Dear Dead Dancer

Essay-Performance / Text & Documentation

Kiran Kumar

Projection #1:

[Video]

iPod: Music > Artists > Kelucharan Mahapatra > Nritta > Moksha



Performance #1:

Dancer undresses costume and ankle bells to musical prelude

Dance: Kelucharan Mahapatra's Moksha

Dancer stops arbitrarily and walks over to table



Speech #1:

Dear Kelubabu,

I begin this letter to you with a dance.

I begin this letter to you by performing this dance.

This is the last dance of your choreographic repertoire in Odissi.

I interrupt the performance of this dance to begin this letter.

I enjoy dancing.

So the only time I can address those aspects of dance that I find less than enjoyable is when I am not dancing.

And so I interrupt the performance of this dance to address my critique through this letter to you.

Projection #2:

[Text]

Chapter 1

Suspending Spectatorship



Speech #2:

Earlier this year, German artist Maria Eichhorn closed down the gallery and office of London's Chisenhale Gallery in a work that took the title of its duration: 5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours.

In 1969, the artist Robert Barry realised an art work that would be described as a work of conceptual art. Barry titled the work 'Closed Gallery'. A note was sent out as invitation to exhibitions in three galleries in Amsterdam, Turin and Los Angeles. It read: "During the exhibition the gallery will be closed."

Earlier that century, the Tamil poet Papanasam Sivan stood, presumably, before a stone sculpture of a female deity in a South Indian temple, and sang:

Niraindaval yen mana kovilile yezhundaruliya tAye / Amma Ini Ada mudiyadu

Seated as you are in stone Stand up and show me your grace For Mother, for you I will dance no more.

It is true that space for critique, institutional or personal, is enabled by ceasing the mode of production.

Yet I do not want to cancel the performance, for that would irreversibly revoke spectatorship. I'd rather suspend spectatorship, so that the space for critical reflection can be opened up here, within the performance space.

This is not any performance space. This is a theatre/studio. It is typically a space for theatrical performance. This space for theatrical performance is different from that other space for ritual performance, the temple.

The British Raj was responsible for discontinuing temple dances in India.

And you, Kelubabu, in no small part, are responsible for transforming one such temple dance from a ritual performance to a theatrical performance, in re-situating it from temple to stage. I believe you called it Odissi.

In the early 90s, the British Broadcasting Corporation commissioned a series of documentaries on South Asian art. Surely enough, there was one on Odissi. Hosting this particular episode of the series in his English-accented English was the Pakistani actor, Zia Mohiyuddin.

Projection #3:

[Video]

Odissi by Sharon Lowen

Link: https://youtu.be/RI8znGJcF-k



Speech #3:

Kelubabu, I admire your work in reconstructing Odissi. I value what seems to me to have been a multi-modal approach, an energetic effort in working through sculpture, painting, writing, singing and drumming, all in order to construct dance.

Yet today, I cannot help but lament how this multi-modal, fully sensory approach that you seem to have had to dance, has become systematically undermined. This has been done through the reification of your, by now ready-made, aesthetic decisions at the expense of keeping the decision making processes active and diverse.

Kelubabu, you and I haven't met in your lifetime. I began learning Odissi from Raka Maitra in Singapore in 2007. Raka was a student of your student Madhavi Mudgal, while in New Delhi. Madhavi Mudgal is, of course, Sharon Lowen's contemporary. As is your other shishya, Daksha Mashruwala.

Last year I had the opportunity to work with Dakshaji. She was a gracious and generous teacher to me, hosting me for a month in her home in Bombay. She adores you; reminiscing so fondly about you every now and then. Her living room wall carries a very large photograph of you probably taken while you were dancing. One night when I returned from a walk along Juhu beach, I found her sitting in the living room. Something about the dance that was then in the process of making was keeping her up. We talked briefly, almost perfunctorily about it. She then asked me, as if prompted by something specific: "Kiran, have you seen Kumar Sahani's film on guruji?"

