

BODY | SPACE | TIME

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The choreographer Chandralekha once asked, “Where does the body begin ... and end?”¹ Can we imagine the body beyond its corporeality, examining how it locates itself and is marked by new configurations of space and time? Does performance necessarily produce moments of disjuncture? How, where and why do we make dance? In doing so, how can we arrive at new modes of spectatorship, where audiences are implicated and empowered, where they have agency and choice? The four new dance works that I commissioned for Serendipity Arts Festival 2018 placed the dancing body in an active conversation with new texts, disciplines, sites and audiences.

My work in the field of dance has largely unfolded in urban centres like Mumbai and New Delhi, as an independent practitioner and in communities of artists. As practitioners, our dilemmas have been a chaotic blend of the logistical and aesthetic. How does one identify the principles of one’s practice? What are our geospatial negotiations with the term “contemporary” and what configurations of nation, allegiance, belonging and aesthetic choice inform our artistic identity? What lies beyond proscenium spaces, beyond audiences washed out by overwhelming light? The conversations between the lived and performative are deepening, and choreographic concerns often lead the artist past form and presentation, opening up new spaces of engagement and new possibilities for what might be construed as “performative.” This expanded sense of performance also accounts for a greater honesty around the body. How do you formulate an artistic practice around knees that have given way, the cartilage eroded by years of dancing on unsuitable surfaces? What does it mean to make *dance* work today, to make dance *work*? Where does one rehearse in the absence of affordable spaces? The body is never too trivial or silent—its needs begin to shape the ecology it inhabits.

The works at Serendipity—made by Anoushka Kurien, Avantika Bahl, Deepak Kurki Shivaswamy and Navtej Johar—resonate with some of these questions. The four choreographers come from different kinds of dance training, shaped by an engagement with particular forms and by means of more autodidactic systems of learning, where these artists have formulated training practices around their choreographic inquiry. In order to account for the discursive nature of their practices and distinct artistic concerns, this essay is organised as a series of individual sections that look at the work of each choreographer.

Tanashah

Choreographer Navtej Johar situates his practice at the intersection of dance, yoga, research and activism. As a college student, he was introduced to street theatre, and then to dance, following a spell of work with theatre director Badal Sircar. He went on to train in bharatanatyam at Kalakshetra in the 1980s, also studying yoga during this time. Moving to the US, he joined New York University’s graduate programme in performance studies, which proved to be his introduction to academic discourse in the liberal arts. His work as a choreographer and teacher reflects these influences, also accounting for the contradictions that lie in the various movement practices he draws from. Johar’s work further reflects on the nature of viewing and spectatorship. He is disturbed by what he terms the urge to be “understood correctly,” speaking specifically of modes of communication in classical dance.² Reducing performance to a show-and-tell format, he argues, leaves no space for abstraction,

¹ Lall, Ein. "SHARIRA - CHANDRALEKHA'S EXPLORATIONS IN DANCE." YouTube. November 13, 2014. Accessed April 22, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vyXh_5dT0zw.

² Johar, Navtej. "The Contemplative Spectator." In *Movements of Interweaving: Dance and Corporeality in Times of Travel and Migration*, 339. London and New York: Routledge, 2019.

“as it is prescribed by the agenda to correctly ‘instruct,’ if not edify, the viewer.”³ His current artistic and pedagogic concerns are rooted in the method of somatic practice he has developed and formalised over the last few years, scanning and mapping the body in a detailed manner and accounting for its nuanced materiality. This acknowledgement of corporeality, Johar proposes, points towards an understanding of the “dynamics of the body as not only mechanical, but even *emotional*.”⁴ This link between body dynamics and emotional potential gestures towards more complex understandings of abhinaya. In theory, the mimetic or emotional component of classical dance performance does deploy the entire body and demands an understanding of what transpires in the body when it experiences and displays emotion; but very often, the focus in performance and viewing is on abhinaya’s most superficial manifestations, like facial expressions or body postures, without a sufficient investigation of the underlying processes that support this outcome. Johar’s somatic practice challenges the body to return to a deeper understanding of abhinaya as it occurs in the body, to be in the moment and experience the process of abhinaya, rather than merely focusing on its most outward, and perhaps shallow, manifestations.

