

## Reorient the Orient: A Case Study<sup>1</sup>

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My recent performance/installation, entitled *Reorient the Orient*, is an 8-hour durational exhibition examining my own archive of thirty-years of artmaking within the history of representations of South Asian performers on Western stages.<sup>2</sup> This article touches on multiple sections of the work as a means of expanding the discourse on how South Asian dance exists in the diaspora. Within this context, I speak from an artist's perspective, employing an episodic accrual of images. I am valuing artmaking as primary research and advocating for art's capabilities, on its own terms, to describe and express how we do what we do in the world.

Within *Reorient the Orient* dancers, videos, archival materials, rugs, sculptures, neon yellow wiffle balls, the headpiece from an elephant costume, among other items, all invite the audiences to make their way through the entire space, choosing where to be, and what to see. No person will see it all. This is purposeful. The audience can stay as long as they like and arrive whenever they wish. The multiple rooms and simultaneous events are a nod to the politics of partiality attributing it to Donna Haraway as a statement in opposition to singular comprehension and identity.<sup>3</sup> While the audience has access to the installation in the theater and gallery for the full eight hours, the performers do kinetic scores on a loop in a two-hour durational format. The work is intentionally modular, with multiple episodes, live and mediated, that overlap, dovetail, collide, avoid, and intersect each other.

How does my project enter the transnational hierarchies of form and social expectations that have historically categorized South Asian dance in the diasporic setting of the United States? The impact of historical figures is a key thread in the work. Ruth St. Denis lurks, but mostly through the legacy of my 2013 piece *Ruth Doesn't Live Here Anymore*.<sup>4</sup> The more immediate conversations are with Uday Shankar, Ram Gopal, and other figures who laid the groundwork for the potentials and possibilities available to South Asian performers

on western concert stages and are featured in the exhibition. In my recent article, *Uday Shan-Kar and Me: Stories of Self-Orientalization, Hyphenization, and Diasporic Declarations* (2023) Uday Shankar is discussed quite thoroughly, as such in this context, I will focus on the parts of my overall project that directly intersect with Ram Gopal's legacy.<sup>5</sup>

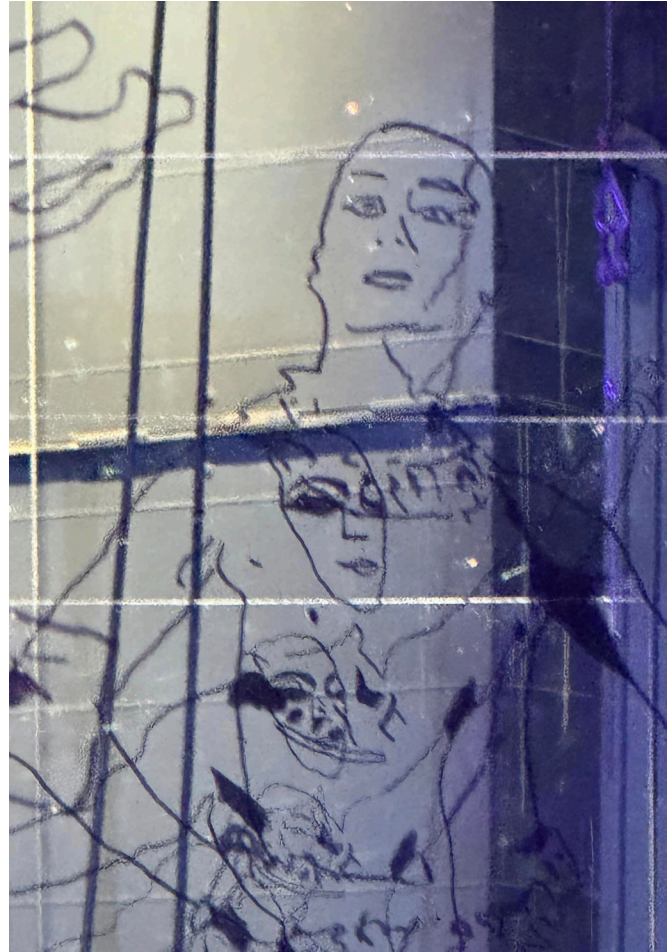
For context, I offer a brief biography of Ram Gopal and draw some comparisons between Gopal and Shankar.<sup>6</sup> Ram Gopal was probably born in 1912 in Bangalore, but there are conflicting reports. He definitely died in 2003 in London (citation source). He arrived on the international dance scene in the late 1930s, about a decade after Uday Shankar did. Gopal was frequently compared to Uday Shankar, and they shared many commonalities. Both were of mixed heritage. Shankar's father was Bengali, and his mother was from Rajasthan. Gopal's mother was Burmese, while his father was an Indian Rajput according to the literature. Unlike Shankar, Gopal was extensively trained in what was then becoming categorized as classical Indian dances and projected a new form of authenticity for western audiences. Shankar had continued the mantle of orientalist performance styles developed by pioneers such as Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. The biggest difference was that Shankar, unlike white interlocutors such as Denis and Shawn, was from what is now India, and therefore more authentic to western audiences than that previous generation of performers. Gopal took the authenticity test one step further by having a more rooted and "real" classical dance training as opposed to Shankar's more experimental approach.