I paused, to think what had led her to that association. I broke the brief silence with a lie. "No", I said. I don't know what had led me to that lie either. Her enthusiasm in sharing those filmic fragments on your life with me was almost child-like. Yet, simultaneously she talked me through parts of the film, carefully curating this late-night screening into my month-long learning and living experience with her. I secretly looked forward to that segment which appears around 20 minutes into the film.

Projection #4:

[Video]

Excerpt [19:40 - 22:10] from "Bhavantarana" (1991)

Director: Kumar Sahani

Commissioned by Public Diplomacy Division, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

Link: https://youtu.be/fWWba3Asg6U



Speech #4:

This second look made me think: what if Sahani's film was one on your process of constructing Odissi rather than a film on the object that is 'Odissi'? What if it were a portrait of a practice rather than a portrait of a genius.

Indeed, accessing you through the media of television and film has revealed to me that inasfar as these media serve to comment on culture, they are structurally predisposed to 'reducing' dance to a cultural object. As I see it, this cultural object of dance, in contemporary times, has assumed two avatars: one as cultural artefact and the other as cultural commodity.

Projection #5: [Image] Crockery cabinet



Speech #5:

As artefact, dance has undergone a process of systematic fetishization, reified behind a glass enclosure, deliberately displayed and placed out of haptic access, open only to a visual consumption that is almost always mediated by narratives of identification. Identification of where I have been, of where I have come from, of my taste, of my socio-economic class. The artefact is an easy pawn in identity politics wielded repeatedly by the nation-state and the socio-economic elite, as much as by local, and migrant communities. As artefact, dance has become relegated to being representational rather than being danced.

As commodity, dance has been subject to the economic imperatives of commerce, always being skewed towards assuming a form whose marketability is impinged on superlatives: virtuosity, novelty, creativity, innovation and ultimately a grossness or concreteness. For it is a challenge to commoditize and monitize that which is truly subtle. As commodity, dance has been relegated to being consumed rather than being danced.

But I suspect that you might not be as critical to such an objectification, given that you self-consciously participated in the project of nation-building. By chosing to name your assimilation of diverse practices as 'Odissi', meaning 'of Orissa', you have self-consciously lodged the dance within a geo-political demarcation. Despite this gesture of fixity, to me you seem to have found a greater freedom within your dance-making process. Your prolific body of pallavi, that dance exploiting musicality, stands to me as evidence of this freedom. Nevertheless, Kelubabu you have implicated future generations of dancers in your participation in the objectification of dance. Whether or not we are conscious of it, dancers today live in the climate of dance being fetishized as artefact and ossified as commodity. I cannot help but think that in such a climate dance can only be as free as fabric on a flag post; fluttering in a confined abandonment, ultimately only to draw attention to identarian or consumerist agendas.

My critique is not so much of dance being made artefact or commodity in itself, but of being made so at the expense of dance's critical and vital development. For in maintaining their own interests, neither mechanisms of identarian imperatives nor economic imperatives will allow dance the freedom to break out of objectification. For the better part of South and South-East Asia's post-colonial years, this condition has kept dance dancing a servile dance, confined within a cage.

Projection #6: [Video] Caged bird bowing



Speech #6:

When I visited Central Java to learn traditional Javanese dance, I was often confronted with what seemed to me a disturbing trend of keeping caged birds as a sort of symbol of beauty or prosperity or some such aspiration. "Why don't you free the bird?" I asked pointedly to one man. He was slightly taken aback by the confrontation. And then he half-apologetically responded: "Even if I opened the door, he doesn't want to fly."

On another day, while in the same place, I saw the bird doing this:

Projection #7:

[image]: Caged bird with open wings



Speech #7:

I was astonished. He was sitting silent and perfectly still, his wings thrown wide open. His sculptural commitment to the posture surprised me. Did he not know what to do next? Had the confinement of the cage rendered his wings vestiges? Does he have no memory of his capacity to fly?

