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Indeterminacy in the Art of Nalini Malani: A Poetic Breaching of Rules

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Outrage, outcry, denunciation, lament, elegy, vitality, the visceral, the abject, deviance, intelligence, care, optimism, history, myth, metamorphosis, milk, honey, salt, glass, photography, Mylar cylinders, projections, light, sound, poetry, painting – Nalini Malani's textured and striated feminist approach does not reduce the understanding of the world to any stable logic. It hovers in a similar territory to that invoked by philosopher and quantum physicist Karen Barad when she muses on imagining a new form of justice – social justice, ecological justice, cosmic justice – based on the inherent indeterminacy, “intra-acting,” and entangled nature of the universe. Like Malani through art, Barad explains through physics that nothingness is filled with virtual particles that allow for actual particles to exist:

A quantum ontology deconstructs the classical one: there are no pre-existing individual objects with determinate boundaries and properties that precede some interaction... This indeterminacy is responsible not only for the void not being nothing (while not being something), but it may in fact be the source of all that is, a womb that births existence... Virtual particles do not traffic in the metaphysics of presence. They do not exist in space and time. They are ghostly non/existences that teeter on the edge of the infinitely thin blade between being and non-being... The void is a lively tension, a desiring orientation toward being/becoming. The vacuum is flush with yearning, bursting with innumerable imaginings of what could be... Indeterminacy, in its infinite openness, is the condition for the possibility of all structures in their dynamically reconfiguring in/stabilities... The idea of finitude as lack is lacking. The presumed lack of ability of the finite to hold the infinite in its finite manifestation seems empirically unfounded, and cuts short the infinite agential resources of undecidability/ indeterminacy that are always already at play... Infinity and nothingness are infinitely threaded through one another so that every infinitesimal bit of one always already contains the other. The possibility for justice-to-come resides in every morsel of finitude.¹

This perspective, which comes from physics, is similar to Malani's, which engenders an art that does not find resolution in one medium, form, style, or technique over another; that does not decide on figuration over abstraction (or vice versa); that does not create stable and timeless images but rather allows for images to co-emerge and dissolve. This perspective shudders at political “solutions” such as drawing a line through India in 1947 – Partition between non-Muslims and Muslims, between the new India and Pakistan – that attempt to find clarity and boundary.

¹ Karen Barad, “What Is the Measure of Nothingness? Infinity, Virtuality, Justice.” In *100 Notes 100 Thoughts*, no. 99, DOCUMENTA (13), 1–17. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012.

This perspective echoes other feminist lines of flight, and “stays with the trouble” like a “creature of the mud” (Donna Haraway), hovering in a “matrixial borderspace” (Bracha Ettinger). As in Ettinger’s universe,² where the self “coemerges,” Malani’s figures are never autonomous, but rather liquid transformations. Ettinger’s 1990s concepts positioned co-emergence as:

rethinking desire and the unconscious by reference instead to the transgressive encounter between I and non-I grounded in the maternal womb/intra-uterine complex and a notion of affective economy that avoids phallogentrism... As a feminine sexual difference, the matrixial designates “woman” not as the Other but as coemerging self with m/Other, and *link a* rather than *object a* not as lack or a figure of rhythmic scansion of absence/presence but as a *borderlinking* figure of *differentiation in co-emergence*...

A matrixial borderspace is a mutating copoietic net. Matrixial co-emergence has a healing power, but because of the transgression of individual boundaries that it initiates and entails, and because of the self-relinquishment and fragilization it appeals to, it is also potentially traumatizing. Therefore, to become creative, the aesthetical transgression of individual borderlines, which occurs in any case with or without our awareness or intention, calls for the awakening of a specific ethical attention, responsibility and extension. In artworking it calls for generous self-relinquishment. In art, the aesthetical working-through bends towards the ethical with matrixial co-response-ability and wit(h)nessing; in psychoanalysis the ethical working-through bends toward the aesthetical realm.³

