, in some way, engaged in the processes of production and destruction. The performance takes movement, shape and form in the visceral and bodily experience of the present, which is later stilled by the photographic or video archive that enables exposure through systems of circulation and exchange (so that images documenting the performance event might eventually appear in a catalogue, book, or now in the digital sphere of the Internet).¹⁷²

Because of this resonance between the destructive and ephemeral nature of performance, and the accumulation and emptiness central to the a digital era, Kant's

¹⁷² Debates in field of performance studies speak to the complexities of this claim that performance is an act of "destruction," in the sense that thinkers in this area have wrestled with how to understand performances as fleeting ephemeral moments in which live bodies are active in the present. Performance theorist Peggy Phelan writes of this in her book, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* where she thinks through the political possibilities offered by performance, which she reads as that which "becomes itself through disappearance" and cannot be contained by the archive (p. 98). While a performance may be recorded by video footage, or photography, or written transcription, it ultimately slips through the fingertips of documentation and reproduction, since at the end of the day, "performance's only life is in the present.". For Phelan this "representation without reproduction" holds significant potential for theorizing subjectivity, power and representation, as it speaks to limitations of the image in the political field of the sexual and racial other. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 11. Rebecca Schneider later disputed this argument in her essay entitled "Performance Remains." Schneider notes that the danger in this understanding of performance is that it reinforces our own "cultural habituation" to archival logic. She suggests that the archive itself is a performative site. She asks, "does an equation of performance with impermanence and loss follow rather than disrupt a cultural habituation to the imperialism inherent in archival logic?" Rebecca Schneider, "Performance Remains." *Performance Research* (Routledge) 6, no. 2 (2001), 100.

performance asked whether in 1996 there could be radical potential for the performance artist on the brink of this new “birth of a civilization.” Kant suggested that perhaps artistic production in digital civilization could resonate with the paradoxical material and immaterial form that she was foregrounding in her practice of “installation performance.”¹⁷³ We might even think of installation + performance as the aesthetic equivalent to $1 + 1 = 0$. The artist adds objects and images together in order to break them down.

This method of construction and destruction also reinforces Kant’s ambivalent depiction of nature, spirituality and “womanhood” as subjects that are simultaneously concrete and intangible. On the scroll, which unfolded in the center of the performance, Kant wrote a desperate prayer to the Mother Goddess that began: “Oh great Mother forgive us.” This Mother Goddess, who presides over *Birth of a Civilization?* is a complicated and irresolute figure. Kant does not call the Mother Goddess by any recognizable name such as Durga, who is often depicted as a protective figure of motherhood, or Adi Parashakti, a creative force that becomes Mula Prakriti (Mother Nature), or even Bharat Mata, the nationalist depiction of Mother India. Rather, the Mother Goddess is as complex and indeterminate as the absurd global civilization that begs for her forgiveness. Just as the egg in the final part of the performance gives birth to an era of technology that is vast and uncertain, the Mother Goddess is omnipresent and unrealized. This figure of the goddess, like Kant’s broader representation of “womanhood” in her nature-centered and ritual-based performance practices, is

¹⁷³ Ratnabali Kant, interviewed by the author, New Delhi, April 5, 2012.

structured through a framework of critical ambivalence. On one level the goddess suggests a primordial interconnectivity between women and the earth, and at the same time she places the goddess in relation to a process of destruction, change, and uncertainty.

Kant's practice of "installation performance" underscored the ways in which the very act of realizing aesthetic representation within the gallery was always contingent upon the very physical and performative nature of the body. Thus, the very processes of constructing, producing and exhibiting artistic representations are formed not only through the tactile efforts of the artist's own hand, but also by a body which is itself read as a social text and formed through a representational economy. Kant offered up her own body and became part of the realm of artistic production through such performances, underlying the complicity between the body as both a site representation and producer of cultural representation.

While the height of Kant's career was during the 1980s and 90s, prior to the commercial viability of "performance art" on the contemporary Indian art scene, her creative politics and aesthetic methodology mark an undeniable turning point in the history of Indian performance art. Not only was Kant among the first artists (in addition to the previously mentioned Sahmat Collective) to enact body-based performative art practices within the context of established modern art galleries in Delhi and Kolkata, she is also among the common names mentioned by young contemporary artists in oral histories on the development of performance art in India.¹⁷⁴ Kant's prophetic hope for the

¹⁷⁴ Oral histories of performance art in India were documented by the author during my research through as a Fulbright-Nehru scholar in India from November 2011-May 2012, through informal interviews that

future, expressed in her performance of *Birth of a Civilization?*, in which she prays that artists of the next generation might turn more towards destructive, immaterial, and experiential processes with the arrival of the digital era, was in a sense realized within the Indian context. As we have seen in the work of a later generation of artists active since the early '00s, such as Saikia, Shah, Salim, Gupta and Kumar, the body has become a viable tool for the production of experiences and encounters that elicit social and political critique. This continues to be evident in the work of the artist I will address in my final chapter, Nikhil Chopra. As we will see, Chopra is an artist who, like Kant, troubles the veracity of artistic representation through body-based performative practices by moving creatively, and strategically, through space and time.

were conducted with twenty-seven young working artists in India who describe themselves as working with performance art practices.

Chapter 4-Surrogate Bodies: Nikhil Chopra’s Post-colonial Substitutions

In the previous three chapters, I have shown how performance artists in India have utilized their bodies in various ways as tools of dissent against systems of authority and the cultural narratives those systems produce. Tracing the activist-based roots of modern theatre in India, formed through colonial struggle and the subsequent national independence movement, as well as the complex history of “performance art,” I have sought to foreground the creative strategies and efficacy of the performative body within the context of contemporary social and political critique.