Projection #8:

[image]

Cabinet and cage





Speech #8:

The bird's cage hangs within a short range from the cabinet of unused crockery.

I feel the need, even an urgency to propose an antidote to this objectification of dance.

This is why I first call for a suspension of spectatorship.

Followed by a cessation of current modes of production; lest the artist becomes an apparatchik, that over zealous official working ever so diligently within fundamentally flawed systems, only to reinforce these systems through his uncritical, productivity overdrive.

Having ceased production, Kelubabu I propose to unabashedly do what you did. Not by aping your aesthetic decisions, but in undertaking, as you had, a decision-making process.

I call for a return to reconstruction. For it is by reconstruction, that dance may be reclaimed as a process, as a practice, as a way of doing and thinking rather than as object.

And this return to reconstructions calls fundamentally for rethinking dance pedagogy, for it is ultimately on the body-minds of dancers that dance is constructed.

Projection #9:

[Text]

Chapter 2:

Rethinking Pedagogy

Speech #9:

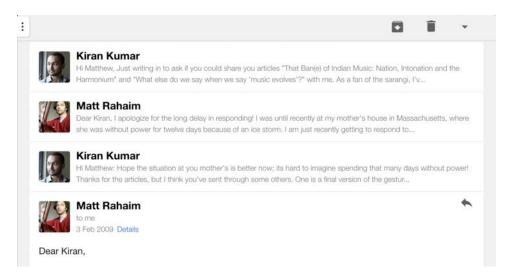
About a year into Odissi training, I seemed convinced that aesthetic structure in the dance was almost 'superficial' and that to access a deeper complexity, I had to turn to music. In some strange associative sense, the tipping point for this decision was a solo performance by contemporary dance artist Xavier Le Roy to Igor Stravinsky's music for Le Sacre du Prentemp. In Le Roy's The Rite of Spring, the dancer dances the part of the conductor of an otherwise absent orchestra, while facing spectators.

I came home from that performance, and later that night expressed my decision to Matthew Rahaim, who I was speaking with via email at the time.

Projection #10:

[Image]

Email Screenshot



Speech #10:

Matthew was then a PhD candidate at the University of California Berkeley researching hand gestures in Hindustani Music.

"Dear Kiran,", he wrote, "Congratulations on beginning your Hindustani vocal study.. Whitman wrote a poem about beginning study:"

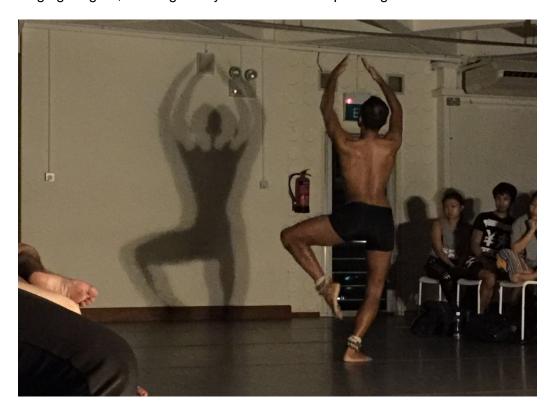
He quotes:

"Beginning my studies the first step pleas'd me so much,
The mere fact consciousness, these forms, the power of motion,
The least insect or animal, the senses, eyesight, love,
The first step I say awed me and pleas'd me so much,
I have hardly gone and hardly wish'd to go any farther,
But stop and loiter all the time to sing it in ecstatic songs."

Performance #2:

Dancer straps on ankle bells

Dance: excerpt from Nrityagram's Basant Sargam Pallavi, singing sargam, dancing slowly with ankle bells quivering



Speech #11:

That was a choreographic adaptation of a Pallavi authored by Surupa Sen, and danced as a duet with Bijoyini Sathpathy; the Banaglore-based Odissi duo that is Nrityagram.

