



TRADITION AS AN ARCHIVE BOX  
LOCATING AUTONOMY, DE-POLICING AMBITION

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206 The 'contemporary' with regard to Indian dance is still a quasi-autonomous term: (a) it is ill-defined; and (b) it stands both in the shadow of and in opposition to the classical or the traditional. And yet it is a significant movement as it attempts to speak of, from and to the 'insiderness' of contemporary India. It probably has more promise and potential to reflexively re-vision contemporary India, as opposed to a linear, fixed and prescriptive traditionalist approach that is invested in projecting an idealized 'India' seamlessly flowing from antiquity to modernity. One telling question that may be asked is about how the contemporary relates to the traditional: does it accept it, defer to it, is it indifferent to it, does it ignore it, reject it, ridicule it, assimilate it, make excursions into or extensions out of it, is it intimidated by it, does it feel the freedom to walk in and out of it, and so on. However, what can certainly be said about contemporary Indian dance is that it potentially acts out the anxieties and fears of traditional zealots, for whom tradition is precious, fragile, under perpetual threat and risk of being disrespected or undervalued, and therefore urgently in need of being protected from the onslaughts of the modern, the contemporary and the popular.

These anxieties might more acutely affect practitioners who happen to have been classically trained, and who had once been steeped in the ethos of the classical but then opted for the contemporary. However, even those who are not trained in the classical or are trained in non-Indian styles may not escape the highbrow disdain of the classicists. Thus the contemporary as a category remains contentious, even suspect, as it is seen to be deliberately deviating from traditional norms. Needless to say, classical and traditional are highly problematic terms, quite precisely a jumble of half-truths and sweeping projections that are at best ahistorical. Instead of offering a critique of the existing definitions of 'tradition', this essay arrives at an alternative way of engaging with tradition. I here share a creative experience that perhaps obliquely holds the promise of autonomy for an embodied practitioner, one who is totally unconvinced of the impositions of the classical and the contemporary.

#### ARCHIVE BOX PROJECT

The Saison Foundation of Japan and the Singapore International Festival of the Arts (SIFA) launched a project in 2014 called the *Archive Box Project* that invited six prominent Japanese choreographers to each archive one of their works using any material or medium of their choice and convert it into a composite box, real or virtual, called the 'archive box'. A variety of things went into these boxes; they included objects, scripts, random texts, music, costumes, images, textures and so on, which directly or indirectly corresponded to the original works. This box was then to be chosen, opened and used by another dancer/choreographer to resurrect or recreate a work based on the information drawn from the material found in the archive box. On the part of the box-maker, it required a dexterous putting together of suggestions, directions, clues and triggers that would help shed light on the form and intent of the work; and on the part of the box-

user, it required careful reading, adapting, interacting and then creating a dance piece generated out of the material found in the box. 207

A number of Indian dancers were invited to participate in this project as ‘users’. SIFA arranged a workshop in Singapore in February 2015 for the two groups, i.e. the archivists and the users, to meet and discuss the logistics as well as the scope of using these boxes. I was not able to attend the workshop due to prior commitments, so I entered this project only towards the end of the year, both late and ‘clueless’ – which in hindsight, I would say, worked to my advantage. I chose the box made by Yukio Suzuki, in which he had archived his solo titled *Evanescere*, derived from the Latin word ‘evanesce’, meaning to disappear, to diminish, to evaporate. I received the virtual archive box via email in mid-October 2015; it contained a contract, a detailed text – both in print and in recording – carefully instructing me how to move through the solo, and some music. The contract said that I would not be able to perform this piece again without further discussion with or permission from the archivist. Therefore, since this was going to be a one-off presentation, I decided to view it as more of an explorative ‘exercise’ and accordingly decided the number of hours I was going to devote to its making. The contract also categorically stated that the ‘performer should neither think [that] “this is dance” nor [that] “this gesture is the product of the instruction”. S/he has to make efforts to always be in-between.’