As we have seen in the work of Sumudra Kajal Saikia and Ratnabali Kant, performance artists in India have frequently drawn inspiration from ideas based in grassroots activist movements (such as anti-communalism, environmentalism, and feminism). At the same time, however, this study has emphasized the ways “performance art” in India in recent decades has been greatly dependent on institutions driven by the economic and commercial demands of a global art market (specifically, artist residencies, contemporary galleries, established university art programs, grant funding bodies, and international biennales and art fairs). To the extent that the realms of activism and the commercially driven arts institution are not mutually exclusive, but rather interconnected through the realities of labor and economy that fuel the nation-state and the globalized contemporary art world, I have sought to examine the ways the artists have intervened

where these two realms encounter one another, and the ways the designation “performance art” has marked Indian contemporary art practices as relevant and “cutting edge” within the global art market.¹⁷⁵ As I have argued throughout, the turn towards body-based practices among these artists can be understood as an effective and viable means for critiquing the dominant frameworks within the arts institution itself, as well as the wider social context through which they have been formed.

This chapter turns to the work of Nikhil Chopra, a performance artist whose practices exemplify the mutual influence of the activist-based roots of Indian modern theater and in relation to a complex and ever-changing contemporary global art world. Chopra is of Kashmiri decent, but his parents left Kashmir before his birth, and the artist grew up in Goa and Mumbai. Like both Kant and Saikia, Chopra began his arts education at the distinguished Maharaja Sayaji Rao University in Baroda. From there, Chopra completed his degree and finished a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Baltimore at the Maryland Institute College of Art (2001) and went on to receive a Masters of Fine Arts from Ohio State University in Columbus (2003). He now works primarily out of his studio based in Bandra, a stylish urban suburb on the outskirts of Mumbai.

Of all of the artists included in this study, Chopra has been the most successful internationally. Often, when I told people in both New Delhi and New York that I was working on a project about contemporary performance art in India, their first response was, “Oh, you must be working with Nikhil Chopra.” In 2007, Chopra became an artist in residence at the influential Khoj International Artist Association’s “International

¹⁷⁵ In chapter one I discuss the rise and fall of investment in contemporary Indian art from 2000-2008, which struggled after the international economic crisis in 2008. *Time Out India* used the term “cutting edge” in a special issue of performance art that coincided with the 2011 India Art Fair in Delhi.

Performance Art Residency” in Delhi. As I discussed in my first chapter, Khoj has played a major role in the promotion of performance art as a practice in India, and also in harnessing international support for their artists. Shortly after his residency, Chopra performed at the well-regarded Serpentine Gallery in London (2008) and at Chatterjee and Lal Galleries in Mumbai and New York (2007 and 2010). He also secured various residencies across Europe, most notably, the Centre Intermondes, La Rochelle, Kustenfestivaldesarts, Brussels and Freie Universitat, Berlin. In 2009 Chopra gained major international recognition through his participation in the 53rd Venice Biennale as part of the “Making Worlds” exhibition, and the same year, was granted a solo exhibition, entitled “Yog Raj Chitrakar: Memory Drawing IX,” at the New Museum in New York.

In addition to his exhibition in New York, Chopra has performed the “Yog Raj Chitrakar Memory Drawing” series in cities all over the globe, including Chicago, Tokyo, Yokohama, London, Brussels, Oslo, Venice, Mumbai and Srinager. In this series Chopra takes on the identity of a self-constructed character he refers to as Yog Raj Chitrakar. Yog Raj Chitrakar, (*Chitrakar* translates as picture-maker in Hindi), is an elite Victorian era/turn of the century Indian draughtsman and landscape painter, trained by the Western academy, who goes on expeditions as an explorer making chronicles of the landscape and the culture of its inhabitants. Chopra’s performances in this series depend largely on a creative engagement with the people, urban geography, and architecture in the particular city in which he is performing. In each setting, the character of Yog Raj Chitrakar goes on a type of “expedition” through the area to find a specific architectural

structure and then proceeds to draw a picture of, and this act of drawing becomes a key part of his live performances in public space. Chopra uses elaborate Victorian-era theatrical costumes, props and staging to make Yog Raj Chitrakar clearly stand “out of place” in the present, so that when he walks through the streets, or settles down in one spot to begin drawing his picture, he is an uncanny figure who attracts unsuspecting observers.

This chapter focuses on a specific performance from “Memory Drawing” series, which took place in Sringager, Kashmir in 2007 entitled *Yog Raj Chitrakar Visits Lal Chowk* (Figs. 43-46). In my examination of this performance I will discuss how the artist fashions himself as Yog Raj Chitrakar in order to examine the performative function of cultural memory in Kashmir’s postcolonial urban landscape. In doing so he draws upon the creative methods of resistance and critique formulated through histories of political theater and activism, movements that I outlined in detail in my first two chapters. While Chopra’s activist interventions are less overt than those of Kant and Saikia, he utilizes the aesthetics of protest in *Yog Raj Chitrakar Visits Lal Chowk* to examine the nation’s ambivalent relationship to its colonial history.

Chopra’s obvious troubling of his own subject position, as he plays the role of a fictional artist in a living costume drama set in the colonial era, sets him apart from the previous work this dissertation examines. Like Kajal and Saikia, Chopra makes use of the body as a tool for creative institutional critique. However, Chopra’s “Memory Drawing” series focuses more specifically, and self-reflexively, on a critique of the legacy of colonialism and elitism in the history of art in India and the ways in which social and

political memory works strategically to both maintain and conceal these histories.

Chopra's embodiment of Yog Raj Chitrakar , as a turn of the century artist who finds himself reappearing in the 21st century, underscores the significance of a past for both the maintenance and critique of ideology in the present. To that end, Chopra's performance as Yog Raj Chitrakar troubles the very subject position he himself inhabits: a western educated Indian artist who must performatively navigate multiple complex roles and identities in relation to the global circulation of art and culture.

In examining the function of Chopra's practice in relation to postcolonial cultural memory, history and performance, I draw from the work of Joseph Roach, a scholar of theater who has examined cross-cultural performance practices across Europe, Africa, and the Americas, and the intersection of social memory and performance in relation to global systems of cultural circulation and exchange. In his book, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (1996), Roach addresses the three-fold relationship between memory, performance, and what he calls "substitution" in order to understand how culture reproduces and re-creates itself through a process he defines as "surrogation." For Roach, culture has no fixed origin, but constantly reproduces and re-creates itself through surrogation, with repeated substitutions that make up the social processes of memory and forgetting.

