

tiltpauseshift

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THE CONTEMPORARY
BETWEEN TIME AND ART OR TIME AS ART?

Sundar Sarukkai

The notion of the contemporary has become an important one across disciplines, but it cashes its full value in the domain of art. While there have been many influential approaches to the question of the contemporary, there has not been a sustained theoretical reflection on the idea of the contemporary in general in the Indian context. There has been some engagement with this idea in Indian art, but it is mostly restricted to the visual arts and little with movement arts. In the Indian scenario there is a tendency to place the notion of the contemporary in opposition to tradition, like earlier oppositions between modernity and tradition. Thus there is a constant slippage of the categories of modernity and contemporary in their engagement with tradition. In this essay I want to approach the question of the contemporary not in terms of debates on Indian art, but through the relation between art and time. Through this approach I will engage with a production by a contemporary dance troupe in India around the theme of time, and use this to understand some ways of articulating the contemporary in the Indian context.

There is a sense of timelessness in the notion of the contemporary. This arises from a perception of the contemporary as the present, or, equivalently, as being in the domain of the 'now'. If the contemporary is defined with respect to the now, then we need to pay attention to the aporia of the now. Even if we disagree that anything done now is contemporary, we need to acknowledge that anything done now is always 'potentially contemporary' – the past has no such potentiality attached to it. Thus the ever-present shadow of the now pervades any idea of the contemporary. The aporia of the now which influences our understanding of the contemporary is simply this: now is eternal (every moment is a now) but at the same time it is always absent since every cognition of the now has become the past. The now creates a three-fold division of time into the past, present and future. Thus, to encounter the idea of the contemporary in art, we first have to understand art's relation with time. Often, this is reduced to a relation between art and history, but that is not really a relationship to time. One of the most basic paradoxes underlying art's response to the question of time is belief in the eternity of art – in terms of its truth or even in terms of its objects. But to be eternal is only to be timeless. I would argue that the practice of 'serious' art always exhibits this tension between timelessness and, what I would call, 'timefullness'. This is perhaps most forcefully exemplified in performance and movement art. This essay will explore these conceptual questions about time and its relation to the idea of the contemporary against the background of an Attakkalari production, *Chronotopia*, which is explicitly about time and the contemporary.

How does the notion of the contemporary appear before us? What do we refer to when we invoke this notion? Is it the present? If yes, what type of present: the present moment in time, the present location, present belief systems, the present state of technology, the present mood? By replacing the idea of the 'contemporary' with that of the 'present', have we captured the semantic space of the former? Very often, we tend to understand the contemporary as if it has something to do with present time: the present 'now', 'duration' or 'epoch', depending on the

thickness of time we may choose. But these are too broad categories and we need to refine this further. One useful way to understand the contemporary is as 'proximate present' – with the proximate being understood as it occurs in the term 'proximate cause'.

The 'present' is like an event. It has many elements associated with it, most particularly the element of time and, within it, the element of the 'now'. Some might argue that we can experience only the present, only the now. Everything else is either memory (past) or fantasy (future). But there is a unique problem about the now – one that influences not only our belief about now, but also about time in general. The basic aporia of the now is that it is never present but is always present. The now is the instant of the present; but even as we utter it or cognize it, it has already become the past and we are in a new now. It is also the now that breaks time into the threefold division which informs our common understanding of time. But once we note that we can never be in the present since a given now is immediately the past, it might seem that just a twofold division is enough: past and future. However, the fact that we are always in the presence of the now, at every instant, recovers its constancy and eternity. Nows are always present, they are always the same, they do not change. In speaking thus it might seem that we are committing ourselves to an ontology of the 'now', as if it is an entity that is eternal but also completely out of our grasp.

There are other ways of thinking about the present, which are not about its relation to time. The present can be understood in terms of action, as against the past (in terms of memory or nostalgia) and the future (in terms of hope and expectation). All actions are in the present and we only act in the present. If the contemporary refers to the present as the space of action, contemporary art is art that makes meaningful action possible in the present. To understand the relation between time and the contemporary, I briefly discuss the relation between art and time.

ART AND TIME

We can see that initial formulations of the contemporary are already immersed in the conceptual world of time. Since the aim of this essay is to engage not just with the contemporary but with the notion of contemporary art, we are forced to engage with the three terms contemporary, art, time. Given the long and complicated relationship between art and the idea of time, we can perhaps consider the notion of the contemporary as a relational term that mediates between art and time.