After living abroad and touring for a few years, Gopal returned to India in 1940 because of the second World War. Then, in the summer of 1947, as India and Pakistan were on the cusp of independence from colonial Britain, Gopal moved back to England where he would base himself for the rest of his life. On September 17, 1947, just over a month after the India's Independence Day, Gopal performed a suite of dances at the opening

festivities for the new India section in London's venerable Victoria & Albert Museum. Gopal toured extensively throughout the world in the 1950s and made major group works for venues such as the royal Albert Hall and The Edinburgh Festival. In the early 1960s he paired with the famous ballerina Alicia Markova to create a Krishna-Radha duet in a stunning echo of Shankar's early 1920s performance tours with Anna Pavlova.

Within the context of Gopal's life, there are three main ways my project interacts with him. First, hanging in the theater are six line drawings on thick acrylic, which are tracings of archival photos taken from different phases of Gopal's career. They lurk in the space, set up in a line so as to overlap and blur each other, as an ethereal or spectral reminder of his multifaceted legacy which included:

- his diasporic life in London
- his professional life as an ambassador of Indian culture
- his somewhat private homosexuality and his public marriage
- his constant dialogue with western presenters and audiences alongside his desire to perform in respected and lucrative venues.



[Figure 1 & 2] from *Reorient the Orient*. Photo 1 by Nicola Goode. Photo 2 by Ilaan Egelund. Used by permission.

Second, I have an excerpt of Gopal's 1954 performance at Jacob's Pillow playing on a monitor tucked into a corner for the audience to discover if they wander over that way.<sup>7</sup> Gopal's 1954 trip to the Pillow was fraught in many ways. Prior to his summer performances there, Gopal and Shawn exchanged letters and disagreed on the financial arrangements and support structures for Gopal. Rebekah Kowal (2020) has documented that correspondence quite well, taking into consideration the cultural and fiscal contentions at play.<sup>8</sup> Other correspondences in the archive reveal a different set of difficulties for Gopal when traveling to the Pillow and are less concerned with Shawn and more about La Meri, an orientalist performer who was a fixture at the Pillow and who had "discovered" Gopal in India in 1936. Gopal's friend Peter, in a letter dated 7 March 1954, writes "Don't be too hard on La Meri"



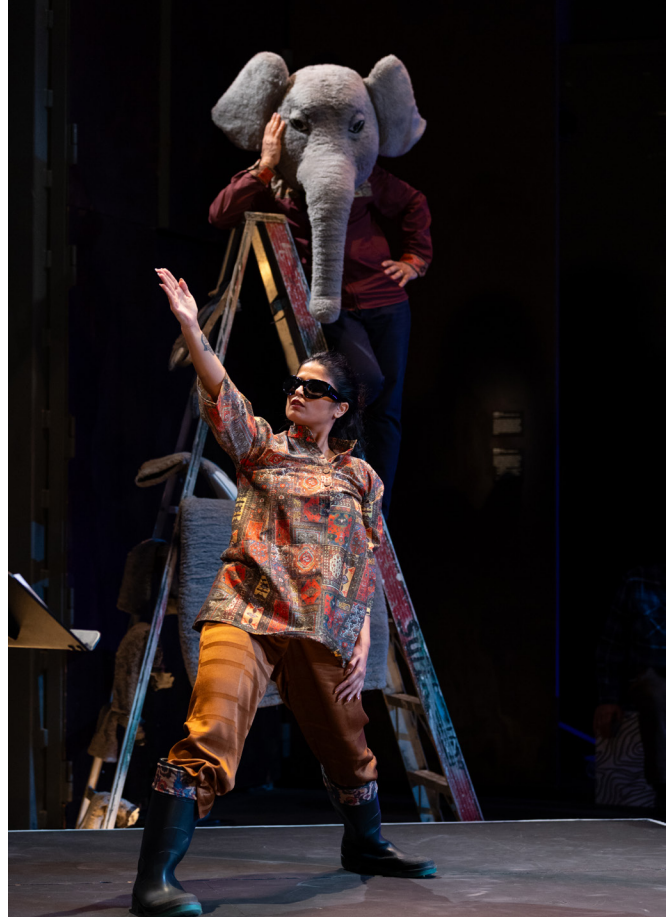
and then continues, “A wise and spiritual thing it is to avoid direct criticism, even of fakes: some people prefer the fakes... Presentation of the true is the best gospel.”<sup>9</sup>

