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Title: Bodily relations and reciprocity in the art of Sonia Khurana

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Abstract

This article explores the significance of the 'somatic' and 'ontological turn' in locating the radical politics articulated in the contemporary performance, installation, video and digital art practices of New Delhi-based artist, Sonia Khurana (b. 1968). Since the late 1990s Khurana has fashioned a range of artworks that require new sorts of reciprocal and embodied relations with their viewers. While this line of art practice suggests the need for a primarily philosophical mode of inquiry into an art of the body, such affective relations need to be historicised also in relation to a discursive field of 'difference' and public expectations about the artist's ethnic, gendered and national identity. Thus, this intimate, visceral and emotional field of inter- and intra-action is a novel contribution to recent transdisciplinary perspectives on the gendered, social and sentient body, that in turn prompts a wider debate about the ethics of cultural commentary and art historiography.

Keywords

Body, contemporary art, relationality, reciprocity, Sonia Khurana

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This year marks for me the end of two decades of scholarly interest in art and artists of African, Asian and Caribbean backgrounds in Britain, culminating with the publication of my book *Phenomenal Difference: A Philosophy of Black British Art* (Wainwright, 2017). The book seeks to expose the gains and losses that have been made by a field of cultural commentary which aims to elevate the importance of such art and to galvanise and transform the attitudes of art audiences by asserting its place within the (counter)cultural narratives of late modernity. My contribution to this field of discourse primarily evaluates matters of scholarly approach, by questioning whether a transformative space of creativity for diaspora, black and marginalised subjectivities can indeed continue to be built around the existing terms of cultural analysis. The conclusions sound a both hopeful and sceptical note, with the book suggesting that now may be the right time to seek a break from the established pattern of theorisations and come to transpose this history of art into a more distinctively philosophical field. The present article pushes that project further, enlarging on its evaluation by way of attention to a single artist who bears a discrepant relation to the black British art discourse.

During the decade of the 1980s, it was historically notable that many black and Asian artists in Britain began to group and work together, both for the purposes of exhibiting their art, but also to foreground the issues and difficulties involved in establishing themselves as artists at all. They would highlight their shared struggles at the levels of art production and resources, education, exhibiting and reception (see for instance: Araeen, 2004; Chambers, 2014; Hylton, 2007; Owusu, 1988). The ensuing narratives of

making and exhibiting this art have been elaborated in a remarkable and notably *critical* line of thought, comprising polemical interventions and historical overviews, archival projects and documentary. That activity has seen a recent renewal of energies within the academy,² sustaining the concentration of efforts from previous decades by showing how artists produce their works out of the range of experiences of living in diaspora communities in Britain, and how art-making itself is a field of inscription and identification in the sphere of public culture. Broadly, such a conceptualisation takes its cues from post-structuralist scholarship addressed to everyday signifying or semiotic-like practices of 'making things mean' (Hall 1982: 64; Hall 2006; Mercer 1994), which has been applied through accounts of how black and Asian British artists have participated in filmmaking, photography, performance, painting, installation and so on, as well as exhibition curating, publishing, archiving, arts organising and activism. In this way, black British art has been conceived as a corpus of practices consisting of performed identities, with productive relationships and 'articulations' between contemporary art and difference.

One might well ask what grounds there are for raising the issue of 'losses' or weaknesses in this formidable, if not game-changing avenue of cultural analysis, when it appears that there is nothing more to say here than to commend commentary on black

² Some recent research projects based within UK universities include *Making Histories Visible* (University of Central Lancashire), a catalogue of letters and reviews, posters and publicity from black artists' exhibitions and events, surveyed from the 1980s to the present day; and *Black Artists and Modernism* (University of the Arts, London and Middlesex University), which includes a database of works by black British artists held in public collections throughout the United Kingdom. See also my own bibliography of such sources (Wainwright, 2005).

British art and draw from its example. But on closer investigation, it has become clear that by the end of the twentieth century many artists of diverse ethnic or racial backgrounds in contemporary Britain began to feel unsure about the legacy of this mode of cultural criticism. Black British art, as it came to be identified, seemed almost exclusively governed by the drive to make visual texts that held the goal of cultural representation centrally in view, with what seemed to be a predominance of interest in historical revisionism, social critique and political opposition. Such associations have often worked to the detriment of the formulation and reception of more open-ended artistic projects (a trend consistently noted by Araeen, 1989; Araeen, 1991; Araeen, 1994). Those associations, indeed, have brought many such artists to a sort of impasse, feeling encumbered with the matters of cultural identity and its politics that have dominated this discourse. Preferring a more diversified appreciation of them and their art, a particular feeling of discomfort has surfaced with regard to the *black British* label, and a more general one about the political (and commercial) wisdom of any such group identification. It is a situation that bears comparison with the United States where complaints of reductionism have been heard from certain American artists and thinkers who share the desire to move 'beyond black representational space', favouring instead a mode of 'strategic formalism' among art historians and theorists – one capable of drawing out 'the peculiarity of [art]works within their varied contexts of meaning, responsive to the specific artistic operations that often manifest relations and differences to which culturalist regimes of reception must remain blind' (English 2007: 32).

While this article is not the place to demonstrate how a critical approach to analysing art came about in this context – a genealogy of the formation of a discourse on black British art (see Wainwright 2017) – it bears repetition that the long-standing analytical approach taken by commentators in their support for British artists of diaspora

backgrounds has brought mixed outcomes. It is not that the preoccupations and struggles over cultural representation have become an obstacle, whether intellectually or institutionally, perhaps standing in the way of a more rounded understanding of this art, but that the terms of reception and the sort of relations that pertain between works of art and their audiences may have cast things in a way that is no longer useful.