Last week, I was on an airplane. I've often been destabilised during air travel. Something tips me off; perhaps it is the sheer pretence of 'sitting still' as I'm being jettisoned across large distances. Or perhaps this time it was more specifically a documentary video that I saw inflight. It was another 'portrait of a genius'. This one was a fresh new release: 'Mr.Gaga'; a portrait of the dancer, choreographer and artistic director of the Tel Aviv-based Batsheva Dance Company, Ohad Naharain. At one point, Naharain says that, with time, choreography for him had become the act of helping dancers interpret movements, not as much authoring those movements. Something in me was stirred with this observation. I paused to think that by this principle I have never actually danced your choreography at all. You have never been present to help me interpret movement. And by extension, each of your students who in their turn are Teachers and their students and those Teachers are all, by Mr.Gaga's principle, somewhat disillusioned in claiming to transmit your choreography. For it is they who are helping generations of dancers interpret movement that you have authored. And as it so happens, the author, is quite literally, dead.

Kelubabu, I have come to realise that a culture of artificially preserving a dead author as an active choreographer is disturbingly necrophilic.

I have come to realise that in absolving their own agency in helping me interpret movement, these Teachers of your choreography are effectively shirking a sense of care that being a choreographer demands.

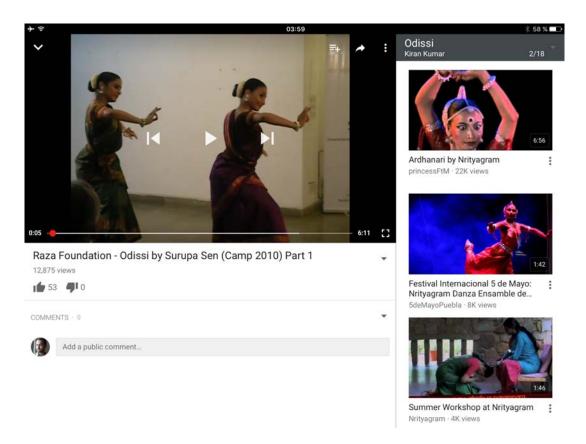
And when placed in such an environment of care-less-ness, I have come to realise that my bodymind becomes incapable of learning; of appreciating and connecting with movement.

So, in order to respect these realisations, I have had to turn to a project of self-learning. In the past six months, I began teaching myself Odissi dances from YouTube.

Projection #11:

[image]

YouTube screenshot



YouTube is an online digital repository for video content; perhaps one of the largest contemporary archive of moving images. YouTube, is where I first saw you. On this platform, I had started accumulating videos of dances that moved me to the point of wanting to dance them. One of the first videos on this list was that Pallavi by Nrityagram. One day I decided, perhaps cheekily, to name this list 'The Ekalavya Project'.

Ekalavya, that boy from the Mahabharata who, in many ways, was a victim of the socio-economic caste system; he was denied an education by the pedagog, guru Drona. Ekalavya was disenfranchised by a pedagogical system ridden with moral flaws. I have been far more privileged than he was. Yet I remain dissatisfied with a pedagogical system that has come to undervalue critical thinking and aesthetic inquiry. I deeply lament this loss, particularly in the practice of the so-called, self-professed 'classical' Indian dances.

Choosing not be occupied with silks, jewellery and face-painting, is admittedly a rejection of and resistance to a certain objectification dance. These cosmetic trappings do little other than reiterate unhealthy socio-economic classifications, I thought. For what does it even mean to be covered in silk and gold and silver when a dancer's wage today can barely cover basic health care.

At one point, I even stripped naked to dance, but the residual movement of my free hanging genitals stood in the way of the more subtle and nuanced movement that was to become my focus. And so I kept the underwear on; a minimal intervention.