Gopal’s friend, this mysterious Peter, was likely building on shared conversations and concerns, seeking to protect Gopal should he reunite with La Meri nearly fifteen years after their fraught parting in Tokyo in November of 1937.<sup>10</sup> There is both a personal care and a sharpness to Peter’s words. Gopal and Peter clearly value authenticity and, unsurprisingly, conclude that Gopal is the real deal, not a faker. Gopal’s dancing, unlike that of others, is a “Presentation of the true.”

Like Ruth St. Denis and Denishawn, like Uday Shankar, like La Meri, like the reconstructionist classicists of Indian dance, like Gopal, and like many curators, funders, and audiences today, the endless search for authenticity of presentation has driven the Orientalizing gaze imposed on South Asian artists in American Modern Dance, perpetuating a hierarchy of form and limiting the expressive capability of what performance can and does mean when navigating diasporic life with all its complexities and necessities.<sup>11</sup>

My third mode of summoning Gopal’s presence is a movement score I developed in response to the aforementioned archival footage. The score translates Gopal’s bodily approaches, positions, and gestures from his dancing, and converses with them in a performative score from my perspective. Asking questions such as:

- What does it mean to place one’s hands on one’s hips?
- What if your hands are as far apart from each other as possible in a diagonal?
- What is the difference between your arms hovering in space and your fingertips cascading through the air?
- How do those overlap?



[Figures 3 & 4] Performers in *Reorient the Orient*. Photos by Angel Origgi. Used by permission  
With *Reorient the Orient*, I am staking my own claim on process and representation. I am not interested in perpetuating imagery that promotes an orientalist fantasy, homeland nostalgia, assimilationist whitewashing, or that

contributes to the mirage of authenticity. Instead, I am investigating kinetic imagery that focuses on the trust, support, and risk necessary to survive and process the complex experiences of brown, particularly South Asian performers within the American art world.

As I said, the full work is extremely modular and episodic. In a nod to that I will touch on two other parts of the larger event. One is a video, the other is a wall text. I will start with the video. Between February and September 2022, as the world seemed to be opening up again and commuting for work and school returned as a reality, I traveled to and revisited multiple commutes from my past. Walking forward while looking back, I reflected on the nearly two years spent without commuting in contrast to those pathways that shaped and influenced how, where, and why I went about my daily endeavors. My walking was intentional. No wandering to get lost, no abandonment of maps and geolocation devices. The walking here was a retracing of old pathways revisited for new contemplations; old decisions re-examined, from perspectives anew. And I filmed it. I latched a camera to my head and walked forward while filming backward, letting the landscapes recede.

To be clear, I did not do every apartment, every job, every city. I did the ones that have stuck with me, that have resonance and mental duration. I skipped my middle school. Wouldn't you? In cities where I lived in multiple places, I chose the path that was dominant in my memory, even if it was not where I had lived the longest. In some cities the house had been replaced by another dwelling, or the studio had turned into a restaurant. No matter. I recorded the present.

Many have written on the complexities and nuances of memory and the act of walking.<sup>12</sup> A layered representation of these walks made sense to me. In my mind, places overlap, recollections dive into each other. The landscapes varied from the urban to the rural, with the suburban in-between. In the full work, we see snow covered fields and sun strewn bike paths, an iconic bridge, and a crowded roundabout. In the figures here, we see the walk in New York City from my Brooklyn apartment to Trisha Brown's loft where I sometimes worked, overlay onto the commute from my old flat in New Delhi to Mandi House where the Kathak Kendra studios used to be when I took classes there. These documents of past and present travel, provide a meditation on the commutes we take and the possibility of finding insight into the mundane.