That is certainly the case in the particular circumstances of the art of Sonia Khurana, who stayed in Britain for two years in late 1990s during her postgraduate study at the Royal College of Art in London. I came to know the artist and began to interview her about her work, feeling from the moment of our first acquaintance in 1999 that each represented a challenge to the analytical frameworks that then seemed to be predominant (Wainwright 2000; Wainwright 2003). Sonia Khurana was born in 1968 and grew up in India and has worked in New Delhi for much of her professional life, travelling extensively for residencies, art events and exhibitions, and moving throughout a global network while locating her practice both within and without her notional base in India. An impression of the art that she produced in the United Kingdom has stayed with me over the past two decades. Instead of seeming to restate the cultural politics of difference and identity, Khurana's artworks have taken a deliberate and extended look at phenomenology. They have promoted interest in the intimate and at the same time philosophically significant relations that can emerge in the spaces and connections between artists, audiences and artworks themselves. Foreshadowing many of her subsequent projects, the historical works that she undertook in London, which I will introduce shortly, brought into being an array of physically-involving and visceral relations, in a range of creative phenomena including performance, photography, installation, and digital practice.

Seeking to channel attention to movement, time, gesture and illusion, Khurana's art is an arresting nexus of making, feeling and thought, and a celebratory one too – sharing her

fascination for the agency of objects and the grounded materiality of mediation. The underpinning concerns of this art have come to seem more central in the current debate about how art's viewers are demanding ever closer attention, and attempts to understand new sorts of interrelationships with art. Indeed, Khurana has played a role in setting that agenda, and as such her contribution registers the growing intensity of ontological inquiry currently being addressed to and *through* art practice. She has helped to make more public and better understood what may pertain between individual artworks, their viewers and the world at hand, and why exploring these relations is a project that is worth pursuing.

At the same time, by engaging with philosophical matters, Khurana's art demonstrates a concomitantly radical purpose for art. The convergence of ideas and creative processes constituting her practice illuminates *by indirection* that there has been a general over-attention, at the level of art reception, to differences of cultural, ethnic or racial identities – a process of representational 'positioning' that surrounds artists such as Khurana who work internationally from a base in the global South. Her art seems to call for a progressive and critical outlook and the grounds for community with the artist, not *despite* differences of ethnicity, gender or nationality but through and beyond them. The particular insistence on 'relationality' that emerged from 'identity politics' movements – feminism and queer theory in particular, but also some forms of postcolonial writing (for an overview see Jones and Stephenson 1999; Jones 2003; Butler 1989) – has sought to furnish a more fully engaged encounter with art that can parse various social and existential differences and subjectivities, and Khurana's art extends that objective.

In several aspects of difference, my own subjectivity is marked out from Khurana's, while our exchanges through and at the site of art practices have only consolidated my personal sense of solidarity with her. Her art, indeed, is the very means for building such a relationship of mutual respect and agreement. What we share is an anti-racist initiative for avoiding the reduction of art and artists to ethnic categorisation per se, to stereotype, or a

notion of cultural character that draws on absolutisms and euphemisms of Otherness. I have long been invested in this outlook, motivated to study art of the Caribbean (Wainwright 2011) and Asia (Kennedy, Mitha and Wainwright 2014) and to identify professionally with art of these regions and their diasporas, as a foil to the preponderance of research on Europe and North America in the discipline of art history. This perspective is articulated to advocacy of the kind of art practice that calls assiduously for aesthetic analysis. Such art is thereby a counterbalance to the excessive weight put upon artists when they are compelled to try to reify and make a virtue of difference as a commodity, such as within a globalising art marketplace. The result is art that succeeds in bridging many of the gaps between differently positioned subjects such as the two of us, Khurana and I. It makes for a distinctive mode of relation that is simultaneously a matter of politics (not limited to our participation in processes of identification and identity), intellectual inheritance *and* affective connection.

The key to seeing such a relation lies in the material and phenomenal foundation of encounters with art that allows flesh to meet with flesh. Khurana's art has stood as a consummate work *of* the body and its significance can only ever be found or generated *through* the body. These are bodies in action, choreographed, motionless, or else bodies beyond the viewing frame. In turn, they demand of their viewers not a response but a wholly involving and evolving sort of relation – immersive, visceral, sustained, active. When this approach works best it is essentially at war or at odds with disinterest and detached contemplation. Such encounters have a structure that is repeatable, unfolding, graspable. However, with and through Khurana's practice, viewers and commentators of her work will ultimately find value not in the bodies or body parts that she pictures, but what for the sake of precision may be better described as *the figural*. Recalling Jean-François Lyotard's sophisticated work on the figural in his celebrated essay 'Discours, figure' (1993), David Rodowick summarises the concept thus: 'The

figural ... is not primarily a montage or chiasmus between the said and the seen ... It is a third dimension, neither sayable nor showable' (2001: 12). As I will show, the figural aspect of Khurana's practice has been there since the video sequences she arranged in the 1990s. It struck me then, as it does now, as a clear achievement for the way that she exposes and critically exploits the visible absence and presence of the body of an artist. As such, Khurana's interest in the figural calls for an engagement and an analysis of the body as a 'thing in itself', while prompting the viewer to problematise altogether any extant definition of the body without subjectivity. This yields a ceaseless analysis of the 'workings of bodies', so to speak, that directs attention to the interweaving between self and other, self and world.

