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Sonia Khurana: The Contemporary Art of Relationality

Leon Wainwright

During the decade of the 1980s, it had become common for many artists of black and Asian backgrounds in Britain to group together for the purposes of exhibiting their works, while seeking to foreground the issues and difficulties involved in such public displays, notably at the levels of resources and reception (see, for instance, Araeen, 'Success and Failure'; Chambers; Hylton; Owusu; Wainwright, 'Bibliography'). The ensuing narratives of making and exhibiting this art have been elaborated in a remarkable and notably *critical* body of commentary, writing that includes polemical interventions and historical overviews, documentary and archiving projects. A recent renewal of academic interest in this history has sustained the effort to show how artists produce their works within the diverse range of experience that comes with living in diaspora communities in Britain, and how art-making is a field of inscription and identification in the sphere of public culture. This conceptualisation takes its cues from post-structuralist scholarship on everyday signifying or semiotic-like practices of 'making things mean' (Hall, 'Rediscovery' 64; Hall, 'Black Diaspora'; Mercer) which came to be applied to the evaluation of black and Asian British artists' participation in film-making, photography, performance, painting, installation and so on, as well as more broadly based involvements in exhibition curating, publishing, archiving, arts organising and activism. In this way, black British art has long been conceived as a corpus of practices consisting of performed identities, as commentators have chartered the relationships and 'articulations' between contemporary art and the lived experiences of difference.

Against the background of such attention, however, by the end of the twentieth century many artists of diverse ethnic or racial backgrounds in contemporary Britain began to feel unsure about the lasting value of such cultural criticism. Black British art, as it was identified, seemed to be governed almost exclusively by the drive to make

visual texts, by artists who held the goal of cultural representation centrally in view, along with an interest in revisionism and political opposition (a trend consistently noted by Araeen, *Other Story*; Araeen, 'From Primitivism'; Araeen, 'New Internationalism'). Those associations brought many artists to a sort of impasse as they came to feel encumbered rather than galvanised by matters of cultural identity and cultural politics that dominated their art's reception. That feeling has extended, indeed, to broad discomfort among artists with regard to the *black British* label of identification and its uses for building a transformative discursive space for creativity in contemporary Britain. The situation bears comparison with the United States, where complaints of reductionism have prompted certain American artists and thinkers to move 'beyond black representational space'; favouring a mode of 'strategic formalism' within art criticism and historiography, in order to draw 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 32).

Cultural commentary has made both gains and losses in its aim to understand contemporary artists in Britain of African, Asian and Caribbean backgrounds, to elevate the importance of such art, galvanise a degree of organisation among artists, and transform the attitudes of art audiences. 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, *Phenomenal*), it bears repetition that the long-standing attitude of commentators in their support for British artists of diaspora backgrounds has brought somewhat mixed outcomes. The preoccupations and struggles over cultural representation may even have become an obstacle, intellectually and institutionally, in the way of a more

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

rounded understanding of this art. Such is the case for the art of Sonia Khurana, an artist who stayed in Britain for two years in the late 1990s during her postgraduate study at the Royal College of Art in London before returning to India. 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 Khurana and her art represented a challenge to the analytical frameworks that then seemed to be predominant. 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 more global network. Khurana's artworks have taken a deliberate and extended look at phenomenology, promoting 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 brought into being an array of physically involving and visceral relations, in a range of creative phenomena including performance, photography, installation, and digital practice.

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. She has been subject to a process of representational 'positioning', in common with many artist contemporaries who work internationally from a base in the Global South. As such, Khurana's art seems to call for a progressive and critical outlook and the grounds for community with the artist, mindful of differences of ethnicity, nationality and gender difference. On each of these differences, my own subjectivity is marked out from Khurana's but this has not detracted from a personal sense of solidarity with her, indeed it may have come to heighten it, as I am about to show.

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

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. It betrays a 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 a current debate about how art's viewers are demanding ever

Figure 3 'Bird', Sonia Khurana, 1999, single-channel video, black and white, 2 minutes, looped. © Sonia Khurana.

closer attention, and through attempts to understand new sorts of interrelationships with art. 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. Her art is the very means for building a very urgently required relationship of mutual understanding, respect and agreement. She and I have shared an anti-racist initiative for avoiding the reduction of art and artists to ethnic categorisation per se, to racial stereotype, or any notion of cultural 'character' that would draw upon absolutisms or euphemisms of Otherness. I have responded to Khurana in what I submit to be a mode of art historical advocacy, recommending that we foreground the kind of art that Khurana practises, an art that engenders a distinctive mode of relation which is simultaneously a matter of politics, intellectual inheritance and experiential 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.