The real source of tension between art and time lies in the possibility of eternity of artworks. The belief that art (or at least 'great art') endures through time makes the artwork atemporal. When something is stated to be eternal, it means that nothing changes through time, or that time is not a factor for its existence as art even if its physical existence is finite. In this embodiment of eternity, art shares a common space with the ideas of truth and mathematics. In a long tradition from Plato onwards up to the present day in dominant western thought, mathematical truths are presumed to be eternal in that they do not change as time progresses.

58 Mathematical objects are atemporal in that they do not come into or go out of existence. Thus there are no markers of time and temporality in mathematical statements and in the larger mathematical discourse. Keeping time out is another way of bringing eternity in.

In the case of art, a similar preoccupation with timeless art leads to the tension between art and time. More specifically, when the question of art is reduced to not just some aesthetic properties but to certain eternal truths that are captured by art, then that again leads to art being timeless, since truth, or at least some truth, is seen to be timeless. The identification of truth with art, or even the possibility that art can exemplify some fundamental truths, makes the essential element of art independent of time; this is a claim that is found as much in earlier traditions as in philosophers like Gadamer in the twentieth century.

The independence of art from time makes the question of the contemporary quite redundant, since every moment is contemporary as far as truths are concerned. If something is unchanging and remains the same, then there is no past and future that can define the present. The present itself is unchanging, and it cannot be distinguished from other temporal modes when in the presence of eternal, unchanging truths. Thus mathematical truths, like truths of art, transcend the idea of time and, through this, make the notion of the contemporary quite irrelevant. Viewed in this manner, we can perhaps find a clue to the origin of the contemporary as a way of making sense of change in the present. If we do so, then the question of time is derivative, since it may be possible to conceive of change without bringing the question of time into it. This is the reason why when contemporary art is contrasted with tradition, it leads to complications – since if a traditional artwork embodies an eternal truth, then it has already become contemporary and was always contemporary. Thus it is important to understand in what sense the word contemporary is used in conjunction with art.

However, if we leave aside these grand narratives of art and truth, and look at the practice of art, it is the case that over time, art has constantly engaged with various aspects of time, some of which are encoded within its practice. Pamela Lee, in a book titled *Chronophobia: On time in the art of the 1960s*, describes the anxiety caused by time in art practices of the 1960s, and through it reinforces the constant preoccupation between art and time. She notes:

Indeed to survey the art and art criticism of the sixties is to encounter a pervasive anxiety that I describe as chronophobic: as registering an almost obsessional uneasiness with time and its measure. Cutting across movements, mediums, and genres, the chronophobic impulse suggests an insistent struggle with time, the will of both artists and critics either to master its passage, to still its acceleration, or to give form to its changing conditions. (Lee 2004: xii)

This time also presages the changing control and lack of control over time in late modernity and after. With the digital revolution waiting to happen in the wings, the signs of accelerated modernity were already in the air; and it was art that most potently engaged with the new and chaotic formulations of time that were being formed.

59 It is perhaps in modernity that the cultural influence on time can be most forcibly seen. Groys (2009) argues that the present was devalued – ‘seen as something negative’ – in modernity and the emphasis was on the future. He goes on to add that being in the present is a different frame of mind than being in the past or the future. Being in the present is to be in states of ‘doubt, hesitation, uncertainty, indecision’, which lead to the state of wanting to delay and to postpone. One might read this diagnosis as if being in the present is to know that since we are always in the present, there is no really no need to act immediately! This leads Groys to claim that the contemporary is a ‘prolonged, even potentially infinite period of delay’ (ibid.: 3).

Modernity also came with promises of grand projects, of grand ideas. But the contemporary’s concern with the present, with its properties of delay and instability, has also affected the way art is viewed. Temporary exhibits in a museum as against permanent collections, Groys argues, are one manifestation of this shift. Moreover, the engagement with the present in the time of the contemporary has also changed the character of the present; it has become a site which is not just an indifferent medium between the past and future but one that modifies both, and in so doing, negates the essential characteristics of both past and future. This murky present constantly erases and recreates the past, and does not create any future.

As examples, he points to the art practices of the contemporary which are just *about* time, what he calls time-based art, in the sense that they are primarily about ‘non-productive, wasted, non-historical, excessive time’, which are also manifestations of time in action and not about any specific product (ibid.: 6). The excess in time is that which has not been reduced to or absorbed by the ‘historical process’. He also suggests, following the etymology of the word contemporary, that the contemporary should be seen as ‘with time’ rather than ‘in time’; he describes contemporary as ‘comrade of time’, as a friend of time.

