

# Teaching Dance as a Multi-Spatial/Multimedia Practice: Reflections on Devising Contemporary Dance Pedagogy in University Spaces

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## Abstract

The last ten years have seen a remarkable rise in the number of art and dance degree programs in universities worldwide. This essay originates in my experience of having taught for three years (2019–2022) on an ad-hoc basis at one such program in a private Indian university. I describe some of my pedagogic methodologies and creative teaching experiments devised during my tenure and that were dedicated to questions of space and multimedia in dance and performance research. I examine how these methodologies and experiments were not just creative in nature but also triggered by: a. the output-driven approach of private-university systems, and b. the precarity of my own status as an adjunct teaching faculty and a “contemporary”—by which I mean non-classical, non-traditional—dancer in the Indian context. Dance scholar Janet O’Shea, in her essay *Decolonising the Curriculum? Unsettling Possibilities for Performance Training*, critiques the structure of the university as both “colonial and corporate” (750), and points at its links with the “precarity of neoliberalism” (750). I resonate with O’Shea’s position and acknowledge the neocolonial and neoliberal tendencies of private universities in India that idolize Euro-American university models in their approach to higher education. However, I also argue that these universities, with their advocacy for the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary forms of research, mostly aimed at claiming the “cutting-edge” in the liberal art and education industry, inadvertently generate scope for upsetting the traditional hierarchies and trajectories of dance pedagogy and challenging the exclusive notion of dance itself.

## Key Words

site-specificity, colonial/neocolonial, body-space interface, visual arts

## Introduction

Dance education programs in India are being shaped by two factors, in my view. One is the turn towards the liberal arts that universities worldwide, but especially in the Euro-American context, are taking. And second is the increasing visibility of scholarly discourse and experimental practices within Indian dance that intend to trouble the tyranny of classical traditions in the epistemological and pedagogic frameworks of Indian

dance research. This essay concerns my experience as an ad-hoc teaching faculty at one such program, namely, the dance minor program at Shiv Nadar University. Considering how most Indian dance academics appointed as teaching faculty in university dance and art departments around the world are primarily Indian classical dancers, I would like to flag my case as rare. I situate myself in the realm of “contemporary” dance in the Indian context, which I am framing less as a form on its own and more as a condition reflecting a distance from, but in my case an absence of, the “classical” or “traditional” dance in my practice.

At one level, my appointment was supported by my PhD in theater and performance studies, gives me an edge over several other dance artists in my context (I studied at a public university which, in the context of this essay I argue, still retains some hope for subsidised education in India against the high fee structures being adopted by the newly emerging liberal art institutions). But at another level, I thought of my being hired as a matter of chance because as a practitioner I have trained in “Western” dance forms such as classical ballet, jazz, modern dance, hip-hop, etc; as against a form that may be considered quintessentially Indian or indigenous. For a South Asian dancer, it is almost mandatory to show some connection to classical dance training in their resume to find a faculty position in a university, even when the whole body of Indian dance history rests on criticisms of classical traditions such as bharatanatyam, classifying these traditions as casteist and colonial. In case a performer is trained in Indian folk and tribal traditions, which occupy immense academic attention in university-based research, they may still not be employed by a university. These performers mostly hail from lower-economic and -caste backgrounds, their practices are oriented at survival, and they rarely acquire the kind of artistic accolades and higher university degrees one needs to fit the criteria of university recruitment calls. In this essay, I will reflect on how in my teaching methods I navigate the complexities and limitations of my dance training by seeking an identity-refuge in the term “contemporary.” I see it as an identity-refuge vis à vis a lack of Indian dance lineage in my practice, but also vis à vis the neocoloniality of the Western dance academies and networks in India that I come from. As an artist, I claim the term “contemporary” to identify myself as a practitioner belonging in not one but a multitude of dance vocabularies. In other words, by claiming “contemporary,” I claim a practice

that foregrounds diversity and experimentation in its expression, and envisions alternatives against the hegemony of classical dance ecologies in the local and global arenas of Indian dance scholarship

My key aim in this essay is to illuminate how while teaching a dance minor program that was situated in the context of a visual arts department—that is, the Department of Art, Media, and Performance—I encountered multimedia thought processes and discovered ways that the term “contemporary,” as used in connection with the philosophies and economies of the visual arts, could prompt dance research. With respect to my focus on choreography and composition, I have always been interested in the interspersed of bodies and spaces—an idea that framed the center of postmodern dance in the West (Briginshaw, Banes), and also prevails in the basic definition of “contemporary” dance as bodies moving in relation to their here and now. Teaching in a dance program in the context of a visual arts department encouraged me to interpret contemporary dance not just as an inquiry into multiple dance techniques, but also as a multi-spatial and multi-sensorial inquiry. It encouraged me to evolve my contemporary dance pedagogy into an engagement with media such as camera, site, sound, and text, other than just the dancing body, and through which it would be possible to perceive dance as movement dispersed across spaces as well as split into embodied and disembodied expressions.

In this essay, I attempt to reflect on my pedagogic experiments by assuming two contrasting positions. On the one hand, I problematize the multi-spatiality I seek in those experiments as an example of “creativity in art education” that Jan Jagodzinski critiques as a consequence of “designer capitalism” (Jagodzinski). In that, I describe how this notion of multi-spatiality for me was prompted by a need to produce “visible output” in dance and meet obligations, which university structures, as agents of the global market, can insert into curriculum-building processes. But, on the other hand, I suggest the uncertainties of private university structures as fertile. I argue that these universities may be seen as spaces for what O’Shea calls “unsettling” (O’Shea, 754) the disciplinary boundaries of dance and performance research within the larger framework of liberal art education programs, which can also be perceived as nascent and still emerging.