After stripping down, I turned the music off. It was a series of self-imposed control experiments. At this point, I was of the belief that music provided too cerebral a structure that tended to interrupt my focus on the somatic pathways in dance. And the silence did, no doubt, help me a great deal. For in the silence, I found time. And in that time, I wandered. At times, this wandering felt like the vague loiterings of a vagabond, that unproductive speck drifting in a society driven by labour. At other times, the wandering amounted to the meanderings of a river; that uneconomically non-linear path between mountain and sea, marked patiently by water, relenting earth and season only to beget a fertility out of its futility.

And strangely enough, as I wander these silent somatic pathways, as my feet gently clasp the earth under them, as my legs sink a little deeper into the soft soil, as my belly button travels slightly inward to meet my spine, as my joint palms softly press into each other before my chest, and as my chest swells with air and meets my wrists, then the beat of my heart and the pulse in my wrist play on like two faces of a drum. Upon this drum, my breath heaves nonchalant, singing a silent song.

Projection #12:

[Text]

Chapter 3:

Distilling the Dance

Speech #12:

Kelubabu, this is perhaps where our paths diverge drastically.

I must admit that for me this turn towards self-learning and somatic pathways has amounted to a quasi scientific reductionism. For I take dance, as I have come to know it, context and all, and subject it to the fire of critical thinking and aesthetic inquiry, letting a relentless loop of why and how questions to continually reshape dance, until the dance distills into a minimum.

The December of 2010 was one such minimum point for me. I visited the Sun temple in Konark, Orissa. Within the site of the now defunct temple complex, standing upon the nata-mandira, the dance-temple, something happened to me which was of some significance.

Projection #13:

[image]: Konark Temple Complex



Speech #13:

The following year, the art critic and scholar Hal Foster published his book The Art-Architeture Complex. Two years later, I picked up the 2013 reprint of this book, and within a section titled 'Mediums after Minimalism', I found Foster articulating what seemed to me the anatomy of my experience at the Konark temple back in that December of 2010.

The more precise ramifications of Minimalism, Foster says, are a partial shift in focus from object to subject, or from ontological questions about the nature of the medium to phenomenological conditions of particular bodies in particular spaces. This shift away from objecthood into the phenomenological condition, Foster claims, effectively became the new ground of sculptural art.

In the years since my visit to the Konark Temple, I had begun journeying inadvertently within the aesthetic spectrum of architecture, sculpture and image.

At First by collapsing stage and screen into a composite pictorial frame that variably conceals and reveals the act of dancing.

Projection #14:

[Video]

Something like this (2012)

Performance with single-channel video

Excerpt

Link: https://vimeo.com/42064574



Speech #14:

And then by expanding the pictorial frame to fit to scale into an architectural frame, while doing away with any explicit act of dancing.

Projection #15:

[Images]

Take a look

Installation









Speech #15:

For me this work with the pictorial frame and the sculptural and architectural fields, was very much a work in dance. I believe it was the philosopher Bertrand Russel who observed: "Every language has a structure about which nothing critical can be said in that language". I suppose then that in working with video and installation I seek a second language to perform the task of critiquing dance.

Indeed, distilling the dance has meant relinquishing medium-specificity and absolving disciplinary boundaries in the arts. I have since become an advocate for inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary art practice.

This advocacy has been put to test each time I have sat my baby nephew since he was in his terrible twos. With a gay abandon he plays with theatre, dance, music, painting and sculpture, with no regard for discipline whatsoever. The little boy has made me wonder what it might mean to be an 'indisciplinary' artist.