Khurana's art practice calls into question, moreover, precisely what defines – theoretically and physically – the sentient body. Take for instance her 'Breath 1' (1998; [Figure 1](#)), 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 the philosopher Maurice 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. (*Phenomenology* 102)

Here the undulating line separating fields of colour – two smoothed ridges at the base of the ribcage – 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 Cord' (1998; [Figure 2](#)), a two-monitor video installation, fixed one above the other, plays out perspectives from a hand-held camera carried along a shoreline. Such concerns with repetition and rhythm develop into the measuring and orienting devices for a study of the body. 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.

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. In 'Bird' (1999; [Figure 3](#)), she delves into the limits of the body-in-the-world, limits that are simultaneously dramatic, elegant and amusing. 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 (while bemusing and frustrating the viewer) with the limitation of being unable to fly.

Merleau-Ponty's thesis of 'reversibility' is instructive for elaborating a view of the conclusions that Khurana's art seems to draw. 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', he writes (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 139; cf. Dillon 48). In 'Lone Women Don't Lie' (1999; [Figure 4](#)), for example, Khurana makes inventive use again 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. Evidently a *figural*

Figure 5 'Zoetrope', Sonia Khurana, 1999–2006, interactive, kinetic object, with images of simulated performance wood, paint, metal, turntable, photograph dimensions: 62 inches height, 48 inches diameter, 16 photographic images: 24 inches x 32 inches: version # 3, temporary installation on a beach in St Tropez, France. Exhibition: Art on the Beach, 2006. Image courtesy Gallerie Enrico Navarra. © Sonia Khurana.

experience is being spoken about here, rather than one that is simply about figures per se. Khurana cannot be in two places at once but her figural presence can. 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, 'Eye' 129).

Figurality is explored further in Khurana's 'Zoetrope' installation (1999; Figures 5–6), which employs the movement of a drum-like object, whose historical design once provided one of the few ways to animate static images. The subject of the display is Khurana herself, drawn into various poses, offering a tribute to the Egyptian singer, songwriter and film actress, Umm Kulthum. 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; at her waist is a reflective disc tied in place with an elaborate bow. This is illusion by mechanical means; dissolving the separation between individual images of the body of the artist by a repetition of actions, with the impression of a continuous cycle, while inviting interaction from the viewer, who supplies or initiates and can bring to an end the operations of this work.

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

Figure 6 'Homage to Umm Kulthum', Sonia Khurana, 2006–2007, images of simulated performance, Diasac, photo prints, size variable, first from set of 3 inserted within 'Zoetrope'. Image courtesy of the artist. © Sonia Khurana.

that urge a close analysis of how the body does not dwell in space but is made of it, how subject and space are entangled and co-constituted, rather than separate entities that meet to simply 'interact'. As physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad suggests, such 'interaction' is better conceived as 'intra-action', where relata follow relations, rather than the other way around (Barad 33). In an art such as Khurana's that sets up spaces of entanglement, the viewer enters in order to partake. We become complicit in the displacement of the boundary between the private and public.

Take for example her 'Lying Down' series (2006; Figure 7), where the ontology of being a body extends to an exploration of how the body may be present through its absence. In expecting, looking for and mourning her body, the viewer gives it substance. Khurana's body is not represented by the lines on the ground, but enacted through them, in an 'interworld' of streets and pebbles, crowds and traffic, tides and gravity.

Her 'Anhad: The "Original" Sound' (1998; Figure 8) is also an enactment of poetics, or, more properly, a physics of such processes – between sand and water; skin and time – that depends not on mere limits but the elaboration of sites. A still image, a black-and-white photographic print of a hairless navel area, is placed next to a back-projected video of a colourless surface of trickling sand and water. From some aspects, the grains of sand ascend, from others they descend, slipping and cascading hypnotically across the channelled surface, while across from them, in a strong light source, the ridges of wrinkled skin remain unmoved. Here is a continuous creative project focused on forms of intercorporeal relationality. It 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' by performing acts of 'abandonment, dereliction, dissidence' (Khurana np). 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, fundamentally rearranging their boundaries.

A vivid example of such bodily relations and physical movement is Khurana's series of photographic work (Figures 9–10), which are photographs that were later developed into a video installation entitled 'And the One Does Not Stir Without the Other', made up of two parts, 'Sleep Wrestlers' and 'Sleep Interludes'. Khurana has an evolving writing practice, in transition from 'script to video to poetic text', and the series is what she has described as a composite 'work of connections' that materialise through both visual and textual production (correspondence with the artist, 5 September 2015). Here the artist and her mother lie on two separate mattresses that are positioned on the floor, two bodies in visible physical contact but also connected through emotional and invisible ties that the viewer is left to suppose. As the bodies turn and move over the time of their being filmed, they come into various points of contact, only slightly invading each other's mattress. Thus they find new points of encounter and although their individual clothing is at times indistinguishable, it tends to remain the physical marker of separation. In establishing physical and affective connections, the individuality and singularity of the body is not lost, and the subject is never obliterated by its relations. Their separatedness allows for the generation of a space of *contact* rather than

Figure 7 Sonia 'Logic of Birds' from the *Lying Down* series, Sonia Khurana, 2006, performance, Barcelona. Production support: Casa Asia; Barcelona Hangar Center, Barcelona; Sergi Botella and Katerina Valdivia Bruch. Image courtesy of the artist. © Sonia Khurana.