“Body/Space”: University as the Site of Dance Pedagogy

In the year 2019, when I started teaching dance studies at SNU, I realized I was most excited not so much by the availability of a well-furnished studio in the university,

but by the quality of outdoor spaces I found access to all over the campus. As someone born and brought up in an exceptionally crowded and congested city like Delhi, I felt overwhelmed to have access to the open skies, the lush green lawns and meadows around, the spacious parking lots, the landscape views from terraces, etc. The experience in many ways also became a way to further realize the disparity and privilege based on space and spatial politics in the human society. Briginshaw writes, “I use the slash (/) between body and space to indicate the conjunction of two concepts creating an interface. . . . The conjunction of bodies and spaces is important because it is through this interface, through our material bodies being in contact with space, that we perceive the world around us and relations to that world.” (1) Taking Briginshaw’s argument further, I would say that one’s body too is to be considered a form of space and perhaps the only space one may be entitled to occupy by birth. However, that too, as one may further argue, is a matter of one’s sociocultural and economic circumstances. The labor-class women I get to see sitting on their haunches on the floors of Delhi metro trains, suffer varied forms of social repression as a result of which they learn how to invisibilize themselves and inhabit the least space possible with their bodies in public places. In other words, one’s sense of embodied subjectivity and identity is formed by the socio-political hierarchies of the spaces one traverses. And, as I entered the university, I realized that as much as this logic qualifies the significance of studying dance as a self-standing academic discipline of body and space, it also validates dance as a valuable methodology for university-based research. I realized that the understanding of dance as a research methodology lies in how it can enable the researcher to acknowledge her spatial and sensorial experiences within the network of her research activities involving language and text. In other words, the role of dance is to insist that any academic research is a matter of both bodily and spatial practice.

As a young dance pedagogue, I encountered university as a “site” where the idea of body = / space could be investigated and developed into a formative understanding of dance, without one having to conform to its definitions imposed by forms and categories. I use the word “site” here because I want to invite the reader to perceive university not simply as a “location” but as a set of spatial/temporal, infrastructural, and intellectual dispositions that are distinct from those prevailing in other contexts and institutions of dance, and with which dance may interact constantly to evolve into a multi-dimensional study of human body and movement. In the process of devising my teaching methodologies, I dissected the site of the university into three sub-sites: 1. The architectural sites, which involved the spaces inside and outside of the dance studio to be explored via

an interplay of live performance and video; 2. The space of theory-making or writing as the site of performance, reflection, and documentation of dance; 3. The screen or digital space that emerged as a dominant site of dance for much of university education as a result of pandemic circumstances.

Before I elaborate on these, I would like to discuss the three conditions I needed to navigate to arrive at space/site as my key pedagogic inquiry. One was the structural obligations and conflicts posed by the university system. As much as the university was a site provoking for me philosophical and compositional dilemmas about moving body and space, it was also a site involving logistics and resources that would impact my articulation of these dilemmas into my curriculum modules. The dance minor program that I was teaching in comprised both theory- and practice-focused electives for undergrad students from all disciplines. Most students who opt for these courses are usually absolutely new to the academic discipline of dance with no background of any kind of training in technique, and often only stay in the program for as long as one semester. As a result, I as a faculty was free to design my courses in my own way, but then I would also feel obliged to keep the course content equally accessible for all students. This meant that in order to maintain a sense of democracy in my class, many times I would have to compromise the level and intensity of technique I would teach in my practice courses; while for the theory courses, the number of readings an undergraduate non-dance studies student could sustain also felt very limited. Considering it is not a major degree program yet, I also felt the need to orient my methods towards maintaining decent enrollment in my classes, and generating advocacy for the program in the context of a corporate university mostly governed by an overarching emphasis on natural sciences and vocational degree programs. In addition, my methods were influenced by my adjunct status in the university, which was further complicated by the faculty assessment criteria that private university systems lay out. This, on the one hand, gives students the discretion to assess their instructor (even when they have only remained under her guidance for a short span of three months and for a course they tend to regard as secondary), and on the other, demands the faculty to produce publications and other calculable personal research, in addition to maintaining their teaching and administrative responsibilities in order to contribute to the university's branding/ranking. The collaborations with other artists and scholars that I invited in my courses, were influenced by the department as well as the university's criteria for providing acknowledgement

and funding for such collaborations.

The other two conditions were, the absence of classical dance lineage in my practice, and my training in Western dance forms. As I have already pointed out, these two conditions have led me to seek an alignment with the term "contemporary" in my practice, and which I argue, I was able to recognize and articulate further owing to the location of the dance program in a visual arts department. In my opinion, it is important to trace, in these three conditions, representations of the neo-liberal and neocolonial in the context of dance in India. But I would also alternatively argue that it is these three conditions/forms of precarity that enabled for me a sense of conceptual open-endedness, as well as material and intellectual faculties required to test the boundaries of dance curriculum and cultivate in it a multi-spatial/multi-media pedagogic practice.

#### Teaching Dance in a Visual Arts Department: Constraints and Openings

The dance minor program that concerns this essay holds a singular position in the Indian context, since, currently there are no full-fledged degree programs or departments dedicated solely to dance studies and research in the country. The main degree program of the Visual Arts Department that houses the dance minor is the MFA in Art, Media, and Performance. I believe this particular aspect of the dance program has impacted my premise in this essay at several levels and therefore needs some critical analysis.

Curator, writer, and producer Andy Horwitz in a blog-post titled, "Visual Art Performance versus Contemporary Performance," recalls his conversation with an artistic director who, on this question of the difference between the two kinds of performance, said to him, "The visual arts world hates craft—they're seeking 'authenticity.'" Horwitz explains that what the comment essentially suggested for him is that "when a visual artist stages a performative event it should not have any degree of artifice, that it be perceived as "real." He further argues,

It would seem that they (visual artists and curators) are frequently unaware of—or indifferent to—the fact that there is a long history of performance theory; that theater, and especially dance, have for many years explored issues around presence, embodiment, presentational aesthetics, the observed/observer relationship, the visual presentation of the constructed environment, the semiotics of representation, etc.