Khurana's art practice calls into question, moreover, precisely what defines – theoretically and physically – the sentient body. Take for instance her 'Breath 1' (1998), a colour video first installed in London in the late 1990s, that focuses on the function of respiration by presenting the midriff of the torso in its continuous rising and falling breaths. Flattened on a digital screen is a shifting form, an expanse of pink flesh fringed above with a narrow finger of white space. The image carries forward the insight from Merleau-Ponty that "...it is clearly in action that the spatiality of our body is brought into being, and an analysis of one's own movement should enable us to arrive at a better understanding of it" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 102). Here the undulating line separating fields of colour – two smoothed ridges at the base of the rib cage – is our only register of movement. In another of her early silent works, Khurana's 'I'm tied to my mother's womb with a very long chord' (1998), such concerns with repetition and rhythm develop into the measuring and orienting devices for a study of the body. This two-monitor video installation, fixed one above the other, plays out aspects of a hand-held camera carried along a shoreline. The discontinuity between upper and lower sequences breaks the body into separate frames of time and location. It also entertains the desire to

combine and rejoin them, which is met by the gentle realisation that their differences cannot be reconciled.

Such a phenomenological account of perception offers an entry point for appreciating how this art makes the figure of the body present through visual technology. While Khurana's practice is centred around the body, even so it is not always the artist's body that is at the centre of her work. The body we encounter is at times hers, at times that of the passer-by and the stranger. But it is also the non-human body, the traces left and produced by and through these bodies, where physical space meets the fugitive, temporary presence of the breathing, sensing, enduring body. And while these encounters between space and flesh are often out of the ordinary, they also remain grounded, earthly intersections. Here, in the words of the artist, bodies can "share a space of existence, if only momentarily, to perform an inconsequential act."³

I am about to argue that this line of approach to art practice should bear significance for anyone oriented to one or more of three fields, and how they may intersect: the objective to undertake creative production that responds to a public and calls for public involvement; the objective to understand how subjectivity is grounded in material and somatic experience; and the objective to put aesthetic analysis to use as a strategically effective, radical politics, especially if this takes an indirect or even recalcitrant path. My opening remarks about the context of black British art should serve to suggest simply one historical location for Khurana's art, but at the same time to show how uneasily such art may 'fit' with the surrounding discourse of black or diaspora cultural criticism. And that is really central point: to remind us that more than occasionally we might come across art and artists who raise pertinently historiographic issues that are implicitly ethical in structure. For here, in Sonia Khurana's situation, is an art that would be nigh

³ From Khurana's unpublished poem, 'Lying down on the ground'.

impossible to explore meaningfully without a concomitant and extended look at the ontology of embodied relations. When an artist successfully parses the dimensions of affectivity and political action then a detailed philosophical and transdisciplinary knowledge can inform *how* this takes place. In turn, such art can ensure a pathway to a dynamic kind of cultural knowledge through relational and reciprocal encounters.

Inhabited spaces

I should get out into the open here at the very beginning that the imaged body at the forefront of attention in Khurana's art practice is not at all a representational one. Rather, it comes closer to enacting what Edmund Husserl had called 'the thing itself'. The body of the figural is the living, breathing, sleeping body: the vernacular, limited body, caught in constant encounters and distractions, enmeshed in the material world. Khurana reminds us of the importance of the sentient, playful, breathing body; that this is hardly a body in the abstract, detached somehow from its lived contingencies and surroundings. It is a world of streets and pebbles, crowds and traffic, tides and gravity. In 'Lone women don't lie' (1999), for example, Khurana makes inventive use of split levels of upper and lower monitors, showing her head and naked shoulders, engaging with the vernacular language of the body, nuzzling, sniffing, nibbling on her lips, flicking her tongue. In 'Bird' (1999), she delves into the limits of the body-in-the-world, limits that are simultaneously dramatic, elegant, amusing and grotesque. The artist spreads her arms, lifts her feet one by one in preparation for flight. She lies on a block, rolling, kicking her legs, spinning, bemused and frustrated at the realisation that she cannot fly.

In each case, Merleau-Ponty's thesis of "reversibility" is instructive for elaborating a view of the conclusions that Khurana's art seems to draw. He suggests that not only bodies but also things in the world may be considered to have "presence", indeed that

they "look at us" by substantiating a form of visibility in which "the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 139; cf. Dillon, 1998: 48). Evidently a figural experience is being spoken about here, rather than one that is simply about figures per se. In parallel, Khurana's practice of imaging and placing individual figures in the world is also far from literal (far then, for example, from those cases noted by the art historian Hans Belting when: "The image ... not only represented a person but also was treated like a person, being worshipped, despised or carried from place to place in ritual processions", 1994: xxi). It is more like what the biographer André Marchand had in mind, thinking perhaps of the artist Paul Klee, of an experience of the forest in which the trees seemed to be looking back at their viewer. "In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me.... I was there, listening...." (Merleau-Ponty, 1993: 129).

Figurality is explored further in another of Khurana's early works, her 'Zoetrope' installation (1999), which employs the movement of a drum-like object, whose historical design once provided one of the few ways to animate static images before the introduction of cinema. The subject of the display is Khurana herself, drawn into various poses. Arms raised and open-mouthed, with head to one side as if delivering a song, she is dressed in black, with lace gloves and a wig, and at her waist is a reflective disc tied in place with an elaborate bow. The piece employs illusion by mechanical means, dissolving the separation between individual images of the body of the artist. Spinning around, images arranged in series inside the drum may be spied through the narrow viewing slits within its circumference, and the drum can be turned quickly enough for the numerous images to merge into one. Here is a repetition of actions, with the impression of a continuous cycle; an object that invites interaction from the viewer, who supplies or initiates and can bring an end to the operations of this work.