Roach starts his book in an unlikely place with a discussion of the cultural phenomenon of attrition, or the gradual reduction of the size of a workforce in which personnel lost through retirement or resignation are not replaced. As Roach emphasizes, while these shifts often appear as if no replacement is actually taking place, in fact, others

are forced to take on the responsibilities of those who have left, and to *play the roles* of those who are no longer present. Even when an official replacement is brought in, these “substitutes” inevitably fail to fill the emotional/social void left behind. Thus, as Roach notes, while the previous worker is now “gone” those who remain are forced to experience “the doomed search for the original by continuously auditioning stand-ins.”¹⁷⁶

I take Roach’s reading of attrition as a conceptual platform through which to explore broader cultural processes of casting and miscasting, script and improvisation, memory and imagination, as these play out in Chopra’s work. Attrition produces “surrogates,” or substitutes that stand in for something that is apparently absent but actually continues to exert influence and pressure on the present as part of a new iteration. While the function of the surrogate is to act as a substitute for a lost origin, this substitution does not act as a complete or wholly successful replacement; instead it functions as a continual *restaging*. As Roach contends, “In the life of a community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the networks of relations that constitute the social fabric.”¹⁷⁷ As I will discuss, Chopra’s character of Yog Raj Chitrakar intervenes in the “life of the community” and its “social fabric,” but enters into public space as an odd figment of the past in order to emphasize the continuous presence of social and political memories from the past that are still visible in the present, but are less obvious because they appear in complex and ever-changing visual or structural forms.

¹⁷⁶ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 3.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

Roach examines “networks of relation” as they specifically operate in a wide range of theatrical, musical and ritual performance practices along the Atlantic rim (from British funerals in early eighteenth-century London to Haitian voodoo in New Orleans). While Roach’s study focuses on the transatlantic world, my own has examined the performance histories of India. Nevertheless we share an interest in the impact of the British colonial project on governance as well as culture that is central to Chopra’s work. The character of Yog Raj Chitrakar harkens back to a pivotal moment in Indian art history and visual culture during the late nineteenth-century, a moment in which aesthetics were shifting towards styles valorized by the European art academy due to the establishment of the colonial art school. Moreover, this period marks the rise of mechanical reproduction (photography and popular prints) and the ways these new technologies began to change India’s visual culture as well as representations of Indians abroad.¹⁷⁸ This links to Chopra’s Yog Raj Chitrakar, because this character reappears in the present as a colonial era “picture maker” who emerged during a moment in the late nineteenth century in which pictures (drawings, painting and photographs) of both places

¹⁷⁸ Partha Mitter writes in his book *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India: 1855-1922* that the introduction of mass-produced images came to the area in the second half of the nineteenth-century, as the market flooded with cheap prints from Europe depicting Christian subjects. During this time the British began to use prints to advertise products sold in Indian urban areas. Shortly thereafter local Indian companies established their own lithographic presses, many of which were based in the state of Maharashtra in Western India.¹⁷⁸ On the other side of the sub-continent, the Calcutta Art School, as a commercial venture for its graduates, opened a popular printing press in 1878. These presses reproduced images of deities, mythological and secular subjects that catered initially to urban middle class Indians. However, in time chromolithographs equally served the non-literate lower class with lower cost popular art posters of religious images that were inexpensive or freely distributed by marketers. Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India Occidental Orientations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 120.

and their inhabitants constructed a notion of Indianess both nationally and abroad that continue to shape India's present.¹⁷⁹

To that end, the concept of surrogation is not only a lens through which to understand the broader dynamics of British colonialism, which took shape through cross-cultural exchange and cultural memory, but also a way to read acts of creative expression that challenge these legacies in the present. The notion of a process of surrogation, which continuously restages and recasts the past, brings up the question of who or what determines this staging, and how artistic restagings, like Chopra's "Memory Drawing" series might disrupt official or dominant stagings of history. I read Yog Raj Chitrakar as a surrogate who hybridizes multiple figures from India's past: colonial anthropologists, explorers or artists who aided in the colonial enterprise through "picture-making" and Indian elites who trained in the colonial art academy or abroad. Not only does Yog Rak Chitrakar act as an unusual "stand-in" for these former subjects, his parodic performance also makes visible the very processes of surrogation in the city and nation. His reappearance in the present speaks to the ways in which cultural memory continuously restages the past, or strategically forgets the past to politically manage the present.

In addition to drawing from these historical archetypes, the character of Yog Raj Chitrakar is also loosely based on the artist's grandfather, who spent his early college years in England attending Goldsmiths College and lived in Germany in the 1930s.¹⁸⁰ He returned to India and in "his later life was a passionate, yet inconsequential, landscape

¹⁷⁹ Christopher Pinney in "The Nation (Un) Pictured? Chromolithography and Popular Politics in India 1878-1995." *Critical Inquiry* 23 no. 4 (1997), 866.

¹⁸⁰ "About," Nikhil Chopra, last accessed April 26, 2014. http://www.nikhilchopra.net/home/?page_id=1615.

painter” who spent his 50s and 60s in Kashmir recording in paint “the grandeur of the valley.”¹⁸¹ When discussing the influence of his grandfather on the development of Yog Raj Chitrakar, the artist notes how he grew up gazing for hours at his paintings, which adorned the walls of his family home in Mumbai. He recalls, “They evoked a deep nostalgia for a place that became inaccessible to us after 1989, when the Kashmiri Separatist movement gained momentum. His paintings were like windows to a time when I spent the summers with my grandparents in their cottage by a stream flanked on all sides by the pristine Himalayan Mountains.”¹⁸² The sense of nostalgia evoked by this statement about his grandfather’s paintings links the character of Yog Raj Chitrakar to discourses of memory and history in Kashmir.