I remember a similar conversation I once had with a fellow faculty member in which they had made the same comment, saying that performance art was more "real," and therefore somewhat superior and more complex, than dance. During the time I taught at the department, I remember experiencing a sense of binary between visual art and dance, very similar to the one Horwitz is addressing as "visual art performance versus contemporary performance," the latter of which he sees as being fundamentally rooted in theater and dance. As much as I would feel compelled to interact with visual art theories and practices involving a range of artistic media, so I could situate but also visibilize dance within the larger vision and interest of the department, I equally felt troubled by the limited appreciation and engagement dance received from the visual arts practitioners and scholars. From my experience of having danced in gallery and exhibition settings, I can tell that this issue persists very much at the ground level as sometimes curators and organizers, who invite choreographic works stating their enthusiasm for live body and ephemeral scenarios involving performance, appear unaware about meeting some of the most basic necessities of dancers such as a green room, which they require for preparing and resting their bodies while they are not performing.

As Horwitz points out, visual arts as against dance and theater have been historically focused on creating finished objects for ownership and sale, which well aligns them with the goals of both the capitalist market and the corporate university. For me, as a dance pedagogue recruited by a liberal arts department, the problematics of such a separation between visual arts and dance became apparent when this impacted not only my participation and relevance in the department, but also the amount of resources the university would allocate to the dance minor program so I could aim for it to grow into a full degree program over time. Yet, as urgent as this issue is for me, in this essay, I propose to look inwards and discuss how teaching in a dance minor program in a visual arts department brought me closer to the issues persisting in, as well as possibilities available in, my own discipline, which is dance. I analyze how the department's consistent focus on seeking contemporaneity in its practice-led teaching methodologies helped me to identify the colonial, neocolonial, and capitalist elements in dance, as well as find resolutions in certain aspects of my dance training and situatedness in critical Indian dance scholarship.

#### Lack of Indian Dance Lineage in My Practice

In his essay, "But We Will Not Give Up The Categories! (De)valuing the Categories in South-Asian Performance Traditions" (2022), Brahma Prakash examines a very pressing

issue in South-Asian cultural performances that one cannot overlook in discussions on Indian cultural institutions including universities. He critiques the prevalence of labels such as classical, traditional, modern, contemporary, urban, folk, secular, ritualistic, etc. and argues that "devaluing" these categories must comprise an important step towards "decolonising existing discourses." He writes,

Naming and categorization are some basic criteria through which others are pushed aside. Institutional claims such as your movements are not dance; your rituals are not theatre; yours is song, not poetry, become the usual rhetoric through which artistic and cultural activities are disseminated and dismissed. . . . [C]ultural institutions create a framework in which only individual artists or those trained in "legitimate" institutions are recognized as dancers, musicians, and theatre makers, in a society where marginalized sections remain uneducated.

When I started teaching at the university, I felt constantly alerted by the fact that I could not name allegiance to a tradition or, as Prakash says, "legitimate" institution to justify a sense of cultural rootedness in my dance practice. As I have said before, I had trained in Western dance academies, international dance companies, and open studios, in multiple forms such as ballet, modern jazz, hip-hop, modern dance, contemporary techniques etc, that meant that my practice comprised a combination of Euro-American, elite/urban, and popular dance aesthetics. The real problem though was not just this, but that it meant that one could dismiss my training as "half-baked," something I would hear passingly both in scholarly and artistic circuits of dance. And it is quite true that I am not a "proper" ballet dancer, and neither am I a proper jazz, or proper hip-hop, or proper modern dancer. This in effect means that in the context of university teaching, I cannot claim "expertise" in a single technique, and as a result of that I cannot claim inheritance of a historically approved and institutionalized model of pedagogy.

So far as the absence of Indian classical dance in my practice is concerned, as a critical dance studies scholar I am aware of the relentless labor of resistance that a whole generation of South-Asian scholars as well as artists have invested in calling out the colonial legacy of classical dance traditions such as bharatanatyam. In that, they have strongly condemned the nationalistic procedures comprising the inventions of these traditions that have led to cultural and historical disenfranchisement of marginalized communities (Cherian, Munsu, Basu). Urmimala Sarkar Munsu, in her essay "Becoming a Body" argues, "A body that claims history is not necessarily a historical body" (2). Prakash rightly points out that if South-Asian dance scholars, both



in the local and diasporic networks, want to participate in the decolonization project, they need to take internal structures of colonization in dance such as caste and Hindu nationalism very seriously (Prakash). Empowered by such academic works, as a dance scholar I have never felt bothered about a lack of lineage in my dance in the way it sits next to my academic practice. This is to say that in my theory classes at the university, I could claim an indigenous alignment in the realms of dance history and research by focusing on the works and practices of critical Indian dance scholars and artists who have resisted the dictatorial politics of classical dance. However, the question for me was how would I find such an alignment in my practice classes?

In what he terms as “4D model of decolonization,” Prakash underlines democratization and diversification of art and cultural practices as one of the key nodes in decolonial processes. For him, the separation of dance, music, and theater into individual categories is itself Western, as “in folk forms and popular cultural performances, genres tend to cross over, and maintain more organic links.” As I evaluate my pedagogic experiments in retrospect and think in the light of Prakash’s reflections, I feel I found my answer to the above question, which I may re-articulate as: *How do I find methods in my practice-based teaching with which to participate in processes of diversification of art and cultural practices and align with critical Indian dance discourse?* Precisely in the multimedia approach of my department. Beyond the fact that part of my reason to incorporate this approach in my teaching methods was to strengthen ground for dance research both in the department as well as at the university, this approach that corresponds to the “contemporary” in visual arts discourses directed me to redefine my contemporaneity as an Indian dance artist.