Groys’ view of the contemporary is quite in contrast with the idea of the contemporary as it occurs in Indian art practices, where it is dominantly contrasted with ‘tradition’. Geeta Kapur points to this trend when she analyses the contemporary in opposition to tradition, but at the same time points to the different ways of conceptualizing tradition with various art practices (Kapur 1990). She suggests that when placed in contrast to tradition, the contemporary seems to attain a kind of atemporality, although it is not really so (ibid.: 53). Tradition has more than one temporal sense: it can be a signifier of historical time, something in the past; it can also stand for the presence of earlier practices; and, in this mode, it does not exhibit or perform its historical nature. Counterposing tradition with the contemporary may only emphasize one particular meaning of tradition. Welbon’s claim that tradition is always embodied in the person who is personifying or performing that tradition, then, makes tradition always contemporary (Welbon 1986). Moreover, Rustom Bharucha’s argument that tradition is not just a ‘handing over’ but is created should make us consider the possibility that the tradition we create is already contemporary, and that it is the concern of the contemporary that drives the creation of tradition (Bharucha 1989).

In the Indian case, examples of temple art and other ancient practices of art are still part of the 'public art sphere' – a domain that I prefer to see as one in which the public forms impressions on what art is. These artworks are not seen as ancient art but as art in the present, even if we may not like to call them contemporary art. The fact that these artworks are not museum pieces but are part of lived culture implies that they continue to present themselves as art and are received as art, and in so doing, underline the ambiguity between an artwork that is in 'some time' but in its acceptance in the present transcends that time also. Thus, the presence of ancient art forms as a part of contemporary lived culture poses the greatest challenge to formalizing contemporary art in the Indian context. For example, the document titled 'The And: An Expanded Questionnaire on the Contemporary' (2012), on Asian contemporary art, points out to the problem of tradition as a category that gets appropriated by nationalism. Rasheed Araeen suggests that 'when art becomes trapped within a nation state it tends to turn to folk and traditional practices', thereby emphasizing the intricate and complex relationship with tradition pervasive in Asian cultures (ibid.: 13). It is only by bringing on board the various cultural views on time that we can begin to unravel these claims about tradition itself.

There has been a constant change in the way time itself has been understood across cultures and over time. The ideas of time range from seeing it as something static, as something that is constantly and irreversibly flowing in one direction, as something that is the source of creation and destruction, as cyclic instead of linear, as efficiency, as value, as a measure of leisure, as a commodity, as a fiction, as relational, and even as moral quality (in the modernist sense that 'wasting time' is a morally weak act). These varying views on time influence the artworks that are produced 'in these times'. The examples from Groys and Lee discussed earlier are examples from modernity and the onset of the postmodern. But we can extend this to the above theories of time and see how they actually end up describing the art of those times. This is one way to understand the phenomenon of 'being with time' and not 'being in time', mentioned above by Groys.

This relationship between the contemporary and time is sometimes mediated through the self. Anil Kumar situates the contemporary in Indian art by looking at the distinction between the self defining itself (modernity) and articulating itself (the contemporary): 'the relation between contemporary and self lies in the selflessness of contemporary art'. Extending this, he suggests that the moment of the contemporary is a peculiar tension of the difficulty in defining art while at the same time extending art beyond the physicality of the artwork or the artist. Thus he understands the uniqueness of the contemporary in Indian art as a movement from 'self-depiction' to 'self-reference', where self-doubting becomes dominant over self-portrayal (Anil Kumar 2011).

Luc Ferry's interesting discussion on cubism also illustrates another deep engagement not just between art and the phenomenological or even commonsensical notions of time, but with time as understood in relativity theory (Ferry 1993). Cubism captures the perspective of time as a fourth dimension, and in doing so, 'spatializes' time but in a non-spatial way. This

engagement between time as the fourth dimension (as understood in a specific scientific sense) and art, and the impact that such an imagination had on visual art, is a wonderful illustration of a simple point: the theories we hold about time will influence the way we understand art. Different views of time are many times encoded within many different artworks; this makes sense if we understand the implicit relation between art and time. There is really no reason to believe that there is one universal theory of time; thus, engaging with different theories of time actually allows us to understand art across cultures much better.

In the Indian context, the theme of time is of great importance, and it arises through narratives of myth, philosophy, literature and art. It has often been claimed that time is seen as cyclic in the Indian traditions, but this is just one part of the story since many different views of time have been held by different philosophical and artistic traditions.¹ If it is indeed the case that art's relationship with time depends on the theories of time that surround the artist's work, then, one of the ways to understand Indian art is to explore the ideas of time in Indian thought as inscribed in art, rather than make a comparative analysis of forms of artworks without reference to the presence of time in these works. In other words, if Indian art is defined, in part, through Indian theories and narratives about time, how will our definition of Indian art change?