The idea of “extremes” becomes a fundamental premise for *Tanashah*. Johar read the jail diaries of the revolutionary Bhagat Singh, and was struck by his essay “Why I Am an Atheist,” in which he anticipates his death with great acuity. He stands for his beliefs, even if death is the price he must pay. There is desire; he yearns for the end with frightening passion. Juxtaposed with Bhagat Singh’s desire is a yearning of another kind: that of a man separated from his beloved, as articulated in the Bhairavi padam “Rama Rama Pranasakhi.” How does *viraha*, or unfulfilled longing, and the desire it triggers, speak to the longing of a man waiting to meet his end?

For someone who must channel lofty narratives of death and love, on stage, Johar’s appearance is unassuming, almost anticlimactic. Clad in sweat-clothes, he looks at the audience entering the space, lying on his stomach, propped up on his elbows. Sitting up, he hums, letting out disembodied fragments of melody and bursts of sound. He laboriously proceeds to wrap a length of cloth around his head in the shape of the *patka*, the turban that Sikhs choose to wear. Each turn of the cloth is stretched out, and the audience watches the cloth settle in the shape of the turban, fold by laborious fold. At the very end, a tiny fold of cloth is yanked out from the underside of the turban, covering the head completely, masking all the hair you can see. Then, when Johar speaks in the first person as Bhagat Singh, it isn’t just an assumption of a role being played. Rather, in the machinations of the body that precede this spoken text, there is a sense of how Johar prepares to embody and progressively assimilate the role of Bhagat Singh. The transition that follows—from Bhagat Singh to the protagonist of a padam, from 20th-century male desire to mythological articulations of yearning—is similarly protracted, but somehow organic, the parallels between these two elucidations of desire most evident in the ways the body experiences and travels between them.

Johar has had a transformative year: he was part of the group that filed the petition leading to the landmark September 2018 Supreme Court decision to modify Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code — an archaic remnant of a colonial past)—thereby decriminalising consensual sexual activity between adults of the same sex. The past year has foregrounded how the aesthetic and the political coincide and intersect in his work. In *Tanashah*, the autobiographical seeps into Johar’s choreographic negotiation of desire. He describes his first glimpse of Chennai, after a lifetime of being nourished by the melancholic landscapes of north India. How is this landscape infused in the poetry of romantic

³ Johar, 339.

⁴ Johar, Navtej. “True to the Bone: Training in Abhyas Somatics by Navtej Johar.” Abhyas Trust, New Delhi (INDIA). Accessed March 5, 2019. <https://www.abhyastrust.org/TRAINING-IN-ABHYAS-SOMATICS-BY-NAVTEJ-JOHAR.htm>.

folkloric figures Heer and Ranjha, he wonders? Conversely, how is ninth-century poetry Andal's verse inflected by her experience of community and ecology, by the landscape of startlingly red soil that Johar encountered when he moved to Kalakshetra? As he hums, in a fragmented voice, a song about Heer and Ranjha, I am drawn to the sight of a middle-aged Sikh couple in the audience; the man is attentive but watches with a bemused expression, while the woman mouths the words to the song Johar is singing, shaking her head in time with the music. There is something very personal about Johar's somewhat tuneless crooning, an ownership of the material that is also a gentle rejection of any assumptions of how archetypal narratives might be presented in performance. A few months after the festival, during a performance in New Delhi, I spot a few regular concertgoers amidst a sea of middle-aged men and women, many of the men sporting Sikh turbans. As Johar makes his way through the piece, now longer at eighty minutes, the audience click their tongues, and emits sighs of understanding and naughty little chuckles.