Another curious and interesting aspect of the project was that Yukio wanted the user to be wearing earphones throughout the whole process, even in performance, listening to and then, in real time, responding to his recorded voice. Most of the text was only to be heard by the user; however, a short prelude to the solo was also to be heard by the audience, in which Yukio once again made the dual appeal: ‘I have a request in the beginning’, his voice announced. ‘You should not think that this is dance. You should not think that this is just about following instructions either. Let’s walk on the edge, the boundary between them.’ By doing so, he was re-emphasizing his intention of wanting this to be a joint exploration of ‘something in-between’. I decoded this in-betweenness as a space between the imploring force of the word on the one hand, and the eager responsiveness of the body on the other, to carry forth the command into dance. The imploring word and the responsive body were both going to be givens, but they would be incidentals in this search of a ‘live gap’ between word and meaning, message and response. Thus, I wholeheartedly responded to Yukio’s appeal and put aside my own anxieties and ambition to convert this into a performance. I also very clearly accepted my second-generation status in this exercise of being the *re-maker* of a piece that had an original copy made by Yukio Suzuki.

The text included a meticulous sequence of anatomical directions of how and in which direction to move a specific part of the body, a limb or a joint; plus it was layered with a variety of suggestions and images that evoked textures and sensations such as a lizard crawling up the back, an alligator crawling on the body, a swallowing cloud, a dissolving wall, a hot floor, etc.

208 The recorded text was very specifically paced: it got faster or slower, and even the decibel level, intensity and emphasis of the voice changed from place to place. And it ended with a direct and humble 'thank you for your honest body!' All this helped me keep my attention upon my body: a body that was not just a site of Yukio's instructions but an explorative or rather a hovering body that was hoping to catch that fleeting gap between word and dance.

Yukio's stated clarity helped me arrive at my own clarity of how to meet his archive box and I was very grateful for that, and also very happy that it was his box that had fallen to my lot. The process I assigned myself was pretty straightforward and simple: it involved getting to my studio, wearing the earphones, and moving to his directions over and over again. Of course, it also involved a lot of mental organization and reflection in order to get into that frame of mind and body to receive and respond to the instructions as unobtrusively as possible. However, I must admit that the resolve and appreciation that I have shared above came by and by.

In the beginning it felt difficult and frustrating; all I could manage to do was barely catch and follow Yukio's instructions. In fact when I first started reading his text of instructions, I balked. I felt that he had put in far too much information into it and that it left absolutely no space for me. The tedium of it felt daunting and I was even afraid that I might get terribly bored, mindlessly following instructions. So the first decision I made was to not get any more information about the original work or the choreographer. I decided not to google Yukio Suzuki to find out more about his style, sensibilities, politics, training, etc. I did not even read the short introductory note that had accompanied the box or avail the opportunity of doing a workshop with him (which was offered). I decided against all of that and opted very decisively to take the text at face value, and simply proceed to join the dots of his instructions without attempting to embellish or project anything more on to it.

Likewise, I also consciously chose to sidestep and not make this into my piece; it was an exercise and I was committed to maintaining the neutrality of the process. My singular aim was to explore the box's potency of transmission. And it was precisely this that got me excited. How does a text convert into an embodied expression and experience? I was secretly curious, I will admit, to see if my movement would end up looking anything like that of Yukio's. But that was just a curiosity, not the agenda. That also seemed to be what Yukio had requested. I was going to work with the sheer materiality of the text, the neutrality of the text, and let the images and feelings that arose as a result to appear and disappear on their own, without any infusion of ideas. I found that proposition most appealing and I took it very seriously. I was going to follow his instructions, move from instruction to instruction maintaining a live, kinaesthetic connection between each to the next, sensing and riding upon the wave of momentum generated between the chain of triggers and responses, keeping at bay as much as I could my urge to further fill it with my style, imagination, attitude or signature. So, I was consciously trying to pare it down and in a way 'erase' myself out of it. I was going to take the title *Evanescere*, i.e. to disappear or

It took me a few days to get used to Yukio's relatively long text that he narrates over approximately twenty-five minutes. As I grew familiar and comfortable with the text, I began to realize and deeply appreciate the effort he had put into making the text. Being a dancer who improvises a lot myself, I know how absolutely impossible it is to retract abstract movement – particularly the kind that is free-flowing and not based upon any fixed technique or vocabulary, and thus cannot be easily notated. I began to experience the sense of meticulous 'care' that had gone into the detailing and texturing of the text. Of course, there were times when I wondered if this man was a control freak, as he was quite literally not leaving any room for me. But I chose not to engage that 'thought'; I was already looking for something else in this enterprise, and it was not Yukio or his underlying agendas. I was getting excited about the possibility of transmission from text to movement, and that too from one unknown body to another. My interest and focus was just that, and I am very glad that it stayed that way. Knowing that I was not making a new solo and that I would never perform it again also helped. Later, when I read Yukio's introductory note in which he shared his process of making this text, I was both amused and touched at the effort he had put into it. I would like to share at length here some of what he wrote:

To investigate how to communicate my work, I first translated my dance into words by viewing a video documentation of the piece. However, I soon realized that this process of explaining my own work could be endless: I felt the desire to exhaustively describe every detail, including how I felt in my body at a particular moment in the piece.