In dance especially in the Indian context, the term “contemporary” is often used simplistically, to refer to one’s closeness to Western dramaturgies and idioms. As against that, in the visual arts “contemporary” signifies fluidity in one’s form and radicality in one’s inquiry. It is a term that any artist may seek to denote their interest and investment in contemporary culture, and therefore may be interpreted as an open-ended unifier. In the words of Mexican curator Cuauhtemoc Medina, “Contemporary art carries forward the lines of experimentation and revolt found in all kinds of disciplines and arts that were brought “back in order” after 1970, forced to reconstitute their tradition” (19). From such a perspective, if one looks for examples of contemporary art in Indian dance history, one notices

how “the spirit of revolt and experimentation” that Medina is speaking of defined the practices of artists such as Rabindranath Tagore, Uday Shankar, and Chandralekha among several others. These artists were never bound in genres and labels, but moved freely across them while pinning their focus in issues of social inequality and modernity. Raqs Media Collective, who describe contemporaneity as a “refusal to historicize” (42), see Tagore’s artistic pursuits involving poetry, dance, theater, and music as an illustration of “de-hierarchization” of time and spaces (48). Chandralekha’s reach across disciplines, as Tishani Doshi writes, “from dance to poster-making to poetry to design to feminism to film” as well as her exchanges with stalwarts such as Vivaan Sundaram, Dashrath Patel, Bhupen Khakhar, John Cage, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and many others of her generation and time have been well acknowledged and documented in Indian art discourses. Recently, at a book discussion of Munsif’s *Uday Shankar and His Transcultural Experimentation: Dancing Modernity* (2023), conversations around Shankar’s “nomadic” temperament as an artist made me wonder if such a temperament also equals the “contemporary,” “transdisciplinary,” or “research”-based, inventive outlook to education that modern universities seek in their faculty.

For my PhD, I studied the artistic practices of Navtej Johar, Padmini Chettur, and Jayachandran Palazhy, and argued how their experiments in testing the spatial and temporal limits of body and performance went far beyond dance and choreography. As I started teaching the dance minor program, I felt it was a moment for me to imbibe the principles of multidisciplinary that I only theoretically discovered during my PhD, into my practice and that through my methods of teaching. What indeed inspired me and brought me to imagine an ideological communion with experimental artists in Indian dance history were the heterogenous practices of both faculty and MFA students at the department. As I observed them engaging with film, photography, performance, movement, object art, text, painting, and curation with equal rigor, I could comprehend the relevance of “collage principle” that Garoian relates with the values of dialectics and paradox in art education and that is visible in contemporary practices of dance both in India and the West. I understood my position as that of a researcher-pedagogue and found many foundational questions to investigate such as: Is the true ethic and aesthetic of contemporary dance about crossing the boundaries of dance itself? Is dance, as I know it, an exclusive canon of knowledge? How must it go beyond the totalitarian labels of technique and

become a process of democratization in education? How does it not remain a divisive discipline but a facilitator, or as Anna Morcom writes, a kind of “performance methodology” (Morcom in Prakash, 2022) in inventions of new forms and inquiries?

#### My Training in “Western” Dance Techniques

Responding to the discussions on categories and decolonization in dance curriculum, O’Shea argues that in order to truly decolonize, “histories of global circulation” (756) in dance have to be acknowledged so that the intercultural complexity of the incubation and proliferation of dance forms is not reduced to their “geographical nomenclature” (757). With regard to her location in the American context, here O’Shea is problematizing the categorization of South-Asian and African dances in American university curricula as “world dances” (756) as against white-Western forms such as classical ballet and modern dance that continue to be perceived as the “norm” (756-757). If I speak from the purview of my dance training, I see a reverse of this binary in the Indian context. Here, the South-Asian dance, especially the classical forms, represent the “norm,” while what gets taught in the Western dance academies, very popular and widespread in metropolitan areas, represents the “world” or “international” dances. These Western dance academies started to appear on the Indian dance scene around the 90s with the trends of liberalization, privatization, and globalization. Despite having exposed a whole generation of Indian dancers to forms such as classical ballet, hip-hop, modern dance, jazz, etc., they have received very limited attention in ethnographic and scholarly writings on Indian dance. I too trained at one such academy, and even danced as a repertory company member before I left it to explore dance and choreography residencies, and freelance projects.

In my analysis, there are two contradictory aspects to these academies that I would like point out. On the one hand, these academies need to be acknowledged for generating alternative spaces as much as a level playing field for dancers from across diverse class and cultural backgrounds, while equipping them with a range of skill sets to survive as a professional dancer. On the other hand, these academies very well exemplify what O’Shea describes as “neo-liberal systems in which profit is pursued at all costs” (753). It is very easy to see these academies optimizing dancing bodies as resources, and operating on the hyper-capitalist logic of labor, which involves underpaying their dance-employees while expecting from them prolonged hours of commitment. In my experience, these academies really put to test the illusionary ideal of “rooted-ness,” commonly

and uncritically associated to dance training, as most dancers cannot sustain themselves in these academies, both physically and economically, for long enough to stay dedicated to their training years. As a result, they fall into what I term a “freelance” project-based model of dance economy, which means staying employed through annual-day choreographies in schools/colleges, short-term commercial events including projects in Bollywood, and dance residencies and choreographic works in the circuits of experimental dance. And I must add here that given the precarities of this project-based economy, a chance of claiming the dignity of the “artistic” as well as “personal” is what some of us, who continue to inhabit this economy, tend to seek in the term “contemporary.”