The region of Kashmir, which borders Pakistan on the northeastern border of India in the Himalayan mountain region, has had a long and complicated history and it remains the site of tenuous geo-political conflict. After the Indian Rebellion of 1857, Kashmir became a princely state under the governance of Britain. In 1947, during India’s independence from the British, the region of Kashmir became a disputed territory between the two newly independent nations of Pakistan and India, resulting in the Indo-Pakistan war. While violence died down after a cease-fire in 1949, a disputed state election in 1987 brought enduring tensions to the surface resulting in some of the state’s legislative assembly members forming armed insurgent groups.¹⁸³ While some of these insurgents favored Kashmiri accession to Pakistan, others sought the state’s complete

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Sumit Ganguly, *Conflict Unending: India-Pakistan Tensions Since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 2-3.

¹⁸³ Ibid.,40.

independence. In July 1988 a series of demonstrations, strikes and attacks on the Indian Government began the armed insurgency, which further escalated in the 1990s and became one of the most concerning internal security crises in India, which continues on through this day. Not unlike the Assam conflict in the northeast (discussed in relation to the work of Samudra Kajal Saikia), the tensions in Kashmir are part of the geo-political legacy of colonialism.¹⁸⁴

In 2007, Chopra intervened directly into Kashmir's social and political memory by bringing the character of Yog Raj Chitrakar to life on the streets of the Kashmiri city of Srinagar. The Khoj International Art Association funded the performance, which was entitled *Yog Raj Chitrakar Visits Lal Chowk*. Chopra began the performance in front of a video camera by putting on the costume of his character in a room in his family's home on the outskirts of Srinagar. He dressed himself in a white-collar shirt, tied with a red tie, and cropped khakis that showed off his knee high argyle socks. The artist then put on a tweed jacket, with a matching tweed English driver's hat, and stepped into shiny patent leather shoes. He groomed his thick beard, and lined his eyes with black eyeliner in order to underscore the theatrical quality of the costume. Having finished these preparations, Chopra appeared as an English upper class gentleman, or Anglicized upper class Indian, from the early twentieth century.¹⁸⁵

Yog Raj Chitrakar then walked thirty miles from Chopra's family home towards Srinagar's Lal Chowk, the central city square, which has been politically fraught and heavily policed since the insurgency in the late 1980s. The Russian Revolution inspired

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 42-3.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.,3.

the name Lal Chowk, or The Red Square, which was adopted in the 1940s during the fight for Indian independence. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, hoisted the national flag there in 1948 and promised Kashmir a voting referendum that would enable citizens to decide their political future. Five years later, however, Nehru did not hold the referendum. Since that time, the market square became the site of numerous political conflicts, including militant separatist struggles, as well as a central gathering place for protests, rallies and public events.

When the artist arrived at the square during the 2007 performance, followed by a number of local art students with video cameras who posed as members of media outlets, he began to make a charcoal drawing of the Lal Chowk clock tower directly above the square. Looking up repeatedly at the clock tower for reference, the artists sketched his faithful representation of the monument directly on the tarred surface of the square. As the artist worked, a crowd of pedestrians began to gather around to see what this man dressed in colonial era clothes was doing in the square.

The history of the Lal Chowk clock tower, and its loaded political significance, is crucial to understanding the significance of this performance and its engagement with state and corporate power. Bajaj Electricals, a now multi-billion dollar Indian electrical equipments corporation, built the clock tower in the square in 1980 as a strategy to foster public support and awareness of their brand. In 1992, the clock tower became a site of political strife during a moment when Srinagar's streets were run by armed opposition militants fighting for secede. As an act of authority, the Border Security Forces (BSF) and Indian Army personnel fortified the city center and Lal Chowk turned into a war

zone.¹⁸⁶ As a show of state power against the insurgency, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) President Murli Manohar Joshi announced that he would raise the tricolor Indian national flag on the Lal Chowk clock tower. On January 26, 1992, Joshi raised the flag on the tower amidst firing rockets. The president was injured when the flag pole broke and fell on his head, and a number of civilians protesting the act were also hurt or killed by gunfire or flying debris.¹⁸⁷

With this violent history of the square and clock tower in mind, it is not surprising that within minutes, the performance of *Yog Raj Chitrakar Visits Lal Chowk* provoked a police crackdown. Traffic was blocked from either end of the square and the people gathered around the performance were lined up and frisked by state police. Remarkably, despite the police intervention, the performance lasted an hour through the crackdown. After being frisked, members of the audience returned to watch more of the performance, and increasing numbers of people gathered around to see what Yog Raj Chitrakar was drawing as police closely monitored the event, so that they themselves also became part of the audience.

Chopra has described the sustained interest of the audience under such conditions as a significant moment in the development of his practice, which often combines performance and drawing to provoke a sense of attention and urgency from the crowd. He recalls:

¹⁸⁶Ravina Aggarwal. *Beyond Lines of Control: Performance and Politics on the Disputed Borders of Ladakh, India* (Durham: Duke University Press).

¹⁸⁷ Sumit Ganguly, *Conflict Unending: India-Pakistan Tensions Since 1945*, 43-45.

This instance made me conscious of the unwritten agreement that is made by the audience to bear witness to the performance. The desire in an audience to see the performance through, being careful to keep the illusion alive, propelled the performance. The inconvenience did not deter passers-by from stopping and watching, in-fact, it loaned a sense of urgency to the performance....This performance became especially significant to my practice as it reaffirmed to me that the act of drawing and performing could be used as a tool of powerful critical intervention.¹⁸⁸

Here, Chopra describes how police intervention did not stop the performance, but instead highlighted its “sense of urgency” for the crowd. He suggests that the attention held by the audience was sustained, in part, by the desire to see the artist complete his drawing of the tower. This notion that a picture must be “completed” helped to prolong the focus of the audience, so that intervention by the police actually enhanced the