So I asked dancers, who regularly performed in my works, to watch videos of my dance and describe them in words I was interested in finding out how my dance would be construed by these dancers, who had an understanding about my language, use of body, and way of thinking.

As a result of this process, the dancers came up with very simple explanations of my dance. Although their choices of words were at times different from mine, I could see that they were more than enough to convey the dancer's essence, and often, even more concise and effective than my own description. Therefore, I combined their texts with mine to write the script.

I then recorded myself reading aloud this script in correlation with the progression of the dance, to convey its timing or *ma*. *Ma* – a sense of timing with the space in-between – is one of the most important aspects of my choreography. I controlled the accentuation and pacing of the words in my speech, so that the user could find the appropriate timing by following the recording. I attempted to choreograph the user this way.

I was happy to hear that Yukio too had struggled with making this transfer from movement to words, and appreciated that he had decided to let go of the perfectionist tendency to provide just that most fitting and meaningful description in favour of simpler and perhaps more neutral ones suggested by his dancers. What was also very gratifying for me was to hear of this idea of

210 'ma – a sense of timing and sense in-between', as this was one of the first things I had started to detect and respond to as I became familiar with the audio of the text. I would find out later that it was exactly the embedded energy or force of these in-between gaps that would determine the direction, intensity and momentum of the movement.

Rehearsing the piece felt like getting into a loop. As I proceeded to flesh out Yukio's detailed instructions, it started to become more alive with each repetition.

What was very clear to me was that this exercise was devoid of any ambition from my side, and in putting my ambition aside, I was not plugging into any ambition of Yukio's if there was any; my aim was neither to outsmart the text nor become a slave to it. I was following it as simply as I could, and let the repetitions reveal and render the dance real and alive for me from my inside. Thus, the physical repetition and consequently the extra attention I started to pay to the dragging or racing of time between the words was what eventually ignited the piece for me. It was precisely the unselfconscious yet plainly-sincere repetition, and the subconscious curiosity to sense and ride the energy of pace and time, that made Yukio's solo mine. What seemed like a tedious, linear score in the beginning was now beginning to gain a cyclicity of sorts, and that cyclicity had a force of its own which carried me. What I presented was the piece as it stood at the time, after as many repetitions as I had been able to manage within the time-frame I had allocated to it. And it felt just right, it was enjoyable and felt real.

During the post-performance dialogue that was arranged between user and maker of the archive box, i.e. Yukio and me, at the TPAM festival where I finally presented the remade solo in February 2016, at Yokohama, Japan, Yukio remarked that out of the three users who had so far used his box, this one had captured the spirit of the work the most; and incidentally it even resembled his solo at a number of places, of which he then showed us a video. I had had no desire to make my solo look like Yukio's, but conversely, I had had no desire to make it look different either. And for me, therein was located the scope of transmission I was looking for. To further affirm my approach, Yukio said that he could detect that 'care' had gone into the remaking of his solo. To me this was a hugely successful exercise, and gave me many an insight and answer.

To begin with, I had wanted to understand what an archive box meant. I knew that I would err if I confused it with the word archive alone. My understanding of an archive is a compilation of records that have been naturally and necessarily generated in relation to the running of an organization, an enterprise or an activity – whereas a dance archive box is deliberately made. It entails a series of decisions, first to select one piece of choreography amongst many, then methodically dismantle or unmake it with craft and care, and finally organize the material into a box with the aim and hope that it would and could be used to resurrect or regenerate the dance again. The dance chosen to be archived has already been made, it has realized its envisioned possibilities, and been recognized and even perhaps appreciated for its idealized state of completion. In other words, it has successfully 'unfolded' its potential.