Malani’s work concerns making visible the invisible, foregrounding the shadows, blending the documentary and the urgent with the mythical and universal. To be born in Karachi in 1946 of a Sikh mother and a Theosophist father means to have entered a world in crisis, tormented by the consequences of colonialism, world wars, and their aftermath, with huge populations in forced movement, yet with the cosmopolitan and worldly transnational emancipatory knowledges of theosophists such as Annie Besant, whose visions of an interrelated universe of “thought forms” prefigured later quantum physics. Malani’s family, like many others, was forced to flee during Partition, and her early life was marked by those times to the degree that her imagery surfaces as the return of repressed psychic material, or appears to be vomited up from the depths of a subconscious filled with horrors and trauma. Yet her father worked for Air India, thus allowing Malani to travel periodically to Europe from the age of sixteen. In 1961, for example, she saw the Egyptian art collections at the Louvre in Paris with her mother. In 1969, when, in her early twenties, she graduated from art school in Bombay, she decided to spend two years in Paris (1970–72), where she took philosophy classes with Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, and Noam Chomsky, and studied the work of Leon Trotsky. While protesting for abortion rights alongside Italian students at college, she engaged in art history, loving the radical forms of realism invented by Giotto and Masaccio, the fresco cycles of Piero della Francesca in Arezzo, as well as the Mexican muralists and Frida Kahlo. She emerged as a young woman artist at the height of counterculture and internationalist revolutionary impulses, with a strong sense of art’s secular agency and role in recreating the world through aesthetics, while never forgetting to celebrate desire.

To return to India in 1973 was therefore for Malani a political act, a willful decision to refute the diasporic life in the West and to pursue instead the project of modernisation and emancipation for a

² Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Gaze*. Leeds: Feminist Arts & Histories Network, Leeds University, 1995. This and other texts were developed in *The Matrixial Borderspace*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

³ Bracha Ettinger, “Matrixial Transsubjectivity.” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23 (2–3), 2006: 218–19.

secular, advanced, intellectual contemporary India. The story of the 1960s and 1970s speaks to us of a lively internationalist and transnational cultural life where intellectuals, bound by revolutionary aesthetics and decolonisation projects, cross-fertilised the planet. Malani's life story is thus far from contemporary essentialist narratives concerning globalisation and the critique of Eurocentrism that dominate simplistic narratives concerning the global South today (they, too, are part of an old Newtonian binary fantasy in physics).⁴

When a nuclear bomb explodes, or when an atomic energy plant breaks down, releasing radiation as it did in Chernobyl in 1986, the cosmos shudders, bends, and folds in a cry of pain, just as it does when a stick beats a bleeding dog or when a group of frustrated fundamentalist men furiously rape and kill a young girl in the name of religion and ethnic purity in India today. We do not live in a clean pristine world of digital data and hydroponic agriculture – we live in a muddy world of luscious compost and soil, and we sing to the bacteria, the insects, the plants, animals, and minerals that co-evolve.

When I think about Malani's artistic practice, I also see the resilience of life. I see fluid transformative and generative shapes, figures connected and suspended in a liquid abstract rounded world of light and shadows, organic and biomorphic data, symbols and objects flowing in allegorical mode, in cell-like spheres, osmotically relating through their membranes, as in a never-ending rebus, always hovering on the edge and oscillating between pain and joy, warning and the desire for change; I see references to the contemporary real world, and to an archaic and mythical universe of colour and matter, figuration and abstraction, appearance and vanishing, the *solve et coagula* of alchemical memory. Nothing is totally transparent, nor is anything completely opaque in her art; square or rectangular rooms become curved and rounded, unbound and non-orientable topological surfaces like Klein bottles or Moebius strips – irreducible to simple Euclidian space.

If an artwork were able to speak in words, this is what Malani's would say:

It is of the utmost importance to draw the biological, and to work towards the worldly flourishing of life on our planet, for us to remain alive, and to do so with equanimity, social justice, sexual justice, and ecological justice. In a globalised, digital, post-truth society characterised by an attention-driven economy, these principles are no longer self-evident; they are not obvious, and certainly they are not a given. With the rapid development of technological innovation in the field of artificial intelligence and artificial life, wealth has not become more distributed, it has concentrated; plants have not become more diversified, there has instead been a collapse of biodiversity through the concentration of certain crops and species over others; there is not more freedom for women worldwide, but rather violence and abuse are on the rise; sexuality is not synonymous with pleasure and relationality, it is ever more the solipsism of impotence expressed through rape. This implies the need to escape definition (HD), focus and locatability (GPS positioning), specificity, boundary, objecthood, and necessitates the ability to transform, like Daphne, into the vegetal realm of the tree, plunging her roots deeply into the earth and thus escaping the obligation to compete in terms of speed with her stalker Apollo.