When I started teaching in the dance minor program at SNU, I felt there was value for me in both these aspects. I had at hand my exposure to various physical approaches so as to bring my students to reason with the fundamentals of dance and movement, and not simply clone a particular technique. And then, I had my experience of dancing across multiple kinds of spaces and social contexts, as a result of my situation in the freelance dance economy. As a dancer, I have been part of several projects that have attempted to bring dance outside of the elite and exclusive proscenium settings and studio/art gallery contexts, into popular/public spaces such as flash mobs in the malls, reality TV shows, corporate sales events, musicals, and many times onto the streets. In the context of a visual arts department, education was perceived as dispersed across spaces outside of classrooms, and artist studios encouraged me to notice the value of the existing multi-spatiality in my practice and embrace it into my teaching modules. During the MFA project-room discussions, I remember relishing the practice of walking together as a group with other faculty and the students, and locating these rooms across university spaces. I felt there was a sense of both conceptual and physical mobility integrated into patterns of teaching and learning, which, for a discipline conventionally dedicated to the notion of movement such as dance, must be thought of as indispensable. Inspired by such practices, I decided to foreground the idea of site in dance as my most immediate pedagogic inquiry, and devised as part of it certain artistic/pedagogic experiments with my students. I discuss some of those experiments in the following section.

#### Disintegrating Dance: Generating Form through Site-Specificity

In the West, the concept of site-specificity in dance first became visible in the 1960s and 70s with the works of choreographers such as Trisha Brown, Twyla Tharp, and Pina Bausch, among others. These works were also seen

to be exemplifying conceptual and material overlaps between disciplines of choreography and visual arts (Rosenberg). For me, as valuable as the site-specific interventions of these artists are, one cannot overlook how innate site-specificity is to the dramaturgy of folk, ritualistic, and protest performances. While teaching in the dance minor program in the context of a visual arts department at SNU, I rediscovered the significance of site-specificity for my artistic teaching practice. I started to perceive the university as a “site”—a site of embodied action and sensorial learning, as well as a site of critique vis à vis prescribed spatial/temporal aesthetics of education. As I have mentioned previously in this essay, I saw the university as representing three kinds of sites, which I elaborate as follows:

University as “Architectural” Site: Experiments with Camera and Sound

Here I describe the two site-specific experiments I created with my students for a practice course, *The Dancer’s Body*, which I taught in the monsoon semester of 2019. One was a site-specific video-work titled *24 places = 24 traces*, and other was a live performance titled *Setting #24* by Marcel Zaes. Both the works were shared at the end of the semester as installations within the frame of an exhibition titled *The Dancer’s Body*.

### 1. *24 places = 24 traces*, A Video Installation

I choreographed and filmed this video-work with the students at varied indoor and outdoor sites inside the university. The film did not have a sound of its own but was projected next to a sound installation comprising a few compositions by visual/sound artist and scholar Marcel Zaes. Both the video and the sound did not have a clear beginning and end, and were intended as durational/immersive works (played on a loop of 29 minutes for 6 hours). This meant that the audience could enter and exit this video-sound installation any time they wished, and were encouraged to find their own connections between the two. There was a curatorial note kept next to this installation that said: “Through the making of the video, some of the questions that the students have attempted to contemplate are: Who moves us? What moves us? Where do we locate movement?”

My process of building the vocabulary for the video-work involved teaching the students both inside and outside the studio. In the studio, I remained focused on introducing to the students basic principles of dance and movement, comprising a very simple warm-up involving pilates for muscle strength, balance, and

flexibility, and sometimes beginner-to-elementary level dance routines choreographed from a mix of ballet, jazz, and contemporary floor techniques. As a study of body alignment, we would improvise on everyday/pedestrian movements—walking, standing, sitting, lying down, and getting up from the floor—and through that bring attention to the connection between the feet and the floor, or the spine and the flatness of the floor or the wall, impulses of weight shift, and responsiveness of the body to other body’s gaze, rhythm, and presence. This study would become more complex as the semester would progress and we would become aware of the role singular body parts play in initiating and facilitating a movement, the body’s relationship to speed and sound, and the connection between presence/performativity and spectators.

While teaching these undergrad students, most of whom were non-trained dance enthusiasts, I became observant to the diversity in their body types, their corporeal conditioning, and their aspirations vis à vis dance that was really hard to contain within a studio space. Despite an effectively non-hierarchical space that a dance studio offers to learning (as compared to the usual classroom spaces made of a raised platform for the teacher and desks kept at a lower level for the students), its flat architecture does not allow for explorations and projections of varied body alignments and physicalities. In the studio, one is the agent/initiator of one’s movement, which can be extremely intimidating for non-trained dancers. It takes a long process of training to arrive at an impulse/inner motivation to move, to dance—that is if we are speaking of those dance and rhythmic practices that are distanced from one’s very specific everyday sociocultural practices. These thoughts led me to invite the students to improvise outside of the studio, at sites such classrooms with benches, staircases, foyers, lawns, roads, and parking lots where they would put to test their studio-based training, learn to make impromptu choices with their bodies, and encounter more vocabulary evoked by the shapes and contours of these architectures. I observed how dancing site-specifically helped the students grasp many fundamental questions pertaining to gaze and presence, questions pertaining to whether or not certain movement is a stimulus or a reflex to another body, and helped them absorb the important play between individual and collective rhythms.

On the day of the final shooting, I witnessed how the boundaries often perceived between the rehearsal space and final performance, or onstage and backstage, felt dissolved. I could sense a lot of playfulness and ease

in the bodies, more creativity in individual decision-making, and a more compassionate than competitive relationship amongst the co-performers. With an intention to keep the bodies focused, as well as a sense of improvisation alive, I decided on shooting the video over a single day with least number of retakes. So the filming took the form of a somewhat final performance in which the camera person, co-performers, passersby, and I, turned into a group of spectators contributing to the unfolding of the performance in varied ways. In this sense, I propose to think of the final display of the work on the day of the exhibition as a post-performance space, which, I believe, is an extremely crucial space in contemporary dance and choreographic practices. Given that most contemporary choreographies seek a critique of narrative through processes of abstraction, this post-performance space can be perceived as a space where such abstraction can be deconstructed and its meaningfulness consolidated.