The making of the archive box was an after-the-event process; it entailed a thinking backwards which required a creativity and methodology of its own. However, this thinking backwards is quite distinct from revising or retracing the work that you may require in remounting a work. In this case it requires an active *retrospecting* of the work, registering not only what went into its making, but also ‘enfolding’ into it the experiences, counter-impulses, images and meanings that it may have engendered. It requires then, as we see in Yukio’s process of making his archive box, a whole new methodology and a set of fresh rules, plus a new repertoire of images, textures, rhythms and designs – all afterthoughts that may be able to potentially capture the form plus the multidimensional experiences and pack them into the ‘single’ unit of a box. The archive box, then, requires a lot mulling, reflection and afterthought to make it ‘logistically intelligible’ and at the same time ‘impulsively potent’, i.e. invested with a regenerative intelligence of its own. I wish I could do that to all my work as it promises to be a very fruitful exercise in clearing space for successive bouts of creativity.

This exercise also made it quite clear to me that an archive is not a score that is to be imbibed or learnt verbatim, replicated and venerated by future generations. The element of *retrospecting*, of first making a work reach fruition and then creatively inverting it back to its seed or kernel state, gave the archive box both a magnitude and a potency. Because packed into it is both the graph of its making and unmaking, its ascension and descent, its evolution and involution, unfolding and enfolding, it is duo-directional and unfixed in comparison to a score which is linear, unidirectional, prescriptive, fixed and flat. It is indeed this duo-directionality programmed into the seed or the archive box, as in this case, that lends it regenerative potency. In fact its potency perhaps lies precisely in that *play* between opposites which are inherent to its nature – a potency that is located in-between and is also born out of the friction or reflex between the multiple polarities of being alive/dead, open/closed, remembered/forgotten, potent/impotent, effulgent/sterile, etc. I would go a step further to say that the potency of transmission and thus continuity lies in judiciously leaving this play uninfluenced, un-policed and undirected, i.e. free of any projected ambitions.

And this is where I began to draw a comparison between the archive box and tradition. Tradition in terms of dance as we have defined it is like a monolithic score that is not to be tampered with, obediently followed and diligently replicated. It is controlled through self-policing mechanisms that have become entrenched within its training and practice. It is fixed, rigid, linear, and unidirectionally ambitious and nationalistic. Ironically perhaps, it is this very ambition infused into tradition that hampers its free flow and runs the risk of it dying or becoming discontinuous.

As a user totally uninformed about Yukio, his work, sensibilities and politics, but totally committed to again unfolding the carefully enfolded work, I realized I had responsibility, autonomy as well as agency. As I became more intimate with the box my appreciation of the

212 'care' Yukio had put into making the box also grew, and conversely, it offered me the stability, poise and repose of self-reflection. Both of us were decidedly holding back, not trying to outdo oneself or the other for that matter, in search of something in-between. The element of care and the holding back of ambition thus became operative factors; it was indeed the 'chemistry of care' that connected me to Yukio and made the archive box mine. I was neither being clever nor lackadaisical in resurrecting Yukio's box, and I was also not occupied with where 'I' was in the work. I wanted the box to speak for itself, come alive – and it did for me.

Coming from a classical background, deeply steeped in the training of Bharatanatyam at the Kalakshetra, in fact totally and willingly seduced by the form of the dance, no matter how reconstructed; its aesthetics, no matter how cleansed or sanitized; classical imagery, no matter how brahmanical; the richness of Carnatic music, its poetics, etc., it is singularly that enfolded nationalistic ambition that continually jars me and almost compulsively elicits a reaction from me. There are two truths that face me: (a) that there is something invaluablely beautiful, profound, fine and uplifting about what, and in whatever shape, has come down to us as 'tradition'; (b) there is something obnoxiously oppressive, fabricated, insidious and mind-numbing about how we understand tradition today. So, in a way, tradition is duo-directional and its inviting/repelling nature provokes polarities that continuously attempt to gloss over the nationalistically naturalized assertion that tradition is contingent on cultural policing.