One of the standard ways of reckoning with time in art is through history, and it is no surprise that the notion of the contemporary in contemporary Indian art tries to expand the idea of history in order to capture the spirit of the contemporary. Ajay Sinha (1999) attempts to discover the unique historical element of the contemporary in opposition to the postmodern dominance of the contemporary. He points to the difficulty of invoking the contemporary in Indian art since it is often dismissed as being derivative of the production of the contemporary in dominant western societies. As a reaction, he argues, there are two kinds of responses: the shift to 'eclecticism' and 'alternative modernisms'. While he seems sympathetic to Geeta Kapur's 'dialectical synthesis of history' as a useful counter to certain kinds of representations of the 'third world', he wants to go beyond the specific notions of national identities present in such projects, and, interestingly, ends up with rediscovering the importance of the aesthetic along with the historical. I point to this article primarily to show how the notion of time gets prioritized in the idea of the contemporary, and gets reinscribed through the historical as well as the aesthetic.

In the context of the contemporary, and along this trajectory of art's relationship with time, one might then claim that an artwork becomes contemporary when we bring in a contemporary notion of time to make sense of it. But then, what is the contemporary notion of time: as confused, fractured, as another dimension like space, as something that causes stress? The sense of time 'today' is indeed fractured: we don't have time to view an artwork; we are constantly distracted by the mobile, and the act of receiving, talking and texting; we have no time to travel to a museum (particularly when the original Van Gogh looks far better on the internet than in the museum!). These 'cultural' practices are really about how we measure and value time today, and thus our

notions of time regulate our response to these objects. The 'now' in the contemporary version of time is not the classical instant which creates a trifurcation of past, present and future. Now, the 'now' has no concern about past or future; it is itself unstable, not eternal, since it gets infused with temporality, and all the anxiety and stress regarding time get infused into the 'now'. 'Now' is a moment of stress, it is a moment of action where we do not really know how to act in the space of multiple, divergent and discordant possibilities. Thus we might be able to assert that the way artworks are made sense of and related to in a world of time as stress actually defines the contemporary in contemporary art.

THE CONTEMPORARY: BETWEEN TIME AND ART OR TIME AS ART

Giorgio Agamben, in his much-quoted essay, 'What is the contemporary?', points out that for Nietzsche the contemporary 'is the untimely' (Agamben 2009). In Agamben's words, those 'who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands', and thus are 'in this sense irrelevant' (ibid.: 40). But precisely because of this, he argues, 'they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time' (ibid.). He concludes by claiming that contemporariness is a relationship with 'one's own time', adhering to but at the same time at a distance from it. Thus it is 'that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism' (ibid.: 41). In this sense, being in time and being at a distance from it characterize these modes of contemporaneity.²

Agamben also suggests that to experience contemporariness is not to experience the present as visible but to 'perceive the darkness', 'the obscurity of the present' (ibid.: 44). He makes the interesting observation that darkness is actually a kind of vision (triggered by the 'off-cells') and is not strictly non-vision. Thus, perceiving the darkness of the present is an 'activity and a singular ability' (ibid.: 45). So, being in the present in a contemporary sense is not to be blinded by the presence of the present but to occupy the darkness of the present, or the darkness of our time. He then uses an analogy from physics to suggest that there is light that is striving to reach us from far-off galaxies but cannot reach us. This notion is used primarily to suggest an image of something that is striving to reach us but by its very nature cannot do so – and this he equates with the nature of the contemporary. Thus he labels the present, our time, as the most distant because it can never reach us.

The relationship between the contemporary and the past is that '[C]ontemporariness inscribes itself in the present by marking it above all as archaic' (ibid.: 50). The suggestion that the contemporary adds a specific kind of value to the present which negates the present is not adding much to our understanding of the way we understand the constant shifting nature of the present itself. Moreover, what kind of an entity is the contemporary that it can add such a value to the present? Is this a socio-cultural and/or historical phenomenon? Agamben situates

the contemporary as the inability to ever access the present and thus it is always 'unlived'; this is the 'life of the contemporary'.