'Zoetrope' complicates the way that an artist may order the element of time within a kinetic work, by allowing its viewers a degree of play with presence and absence. Here, we may choose to modify the length of its sequences, and the point at which movement of the drum and its contents might be returned to stillness. This extension of agency to its viewers opens up choices about the degree and direction of their participation. The 'Zoetrope' enters the perceptual horizon of viewers in a plurality of ways. Its tactility, its demand to be touched, its need for energy from those who apprehend it, all mean that its rhythmic effects are the rhythms we ourselves command it to produce. The work's materiality is in this sense conjoined with ours, interweaving our interests with the object. Its potential to capture and to deliver movement in turn closes the gap between the object and what the viewer may make of it. Introducing movement to the 'Zoetrope', we relate and inhabit it, as flesh meets with flesh.

This activity shows how art practice can underscore the phenomenological sense that the self and world are inseparable. The body is simultaneously the locus of experience and the means of experience, a body in the world and a site where the world enacts itself. The meeting of flesh, through instances of intimate relations forged between the body and world, happens in an inhabited space, an 'interworld' (the Merleau-Pontian *l'intermonde*; 1962: 357; 409).

Nowhere is this more tangible than in other of Khurana's projects that enlarge on the manipulation of time. The element of time is explored along a spectrum, from slowed or slower-than-real-time, through to real time, to accelerated time, so that the viewer becomes aware of sequence and repetition as dimensions of bodily experience. The artist recommends that we entrust ourselves to rhythms, by allowing viewers to recognise in a digitally imaged sequence the measure and number of moments. Gaston

Bachelard once identified 'systems of instants' (2000: 21), and this art is never far away from manipulating time systematically so as to contemplate the variable brevity or else the longitude of an instant or moment – in other words the objective to understand *duration*. Through Khurana's 'Anhad: the "Original" sound' (1998), for example, there is the opportunity to develop a sharper awareness of the continuity and discontinuity that characterise duration. A still image, a black and white photographic print of an aged, hairless navel area is placed next to a back-projected video of a colourless surface of trickling sand and water. Despite the mention to sound in the title of the work it is entirely silent. The camera has enlarged the rifts and valleys left by water running across the sand, and the details of light and the dark grains of sand are easily picked out. The sequence is cut in places, overlaid with other aspects of the scene. From some aspects, the grains ascend, from others they descend, slipping and cascading hypnotically across the channelled surface, while across from the sand, in a strong light source, the ridges of wrinkled skin remain unmoved.

The poetics, or more properly, the physics of such processes of exchange in 'Anhad' – between sand and water; skin and time – depend not on mere *limits* but the elaboration of *sites*. Khurana's art is in general driven by this same imperative to join self and world, illuminating the very effects of the boundaries between self and world, working to undermine the lines of resistance that distinguish them. Encounters of body and environment are crossings that urge close attention to the body and how it does not *dwell in* space but is *made of* it. Such analysis then conceives subject and space as entangled and co-constituted, rather than as separate entities that meet to simply 'interact'. As physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad (2007) suggests, 'interaction' is better conceived as 'intra-action', where *relata* follow relations, rather than the other way around. In an art such as Khurana's that sets up such spaces of entanglement, the

viewer enters in order to partake. We become complicit in the displacement of the boundary between the private and public.

This is how Khurana's art is the site or venue for a shared, public intimacy. What is generally secluded is put on display, and the enclosed opens up to the viewer. In the video installation 'Closet Piece', for example, she assembles the 'self' of public visibility in the private, confined space of her room. The film allows us to follow her ritual – undressing, combing, abandoning herself on her bed. Here we see the lived body immersed in and enacting its intimacies. Her body is surrounded and adorned by, but also *constituted through* the objects and the spaces of the personal and the idiosyncratic. From the private to the public self, intimacy is in fact constructed and embedded through a space that is replete with (her) familiar objects. The artist's body is not contained within the boundaries of her skin, but extends towards objects that are laden with stories she does not tell. A telephone, a book, clothes and other objects surround her, binding her to the public world outside. These are fragments that together constitute an intimate, protected space of retreat which viewers are gently allowed to enter. Khurana places herself on the bed, hair loose, eyes closed, hands on her stomach. It is an act of transient surrender. We witness an instance of privacy, glimpsing a 'self' that often evacuates the public sphere. We are given her trust, and the viewer's gaze perhaps becomes part of the surroundings, coming to connect the privacy of her room to the world 'outside'. The mediation of the camera thus becomes a channel of intimacy which creates a silent dialogue between the visible body of the artist and the invisible body of the viewer. Khurana's trust in the benevolence of the latter's gaze allows the invisible body of the viewer to enter her room. Spaces and bodies come together, disobeying distance.

Interviewing the artist in June 2016, she shared with me a narrative about the development of the same pattern of setting up such encounters, with emphasis on the role of strangers:

Two exhibitions given at Khoj in New Delhi were about sitting down, not lying. At first, I inhabited an allocated space for two weeks. The space was in keeping with the existing architecture of museum, yet it had a hidden room, painted pink, which was visible through slats. The space was on the left, open on three sides, and adjoining another closed space. That wall could revolve. I set up a projection, a live feed there. Then the work developed during the second exhibition. This manifestation was more developed, but took the same strategy: people spoke to me, I didn't speak, and I could stay within my performative space. The audience were partly known to me, but there were also those who spoke languages I didn't understand. I made placards in English and Chinese. On the opening night I wore a satiny maroon shift (as worn in 'Closet Piece') and used a wind up clock, and went off to sleep. The way it worked is that when the alarm goes off I get up and come out. There was a revolving door, and that was dramatic and beautiful. I would invite people in using bodily gestures and eye contact. I remember in particular how a woman entered and told me she is sick of the art-world. She'd just had a destabilising feeling when being out with others at a party and there was a strong exchange between us.

