

DISSOLUTION OF THE BODY

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In shivaist philosophy, a dance is the original cause of the creation of the world. Shiva, seized by a sudden frenzy of life, is believed to have started dancing, thus giving birth to the Universe, continents, rivers, mountains and humankind. This “laysa” or “cosmic and divine dance,” represented by the famous Nataraja statues, generates the perpetual destruction and rebirth of the world.¹

This legend, by bestowing on the act of dancing and, specifically, bodily gestures, the ability to create things, leads to a poetry-filled cloud of questions around the body’s involvement in artistic creation. The human body is just as much at the root of creation as the spirit.

*“WHETHER FLESH OR SPIRIT,
FERTILITY IS ONE.”²*

Whatever its nature, a work of art is experienced and created by means of the artist’s body, but to what extent? The artist’s body relates to his work in a range of different ways, at once involving, disseminating, dissolving it in what he creates. Differing ways of positioning and perceiving his body in the real world.

Man does not just adapt to the world, he shapes it in accordance with his intentions. A man’s body, as builder, master and owner of nature, operates from the outside of his work, as architect and surveyor. In classic European painting, the artist’s hand performs whatever his thoughts dictate. As a bee busily erecting perfectly-shaped octagonal boxes, that artist is quite apart from his work, moulding matter in accordance with a predefined idea, drawing perspectives and chiseling materials. His consciousness resides in whatever he produces. While often rich in meaning and skill, this way of creating conjures little by way of sensations: the artist’s perceptions play no role in shaping his work.

Yet like magma bubbling under the terrestrial crust, muted or neglected sensations are present, ready to surge up and emerge. This surging is the means by which they assert their role in the creation process while also imposing a new place in it for the body. The vision of a body outside of the artwork is replaced by this new creation concept, in which the sensitive body has all its place. The artist's physical sensations are awakened and listened to, and have the full run of the artwork as their living quarters. The body flows into it and takes possession of it. Sensing the artwork is what guides him in his search.

Thus the Japanese artist Kazuo Shiraga balanced himself above his canvas, fully involving his body in his painting, and filmed this performance in 1956. In doing this, he became aware of the gradual progression of his work, yet without seeking to control it, but rather taking part in it to direct it. He united with his materials while initiating their reactions.

*"ART DOES NOT TRANSFORM
OR DISTORT MATTER; IT
GIVES LIFE TO IT." ³*

Here creation is not a manufacturing process, but rather quite the opposite. It consists in a deliberate determination to let things happen, not to interfere in predefined physical processes. The artwork lives, just as the body of the artist who asserts himself while interacting with it.

Other artists go even further in the dissolution of their body. By considering that the world is in perpetual motion and that this motion is itself a form of creation, the artist can seek to fit into this broader area of creation, of which his body is a mere, infinitesimal part. The union of the artist's body no longer occurs just with his work, but, more generally, with his entire environment, of which his work is but a fragment.

Land Art, for instance, gives the work of humankind access to the work of nature, and gives the artist's body access to the broader range of natural materials at work, building and deconstructing the world. In order to erect his work in the middle of the wilderness, Andy Goldsworthy expends and dilutes all his physical energy in ecosystems whose scale is well above his own.

Nature is creative with the artist prolonging that creation. This

dissolution of the body within a huge cosmos can be related to a range of spiritual traditions. This idea of a human body, connected to the Universe by virtue of its creative nature is found in Rilke. (Rilke rather modestly describes nature as expressing itself through the “pleasures of the flesh,”² but it actually encompasses a wider, Nietzschean meaning, as a source of creative life.)

This body, positioned as an integral part of its environment, is also the dancer’s. The dancer’s awareness of each of his muscles and of the space around him induces him to take part in movements around the globe. He will “give birth to a dancing star.”⁴ Maurice Béjart claimed the dancer’s place is not just on stage, but everywhere, in communion with the whole world, whose stage is just one portion.

*“I LEARNT TO DANCE BY WALKING
ACROSS NATURE.”⁵*

This way Béjart has of conceiving the practice of dancing could be applied to any artistic practice. The artist whose approach is the dancer’s reaches a high level of consciousness: his presence extends at once to his work, to his body and to the surrounding environment. Yet at the same time, this broadened consciousness gives rise to a wider range of sensations. Man, here, is less human-centered than in Shiva’s legend, being confined to his modest position as a mere particle within the Universe. It is man’s position in the world which is sought through the position of his body. Artistic practice allows him to become aware of the world and to find his right place in it.

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- 1 Nitin Kumar, *Shiva as Nataraja, Dance and destruction in Indian Art*, 2001
 - 2 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Lettres à un jeune poète*, Grasset 1937
 - 3 Jiri Yoshihara, *Manifeste de l’art Gutai, Gendai bijutsu sengen*, 1956
 - 4 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra, Prologue (paragraph 5)*, 1883
 - 5 Maurice Béjart, *Lettre à un jeune danseur, Actes Sud, lettre 6*, 2001

overleaf: Omer Ga’ash, BONFIRE NIGHT, manipulated photographic print.