This statement also reflects the way in which drawing is a significant attribute in the construction of Yog Raj Chitrakar ’s identity as a character (as previously noted, “*Chitrakar*” translates as “picture maker” in Hindi). In addition to referencing Chopra’s grandfather’s drawings and paintings of a lush, beautiful and peaceful Kashmiri landscape prior to 1989, the character also calls to mind the art historical significance of the practice of drawing, and most specifically the practice of realist drawing/painting that was dominant during India’s colonial period. In the second half of the nineteenth-century, four fine-art schools, modeled along European lines were established in Calcutta, Madras, Bombay and Lahore. These schools serviced the larger colonial enterprise, which sought not only to acquire Indian natural resources (like silk or tea) for profit, but also to enforce a Euro-centric ideology upon the Indian population. The mission of colonial art schools,

¹⁸⁸ “Live Performance,” Nikhil Chopra, last accessed July 21, 2014.
<http://www.nikhilchopra.net/home/?cat=10>.

in the words of Lord Napier governor of Madras, was to “Romanize the Indian pencil” and thereby the Indian mind.¹⁸⁹ These schools, in an attempt to promote a neo-classical aesthetic drawn from Roman classicism, promoted a move towards the illusion of realism by depicting figures and landscapes with veracity, and as Lord Napier’s statement suggests, this pedagogy was tied to the broader pursuits of the colonial enterprise which sought to Westernize the Indian population.¹⁹⁰

Chopra is vague about the specific nineteenth and twentieth century sources he drew upon when constructing Yog Raj Chitrakar as a colonial era landscape artist, but he notes that he was largely influenced by the history of colonial travelers “who made drawings, serigraphs and etchings of far flung exoticized landscapes.”¹⁹¹ Moreover, he is interested in the way in which the act of drawing the landscape became an act of exercising geo-political power for the colonial project. He notes, “The act of capturing or

¹⁸⁹ Lord Napier quoted by Christopher Pinney in “The Nation (Un) Pictured? Chromolithography and Popular Politics in India 1878-1995.” *Critical Inquiry* 23 no. 4 (1997), 866.

¹⁹⁰ The most well known images from this period, which exemplify the influence of the colonial art academy’s neo-classical aesthetic on Indian art, are the paintings and drawings of the nineteenth century artist Raja Ravi Varma. Varma’s images, like that of the Hindu goddess *Saraswati* painted in 1881, exemplify the representation of an Indian subject that adheres to the Western art academy’s valorization of illusionistic realism. Here *Saraswati*, considered the Hindu goddess of knowledge, sits in a lush landscape wearing a sari and playing a *vina*. Although the musical instrument and dress is native to India, the goddess and her surroundings are rendered in the style of European oil painting. This is particularly visible through Varma’s use of “naturalism” where the illusionistic rendering of three-dimensional space creates a sense of depth, with the scenery in the distant background and the figure in foreground. The facial features are rendered in chiaroscuro, which highlights her fair complexion. The stylistic qualities of the image are in stark contrast to the thick contour lines, sweeping brushstrokes and bold colors of the Kalighat watercolors sold by artists in the Calcutta marketplace to Indian pilgrims visiting the Kalighat temple.¹⁹⁰ Kalighat images depict subjects and landscapes with a greater sense of flat, layered space and abstracted figural and structural forms.

¹⁹¹ “Live Performance,” Nikhil Chopra, last accessed July 1, 2014. <http://www.nikhilchopra.net/home/?cat=10>.

representing these scenes became a means to exercise control and claim ownership over these places.”¹⁹²

This link between realist landscape imagery and the pursuits of control exercised by the colonial enterprise in India is evident in works such as the engravings done by the renowned sketch artists known as “the Daniells.” “The Daniells” refers to the English landscape artist Thomas Daniell and his nephew William Daniell who worked in the service of the East India Company by traveling to India and documenting the local architecture and landscape.¹⁹³ In 1784, the pair traveled across major cities and documented the region’s natural scenery and architecture in drawings that were reproduced as engravings and became widely reproduced images of “the Orient” in Europe. One of the most famous of these images is *The Taje Mahel, Agra* (1800). In this engraving, the tomb, famously built by the Mughul Emperor Shah Jahan in the 17th century, is rendered through three-point atmospheric perspective, framed against a picturesque sky of white clouds, and mirrored in a reflection in the water in the foreground. Boats appear to be floating quietly on the river as travelers on the banks travel by with elephants and camels carrying their goods. The Daniells traveled across India to document a wide range of terrain, architecture and scenery through similar images, including a visit to Srinagar in 1788.¹⁹⁴ Such images served both as romanticized

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Thomas Daniell attended the Royal Academy School in England and exhibited his work at the Academy Gallery in 1772 to 1784. Despite this initial success, Daniell found it hard to establish his career as a painter in London, and then sought respite as an artist for East India Company. See: William Daniel, *A Voyage Round Great Britain* Longman: London, 1818.

¹⁹⁴ Richard Ayton. *A Voyage around Great Britain*, (London: Tate Gallery, 1978).

pictures of a “foreign” land and people for western eyes as well as documentation of the empire for British authorities.

The dominance of a realist aesthetic during the colonial period was largely dependent on the concept of veracity, a trope which Chopra mimics through the repeated gesture of looking up to verify the relation of the subject (the clock tower) to his drawing of it on the ground. In his drawing, Chopra adhered to the principles of realism in an illusionistic rendering of three-dimensional, perspectival space, reminiscent of both the Daniells’ engravings, or Chopra’s grandfather’s landscape paintings. Through the drawing Chopra creates the illusion of space and depth conveyed by the tower in front of him, with the two-dimensional surface of Lal Chowk’s cement floor. As Chopra notes in his discussion of the audience’s sustained interest in watching the performance amidst police intervention, the crowd wanted to “keep the illusion alive.” This illusion was produced both through the theatrical nature of the performance, the artist’s costume along with his obsessive verification (looking up, looking down) and the illusionistic nature of the drawing itself. Chopra parodies the desire for realist “representation” whether in art or, potentially, in the politics of the real. As Roach argues, the “real” is in fact shot through with conflict and contradiction, seeing as there is no simple “original” to represent, but rather a continuous process of restaging.