Projection #16: Baby videos











Speech #16:

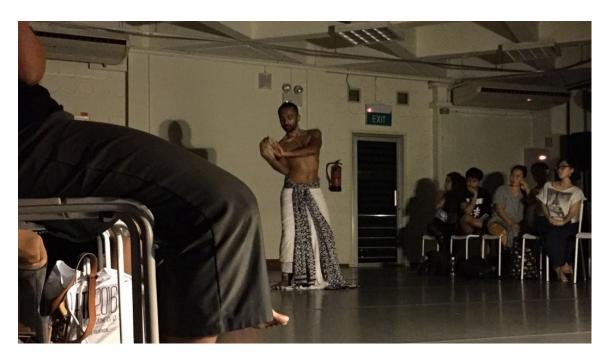
Today I am unhappy, almost disillusioned with the capacity for dance to exist in a theatrical space of performance. For me, dance exists in a sculptural field. And this is an 'expanded' sculptural field in a post-minimalist sense.

And in this expanded sculptural field, I dance slowly. I will admit that there is no invention in dancing slowly. Yet I have found that there is plenty of discovery. Perhaps this is why Eliot wrote:

In a dim light: neither daylight
Investing form with lucid stillness
Turning shadow into transient beauty
With slow rotation suggesting permanence
Nor darkness to purify the soul
Emptying the sensual with deprivation
Cleansing affection from the temporal.
Neither plentitude nor vacancy. Only a flicker
Over the strained time-ridden faces
Distracted from distraction by distraction
Filled with fancies and empty of meaning

Performance #3:

Dance with sarong and sampur



Speech #17:

Earlier this year, while in Central Java, I encountered a minimalism of a very different breed. Now, Indonesia with its busy batik chaos may seem an unlikely site for anything minimum. Yet in the weeks that I spent there, dancing, watching dancing, and dancing again, I witnessed a strange minimalism in Javanese court dance.

My first clue would be my teacher's taunt: "No. Do less." He would say patiently, yet repeatedly. How could I possibly be dancing too much? I thought to myself.

After a couple of weeks, it dawned on me that what was operative here was a subjective minimalism. Not the minimalism exacted by the outside eye, by the objective observer, for this was the breed of quasi-scientific reductionism that I had been engaging in.

No, the minimalism operative in Javanese court dance was subjective, and was self-imposed by the dancer. The Javanese Dancer wraps herself rather tightly in a skirt. She then widens her stance and soon enough her legs are met by her skirt's resistance. At this point the muscles of her thighs and hips relent and rest onto the taut fabric. They sit here for the duration of her dance, and do less.

She also wraps around her waist a sampur, a scarf that hangs to the floor when dropped. She uses the fingers of her two hands to gently pick up the two hanging ends and makes two gestures that both serve the function of holding up the scarf's ends. No gesture is ornamentation. Her gaze is disengaged and tapers into the earth, upon which her feet make slow sinuous motions with the aim of moving forward or backward or simply flicking her skirt's trail behind her.

Kelubabu, as a choreographer you have demonstrated much sensitivity to the female form. Indeed most of your students who have gone on to practice and teach your Odissi are women.

And I was once told, by one of these women, that there was another woman for whom your heart skipped a beat. I recall being told that you would often wrap up rehearsals and make your way to the television set to watch her dance. I smiled gleefully at this trivia, for I too am a big fan of the Bollywood actor Madhuri Dixit. Kelubabu, lest my letter becomes all critique and no play, let me dance for you Madhuri Dixit's iconic item number 'Choli ke peeche' / Beneath my blouse. She sings:

Beneath my blouse
My skirt of silk
This road of dirt
I lift my skirt
I drop my veil
I fail

Beneath my blouse
My two breasts

Within them

One heart

Now you, for your part

Must gamble

Must fail

For superficial symmetries
Belie unequal halves
Of love and loss

Unequal halves

Man and queen

Contaminating binaries

Acknowledging desires

Makes for great love-making

Performance #4:

Dance with sarong, sampur, ankle bells,

Singing:

Resham ka lehenga mera / lehenga hai mehenga mera Lehenga uthake chaloon / ghoonghat girake chaloon Kya kya bachake chaloon, Ramji