In *Tanashah*, Johar's choice of material comes from his background and training, but there is also an attempt to find resonance with **this training** and stake a claim to the body's connections to it, beyond its relationship with codified forms and structures. In the two versions I have seen so far, three months apart, the work has shifted with each viewing. *Tanashah* may be a "performance"; beyond fleeting viewing, however, it also proposes a certain philosophy of the body: as enabling, capable of consent and deeply emotional in intelligent, intuitive and revelatory ways. As practitioners, it encourages us to continue finding rigour in practice, not by imposing it on the body, but by trusting the body's ability to know and understand.

Boundary Conditions

Around September 2018, when choreographer Deepak Kurki Shivaswamy was trying to settle on a name for his new site-specific work, his attention was drawn to what was happening across the country. In debates around the violence of cow vigilantism, for instance, every situation invited polarised viewpoints. What were the "conditions" that each side held fundamental to defining their perspectives, Shivaswamy wondered. He was constructing a work around a site infused with fraught narratives of colonisation and maritime networks, the Adil Shah Palace in Panaji, Goa. Built by the ruler of Bijapur, Yusuf Adil Shah, around the start of the 16th century, it was annexed by the Portuguese in 1510, serving as a residence for viceroys over several centuries. After Goa joined the Republic of India in 1961, the palace served as the secretariat for a few decades, until the Legislative Assembly moved to a more spacious location in Porvorim.⁵ Currently, the space is used for several projects—part of it serves as the temporary home of the Goa State Museum, while other parts of it have been allocated as offices for urban redevelopment projects such as the Smart City Mission.⁶ In its present distribution of space, the Adil Shah Palace continues to offer an opportunity to think about "boundaries" and "conditions"—now a negotiation between various priorities of the state in this postcolonial moment.

While creating *Boundary Conditions* in a heritage structure, Shivaswamy began to think about the meaning of placing moving bodies in a space that had a character of its own. Using the courtyard of the Palace allowed him to play with textures and levels. The stone surfaces, grooves on the staircase (from an era where carpeting may have been draped and tethered to the stairs for special occasions) and the dramatic potential of the landing where the stairway ends, all shape the flow of the piece.

⁵ "Adil Shah's Palace." Government of Goa. Accessed March 3, 2019. <https://www.goa.gov.in/places/adil-shahs-palace/>.

⁶ "Reach Us." Imagine Panaji. Accessed March 4, 2019. https://imaginepanaji.com/reach_us/.

At the beginning, Shivaswamy, who is also one of the performers, is lying face down in a bed of salt, coarse and unprocessed, spread out in a thin layer across a section of the courtyard. Shivaswamy's face and head are masked by a piece of cloth and a thick rope wound around his head, bells woven along its length. In its most common occurrence, this combination of rope and bells is used for cattle, the bells alerting herders to the whereabouts of their flock. Gradually, as the other performer, Manju Sharma, enters the space, Shivaswamy rises from his bed of salt and tethers the rope to a window-frame. Using this as a mooring point, he begins to rotate his body to unwind the rope as he moves away from the window. This is done in slow motion, and the audience that finds itself in the way of this unwinding must move to clear a path for the definitive trajectory of the rope.

The performance of *Boundary Conditions* at Adil Shah Palace combines live movement with a video installation. In the grooves of the sweeping stairway leading to the upper floors of the Adil Shah Palace, Shivaswamy places a series of tiny video screens, playing fragments of movement shot at several heritage locations in New Delhi. The space of the video installation is woven into the movement trajectory. As Shivaswamy ascends the stairs, thumping his forehead with a microphone, producing muffled sounds of impact, Sharma stands at the very edge of the landing bending over into empty space as she swings her head to the beat of the microphone. This starts small and grows into a movement of dramatic proportions. Her long hair streams over her face, swinging violently from side to side as she moves her head, prompting voluble speculation about the possibility of her plunging off the balcony.