If we review the history of dance, particularly Bharatanatyam, over the last hundred years, we can see a trace of deflecting polarizations that get reinvented every couple of decades. In the 1930s India was gripped in the debate over the *devadasis'* chastity; the *bhakti* versus *sringara* furore caught on like wildfire in the late 50s and quite literally consumed the dance world; the modernity versus tradition debate that my generation had to face in the 80s also spawned a parallel debate of whether we could accord classical dance legitimacy on the basis of 'culture' or if had to be socially relevant – this was the time when people started to include issues like bride burning into classical dance; over the last few decades, the middle-class anxiety of protecting Indian 'values' against the onslaught of popular culture has made parents culturally anxious and resort to the education of dance; and today, we are getting caught in nationalism versus anti-nationalism polarization on a national level. Each debate is shrill for its time, and its magnitude forces almost everyone to take a position along the polar extremes and deal with its own breed of political correctness, the compunctions of which leave virtually no room for autonomy. Therefore I am choosing to sidestep and considering rivalling this ambition with a dialectically opposite practice which at one level totally ignores the shrillness of this ambition and at another level takes it on headlong.

As a contemporary dancer of classical origins, I wish to (a) be able to move in and out of the classical form and tradition with autonomy, authority and free will, unintimidated by the cultural police; (b) not have my energies locked within a war of polarities, either upholding or

resisting the current ambitions of tradition; (c) but at the same time, I want to squarely challenge and critique the nationalistic ambition that has become enfolded into our post-independence definition of tradition. So, within the same body, I wish to be free from even the tension and anxieties that go into assuming and maintaining a stance of resistance, and at the same feel fortified, informed and equipped to openly challenge the fabricated definitions of tradition that clearly impinge upon my autonomy. As stated earlier, I find tradition to be much richer, more layered, intelligent, resourceful, giving and liberating than its ambitious definitions would allow or even imagine it. And I definitely do not want to lose out on materially engaging with what I see as richly yielding, nuanced and insightful, by getting caught within the fashionable polarities of the time, of what is right and wrong, kosher or taboo, or even what is politically correct or not. Yet I cannot let this ambition go scot-free because to me it is politically and socially toxic, and more so, it violates and totally eats into the autonomy of the artist. So where I see the answer is in a fierce critique on the one hand, coupled with an almost oblivious and focused engagement with the materiality of both the body and tradition. I am proposing, then, a parallel practice that is schizophrenic in nature: one that segregates physical engagement from critique within the same body/mind.

Even though the body and mind are one, they are endowed with respective capacities to operate in different dimensions: what the mindful body can phenomenally calibrate, distil and unearth, and what the intellectual inquiry of an embodied practitioner can critique and draw into the realm of first-hand knowledge and power, are distinct pursuits. These are two very different potentialities that are of course connected, intimately inform each other and work in tandem; they are in essence flip-sides of the very same coin, but don't have to be co-dependent, hemmed in or weighed down by the burden of the other. For the longest time I have made dance-work that in some manner or the other makes a comment on dance and its history. Because I felt I could not abandon the burden of history, I felt responsible to somehow attempt to right the wrong of history, compelled to show it up in some form or fashion in my work. But in reality this prescribes and limits the wondrous possibilities of my engagement with the body. I cannot allow history to fetter the body, especially when as an embodied practitioner I have that exact possibility of letting the body exceed or transgress its given definitions. This compunction of keeping the body history-bound might be supported by the conditioning of being a classical dancer, which is not only narrative-driven but also governed by the nationalistic narrative that is invested in the show-and-tell model of cultural exhibitionism.

I do not want my dance to be a reaction to or a demonstration against challenges that are posed by the powers-that-might-be. I do not even want my politics and my practice to coincide, or for that matter my words and my images to match. In fact, today, I quite like the idea of a discrepancy between what I have been able to intellectually understand or articulate, and what I have been able to martially calibrate, distil and unearth from within my body. I love the idea

214 of the two being intimately related but one always exceeding the other. The friction and tension between them to me is far more exciting and creativity-generating. My interest is quite keenly set upon something that hangs somewhere 'in-between' the word and the image, and that may be absorbed within a mindful, sensitive body. I do not want this delicate capacity of the body to be marred by the anxieties and ambitions of my political correctness or history – because today I locate meaning and thereby art both beyond and in-between the polarities of conformity and resistance!

To conclude, I would like to say that tradition is like an archive box; its potency lies in its un-fixedness and duo-directionality which need to be rigorously de-policed and divested of any collective ambitions. The critique of nationalistic ambition affords the arsenal to wrest back the licence to a no-holds-barred engagement with both the body and tradition. However, this freedom also entails a freedom from feeling beholden to the very campaign of critique that affords it this freedom. And for the sake of such freedom, I propose the devising of an embodied practice that is at the same time fiercely aware and schizophrenically oblivious.