With this recollection, it becomes easier to appreciate those artworks in which it is not only Khurana's body that is central but also the bodies of the passers-by, the unforeseen. The artist has explored the textures of the shared intimacy that can be generated through distant bodies of such strangers at the point of encounter. As her body extends to encompass her surroundings, it also *becomes* its connections. The body

we sense, then, is made of flesh and past stories, connections, affections, clothes and movements. In this process, the viewer becomes part of the scene. Which is to say, we become part of a body that is not enclosed in skin, not a self-contained and self-bounded body that comes into contact with other bodies. Accordingly, the working definition of 'a body' for Khurana comes to encompass and invest the relationships through which 'this body' is constituted, and which it constantly enacts.

In the 'Lying Down' series (2009), mentioned in our interview, viewers literally took part in making the work, lying on the ground alongside Khurana, the silhouettes of their bodies then marked with chalk. The former presence of the participating viewer would now have an imprint on the performance space. The video footage of this process shows clearly how such absent bodies accumulate on the floor, how they overlap with each other and in doing so can become indistinguishable. The initial image of a body frame that was perhaps uncomfortable and reminiscent of a corpse is now almost in caricature. As the frames lose their distinction and solitude, we come to encounter a new space which can properly be described as one of embodied human absence.

Affective bodies

By enacting bodies as relational phenomena, Khurana's art has occupied a newly diversified intellectual horizon which resonates the emergent interest in 'the somatic' within the humanities and social sciences. The interdisciplinary 'turn to the body' from the late 1980s was indebted to a phenomenological tradition, in developing an engagement with the body in fields such as anthropology, the medical humanities, sociology, and feminist theory (See for example: Csordas, 2003; Leder, 1990; Turner, 1984; Gallopp, 1988). With various concerns and agendas, these disciplines have focused on the centrality of embodiment and experience as exquisitely corporeal forms

of 'being-in-the-world', juxtaposed to more abstract ways of theorising bodies, and introducing a shift in the questions around experience, from the meaning of *having a body* to the dynamics of *being a body*.

In the past three decades, this 'somatic turn' has also been shaped by a series of scholarly reorientations which have also grappled with concerns over 'being a *singular* body', problematising *what* a body can be, where its boundaries are, and what the potentials beyond its physical boundaries might be, thus engaging with forms in which several bodies connect and expand their limits. Such questions are central to the current interdisciplinary interest in 'affect' and its articulation through 'affective bodies' and 'affective practices'. As social psychologist Margaret Wetherell puts it (2012: 10), these questions are raised as attempts to put 'the visceral' in touch with 'the social'. This approach places an emphasis on bodies as always in process, with porous boundaries, defined by their capacity to affect and be affected. The body becomes ontologically and quintessentially *relational*. The vocabulary and critical frameworks within this 'turn to affect' and renewed interest in bodily experience come from various traditions within the fields of philosophy and psychology, ranging from the work of seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza and its adoption in Deleuzian philosophy, to the interest in telepathy and hypnosis in late nineteenth century clinical practices (Ticineto Clough and Halley, 2007; Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001). While different, these vectors share an interest in the forces of connections between bodies that reconfigure the idea of the singular and self-contained body, while examining its social and political impact.

Khurana's projects enter this domain, lending themselves to an exploration of the sensuous relationships that are mobilised between and among bodies, stretching these questions and engaging with forms of perception that, while embodied, are not strictly located in or on the body. In this sense, 'the thing itself' that a phenomenological tradition aims to 'bracket' in the pursuit of engagement with the body before pre-

existing knowledge, becomes in her work not only the 'material body' of sensual perception but also the relational bodies that are produced and enacted in these bodily encounters. She aims to "transform[ing] a singular act into a collective one",⁴ and the singular body of each artwork is assembled into an extended body of absences, a platform and interface for (absent) bodies to spatially co-constitute such corporeal absences. Like forms of proprioception and exteroception that qualify the bodily experience of the world, this relational bodily space is never static, but is composed of movements, twists, detours and deviations, as a space that moves with us. This motion is both an e-motion, a form of moving 'outside' (ex-movo) our bodies and 'ad-movo', towards other bodies. The space of movement is then one of kinaesthetic 'throughness', at the limen between self and other, the material and the immaterial, the visible and the invisible.

The ontology of the body in movement is thereby not one of self-boundedness and singularity, but of spillages and permeability. Its vocabulary pertains not to the realm of self-containment, but of overflowing, as an ontology of relationality. The incarnated body of corporeal perception thus develops through a reimagining of incarnation without *carnis*, and embodied perception without physical flesh. Khurana's body, when mediated and fragmented, such as through a projection screen,, speaks through a language of excess and non containment. In her 'Lying Down series', her body is often present through its absence. In expecting, looking for, and mourning her body, the viewer gives it substance. This body is not *represented* by the lines on the ground, but *enacted* through them.

Relationality

⁴ From Khurana's unpublished poem, 'Lying down on the ground'.