In viewing the moving body as part of a broader landscape, our priorities as spectators change. The performance is no longer contained merely in the mechanics of the body. Instead, the body must constantly think of how it chooses to make itself visible in this landscape. The work of the viewer is also complicated because there is no fixed seating. The viewers move with the performers, implicating them in a process of decision-making—what to see and what to occlude, and how to pick vantage points to do this from. The viewers are also held more accountable; they might find themselves in the path of the performance and must choose how to engage or disengage from such a situation. Sometimes, their responses are equally visceral and tactile. In a section I later revisited on film, two performers walk along the length of the rope that Shivaswamy tethers to portholes in the space, encircling each other's bodies with their arms. One encircles, the other wriggles out, and then they swap roles and repeat their actions. In their faces, you see no agitation—only curiosity—as the boundary is created and then circumvented. As they repeat, a photographer positions herself right behind them, at one end of the rope, squatting and contorting her body in similar ways and directions to keep the performers squarely in her frame.

In the constricted space of the courtyard, the camera is a recurring presence. Festival staff and members of the audience hold their phones up. As a viewer, what you can't see in real-time in three-dimensional space is sometimes more visible on a smartphone screen. There is no palpable "interaction" between the performers and the audience; they may make and hold eye contact but don't particularly talk or communicate with the audience in any way. The chasm between the emotional landscape of the work and that of the audience then heightens the "tension" of the performance. Eventually, both performers return to the bed of salt, book-ending sections of sustained movement with sharp intervals. Every inch of space in the courtyard is occupied, and Shivaswamy and Sharma, alone in their vast expanse of salt, are rendered sharply visible. They use their palms to pool salt around their legs; if the salt were cement, it would truly support their weight, but for now, their movements still make us believe that the salt keeps them moored to the floor. Both performers also draw attention to their arms; the body keeps accommodating and readjusting itself to allow for a certain alignment of the arms held up in front of their faces. Eventually, after a short sequence of

movements performed in unison, Sharma walks away, followed by Shivaswamy, her palms reaching slightly ahead of her torso to draw a path through the audience. The crowd parts, and they disappear.

Look Left, Turn Right

It is 4pm on a Wednesday evening. A steady stream of tourists enters and exits Our Lady of Immaculate Conception Church in Panjim. The cathedral overlooks a traffic intersection, populated by the usual mix of vehicles, passers-by, hawkers and stragglers. Ennui hangs in the air. Watching life go by at the intersection, I am reminded of a week spent on a secluded island in the Andamans, where the arrival of the daily ferry from the nearest market town is the biggest event of the day. The ferry brings daily necessities, and there are those who come to collect these goods, but there are also others who park themselves by the dock just to watch the boat coming in. It is a “happening,” a performative moment that stands out from the otherwise unremarkable graph of the day. At the intersection by the cathedral, in this moment, the sense of the performative is embedded in the ennui, in the cajoling tones of the vendors who sell mementos to tourists and in the anticipation of the few people who look out at the intersection with a certain urgency, almost willing something to happen.

If you observe closely and harness your imagination, you might spot about eight people crossing the road in a coordinated motion. You could put it down to coincidence, the first few times you see it happening. There is purpose writ large on their faces, but it is not the purpose that stems from wanting to get somewhere. They cross the road for the sake of doing so, and purpose, for them, is situated in the moment. Eventually, as they cross, they orchestrate encounters, stopping shoulder-to-shoulder to make eye contact with their fellow performers. The distance between two performers varies, but the gaze is sustained, and this begins to draw the attention of people on the street, who stare back at the performers with a matching intensity. What is happening, I enquire of a stall owner at the intersection. This is a new kind of theatre, he lets on, never taking his eyes off the performance. A few seconds later, he repeats himself, his voice now bolstered by an authoritative certainty.