Begum bagair badshah kis kaam ka
Badshah bagair begum kis kaam ki
Meir marzi main janoon / Teri marzi tu jaane
Aaye maza phir kaisa pyar ka

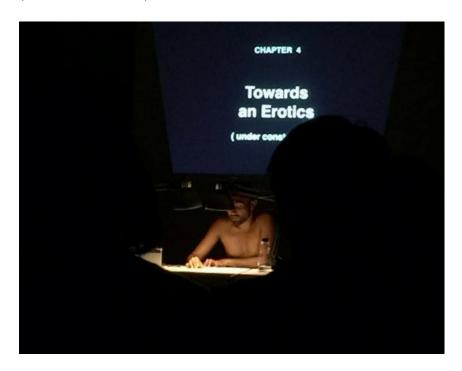
Choli mein dil hai mera / chunri mein dil hai mera Yeh dil main doongi mere yaar ko / pyar ko # Projection #17:

[Text]

Chapter 4

Towards an Erotics

(under construction)



Speech #18:

Each Wednesday in Surakarta, I would go to the Mankunegaran Palace, to witness the open morning practice sessions. Javanese court dance and gamelan music.

What I came here looking for was a certain quality of stillness. I was told to look for it in the female or the soft male. What is a 'soft male' I asked. He is simply male: neither consumed by bestial energy, nor driven by demon desire, nor fortified by female company.

Arjuna is a soft male.

Arjuna?

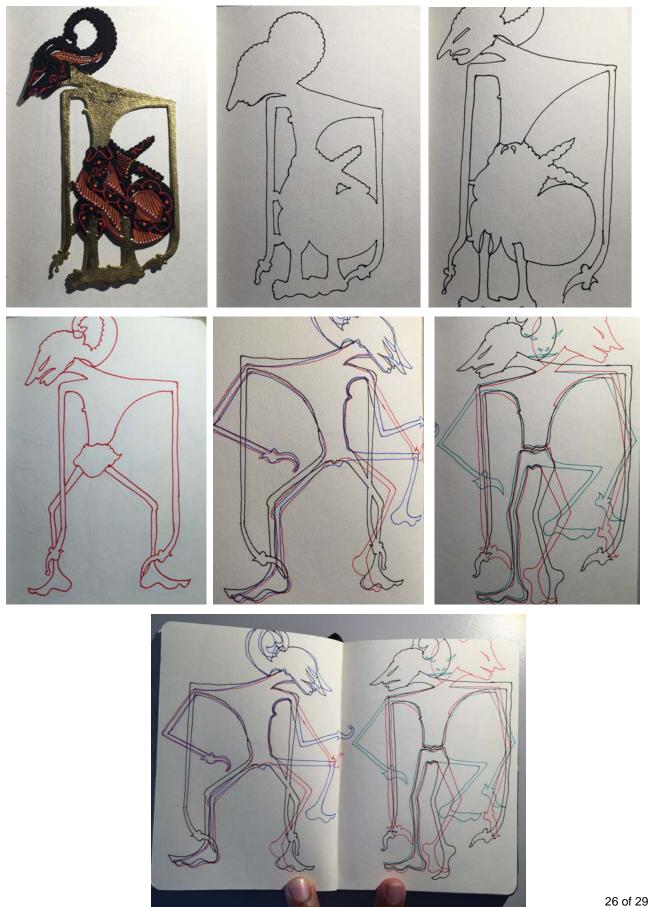
The ace-archer from the Mahabharata?

That warrior prince is a soft male?

Yes. He was skilled no doubt. But he had no attachment to his skill.

On many occasions Arjuna has willingly dropped his virtuosity, stripping himself to a vulnerability: most famously, on the battlefield, to reflect critically on the moral ambiguities of war but on occasion also to drape a skirt and simply dance.