Khurana's art can be explored through these reorientations as an ongoing creative project focused on forms of intercorporeal relationality. Hers is an interrogation into the textures of embodied relationships that move beyond a traditional conception of body to include forms of "entering the spaces" of encounter, and that "try to assimilate these spaces". In enacting encounters and exploring relationships between body and space, Khurana's body performs acts of "abandonment, dereliction, dissidence".⁵ As the viewer confronts her body such acts are not contained in her skin as something to be simply encountered or noted. Instead, abandonment and dereliction become e-motional. They escape (self) containment and move outside her body – affecting, reorienting and reconfiguring the landscape and the body of the viewer, and fundamentally rearranging their boundaries.

The artist shared with me another series of works on this process of physical movement. 'M-Other', is a series of photographs later developed into a video installation entitled 'And the one does not stir without the other', which is made up of two parts 'Sleep restless' and 'Sleep interludes' (2008-216). Khurana has an evolving writing practice, in transition from 'script to video to poetic text'⁶ and the 'M-Other' series is another 'work of connections' materialised through writing. Some of these connections are visible, some others we imagine, and some travel beyond the physical setting to reach the viewer. The artist and her mother lie on two separate mattresses that are positioned on the floor. These are two bodies in visible physical contact but also connected through emotional and invisible ties that the viewer is left to suppose. As Khurana and her mother turn and move over the time of their being filmed, their bodies come into various points of contact, only slightly invading each other's mattress. They find new points of encounter and although their individual clothing is at times indistinguishable,

⁵ From Khurana's unpublished poem, 'Lying down on the ground'.

⁶ Correspondence with the artist, summer 2015.

over the course of the film it tends to remain the physical marker of separation. Barely crossing each other's space, the subjects remain separate, their heads resting on two separate pillows. In establishing physical and affective connections, thus, the individuality and singularity of the body is not lost, and the subject is never obliterated by its relations. It is their separatedness that allows for the generation of a space of *contact* rather than *conflation*. This is the interweaving of self and other in a scene of mutual encounter, a shared space of relationality.

As the title of the piece reminds us, the space of maternal love and affection here becomes not just the space of mother, but also the space of (m)other, where the maternal comes to indicate an ethics of connection without fusion. As artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger frames it, in a 'matrixial theory of trans-subjectivity' the corporeal – or corpo-Real – becomes a psychic zone of encounter, care and awe for (m)other (Ettinger, 2006). This feminine psychic zone is a space of transmission, rather than separation, where the partition between mattresses, for instance, can assist to maintain the diversity between self and (m)other. I am mindful of how the motif of 'partition' may accrue meaning in the South Asian context where the work was first shown, an index of the traumatic historical 'moment' of Partition in 1948, and that interpretative dimension gains depth through a phenomenology of the artwork as a space for the negotiation of alterity. The viewer is similarly cut apart from the body of the artist, having no physical contact with her. But such a split is equally inhabited, where individual differences, as well as physical distance, enter the work not as limitations but as heterogeneous components.

Such components come together in Khurana's 'Head Hand' (2004), in the shape of colour and gender differences. The video installation shows the face of a man lying down, sideways. His eyes are closed, his skin is dark. His head tilts gently as the artist's hand slowly caresses him, moving across his whole face. These two bodily parts, the

primary sites of social interaction, meet in an encounter that, once again, while filmed and displayed, nonetheless remains very intimate. While gendered, their synchronic movement remains sensual and smooth. Their differences become spaces of encounter (not wholly unlike a split between two mattresses). These are spaces of communality and transmission, affection, trust and attachment neither *in spite of* nor *because of* difference, but *through* difference. Identity politics here is a work of connections, rather than deconstructions, an expedition not into diffraction but reflection.

Engaging viewers through absence and presence

If creating spaces of existential, one-to-one, intersubjective encounter has been an abiding aspect of her art practice, Khurana has sometimes directed this simultaneously into a more public field, one that is hardly imbued with an agreed-upon language of art theory and criticism. In that sense hers is partly a contribution to the broad constellation of debates on relational aesthetics, participatory performance and collaborative aesthetics that marked art of the 1990s and early 2000s. Such a 'relational turn' was taken at the crossroads of phenomenology and critical inquiry in art that has extended the possibilities and exposed the limitations for aesthetic encounters which are intersubjective and bodily (Deutsche, 1998; Bourriaud 2002; Bishop, 2004; Kester, 2004; Wright, 2004). The framing of that development, as may be expected, issued from many different positions. What it has shared with Khurana is the sense of problematising the claims for a disinterested gaze of ontological study and recognising that art (far from static or immutable in its qualities and meanings) engages with different audiences across time and space. Yet Khurana innovates too on that general preoccupation, by never insisting on the active engagement of the viewer in the production of a work, as in the establishing conventions of participation. She shows that the working of bodies need not be read or apprehended identically from one context to another – such as first

in an art museum or gallery, next out in the street – nor that this rhythmic relocating of works of art is motivated by social experiment or the imperative for cultural translation.

Equally she is not caught in the dilemma of autonomy-versus-contingency that has characterised much of the art and criticism geared to 'relationality'. While some of her works may have seemed, at their origin, to be unique performances there is in fact a high degree of repeatability here. Many of the same performances transfer into films and are thereby twice-removed and thrice-removed, and so on, from 'engagement' with the public, dispensing with 'participation' as their primary, ostensible purpose. Her works are enacted or shown, re-enacted and re-shown from place to place. That is done only to test whether their founding locus of experience can withstand temporal change, a metric of the shifting aesthetic responses they may generate for variously configured, plural audiences.