[Figures 5, 6 & 7] Video Stills from *Walking from Home* by the Author. Used by permission.

Finally, I close by asking what has changed in the last 100 years, between the first half of the twentiethth century, the second half of the twentiethth century, and now just about a quarter of the way into the twenty-firstst century. In Reorient the Orient, this text is on the wall near the entrance between the gallery and the theater.<sup>13,14</sup>

### The Attribution Game

#### 100 Years of Change?

Below are four quotes in Column A. The sources of the quotes are listed in Column B.

Can you match which goes with which?

#### COLUMN A

1. "The three-thousand-year-old vocabulary of Hindu dance is still employed, with its use of the hands, fingers, lips, brows, neck and head as well as the body."
2. "India has a tradition of dancing that is today, perhaps the oldest and most detailed of all existing techniques."
3. "We come from a country where there is no such a thing as modern... anything we think of we have to go back two or four thousand years."
4. "Right now, far out in limitless space, the great Hindu god Shiva is dancing to set the rhythms of the universe."

#### COLUMN B

- A. 1934. Uday Shankar's performance brochure for his American tour.
- B. 1957. Ram Gopal, writing in his autobiography about his latest works, *Dances of India* and *The Legend of the Taj Mahal*.
- C. 1984. Amala Shankar in her preshow speech at the American Dance Festival in Durham, NC.
- D. 2023. Wall text for the San Francisco Asian Art Museum exhibition 'Beyond Bollywood: 2000 Years of Dance in Art'.

Answers are available in the map accompanying this exhibition.

[Figure 8] Property of Author. Used by permission.



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## ENDNOTES

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1 This paper first developed as part of a conference in relation to the exhibit "Border Crossings: Exile and American Modern Dance 1900-1955," which was first shown at the New York Public Library Performance Arts Division in Fall 2023 and then remounted in January 2024 at the University of California Santa Barbara at which the conference occurred. The exhibit was an amalgam of multiple nationalities, dance forms, and social constructions on display as conveyors of transnational dance ideologies operating as modes of resistance to defined (bordered) categories. Thank you to Ninotchka Bennahum who organized the conference and was one of the curators of the exhibit. Special thanks also to Anurima Banerji who invited me to participate in the conference and encouraged me to put my talk into a written format.

2 *Reorient the Orient* is the recipient of a National Performance Network (NPN) commission with REDCAT in Los Angeles as the lead commissioner and Dance Place in DC as a co-commissioner. Additional funds come from the UCLA Council on Research, The UCLA Chancellor's Arts Initiative, the National Performance Network's Storytelling and Documentation Fund, and the Mellon Foundation. The work premiered on March 9+10, 2024 at REDCAT in Los Angeles, CA.

3 For further context, see Haraway (1998).

4 For a beginning on information on Ruth St. Denis, see Author (2013) and (2015).

5 For more information on Uday Shankar, see Author (2023) and Erdman (1987), Purkayastha (2014) and for the most thorough biographical information, Sarkar Munsu (2022).

6 For more information on Ram Gopal see Ambrose (1965) Sinha (2022), Gopal (1957), and David (2024).

7 Gopal performed twice at Jacob's Pillow, once in 1954 and then again in 1958.

8 For more information on the exchange between Gopal and Shawn see Kowal (2020), particularly pp. 183-185 and pp. 21-25 for information on La Meri and Gopal.

9 Special thanks to the South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive board members who gave me access to the trunks of archives in the Birmingham, England holding facility. Personal correspondence to Ram Gopal. March 7, 1954. Uncatalogued letter in Ram Gopal Collection. South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

10 No last name is used in the letters, but Peter is quite likely the London dance critic Peter Williams who was professionally active from just before World War II until 1990, and certainly knew Gopal.

11 The topic of Orientalism is enormous, but the starting place is Said (1994) and much of my thinking is informed by Cheng (2013) and (2021).

12 Space is too limited here to go into details, but for more information on walking as a topic of research, see Ingold (2010) and Solnit (2005) and (2000).

13 Game sources include Shankar (1934), Gopal (1957), Shankar (1984), and McGill (2023).

14 Answers are 1=A, 2=B, 3=C, 4=D.