A screen shot from the video-work *24 places = 24 traces* (2019). At Faculty Housing Parking Lot, Shiv Nadar University.

### 2. *Setting #24*, a Live Sound-Movement Installation by a Marcel Zaes

Unlike the video installation that was displayed on a projector inside the studio, this was a live performance set on the library lawns. *Setting* is originally conceptualized by Zaes, who brings together an ensemble of performers and non-performers alike to record pieces of everyday sounds on their phones, or other recording devices, and hold those as “sound objects” while they perform simple movements such as walking and standing still. The work is performed at various sites (parking lots, playgrounds, streets, etc.) that Zaes calls “found stage” and is documented into a series titled *Setting*. As part of our creative process, the students first received written instructions from Zaes on how to record the sounds and turn them into a score of 1–2 minutes. Next, we held studio rehearsals so the students could understand

how to connect with each other in space. And then the work was performed live on the day of the exhibition in two slots—one in the morning and other in the afternoon.

My key intention to invite this kind of performance art model that was easy to execute and involved building a relationship across moving body, sound-making, and site was to provide for the students a comfortable and playful performative space in which they would not feel pressured by a spectator’s gaze. As we discovered during the moment of its performance, the work was able engage passersby not simply as spectators but as participants. The audience that gathered around seemed much interested in entering the installation, holding sound objects in their own hands, and walking and interacting with the performers during the performance. Sometimes there were smiles exchanged, other times there were a few collisions, all of which came together to spell out the very valuable fragility of the work. We saw the work transform the relationship between the spectator and the performer as, after a point, it became hard to tell who was who.

The documentation can be viewed at: <https://vimeo.com/388585482>

For me as a pedagogue, the achievement of both these site-specific experiments lies in how they could function as alternatives against the tropes of beginning-to-end finished dance pieces, and encourage the students to stay in the mode of improvisation and exploration. In both these experiments, I sought to critique the black-box/white-box aesthetic of contemporary dance that projects moving body as space neutral—as if it is nowhere—and in that, renders her identity neutral. I, instead, hoped for my students to find through my processes a sense of “place-ness” (de Certeau 117) and belongingness within the university. By positioning myself as a composer-pedagogue, I learnt that any sense of fidgetiness or expression of lack of surety in the body was what required a careful calibration and curation, almost to be valued over and above the codes of the forms and “correct” posture that tend to take away from the body her sense of vulnerability and humility. There is something deeply moving about watching a body slowly and precariously arrive at her individual moment of balance and breath in her process of finding her place in an ensemble/collective. The sense of rootedness or place-ness, in the context of contemporary dance training that employs multiple forms and ethics of dance, therefore comes from striving to stay fully attentive and alive to each and every shift in the body as well as to the surrounding space. If the students can learn how the invitation to move is external to their bodies, something that their bodies need to speak to or surrender to, then they know dance is not about self-indulgence, just as self isn’t



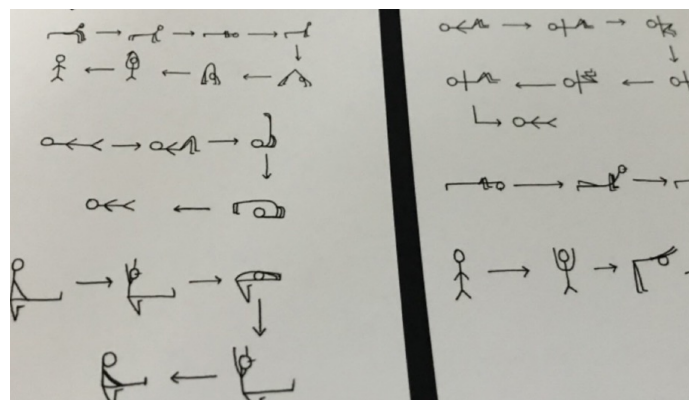
about itself anymore but a variable vis à vis the external other.



Setting#24 being performed at Library Lawns, Shiv Nadar University (2019). Image credit: Ajay Bahal

#### University as a Site of Theory-Making: Text as Performative Installation

A third installation that was displayed as part of *The Dancer's Body* exhibition was a handbook titled *Textualising Dance*. This text comprised excerpts from student journals printed on A5-size sheets tied together with jute threads. For an inquiry based in movement, language is the most inevitable question to investigate. This is simply because movement and language comprise the two primary modes of human existence that interact with each other as much as destabilize each other's relevance. With this understanding, I encouraged my students to maintain a journal throughout the semester in which they were to record their insights and experiences from their movement sessions with me. While writing these journals, students were encouraged to think of the self and the body as separate and through the process of writing arrive at an understanding of how and when the two meet in dance. In other words, they were encouraged to seek a balance between an objective way of treating the body, as if in a laboratory, and a subjective way of orchestrating the emotions and sensations that emerge while dancing (Chettur). My intention behind inviting the audience to engage with short phrases and sentences from these writings was to make the whole process of "the dancer's body" more transparent and graspable for them.