Returning to Joseph Roach’s concept of surrogation, one might envision both the drawing of the clock tower and the character of Yog Raj Chitrakar as complex surrogates of their “original” subjects. Both reproduce the *illusion* of “real” or “original” objects by acting as aesthetic stand-ins. It is important to reiterate here, that for Roach, while the

surrogate continues to enact the “doomed search for the original” the “original” does not actually exist. In this sense, while the clock tower is not actually absent, Chopra’s illusionistic mimicry of this subject through his drawing calls the very function of the Lal Chowk clock tower – as both a general type of socially accepted timekeeper as well as a particular monument within a conflicted political history – into question. While the clock tower manages the passing of time, it also stands as a reminder of Srinagar’s political histories. The structure is brimming with conflicting histories and memories (Joshi’s attempt to raise the national flag, the violence and injury that followed, and the failed promises of Nehru). Moreover, while the clock tower itself was built in the 1980s, Chopra aims to emphasize the structure’s symbolic link to longer histories of colonialism, independence and subnationalist uprising. In this sense, the clock tower becomes an overdetermined symbol, at once a “rational,” instrument to mark the passage of time in linear progression, and also a site in which time and history collapse into many interconnected moments and enduring social memories.

Harkening back to Roach’s contention that the process of surrogation involves a continuous recasting of roles which construct the social and political fabric of the city, the presence of these odd surrogates in the city square (Yog Raj Chitrakar and the depicted clock tower drawn on the square) performs the broader cultural function of memory in Srinagar’s present, calling into question *who* stages history and memory, and what agencies are at work in this restaging. The clock tower not only makes reference to Joshi’s performance of nationalism through the raising of the national flag, but Chopra’s

act of drawing of the clock tower also links in complex ways to histories of colonialism and artistic representations in India.

By emphasizing the link between art and the colonial enterprise, through assuming the role of a colonial character who sets out to explore and visually document the landscape, Chopra also provides a conceptual link between representations of Kashmir and the romanticization of Kashmir's picturesque past. Because Kashmir is home to beautiful lakes and waterfalls, set against the lush backdrop of the Himalaya mountain range, the region is a breathtaking site of natural beauty where British and upper-class Indian travelers would come for leisurely vacations and to take in the splendor of the picturesque scenery and the cool mountain breezes.¹⁹⁵ As previously mentioned, Chopra himself would get "lost for hours" in his grandfather's paintings, seduced by the serene and beautiful landscape. This nostalgic yearning for a beauty functions alongside the nation-state's strategic forgetting of the histories of violence from colonialism to present.¹⁹⁶ When Chopra, as the character Yog Raj Chitrakar, walked thirty miles across this landscape towards the central square of Srinagar, he took a type of pilgrimage towards a site loaded with political memory. As a hybrid surrogate of his grandfather, and British colonial artists before him, Chitrakar's anachronistic presence made him an uncanny outsider/insider treading across the Kashmiri landscape. This untimely reappearance of a living, colonial-era ghost, marching through space and time, rendered the imperial lineages of Kashmiri landscape eerily visible.

¹⁹⁵ Ananya Jahanara Kabir, *Territory of Desire: Representing the Valley of Kashmir*. (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2009), 8.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

While partially inspired by the artist's grandfather, and partially an indistinct figment of a colonial era artist, Yog Raj Chitrakar is ultimately an elusive subject with a fluid and ever changing identity. Chopra describes Yog Raj Chitrakar as "having many different faces." He states: "Educated at Goldsmiths College of Art, London in the 1920s, Yog Raj Chopra was a frequent open-air landscape painter who spent much of his time capturing the grandeur of the Kashmir Valley. Yog Raj Chitrakar has many faces: explorer, draughtsman, cartographer, conqueror, soldier, prisoner of war, painter, artist, romantic..."¹⁹⁷ Chopra's insistent documentation of the clock tower, even in the midst of a police crackdown, evokes the presence of a stoic draughtsman on a mission to accurately document the civic structure in front of him while pedestrians go about their daily activities. To that end, his thirty-mile walk from the outskirts of town into the city resonates with the expedition of a colonial explorer or cartographer tracking and recording the distance between landmarks he designates as significant.

All of these facets of Yog Raj Chitrakar's identity speak to the character's ambivalent relationship to post-coloniality, as a figure who both disdains and romanticizes Indian's colonial past. As Chopra notes, "My character, Yog Raj Chitrakar, emerged as a means to critically examine and represent a particular kind of post-colonial Indian subjectivity represented in his narratives – hung over by the nostalgia for the British Raj yet reeling in the success of the Indian freedom struggle."¹⁹⁸ What is at stake in this paradoxical relationship to colonialism is the way in which Yog

¹⁹⁷ Live Performance," Nikhil Chopra, last accessed July 1, 2014. <http://www.nikhilchopra.net/home/?cat=10>.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Raj Chitrakar personifies the inherent ironies of culture and subjectivity in India's postcolonial present. Chopra plays with the concept of lineage not only through his use of familial ancestry, but also through his interrogation of the ancestral legacy of colonialism in art, culture and identity. He describes the character of Yog Raj Chitrakar as an artist who received his artistic training in Europe in the early part of the last century during a moment in which the colonial enterprise in India helped to cement the centrality of European models of artistic production as part of the cultural project of the colonies. Similarly, Chopra's own performances to date must tend to the tastes and standards of a contemporary global art world, driven by systems of capital and exchange which fuel the artistic and educational institutions of the U.S. and Europe.

In this sense Yog Raj Chitrakar, as an ancestral artist brought back from the dead, provides a parodic critique of the imperial lineages that continue to drive the production and reception of art in the contemporary global art world. Just as artists during the colonial era were forced to tend to the tastes and "standards" of the European colonial arts institution, Chopra must also navigate a complex field of commercial viability and ethnographic self-presentation on the international art circuit. As art curator and cultural theorist Okwui Enwezor notes in his essay "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition" (2003), the imperial roots of modern art history, have made it challenging for artists on the margins of Euro-America to break from the unfortunate role as an anglicized exotic other like Yog Raj Chitrakar.¹⁹⁹ In this sense, Chopra enacts a type of creative parody of these tropes of multiculturalism,

¹⁹⁹ Okwui Enwezor. "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition." In *Research in African Literatures* 34, no.4 (Winter 2003): 57–82.

by embodying a persona that is wholeheartedly aware of the odd necessity of its colonial lineage alongside the utility of his exoticism as a cultural other.