The performance unfolding at the intersection is *Look Left, Turn Right*, choreographed by Avantika Bahl. A few years ago, Bahl, then a young choreographer with a couple of works under her belt, enrolled in a sign language course, resulting in an interest in considering what it meant to make accessible art. Bahl has now shaped her choreographic practice around that question. Her previous work, *Say, What?*, a duet with the deaf dancer Vishal Sarvaiya, considers what communication means, in the slippages between what is codified and what isn't, and between the verbal and the non-verbal. For Serendipity Arts Festival, Bahl was commissioned to make a new work with the condition that it had to be made for a public space. In Mumbai, once Bahl assembled the group of eight dancers she wanted to work with, she started convening each rehearsal at a new traffic intersection. This kept things fresh by challenging the dancers to respond to constantly evolving situations and helped them steer clear of overzealous traffic cops.

Contemporary dance in India often contends with the lack of an audience. Most of its viewers tend to come from within the arts community, at least in urban centres; and at particular junctures, artists find themselves desperate for newer audiences. With the street as her performance venue, Bahl sidestepped that problem. On encountering Bahl's dancers, pedestrians tend to linger. Vehicles slow down, eager to get past the traffic light while it is still green but also curious to understand what is unfolding on the pavement. In Mumbai, an audience was always guaranteed, with people often stopping to watch the entire work. In Panjim, placing the work required slightly more careful consideration because, unlike Mumbai, it has fewer traffic lights or intersections that are likely to see both pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

Making dance work for the streets requires an acknowledgement of the dynamics of a public space. A dancer stationed at one spot is always likely to attract attention, but adding complexity to this static mode of performance brings with it the possibility of playing with what the street already offers in terms of moving bodies. Bahl chose to have her dancers merge into this landscape and pop out of it occasionally. Walking across the street thus becomes the one element that underlines most of the piece. Sometimes, the dancers contort their bodies into various shapes and attitudes as they walk. At other times, they tentatively place one foot in front of the other, exaggerating the effort of keeping their balance as they walk along the raised boundary markers of a traffic island. They walk across roads, tripping or picking imaginary objects off the street, on loop. At some point during the piece, they make eye contact with their audiences. As you tilt your head and watch them, your elbows digging into your thighs, you suddenly realise that a dancer is copying you, staring into your eyes from a distance, and mirroring your actions. Viewers react in different ways. Sometimes, they break eye contact and walk away or sheepishly stare back at the dancer, suddenly conscious of every move they make. The bolder ones begin to perform in response, having the dancer mirror a set of intentionally staged actions. It is at this moment that you begin to realise the role the audience plays for a piece like *Look Left, Turn Right*. These “dancing bodies” read a certain way only because they are embedded in a contextual landscape. The bangle seller casually seated next to a circle of standing dancers, the bystander who annotates the performance with his running commentary, the man who joins the dancers on day two, armed with his own transistor radio for music—each of these viewers shapes the performance in specific ways.

There is something fragmented about reminiscence when it comes to looking back at a performance such as *Look Left, Turn Right*. It is no longer an isolated moment in time; embedded in the performance is an unfolding of its spatial and contextual landscape. The presence of viewers, the reactions of the audience—these are no longer secondary facts or interesting asides. They become central to how the performance is experienced. The pressure to bear witness to the entirety of the performance wears away; what remains might be an intervention or an encounter, or perhaps a happening, and your positionality begins to define the ways in which you summon up, or forget, fragments of what you have seen, heard and experienced.

To be Danced – In Rooms

The first time I watch *To Be Danced – In Rooms* is at a work-in-progress sharing, three months ahead of the premiere. We are in a studio in Aminjikarai’s Railway Colony, a dense Chennai neighbourhood. To get to the studio, we find a staircase hidden at the back of a building, walk past some construction debris on the landing, and finally get to a warmly lit room on the second floor. The name of the studio is emblazoned in big type across a part of the wall. The sharing, originally scheduled for the afternoon, has been moved to the evening to accommodate a power cut the local electricity board has announced. When everyone has settled down, the choreographer, Anoushka Kurien, plugs her phone into a speaker, hits the play button and then finds her place on the dance floor, making her way through a forty-minute solo. What precedes the performance seems crucial, because these are the conditions in which most dance in India is made. Dancemaking must account for power cuts, angry neighbours, the schedules of Zumba classes and the logistics of how much time it takes to hit play and be in position for the next part of the performance.