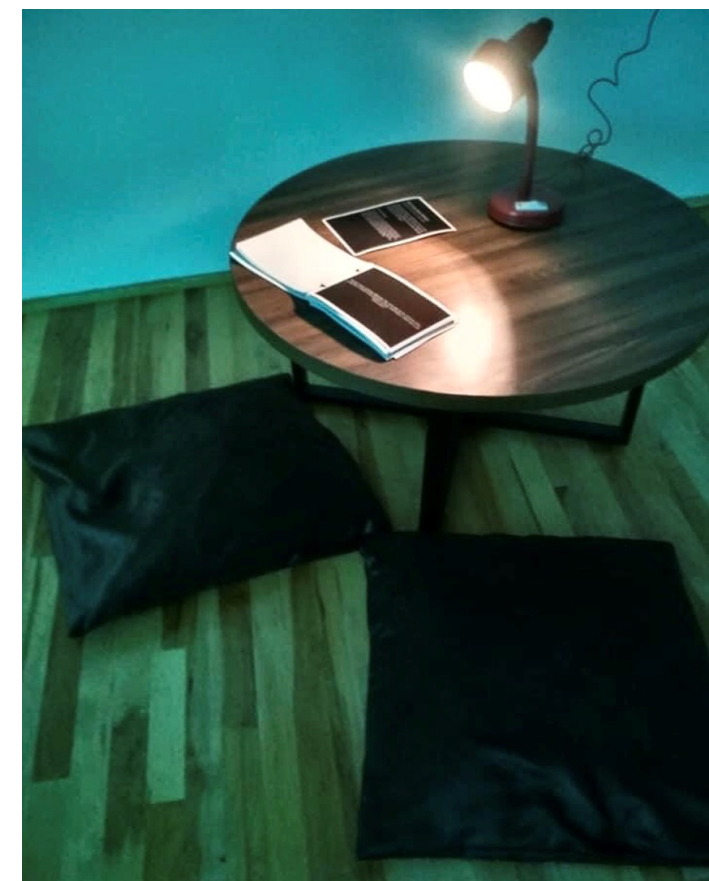
An image from a student journal (2019). Image credit: Ragamalika Muraleedharan. Shiv Nadar University.

In order to provide them the vocabulary, methods of reading and reflecting, focus areas, and a sense of ethics that they would require in this writing process, I inserted into my modules lecture classes in which I would introduce the students to academic essays from dance history, dance philosophy, theater and performance studies, and visual art. I would also ensure the students were exposed to the extensive interconnections these disciplines have with social science and humanities disciplines such as history, sociology, critical theory, gender and feminist studies, political philosophy, cultural studies, anthropology, to name just a few. In addition, the students were invited to engage with dance and performance films, video documentations of choreographies, artists' talks, etc. which I felt could be a way for the students to learn articulation through affective and visual means.

At the center of this whole process was my aim to dissolve the dualism of theory and practice, to emphasize that neither is to be considered a "privileged place of critique" (Klein 7). I wanted the students to imagine this journal writing as an artistic practice that involved not simply reproducing a learnt concept but devising theory; and supported by this logic, to perceive the university as a site where the meaning of theory could be aestheticized and diversified using the experiences of the body. Many critical Indian dance scholars have recognized that the hegemony of classical dance over other performative practices, especially those of the marginalized communities, is centered on the institutional credibility it is attributed through the means of dogmatic Hindu scriptures such as the *Natya Shastra* (Prakash, Munsli, Coorlawala). Therefore, it was important for me to generate in dance a space where students can assume a sense of agency vis à vis text, witness it become both relevant and irrelevant over time, and relate it to critical thought and reason. Apart from writing, students were encouraged to engage

with drawing and sketching, and understand how text could be developed into a compositional tool and a performative object.

This is to say that just as much as there was a focus on investigating the form of the moving body, there was an equivalent focus on studying the poetics and forms of text and theory. In my observation, this process availed for the students an alternative and emancipatory site of performance, as I saw many of them finding this medium of expression safer for themselves than their own bodies.



*Textualising Dance* displayed at *The Dancer's Body*. Dance Studio, Shiv Nadar University. Image Credit: Ajay Bahal (2019).

#### University as a Virtual Site: Deriving Embodied/Disembodied Expression through Collaborative Pedagogy

Once the dance education systems were hit by the pandemic, the key question that emerged was not so much *How to continue to dance?* but rather *How to continue to dance together?* For universities, the most important value of dance education must lie in how it generates a space of learning that brings focus to an embodied sense of interdependence. And, with the classrooms/studios

turning into digital spaces, it was exactly this sense of interdependence that we as dance pedagogues had to find a way to ensure for the students. The crisis also represented a disintegration of both body and the university from physically coherent units to multiple and incomplete digital fragments. I felt it was very important to foreground this thought into my teaching methods and benefit from the porous boundaries that art disciplines and education spaces had acquired during this time through digital means.

The two studio courses that I taught for this one year starting August 2020 until April 2021, were *The Dancer's Body*, and *Movement and Meaning*. For both the courses, I decided on a dual methodology, part of which comprised focussing on learning movement through solo improvisation, and the other part, foregrounding making/composing through collaborations. The former in effect meant, I had to figure a way to value the diversity of spaces I was confronted with through the tiles of the Google Meet window, in which each student projected their respective domestic circumstances. Some had access to considerably large rooms with posh décor around, while some could hardly manage a corner. What was instantly clear for me was teaching a uniform technique would only mean devaluing the rich dynamics and prompts of such diversity. Improvisation methods made most sense in which I would introduce in class a simple physical impulse (a very brief instruction such as explore what the tip of the head rolling on the wall would do to the rest of the body), which the students would elaborate by interacting with the curves, hollows, textures, and, surfaces that were available around them. During this process, what was most interesting for me to witness was how sometimes the most congested spaces brought out the most engaging interweavings of the body and space, which very large spaces could not. That dance did not always require seamless and perfectly aligned spaces with sprung floors. It meant more the ability of the body to navigate abrupt, uneven, rugged spaces that physically reflect the paradox between obstacles and solutions.