Conclusion:

In the introduction to this dissertation I addressed the surprising influence of modern theater on aspects of contemporary performance art in India, particularly as it relates to social practice. I discussed the need for a history of Indian performance art that did not simply mirror the developments of this practice in the West, or see performance art as an extension of Euro-American developments from the post-war era. I first noticed the discursive and historical influence of the social and political methods of theater on performance art in India, when speaking to a number of contemporary artists, even prior to my focus on performance art practices. In 2007 and 2009, I traveled to contemporary galleries in Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore and participated in a series of events organized by the Bar One artists residency program in Bangalore, which brought together artists from across the subcontinent to work on experimental practices. The practices ranged from video art and photography, to installation, painting, sculpture, and fashion design.

In my interviews with Himanshu Shady, M Shantamani, Syed Tauffik Ryaz, Pratiba Singh, Clare Arni and Gigi Skaria, artists who each work in a diverse range of mediums, I continued to hear about the significance of political theater in India. I remember very clearly Himanshu Shady, an artist who trained in painting and now organizes arts resources centers for slum children in Mumbai, telling me in 2007 that when looking back at the developments of street theater to understand what the young generations of contemporary artists in India are trying to do. At the time I dismissed his comment as irrelevant to my own work, given my myopic lens that insisted on the academic segregation of theater history from art history. Nonetheless, my subconscious

continued to dwell on this problem. I again heard similar suggestions from Pratibha Singh, an artist who works on textile-based autobiographic installations and fashion design in Delhi. She suggested that I learn more about the history of Safdar Hashmi and Habib Tanver, and their significance on creative practices in Delhi. While neither Shady nor Singh identify themselves as “performance artists,” they honored the legacy of the creative political practice that was foreground through theater practitioners such as Badal Sircar, Bijon Bhattacharya, Safdar Hashmi and Habib Tanveer.

By 2012 when I returned again to Delhi to attend the Delhi Art Fair, I was determined to understand more about the growing hype around performance practices, completely separate from any analysis of history. On my way to the panel discussion on performance art involving Roselee Goldberg and Sonia Kurana, which I mentioned in my introduction, I noticed a crowd of ten to fifteen young artists literally jumping up and down in the central courtyard connecting the main galleries to the central seminar room. I stopped and the group asked me to join them. Between gasps of air I asked Samudra Kajal Saikia why we were jumping. He answered, “Because we shouldn’t have to stand still.”

While, the group had no intention of “protesting” Goldberg, I believe that an enactment of historiographic resistance was at play in this seemingly innocent moment. While Roselee Goldberg was preparing to receive a crowd with an already established history of performance art, a group of young performance artists was cultivating a concurrent history that pushed up against the one on display. The group had no intention of dismissing Goldberg, but they wanted to add a performative dimension to an otherwise

static discussion, so that the body itself could provide a very corporeal reminder of the limitations of language and the possibilities of physical movement. This subtle presence of dissent, even through the playful act of jumping, speaks to vast permutations of resistance through performance art practices and the continued need to continue to understand, expand and unsettle these histories.

There is a moment between every jump, before your feet hit the ground, in which you hang in suspension in between the ground the sky. While this moment is an apt metaphor for resistance, as a fleeting movement that resists containment, it also works as a valuable allegory for the gaps of uncertainty that hang in between each breath. This study aimed to trace the historical and philosophical ties between theater history and performance art history in order to investigate the layers of complexity hidden in our historical blind spots. I believe that the story of Indian performance art contains generous moments of history hanging in between what we understand to be space and time. These moments contain unfamiliar ways of imagining the material body and the social body, the embodiment of history and memory, and the relationship between artistic production and political change.

Figures



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Fig. 3 (page 44)



Fig. 4 (page 46)

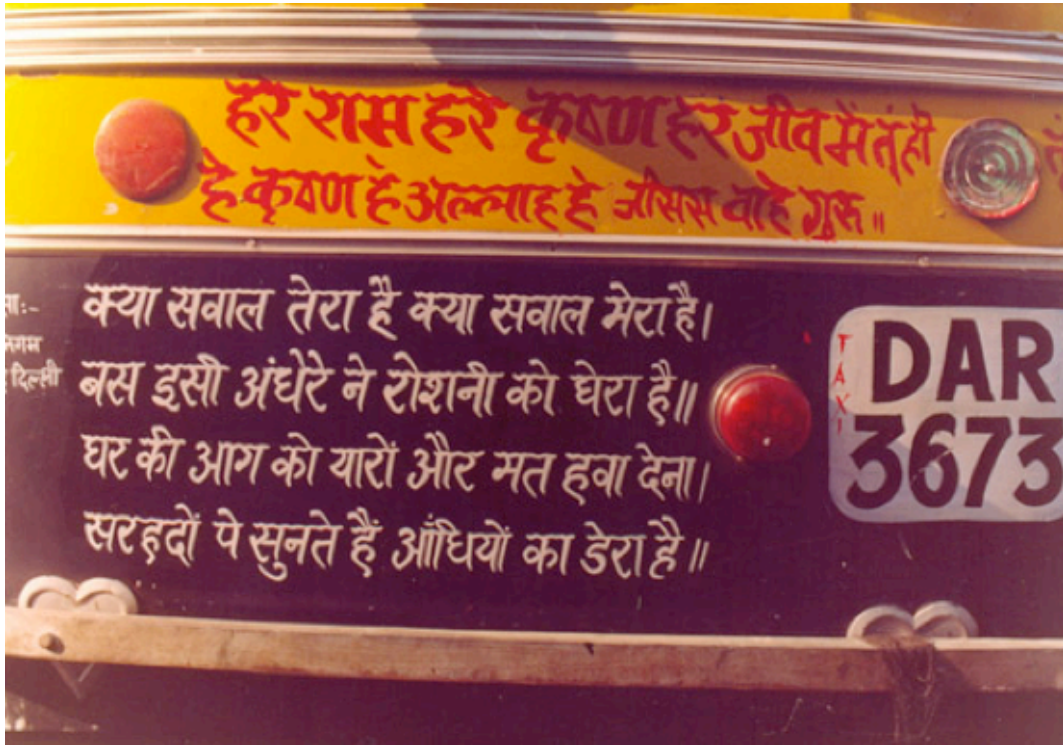


Fig. 5 (page 47)