Anoushka Kurien has lived in Chennai nearly all her life. She trained in ballet in her school days. After college, an interest in working with the body in new ways led her to the choreographer Padmini Chettur. Kurien worked with her over the better part of a decade, and draws from Chettur an interest in the detail of the body, bringing humour into her manner of investigation. I am taken back to a stray conversation I had with Kurien in 2014 over coffee during a break between rehearsals, when she

described the feeling of unceasingly eating one's way through a pack of chocolate-coated biscuits, recognising only in retrospect that the digestive system does not share one's enthusiasm. It is this quality of wry, curious and sometimes caustic observation that Kurien brings to her work.

As a live act, *To Be Danced* concerns itself with a formal pursuit of movement that is layered within the body and in relation to the moving image. A solo, *To Be Danced* is preceded by *In Rooms*, a series of filmic episodes where daily situations—set in rooms, terraces, bathrooms—become contexts for specific examinations of the body. In one scene, we see feet, at rest, in waiting, bearing weight. Ankles flex as someone rises from a seated position, their nerves visibly tensing in this process. In another scene, Kurien is at a table, laying out five steel plates across its surface in different patterns. On laying out the plates, she collapses her upper body across the length of the table, drawing all the plates back towards her in a swift motion. She uses her index fingers to spin two plates around the glass surface of the table. Suddenly, she lets her hands fly out from beneath her, almost crashing into the table nose-first, held up merely by intent and design. The sense of the absurd meeting the mundane is best amplified, however, in a scene shot in a kitchen: Kurien is seated on a stool, and behind her, on the work surfaces in the kitchen, we see a lifetime's worth of steel utensils and boxes laid out. On the floor beside her, two idli moulds lie in waiting. Kurien is wearing her pointe shoes, a relic from her years of ballet. The ribbons that you would normally expect to find only at the ends of shoes are also looped around the idli mould, allowing her to strap it to her thigh. Balancing her feet on the tips of her toes as she rotates her ankles, she clangs two parts of the mould together like cymbals. The steady and sedate rhythm of a metronome in the background is interspersed with the tinny clash of aluminium moulds that were otherwise built to withstand the insides of high-temperature steamers.

While *In Rooms*, made by the photographers Sharan Devkar Shankar and Deepa Vaswani, can work as a standalone video installation, for the festival, audiences viewed it sitting down in the performance space. Kurien, who performs in the work, is also seated in the space, casting a neutral gaze at the screen as the video is played. When she stands up to begin her solo, her gaze is directed inwards; the eyes reflect the discoveries that the body makes within itself. It is hard to distinguish between the movements, not because they are relentless in their intensities, but because they are layered in particular ways where you experience the body cutting across space and time. A second iteration of that movement is then slowly nudged towards a new impulse, and this impulse grows, until the first movement has completely disappeared, now replaced with a new one. There are two screens placed behind Kurien, and occasionally, the movements on screen coincide with Kurien's solo. Sometimes, there are two Kuriens dancing on screen, their bodies starting as specks, unfurling into an eerie landscape of extra limbs, the solo dancing body split into two torsos, going head-to-head, legs attached to other legs at unlikely joints.

As viewers, what do we make of a preoccupation with the formal tendencies of movement, or "abstract" movement, where meaning isn't necessarily being suggested or offered? At a particular juncture, with her legs on tippy-toe and her palms flat on the floor, Kurien tips her weight forward into her arms, almost to the point of letting her legs leave the floor. You wait for her to tip over, to take the action to its most intuitive resolution, but she always returns the weight to her feet, and then to the floor. It is this tension that abstraction proposes so compellingly, where the narrative may not lie in imposed meaning, but in the plotlines of a bodily mechanics.

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