There is a fluidity and corporeality in Malani's art, where metamorphosis and change allow her to escape the definitiveness of a specific technique, material, style. This is why she expanded her art

⁴ Our art world today suggests a different and erroneous story, according to which the radical avantgardes of the 1960s were not internationally integrated, as if the West had been separate then from the rest of the world and only recently – thanks to globalisation and activist curatorial practice today – could there be a new space and recognition for non-Western narratives and art histories.

from painting and drawing to experimental photography and 16 mm and 8 mm film in the 1970s and 1980s, to the large *Mutant A* and *B* series of paintings of the female body in the 1990s, and to experimental theatre and the time-based art of “video plays” in the late 1990s and 2000s (like the multichannel *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain* (2005), a work that stems from the cyclic repetition of violence against women both during Partition in 1947 and the Gujarat genocide of 2002) – effectively introducing video art to India. Malani also expanded simple projection techniques to create immersive environments of multiple evanescent images that appear and move in ghostlike fashion – her notable “shadow plays” or three-dimensional animations made from painted, yet transparent, rotating Mylar cylinders, through which light and images are projected, introducing music and words from various literary sources. The figures in her video and shadow plays, like the six-channel *In Search of Vanished Blood* (2012) created for dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel, appear and vanish simultaneously. She has continued her experiments with presence/absence, or dialogue between the living and the ghostly, which she began in 1991 with her wall-drawing performances. These charcoal drawings made directly on walls interact with the architecture of the space and are ultimately erased publicly, so that her viewers first feel her commitment to image-making, and then the fragility of all images, as of life itself, and finally their loss, and the futility of human efforts, even those of art-making.

For subjectivity to be vital and worldly, it must not resist disintegration through a hopeless and vain quest for individuation and integration, but rather, through liquidity itself, locate the metamorphic potentials of layering and merging, so that a catharsis can be achieved and a Dionysiac dance of life can again become possible. In the shadow play work *The Tables Have Turned* (2008) where painted Mylar cylinders illuminated by simple electrical lights rotate on small turntables placed on the floor, low-tech revolutions and contemporary forms of Arte Povera are possible.

Those metamorphic potentials were in Medea, degendered and deviant, as they were in Cassandra, if only we would listen. While Euripides’ play underlines the figure of Medea as a Negative Mother who kills her children out of jealousy when her husband Jason betrays her (extreme pain leading to inhuman acts), Christa Wolf, the dissident East German novelist much loved by Malani, attempted a feminist rehabilitation of Medea in 1996, where she does not murder her children, but they are killed by a mob. She is an independent woman who scorns corruption and is ultimately turned into a scapegoat for a vile patriarchal society. “She has no need of our doubt, of our endeavours to do her justice,” wrote Wolf, “we must venture into the darkest core of our misjudgement – of her and of ourselves – simply walk in, with one another, behind one another, while the crash of collapsing walls sounds in our ears.”⁵ In *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*, Jacqueline Rose celebrates Wolf: “she has turned Medea into a story of what happens when a woman is held responsible for the ills of the world.”⁶ While mother-hating lies at the heart of Western culture, manifesting as a celebration of and sympathy for the desexualized suffering mother, but also as hatred of the egoistic and unloving mother, who becomes the object of rape, thus expressing patriarchal society’s refusal to take responsibility for the carelessness in the world, Malani’s rehabilitation of Medea is a feminist construction of alternative narratives. It is a perspective for which Ettinger has strived since her alternative proposition of the role of the m/Other in “the feminine-matrixial subjectivising mode (in males and in females),” which “resists both the narcissistic self and the forces of endless fragmentation and endless transgressivity.”⁷

⁵ Christa Wolf. *Medea: A Modern Retelling*. Translated by John Cullen. London: Virago, 1998 [1996], pp. 1–2.

⁶ Jacqueline Rose. *Mothers. An Essay on Love and Cruelty*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2018, p. 71.

⁷ Bracha L. Ettinger, “(M)Other Re-spect: Maternal Subjectivity, the Ready-made mother-monster and The Ethics of Respecting Studies in the Maternal.” *Studies in the Maternal*, 2 (1), 2010: 1–24. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.16995/sim.150>

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Medea takes life (those of Jason and her children), but also gives life (Jason's old father is rejuvenated by her arts). She bends normative time, normative space, beyond the logics of linearity in a poetic breach of the rules.