Projection #18: [images]: object to tracing to drawing of Arjuna



Speech #19:

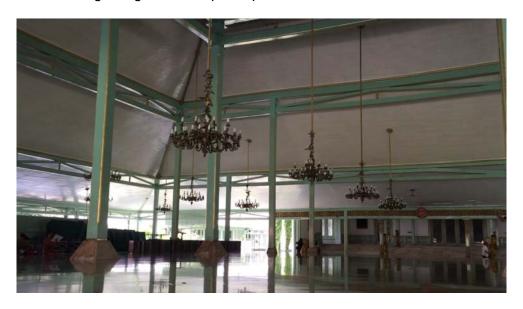
About a year before the war, the epic war of the Mahabharata, Arjuna was put in a position of assuming a disguise so drastic that his adversaries would be unable to locate him. Arjuna sought advice for a suitable disguise. Death, who sees through all disguise, tells him this: Take the form of you deepest desire and you will remain concealed. Arjuna heeds the advice. In order to remain effectively invisible, the warrior prince takes on the form of a dancer. Brihannala. In her he remains effectively invisible.

The dancers in the palace were dancing the female that morning. There were many females aligned in two lines along the central length of the main, open pandapa.

Projection #19:

[image]

Kraton Mangkunegaran main pandapa



Speech #20:

Each female a twin of an other in the opposite line, creating an imaginary vertical mirrored plane in the middle of the space. The clean polished marble of the floor created another horizontal mirrored plane that gave an impression that the females were standing, as it were, on their own two feet. # Projection #20:

[video]

Mangkunegaran Dancers



Speech #21:

In this palace of, by now, doubly doubled females, my eyes were drawn to one in particular: perhaps the youngest of them all. His feet moved on and off the floor with a calculated grace. His knees were bent. This allowed him to move in relative stillness. His head was bent and his face was stoic, almost disengaged. His dance was not one of expression. He was dancing the female as if she was a memory, an involuntary reflex extended in duration through it slowness. It was as though he was trying to freeze her into a stillness, in anticipation that his yet to unfold male adulthood would show little sympathy towards preserving her memory.

Perhaps this was the soft male. An inevitably androgynous figure dancing a lament. I think it was Rumi who wrote that the reed (the flute made out of a weed) is only capable of singing his lament. Lament of separation from the reed-bed, separation from water. As a curse to all men and women who have inflicted upon him this pain of partition, he will offer them not song, but only his cry; the lament of the reed.

It was nearly eight years ago. I was dancing in a temple in Singapore. And after the performance, a woman came up to me. She thanked me for the performance, and said that she really enjoyed my dancing. I must have smiled sheepishly. She then pulled out a boy who was by now hiding behind her, and told me that he was her Son. She said how glad she was that he had had the chance to watch me dance, for its not very often, she added, that one gets to watch manly dancing. I recall that I did not respond to her comment. I recall also that you, Kelubabu, were a gotipua Dancer. I recall that as a boy, you would dress as female and dance.

But in the time since that dance in the temple, I have rehearsed several responses to her comment. In the time since that dance in the temple, these rehearsed responses have transformed through angst and even indignation into hopefulness.

I hope to tell the boy that I have found dancing to be neither masculine nor feminine. Yet, I hope to tell him that, dancing is anything but sterile and secular. I hope that he too will dance, and discover the eroticism of the body-mind becoming a site of consummation. I hope that he too will discover androgyny.

I hope, one day, to be his Mother.
And that night,
as I tuck him into bed,
lean over,
and turn off the lights,
I hope to sing for him
that lament of the reed:

Performance #5:

[song]

Turn off lights, sing softly in darkness

[Nawah-e-neh : Lament of the Reed]

Sun ke neh kehti hai apni dastaan / Dard-e-hijran se hui hai noh khwan Kaat Kar laye nehsitan se yahan / Mard-o-zann meri nawah se khoonchkan Jo bhi apni asal se hoga juda / hoga vasl-e-khish uska mudda Yeh nawah-e-neh usike dum se hai / zindagi ki lay usike dum se hai