Figure 8 'Anhad: The "Original" Sound'. Sonia Khurana, 1998, *Duratrans* print photograph on lightbox and video projection, black and white, silent, 3 minutes, looped. © Sonia Khurana .

conflation, in an interweaving of self and other at a scene of mutual encounter or 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 connection without fusion. As artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger frames it, in a 'matrixial theory of trans-subjectivity' the corporeal – or corpo-Real – is a psychic zone of encounter, care and awe for (m)other. In this feminine space, not of separation but of transmission, a partition (between mattresses, for instance) can assist in maintaining the diversity between self and (m)other. It can also constitute a space for the negotiation of alterity. While the viewer is similarly cut apart from the body of the artist, having no physical contact with her, such a split is equally inhabited. Individual differences and physical distance enter the artwork not as limitations but as heterogeneous components.

Relationality and Ethics

Khurana's projects typically lend themselves to an exploration of the sensuous relationships that are mobilised between and among bodies. These are forms of perception that, while embodied, are not strictly located in or on the body at all. This relational bodily space is never static, but composed of twists, detours and deviations, a space that moves with us. Such motion is both an e-motion, a form of moving 'outside' (ex-movo) our bodies and towards (ad-movo) other bodies, and this space of movement is then one of kinaesthetic 'through-ness', at the limen between self and other, the material and the immaterial, the visible and the invisible.

It is through such a focus on the materiality of the sentient body (its 'wordliness' and sensuous experience at the threshold between the public and the private self,

Figure 9 'Sleep Wrestlers', Sonia Khurana, 2013, set of 7 digital photographs, printed, digital prints, size variable. Image courtesy of the artist. © Sonia Khurana.

the intimate and the mundane), that Khurana's work immediately asks new questions. It may be suggested that this 'material' body's experiences are permeated by forms of corporeal immateriality while the ontology of this earthly body always returns us to the problem of relationality and, as I will suggest, of ethics. In general, what may be suggested of such art is that it shares much with the conjunction of circumstances that bear upon the arts to challenge the centrality of categories of the body that signify ethnicity and identity. It is fruitful to have alighted especially on the art that Khurana produced mostly in Britain in the closing decades of the twentieth century (and I would underline in this regard 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, as well as with my own orientations as a scholar. Her art is exemplary of how artistic creativity has often tried to sidestep 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'. Much before scholars in the arts and humanities took their recent ontological turn toward the new materialism, artists of African, Asian and Caribbean

Figure 10 'Sleep Wrestlers', Sonia Khurana, 2013, set of 4 digital photographs, printed, size variable. Image courtesy of the artist. © Sonia Khurana

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, theories of art and textuality, semiosis and representation that made examples of cultural identification so transparent.

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 ('Gender Mobility' 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 evidently little

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. Equally, is there any purpose in trying to attest to Khurana's 'Britishness' or her 'Indianness', such as by treating nationhood or citizenship as a guide for understanding art in a climate that has become resolutely transnational? 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, 'subTerrain'). Least of all 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).

Going beyond dilemmas over the suitable approaches to analysis of this art, there is the matter of the alternative *attitude* that Khurana's work engenders in our relation to analysis itself. The search for an overarching theme in her art may be entirely beside the point. Any commentator who looks seriously at this art will reflect in turn on themselves. That happened for me too: the paths that I have trodden 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. The process has philosophical depth within a social situation, demonstrating that 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 who structure it.

By way of paradox, then, Khurana's art pinpoints the critical and aesthetic dimensions and 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. The articulation of such complex relations by Khurana calls for ethical responses, moreover, seeking ways of 'granting... permission to be disturbed in the skin of one's own home' (Zylinska 125). Her art sets up spaces for an ethical negotiation of subjectivity and positioning, a process 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' where 'co-affectivity turns the borderlines between subjects... and between subject and object, into a shareable borderspace' (Ettinger 166). This entire realm of intersubjective relationality is at the same moment the occasion for an ethics of negotiation. My own writing about this contemporary art of relationality is 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 identification,

addressed through self-reflection in an affective register. Khurana 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 it makes a resounding and incisive contribution to the subject of experience.

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