Terry Smith, in his response to Agamben's essay, agrees with the larger claim in it that the threefold division of time into past, present and future does not hold any longer, and that the idea of the contemporary 'includes within its diversity many revived pasts and wished-for futures, all of which are being lived out as live present'; this multiple possibility he locates as differing from the modernist preoccupation which emphasized specific linear narratives of time (Smith 2012). However, in making this claim, Smith is conflating the essential characteristic of the contemporary with particular natures of time. So, in essence, what has become contemporary is the current views on time, but this cannot explain the larger notion of the contemporary, particularly in art. Because this also implies that if tomorrow we accept, for some reason or the other, that time is indeed linear and the threefold division (with any necessary modification if needed) gives the best account of time, what happens to the notion of the contemporary as well as its relationship with time? In a sense, the moment of contemporariness is beyond time and yet related to time. It is located within the experience of the subject but is beyond it at the same time.

Smith draws on Jean-Luc Nancy (2010) to make this explicit connection between the contemporary and art. The nature of contemporary art, according to Nancy, is that it is being constantly formed; its definition has to be understood in the midst of its production; it does not refer to all art that is produced today (it has to exclude those that, in Smith's words, are made in 'pre-contemporary modes'); and it does not seem to have any specific 'aesthetic modality' associated with it. Nancy locates the contemporary, then, in the origin of an artwork, since at the moment of its origin every artwork is contemporary with other artworks, and through this relation it brings meanings of the contemporary world to the artist and viewer. But then, since all art has the potential of world-making, what does contemporary art contribute specially to this act?

Nancy places the origin of the contemporary along the historical trajectory from modernity to postmodernity leading to contemporaneity. Following from the postmodern claim of the loss of grand narratives, he suggests that the contemporary arises in the loss of grand narratives about art for artists, leading him to understand the 'question of art' primarily as the 'question of the formation of forms for which no preliminary form is given'.

Unfortunately, however, this captivating play of paradoxes might seem for both Agamben and Nancy, their understanding of the contemporary is only a sign of the contemporary and is not the contemporary itself. Firstly, the invocation of a complex idea through paradoxes – look at their formulations: something that arises in the midst of non-arising, something reaching towards where it cannot reach, finding form without prior form, and such contradictions – is a strategy of the postmodern as much as it is a strategy of traditional philosophical practices, both in Indian philosophy and practices such as the Zen. This way of thinking is itself redolent with modernist logic of the binary, and is seemingly unaware of the more complex multiple

64 possibilities not just in narratives but in logic itself. In fact we can as well use Agamben's term here and call both these attempts mere 'fashion'.

Also, there is much that is unclear in these accounts of the contemporary, least of which is the problematic 'universal' invocation of the idea of time. While there are disagreements as to what might characterize time, common ideas surrounding time such as the notions of presentness, now, threefold division, time and change, being with time, and so on continue to resonate. So it is quite unclear what they actually mean by time and in what semantic domain of time they locate this relation with the contemporary. What is that obscurity of the present that is accessible as the imagination of the contemporary?

Although time is invoked, explicitly or implicitly, in theories as well as in the reception of art, it is not as if there is only one meaning of time or an obvious understanding of time. Right from ancient times till the present, and across civilizations, time has been thematized quite differently. As discussed above, time was understood as a flow, as linear, as cyclical, as a creator and destroyer, and so on. There are two immediate consequences of the multiple ways of understanding time: do these different theories give us different theories of art, as well as yield different relations between art and time? That is, if we hold a linear view of time, would our view of art itself be different from a culture that holds a cyclical view of time?³

LOCATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY

The use of the word 'contemporary' in a phrase like 'contemporary art' does not seek to attain the hallowed grounds of eternity and universal truthfulness of artworks. Almost always, this term is used to invoke a sense of presentness without pointing to the present as such. In other words, the presence of the contemporary is itself an important question about the contemporary. Where exactly is the contemporary to be found in an artwork? Is it another element that belongs to the artwork or is it something that encompasses the artwork? Does it arise within the artwork or outside it, if we want to look at art in terms of this binary?

In other words, where is this loss, these paradoxes of the contemporary, the fractured time, the unstable future – where are all these *located*? Are they located in the artwork or do they arise through reception by the viewers – or in the dynamic relation between them? Does an artist consciously encode these features into her work? If not, does it mean that culture subconsciously intrudes into the artist's mind and influences all the artworks she creates? Within an artwork, are there elements that carry the contemporary – say, the medium, or the costumes, or lighting?

In addition to the conceptual analysis I have described above, another useful way to attempt to answer these questions is to look at what artists and others think about these issues. An interesting article titled 'Questionnaire on the Contemporary', published in the journal *October* (2009), collects responses on the theme of the contemporary from a diverse collection of artists, academics, curators, etc. I will identify a few essential themes around the idea of

the contemporary from these voices. I will then look in more detail at another example: a contemporary dance work titled *Chronotopia*. 65

The editorial in this issue of *October* begins by pointing out that 'much present practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition and critical judgment'; this free-floating signification leads to the incompatibility of using categories like modern, postmodern, avant-garde and so on to describe present work. In order to understand this phenomenon, a questionnaire was sent to critics and curators, and their responses were published in the journal. I will isolate a few characteristics of the contemporary as articulated by these writers.