For the latter, that is the collaborative methodology, I invited a couple of my artist and scholar friends to organize with me a structure similar to a virtual residency for the students. This unfolded as the following:

#### 1. Across Time Zones: A Collaboration with the Students of Williams College, USA.

During the monsoon semester 2020 when I was teaching *The Dancer's Body* to a new batch of students, I got invited for a collaboration by Prof. Shanti Pillai at Williams College in the United States (Williamstown, MA). Pillai proposed to bring our students to work in direct collaboration with each

other, and we organized a total of 23 students from *The Dancer's Body*, to team up with 20 students from the two courses Pillai was teaching, namely, *The Art of Playing: Introduction to Theater and Performance*, and *Global Digital Performance*, and through this bridge to encourage them to co-create with their international partners short films based on their reflections on the pandemic. Apart from Pillai and me, the collaboration was led by one of Pillai's colleague at Williams, Prof. Amy Holzapfel, and my friend Marcel Zaes from Brown University. Since Zaes was not directly teaching the students, we invited him to deliver mentorship lectures involving a couple of sound and digital media workshops for the students to equip them with technological tools they would require in such a process. He also held one-on-one discussions with the students to give them feedback on their works-in-progress.

Conceptually, the collaboration, on the one hand, was meant to emphasize the unique chances the pandemic had created for cross-border interactions, and on the other, to think through artistic ways of how the loss of physical intimacy in the current circumstances could be tackled and resolved via exploring forms of digital intimacy. Through the multimedia and multidisciplinary methods of communication with their collaborators who, very valuably, came from varied languages, races, and ethnicities, students were encouraged to notice how their circumstances were disabling and enabling at the same time. The students were given about two months to create their works, at the end of which we held a brief Zoom sharing to facilitate engagement with an audience for the students. We got to see how students had experimented with a range of forms such as animation, sound art, storytelling, political activism in the arts, choreography, text, to name a few—which exemplified Garoian's "collage principle," and thus, embodied as well as disembodied ways of artmaking. A compilation of all the works by Prof. Pillai can be viewed at: <https://vimeo.com/543208412>

## 2. Care Index Project with Alecia Neo:

I met Alecia Neo—a Singaporean artist, who works on communitarian projects—at a virtual conference in July 2020. At that time, Neo was in the middle of her project Care Index as part of which she would collect via open calls "diverse gestures of care performed by people from all walks of life, sharing states of well-being with the audience." In the summer of 2021, for my course *Movement and Meaning*, I decided that for the collaborative component of the course, I would direct the students to create individual films based on the

concept of care/exhaustion, for which I organized their weekly virtual workshops with Neo. In these workshops, we would together to arrive at embodied gestures of care that Neo would weave into a prolonged score and perform at the final sharing of her project. Based on these workshops, the students were encouraged to build their individual films in their respective pandemic environments that would be published on Neo's website. The students also had a chance to receive virtual workshops and one-on-one sessions with UK-based independent choreographer Marina Collard, and Delhi-based dance-film artist Sumedha Bhattacharya, who had been generous enough to join us on my invitation. My key intention in this collaboration was to avail the students of an experience of how the notion of "care" (Basu) that had become so prominent in the context of the pandemic, could be employed to author their own dance vocabulary. It was to emphasize an understanding of dance as a social practice (Millard) that could transform the space of education into a space of caregiving. The whole process is available for viewing on the following link: <https://www.careindex.net/programmes/dance-nucleus-element-residency>

### Conclusion:

In this essay, I have attempted a non-binary critique of the ongoing corporatization of art education in the Indian context. To think in a non-binary way about this issue is important for me considering my precarious situation of being an artist and pedagogue subject to the overarching sociocultural, political, and economic precarities of contemporary times. My perspective emerges from my disciplinary knowledge of critical dance studies and pedagogic experience of teaching in a dance minor program in a private university. I have addressed how private universities in the Indian context need to be acknowledged as agents of the competitive capitalist art market, yet the true political relevance of these universities lies in how, with their expansive infrastructure and emphasis on transdisciplinarity in higher education, they can operate as disruptive forces and destabilize traditional power hierarchies and divisions in the arts.

Considering the high-fee structures of these universities, one cannot overlook the claim that these indeed are elite institutions, in which most students come from high-class backgrounds. These students often aspire to acquire higher degrees from Euro-American universities that are often glorified in the private university networks. Hence, as a dance pedagogue, the questions I was constantly confronted with were: What is the gap

between the indigenous concerns that exist on ground and the popular representations of those as claims in the Global South that the students need to be acquainted with, if their aspiration is to study in the Global North? How do I navigate this gap as their teacher? How do I process this gap in my own academic and dance training? I have demonstrated in this essay that teaching dance through a multimedia/multi-spatial approach that prevails across Indian dance history, visual arts, and contemporary artistic practices in dance, turned out to be my pragmatic and creative solution to these questions.

One aspect that distinguishes private universities from public is that they provide wide discretionary powers to their individual departments reasoned on the logic of their expertise and knowledge of disciplinary requirements. I have therefore tried to reflect extensively on my position of a dance pedagogue teaching a dance program within the framework of a visual arts department. I have argued that while I found myself often troubled by the disciplinary boundaries that are perceived between dance and visual arts, the very precarity of my situation also gave me a sense of freedom to design my curriculum as creatively and critically as I wanted to. It helped me identify the colonial and neocolonial forces in dance, deal with the scatteredness of my own practice, and allowed me to equate the notion of contemporaneity in dance with the transdisciplinarity of the moving body. I learnt that for me, the true ethic of contemporary dance pedagogy lies in encouraging my students to stay as diverse and nomadic in their inquiries as they can, without ever imposing on them the obligation to commit to a certain genre or category.



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- i Urmimala Sarkar Munsi uses the term "cloning" with reference to the idea of sadhana or dedication to technique as persists in classical dance forms (Munsi 4).
- ii Priyanka Basu argues, "A critical pedagogy framework informing Indian 'classical' dance is a possible first step towards humanising a practice that can teach care-work as an important lesson to the learner."