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Fig. 7 (page 51)



Fig. 8 (page 63)



Fig. 9 (page 65)



Fig. 10 (page 67)



Fig. 11 (page 68)

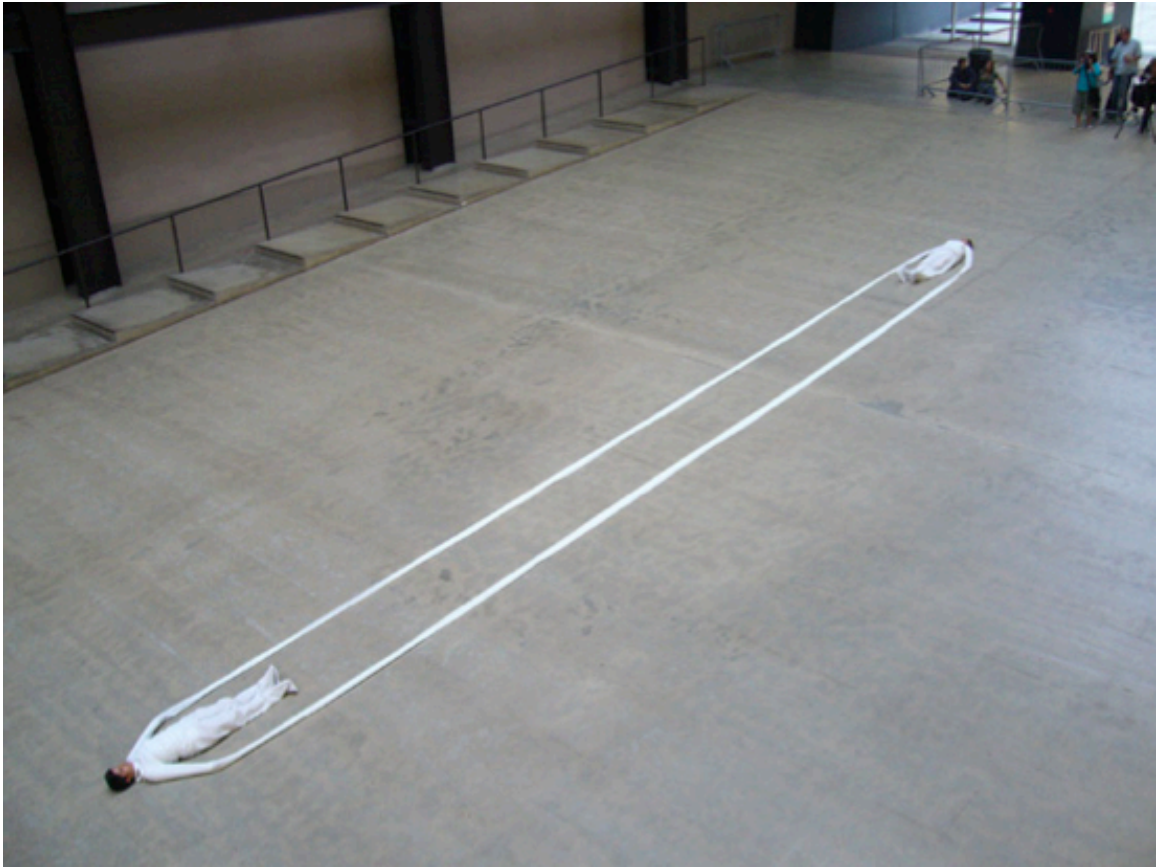


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Fig. 15 (page 72)



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Fig. 17 (page 72)



Fig. 18 (page 75)



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Fig. 20 (page 75)



Fig. 21 (page 75)



Figure 22 (page 75)



Fig. 23 (page 75)



Fig. 24 (page 75)



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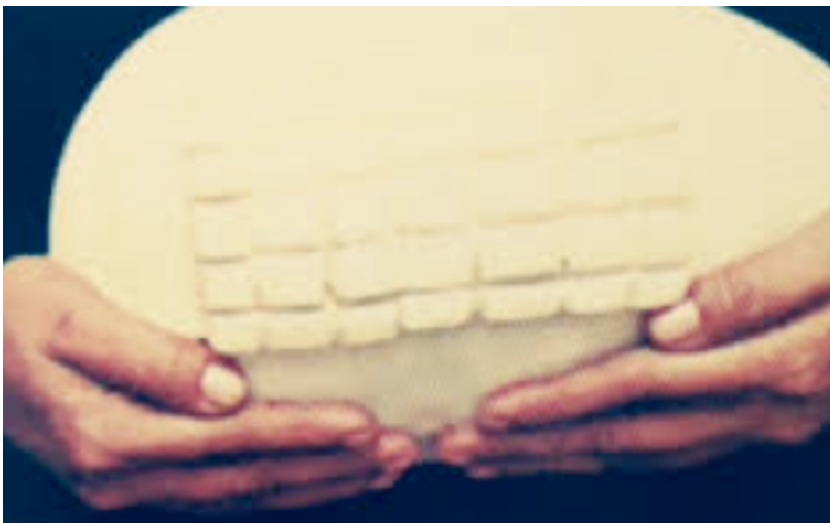


Fig. 39 (page 141)



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Fig. 43 (page 152)



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