Bryan-Wilson locates the contemporary through the global economic crisis and understands the contemporary 'in relation to the urgencies of the troubled future' (ibid.: 4). She prefers to dilute the engagement between the contemporary and the past, and, instead, posit the possibilities of the future as a crucial element of the contemporary. In imagining a future, she believes that the inclusive and exploratory nature of the contemporary will be crucially important so that the imagination of the future is not monopolized by technocrats and others. Kester suggests that the presence of artists in the time of their artworks allows for a completely different reading of art history since the artist is available for dialogue with the critic, and that this is an important feature of the contemporary art movement. Kwon suggests, in contrast to the preoccupation of the present in the context of the contemporary, that it is not so since 'the horizon of contemporary art history is in fact the past, not the present' (ibid.: 14). Terry Smith, while emphasizing the multiple and fractured sense of the contemporary, also suggests that there are three sets of forces contending with each other: one, globalization and its consequences; two, increasing inequity across the world; and three, immersion in a powerful and all-pervasive 'infoscape'.

What is very interesting is that in so many articles on contemporary art, the word 'aesthetics' rarely appears! In fact this itself seems to be a sign of the contemporary: where art as an aesthetic domain is not being challenged (as it has been with some earlier movements), but there is an indifference to the question of aesthetics. This indifference to a 'grand concept' is part of the larger indifference to established systems and methods, an instance of the free floatation of the contemporary.⁴ These approaches push for a privilege towards the category of experience over aesthetic qualities that are dominantly located in the ontology of objects. So much so that it leads to comments such as the one by Molesworth, that 'much contemporary art has also forsaken the object for the audience; hence contemporary art's demand for participation' (ibid.: 112).

This discussion is also very useful in order to situate the contemporary in the Indian context. When contemporary art is seen as an indication of a period or of a style that historically arises in a long line of other styles, it is difficult to use this term to refer to art practices which have not been part of the European and 'western' history of art. So, for example, if postmodernism arises after and in response to modernism, and if there is an absence of a similar modernism in the non-western context, then it does not make sense to ask whether postmodernism arises

in India and elsewhere. While these are potential problems for styles characterized by a period, I would argue that the contemporary escapes this problem for the simple reason that the global appears in all these societies in strong measure and thus gives a semblance of some uniformity of experiences, especially those dealing with fragmentation, anxiety, multiplicities and so on.⁵ Thus access to the contemporary is very much a part of other world cultures which are hardwired to each other in various ways, and particularly through global access to technology. So, while the global, which seems to be essentially linked to the notion of the contemporary, seems to be non-located, it is nevertheless the locality of the contemporary and the politics of this locality that seem to be very important for an idea of the contemporary in Asian art – the many interesting responses in 'The And: An Expanded Questionnaire on the Contemporary', mentioned above, are a good example of an expanded conceptual space of the contemporary that is sensitive to the Asian context, and also to understand better the politics of the location of the contemporary.

THE NOTION OF THE CONTEMPORARY IN *CHRONOTOPIA*

Some of these theoretical concerns around the notion of the contemporary can be illustrated through a discussion of a contemporary performance. *Chronotopia*, a contemporary dance work choreographed and performed by Attakkalari Repertory, Bangalore, was inspired by the Tamil epic *Cilappatikaram*.⁶ The common space inhabited by the performance and the text comprises images of space and time with a focus on expressions of memory. Contemporary life is defined through the unavailability of a stable experience of time and space. This instability of our contemporary experiences is often due to the lack of established meanings – sheltered spaces and what they meant are no longer available in the way they had been earlier. The fragmentation of time into the mythological, poetical, scientific, modernist, virtual and so on makes these experiences psychologically unsettling. It is this disruption of the stability of space and time that *Chronotopia* shares with *Cilappatikaram*, at least in the way envisaged by its choreographer Jayachandran Palazhy, and it is also these features that makes this piece consciously 'contemporary'.

Chronotopia is influenced conceptually by specific elements of the narrative of *Cilappatikaram*: for example, landscapes inspired by classical Tamil poetry; images based on childhood memories; creation of a stylized vocabulary that uses different media; 'soundscape' and 'lightscape' as integral parts of the larger landscape; and so on. The installations also succeed in partitioning the stage space into three different layers, seen as three performance spaces. Not only are there three physical spaces on the stage, but these also stand for the temporal dimensions of past, present and future. In the performance, these temporal dimensions are captured by the themes of memory, experience and imagination respectively. Memory is essentially concerned with the past, experience with the present, and imagination characterizes the future. These thematic correlations are an integral part of the story-telling in the performance. Moreover, all the three women who dance in this piece are facets of just a single character.