Such an approach can best be illustrated with a view onto how Khurana has treated the matter of scale in her inquiry into lived experience. A notion such as 'art that engages with its context and audience' can be complicated productively she has shown, by refusing to replicate a pattern of 'participatory' or 'relational' art and fragmenting the intersubjective, collective and social realm into its smaller units of experience. Often they are smaller even than the generic categories of difference – gender, class, ethnicity/race, etc. – that typically orient the humanities in its regard for difference.

I have worked directly with Khurana in her choice to highlight a realm of experience on the very smallest scale of human interrelation. She and I practised together such a reduction of experience in late 1999 at her home in Somers Town, London. Ours was an intimate encounter that although it was never intended as 'participatory' – it never even courted that genre – it was still in every sense a moment of participation. (What instance or scene of willing social encounter is not?). It was the occasion of

familiarisation between artist and scholar, given to forming a closer personal relationship. We spent three non-consecutive nights staying awake, wanting to share that feeling that creeps up and then sits indignantly at the margins of sleep and wakefulness, and to adumbrate the sensation with a searching discussion of Khurana's art. This was a chance to begin an investigation of an art practice as much as a sure way of getting to know one another and each have remained an incomplete project over the best part of the two decades that have followed. And I cannot pretend that those nights were not difficult. They stretched my endurance and challenged my capacity for coherence. (What conversation can make sense, taken in an unbroken line from dusk to dawn?). Our shared, simulated insomnia lay at the watershed of exhaustion, subsisting in the drained space between sleep and wakefulness.

In that space of exchange, our form of nocturnal dwelling-together brought out matters of difference, but not exactly obvious ones. Our differences correspond to generic social categories (Indian, English; female, male), but more importantly perhaps to less-encoded ones, namely differences of bodily comportment. We manifested fatigue each in our own way; we competed for coherence and surrendered differently to incoherence. (Just who *was* the more tired in the end?). We drew on comparable memories of other times keeping awake with other night-travellers.

Then, just as much as in her other works, Khurana has manifested a desire to engage with another person, doing so when free from any discrimination over whether there are shared ideas and values that resemble an established discourse on contemporary art. She has frequently satisfied that desire by making works that carry a conviction to disregard the requirement that her audience include card-carrying 'initiates' to art and its histories. At the same time, she has the purpose to practise *in spite* of a high degree of prior awareness on the part of her audience, putting aside already-set expectations about a conceptualisation of art practice centred on debates around relationality. This

has proved to be a particular area of success on a creative framework – although one should emphasise that it has brought surprisingly little commercial reward for the artist or given her the satisfaction of an assured 'place' in the mainstream, globalising art-world. She has the proven capacity to set up spaces that move within and through such differences, and she makes a virtue of the absence *and* the presence of embodied aesthetic preferences and critical perspectives in others.

Ethics and multiple bodies

The outpouring of Khurana's works (begun in the 2000s) focusing on insomnia and somnambulism feature a body which moves through its invisibility, a body that is simultaneously that of the absent onlooker and yet always other, which claims "no grand revolution" but is a "potential catalyst for nascent thought." Khurana's concretely asserts that "'I' is already and always 'us'": the singular body is a multiplicity of other bodies and crossings. It is through her articulations of relational dynamics that Khurana's work explores "[n]ot the pure body but the pure encounter with space and the other."⁷ In this encounter bodies exist as ontologically relational. This is art that allows an ethical movement of bodies that are autonomous and yet imbricated into each other's phenomenal world. Khurana's work is thus imbued with an ethics of relationality – an obligation towards the other that comes not *with*, but *before* the other, in order for the self to be whole.

Cultural theorist Joanna Zyliniska has presented an account of such an obligation with reference to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas it arises from recognition of the 'infinite alterity' of the other, which cannot be fully grasped by the self, but can be approached through an 'ethics of welcoming' (Zyliniska 2005: 124). This move serves

⁷ From Khurana's unpublished poem, 'Lying down on the ground'.

to place ethics before ontology as a theoretical practice; it refuses the reduction of the other to the categories known or possessed by the self, favouring instead the need to describe the degrees to which the other is different from the same. This alternative poses ethics as a mode of thinking about the other as a prompt or source of responsibility, one "that challenges and threatens the concept of the bounded self" (Zylinska, 2005: 124). If, as Zylinska has suggested, self is intrinsically prosthetic, requiring an ethical obligation towards the other, then Khurana translates the necessity of a relational ontology into a language of art. Speaking to the viewer through fragmented screens, absent bodies and disclosed intimacies, the ethical obligation that her art suggests is pluralistically relational before being singularly ontological.

It is through its focus on the materiality of the sentient body, its 'wordliness' and sensuous experience at the threshold between the public and the private self, the intimate and the mundane, that Khurana's work immediately asks new questions. It may be claimed that this 'material' body's experiences are permeated by forms of corporeal immateriality, moreover that the ontology of this earthly body is one of relationality.