The partitioning of the performance space on the stage into three has an interesting impact on the way the dancers perceive the audience. Physically, the space is demarcated into three by the use of a gauze screen placed at an angle around halfway of the stage. Behind this big gauze screen is another demarcation indicated by a set of tubelights in a row. So the first physical space is the space in front of the gauze where the dancers are directly visible to the audience. Behind the gauze is the second space, and behind the row of lights is the third space. As far as the dancers are concerned, each of these physical spaces corresponds to specific mental and emotional spaces which they have to inhabit while dancing in that area. Interestingly, the demarcation of space seems to have had a significant impact on the dancers. They told me how when they danced in each of the spaces their emotional states were very different.

Chronotopia is primarily about contemporary women and about the nature of contemporary fragmented time. The main theme is loss; as Jayachandran notes, 'the loss of even our ability to imagine'. The images of this piece as well as the larger narrative are influenced by disturbing events such as wars and conflict, and the onslaught of consumerism which has had an effect on people's imagination and memory. These phenomena affect the world of memories as much as they do the physical world. Memories are wiped out and there is a loss of experience. The dancers had strongly internalized this theme of loss. The three female dancers told me how they ended up crying while rehearsing certain scenes dealing with loss. They felt that the dance piece was a retrospection on loss and the question of time seemed central to the piece. There was a strong engagement with the idea of the past; the past, as one dancer put it, is the time-frame.

One definition of time that arose from this discussion was of time as composed from memories. The role of memory was central to this work since movements were chosen through the agency of memory. The dancers were asked to remember various events and then, through this process, to choose gestures and movements which were then incorporated into the piece. By extracting these memories, the dancers were also trying to recreate their past experiences and place them in a new framework. For Jayachandran, 'Memories are actualized in contemporary framework which is anchored in everyday experience.' One might think that an engagement with memories is only an engagement with the past, and that therefore, in essence, such works come to be placed within the genre of 'tradition' since tradition has an essential relation with the past. However, Jayachandran also notes: 'Contemporary life-situations precipitate these memories.' Thus the contemporary becomes a mode through which certain memories are precipitated.

Chronotopia tries to create collective movements based on memories and shared gestures arising from these memories, rather than only through synchronically shared movements. The performance consists of bringing together the dancers' individual memories and not just individual gestures. Therefore, there are moments in the performance when a dancer or two perform in one part of the stage while other dancers perform a different set of movements in another part of the stage. At first glance this might seem a bit chaotic, in the sense that visually

we have to move from one area to the next and one narrative to the next, not in linear time but in space at the same time. However, what unifies these displacements is the collective memory that is being built through gestures and movements, and it is within this collective memory that the contemporary is present.

Thus, the dancers describe the creation of collective memory as a process which first makes them reflect on their own memory, from which they develop movements. Then they create a collective movement through which they constitute a collective memory. This illustrates a very interesting process of reversal. First, they use memory to create movements for individual dancers. Then they use dance to create a collective dance expression. Finally, they recreate memory (collective memory) from this collective movement. Thus the engagement between memories and movement is very strong in this piece. For example, the dancers strongly believed that movements could be forgotten but not memories. This is interesting since what seems to be primary to these dancers are not the movements in which they are trained but the memories from which they create movements. It is this constant notion of creation that seems to characterize their own understanding of contemporary dance, as against traditional dance in which gestures are given and fixed rather than created at every instant. In so doing, they are dancing not in-time but with-time, and it is their engagement with time that gives the movement – but it is also the loss in memory that gives them a fragmented hold on the present; that is, they dance the contemporary.

For Jayachandran, dance is the 'emergence of a thought before it is thought', and also the 'materialization of time before the movement occurs'. What characterizes such definitions of dance is the impossibility of restricting dance to just a set of movements or a particular performance. Jayachandran's characterization reminds us that a movement is not to be seen as a specific action of the body, because what it is doing is not just showing how the body moves but how time itself gets materialized. Thus, what we are seeing when we see movement is not the embodiment of the dancer but the embodiment of time. Similarly, when Jayachandran says that dance is the emergence of a thought before it is thought, it should remind us that what we see in a dance is the nature of emergence and not the thought (that is, the content of the thought). Thus, what we should be looking for in a dance is not just the content – what the dance says, what it is 'about' – but how something emerges or how something is being said.

As far as the location of the contemporary is concerned, it is useful to understand how the dancers in *Chronotopia* saw their audience. Almost all of them felt that the audience was very much a part of their rehearsals as an invisible collective. They were less concerned with whether the audience 'understood' their performance and more intent that the collective memory which they embodied on stage should be shared with the audience. Thus, what was gathered together as collective memory between the dancers and the choreographer was now available to share with the audience, and through this act they hoped to create a new collective memory with

the audience. In so doing, they were implicitly describing how the contemporary is created. Very often, writers on the contemporary refer to it as if it is a given, as if it has already been created and is in our midst. But this artistic practice points to how we create that moment of the contemporary, a moment which is inhabited with loss – a loss that has no sense of being recouped in any way – but also with a collective sharing of experiences, so that the loss also gets distributed, dispersed and dissipated into collective memory.

CONCLUSION

Chronotopia illustrates the claim about the intrinsic relation between art, time and the contemporary. The loss of the imagination as exemplified in this production is the loss of the future, which gives us a hold on the present and through this creates a sense of the contemporary. The fractionality of time, the chaos of the world around us, the technological landscapes of today, all contribute to the erasure of an imagined future, and that is how we create and remain in the contemporary. Thus the past – which is a problem for modernity *à la* tradition – is a source of strength for the contemporary. *Chronotopia* is about loss, the loss of an imaginable future – a future that could be imagined according to our desires, one that is stable and peaceful. So the contemporary has this double moment of loss: of the past as always, and also of the present. And, given the transience of the present, a total sense of loss characterizes our experiences. And this primary loss – this contemporary loss – is the sense of grounding a hopeful, stable future from the presence of the 'now-s'.

This deep engagement with time and art gets especially pronounced in the time of the contemporary. I would like to think that this time is a 'time full of itself' and not a time that is filled with events. It is the sense of a time that gazes upon itself; that has to reckon with itself, rather than having objects and events to hide within. In this sense, the time of the contemporary is very much like the mind of the Buddhist meditator. I am reminded of the wonderful phrase 'mindfulness', which captures the attempt to be within the mind during meditation. Mindfulness is the state when the mind contemplates only itself, and not the various objects and thoughts that it usually focuses on. How can the mind live with itself, contemplate just on itself? The question about time is the same as that about the mind: is it possible to just live with time, to gaze at time, to be in a state of timefulness? Is it this state that is the essence of the contemporary?

The imagination of time in contemporary dance does not seem to be the threefold division, but more in terms of memory and performance: memory is the past, and performance brings together the present and future. It keeps reminding us that every possibility of the future is inscribed in the present movement, so unless you move one particular way you cannot make the next movement which follows the first. Thus, the mo(ve)ment of the contemporary is not really about its opposition to tradition or the past; it is primarily and essentially a negation of the future, or at least a reduction of the future to the mechanics of the present.

NOTES

- 1 A classical analysis of time in different world cultures can be found in Coomaraswamy (1947).
- 2 Note: this is a view that is focused on who is the subject of contemporaneity. When we ask this question of artworks, what happens to this analysis? What becomes a contemporary piece of art? Does a particular artwork establish a relationship with time through disjunction and anachronism? It may do that by inspiring in the viewer a sense of disjunction and anachronism, but is this what is really at stake in calling an artwork contemporary?
- 3 See also 'The And: An Expanded Questionnaire on the Contemporary' (2012), particularly the Raqs Media Collective panel discussion. The many different responses to the question of the contemporary in contemporary Asian art hide within them a potentially new and interesting conceptual space of the contemporary.
- 4 There are a few exceptions in this collection: for example, Alberro claims that a new philosophical aesthetics is being formed now, and that there is a revival of interest in utopian themes and the idea of beauty. Rebentisch points out that 'the open structure of much contemporary work resonates with a notion of the aesthetic that locates autonomy no longer in certain object characteristics but in the structure of the viewer's reflective engagement with the work, or, to be more precise, with the open question as to what the work really includes on the levels of content and form'. See *October* (2009): 101.
- 5 Although we should note that even the global is not immune to the charms of the contemporary since we could have a notion of the 'contemporary global' or the global in contemporary time. I thank Dhanwanti Nayak for pointing out this difference, but I do not explore its implications here.
- 6 This was performed by the Attakkalari Repertory, whose artistic director and choreographer is Jayachandran Palazhy. In the original production, the dancers were Jayachandran, Rakesh, Hema, Diya and Jyotsna.

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