In general what may be suggested of such art is that it shares a lot with the conjunction of circumstances that bear upon the arts to challenge the centrality of categories of the body that signify ethnicity and identity. I have found it fruitful to alight especially on the art that Khurana produced mostly in Britain in the closing decades of the twentieth century, and would underline the serendipity of having first met her during that time when in fact the mainstay of my work as a researcher was the history of British artists. In relation to that period's identity politics and the wide promotion of cultural diversity emerged an art that was grounded in an ethos of experimentation and resistance, which Khurana seemed to carry with her to Britain, where it found confluence with other artists (and indeed with my own orientations as a scholar). Her art is exemplary of how artistic creativity has often tried to side-step or translate the lexicon of cultural

identification and ethnic difference, wary of there being so many mixed and adverse outcomes for it (what the American art historian Lucy Lippard had once called 'mixed blessings'; Lippard, 1990). Much before scholars in the arts and humanities took their recent ontological turn toward the new materialism, artists of African, Asian and Caribbean backgrounds in Britain had begun to expose cultural criticism's overreliance not only on the politics of identity but its post-structuralist response in the academy, the very theories of art and textuality, semiosis and representation that made examples of cultural identification so transparent.

With all that in view, the complexity of the art that Khurana made in London, and the subsequent direction of her practice, should arrest the designation of her art as supplying simply another performance of ethnicised difference in the public sphere. She is typical in many ways, 'part of the lineage of women working through the body into a space of erotic efflorescence recognized/shown to be (almost definitively) blocked, thwarted, problematized, and therefore won, if ever, by searing forms of self-exposure', writes the art critic Geeta Kapur (2007: 91). Khurana throws off the strictures of identification in a mode of resistance that was shared with her London (black) contemporaries. Yet commentators should hesitate before trying to weave her into a proto-universalist myth about contemporary art, such that it has lately assumed a spatially emancipated sort of 'global' placelessness. There is no point in trying to dissolve the problem of representation or divorce Khurana's early practice from the British context, nor to overlook that here in the late 1990s in London was an Indian artist somewhat displaced from India. At the same time, there is little purpose in trying to attest to Khurana's 'Britishness' or indeed her 'Indianness', by treating nationhood or citizenship as a compass and guide for understanding art in a climate that has become resolutely transnational. In other words, Khurana's art does not return us to talk of a 'universal aesthetic', or of artistic 'excellence', somehow unencumbered or detached from the exigencies and specificities of national location (cf. Kapur, 2007). Nor does it

suggest that aesthetics or the artwork should be taken to exist *a priori* to identification (and the issues of power that accrue in relation to how we identify) – a gesture that subtends patriarchal and white supremacist views of art and culture (Jones 2012).

Going beyond such dilemmas over suitable approaches to analysis, there is the matter of the alternative *attitude* that Khurana's work engenders in our relation to analysis itself, suggesting that the search for an overarching theme in her art may be entirely beside the point. I feel that this leads any commentator who looks seriously at this art to reflect in turn on themselves. That happened for me too: the paths that I have treaded through her work have always led back to myself, even when that seems inadequate for writing that is designed to be about Khurana and her artistic achievements. Indeed, writing about this art has required my involvement so completely that in order to take a better view on it, I have only ever returned to my own presence, my own body and self-image. My own body stands before me and looks back at me, when it is the artist's works that are the actual forms I seek. No matter that I try to take myself out of the equation for fear of distraction, of prejudice and privilege. The process has philosophical depth within a social situation, since the driving forces for any account of the desires, emotions and poetics of relationality will remain those of the identities and politics of the subjects that structure them.

Borderspace

I have picked and chosen quite sparingly from a remarkably wide repertoire of Khurana's artworks, and hardly taken in the full range of her practice. What remains cogent for such a partial analysis nonetheless is that here is art that pinpoints the poetics of relationality in a rare and important way. Relationality here implies more than encounter, such as when the self-contained body 'meets' the world through its sensual perceptions. Given that expansive field of interests, the articulation of such complex

relations by Khurana calls for ethical responses, most of all perhaps for ways of "granting [...] permission to be disturbed in the skin of one's own home" (Zylinska, 2005: 125). Her art sets up spaces for an ethical negotiation of subjectivity and positioning that draws the viewer into the work, but also draws out from the viewer the sort of individuated affective and cognitive responses that disclose the location and style of our standpoints on the world, our bodily comportment and our disposition toward others. The production of new bodies in-relationality does not remain a matter of the 'out-there', to which the viewer is a witness. Instead, it always and already includes the viewer, in a "metamorphosis" that "turns the subject's boundaries into thresholds" where "co-affectivity turns the borderlines between subjects [...] and between subject and object, into a shareable borderspace" (Ettinger, 2006: 166). This entire realm of intersubjective relationality, for me at least, is at the same moment a space in which the ethics of negotiation are undergirded by questions about my professional orientations toward the artist and her work; my choices over how to position myself within the politics of historiography, and the politics of identification, being shaped or led by self-reflection in an affective register.

Khurana's art thus revives a set of issues from within a field of philosophical study: the matter of whether the focus for attention in contemporary art is the art form 'out there', or else, inherently, a way of studying art by way of a more ethically-driven *self* analysis. It opens up the matter of reciprocal lines of responsibility that may be drawn between viewer, artist and artwork, and makes a resounding and incisive contribution to the subject of experience.

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Figure 1: Sonia Khurana, 'Breath 1', 1998, single-channel video projection. Colour, silent. 5 minutes, looped. © Sonia Khurana.

Figure 2: Sonia Khurana, 'I'm Tied To My Mother's Womb With A Very Long Chord', 1998, two-channel video diptych (stacked screens). Colour and sound. 5 minutes, looped. © Sonia Khurana.

Figure 3: Sonia Khurana, 'Lone Women Don't Lie', 1999, single-channel video (vertical screen). Black and white. 3 minutes 20 seconds, looped. © Sonia Khurana.

Figure 4: Sonia Khurana, 'Bird', 1999, single-channel video. Black and white. 2 minutes, looped. © Sonia Khurana.