Virtual and Physical Ways of Being Present in Odissi Dance Networks in Bhubaneswar in India[1]

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Abstract *In this paper, I reflect on what presence is all about, leaning on personal experiences and my fieldwork in Bhubaneswar, capital of the Indian State of Odisha, from September 2021 onwards. The particular context of the COVID-19 pandemic has multiplied our encounters with disembodied modalities of presence. This poses the question of what differences it makes to engage with somebody's presence virtually or physically. While the fieldwork I undertook during this period was marked by the constraints to which both I and my research participants were subjected, forcing me to adapt my fieldwork, modifying the ways in which physical contact could be established, it also raised into prominence the differences that arose from an appraisal of virtual or physical presences of dance practitioners. I analyse these differences utilizing the particular example of my assessment of Odissi dance activity in the early 2020s in Bhubaneswar, based on both virtual sources and physical encounters with the material world. As I assess the perception of these presences, I show the relational nature of this phenomenon within a network of both human and non-human, living and non-living beings, as well as the different ways it engages the (human) perceiver in emotional and sensory manners.*

Keywords *presence; perception; imagination; embodiment; materiality; knowing*

Introduction

Pondicherry, 4th June 2023. I am packing my luggage, as I am about to travel. The room in which I am staying is situated on the ground floor, in the midst of dense greenery. As I shift my bag from one spot on the floor to another, I hear a little sound,

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as if something has fallen or jumped onto the ground. Something that has this capacity to adhere to surfaces and is slightly sticky. It is the quality of sound I hear that makes me think so. Intrigued, I look beneath the bag. Nothing seems to be there. But I thought I saw a glimpse of a little animal. A lizard?

The kind of sensory experience I encountered makes me feel that the sound is somewhat different from the one I am used to from lizards when they let themselves fall from the walls. Yet, as nothing is detected, I forget the episode.

Sometime later, my eyes wander across the floor and focus on a spot about one meter from where this happened. A small scorpion is positioned on the ground, its tail curved, pointing upwards, ready to attack. Is that the 'thing' I encountered? I suppose so.

A kind of a puzzle is comprised in this story. A puzzle about a little animal being present in the room, but not being present to my perception. But, wait? Did not some of my senses capture something about this presence, while others did not? Indeed, in the first part of this experience, I perceived a presence through the sound it made. In the second, it was through my eyesight. Each time, I arrived at preliminary conclusions, based on the perceptions generated by this small event. It is interesting that I was subconsciously aware that this particular presence – of a thing or animal – required my attention. However, it is only upon viewing the animal with my eyes that I became able to consider the danger that existed in the situation. Each way of perceiving this presence made me aware of an aspect of it. I realize that many other beings may be present around me which I am not able to perceive – beings whose impact on my life may be irrelevant or, as in this particular case, potentially quite disruptive. Their presence, whether I acknowledge it or not, contributes to the life and happenings in this room. The specific ways in which I engage with them, intentionally or not, make a clear difference. And they actually constitute context-specific ways of exploring my surroundings and gaining knowledge about them.

This indicates that presence requires urgent attention in the contemporary world. For, as formulated by Eberhard Wolff and Sebastian Dümling on the occasion of the conference panel *Being there – but how? On the transformation of presences*, held at the EASA 2022 conference, presence "now can be physical, face-to-face, digital, distant, online, virtual, contactless, personal, in person, in vivo, usual, real, home, offline, sensual, etc.[2]". Presence, therefore, seems to have become something more complex than the phenomena described above. Or maybe not? In order to shed some light on this intriguing topic, it is this question of the influence that our ways of engaging with particular presences exert on what we know, or may potentially get to know, which I would like to explore in the following pages. How do we human beings gather knowledge on the world around us through encounters with diverse

2 Please see the full abstract of the conference panel here: https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/easa2022/p/11346 .

modalities of presence? What differences does it make that some presences may be physical and others not? Do we assess them in the same ways? Is there a change? And if there is, then what is it about? Furthermore, what effects does it have?

Regarding exploring this question, I would like, in the following pages, to take the readers on a journey through my encounters with presence during the fieldwork I undertook in Bhubaneswar, capital city of the State of Odisha in India, from September 2021 onwards. This city is the centre of a very dynamic activity in the field of Odissi dance, a practice considered to be one of the "Indian classical dances".[3] By using the example of the practices of this dance, I will examine the influence of different modalities of presence on our ways of knowing. The example of Odissi dance in Bhubaneswar lends itself particularly well to this analysis, as the fieldwork I am going to use in the discussion took place in the context of the sanitary crisis, and this generated quite a few reflections on presence. Many have experienced the tensions the pandemic triggered in academic fields in which direct human contact is required to work. As the tension continued, it appeared to numerous people that it would never be possible again to undertake fieldwork as before. I was also affected by this situation: in spring 2021, as I was preparing to leave for India in the midst of the pandemic, the great Delta COVID wave, the one that caused a spectacular death rate and made headlines in the news worldwide from April onwards, raised doubts on whether I could start my research project as planned in July of the same year.[4] I faced all sorts of comments, and amongst others, some suggested that I could start my research from France, using the Internet as my first tool for investigation. This idea appeared somewhat strange to me: How could I do serious ethnographic research about individuals, their lives and surroundings, without being present on the spot, as had been dictated by Bronislaw Malinowsky (1922)?

The great Delta wave subsided, and by September 2021, I had started fieldwork in Bhubaneswar. However, the context continued to be strongly altered by the sanitary crisis, and this added suspense to my endeavour: Firstly, because, although figures were not acute in India at that time, it had required me to undertake special procedures to obtain permission to start my fieldwork. I was committed to conduct it with due respect of sanitary protocols. In other words, the ways in which I could make myself present amongst my potential research participants were circumscribed. And secondly, because the pandemic impacted what was being researched: In which manners would dance practitioners[5] turn out to be present at a time

3 For information on the "classical" genre in the fields of music and dance in India, see, for example, Subramanian (2006).

4 These questions raised diverse administrative issues because my project, GATRODI, had obtained funding from the European Commission.

5 I use the term "practitioner" in order to designate any person engaged with dance activity in a practice-oriented manner. This includes, of course, dancers, dance teachers, people who

when ordinary primary educational institutions were still closed in Odisha, when secondary schools were only partly open, and left parents with the choice of either sending their children physically to their schools or letting them partake in online classes? In this anxiety-driven context, dance schools were most likely to be closed, presences were very likely to be, to a great extent, disembodied, the ways in which I could be present with dance practitioners, constricted. Let me, therefore, get back to the puzzle about the little scorpion – which suggests that it does not require any sanitary crisis for presence to appear as a complex phenomenon. Indeed, long before encounters between human beings started taking place in virtual conferences, the phenomenon of presence had attracted a lot of attention in the field of philosophy. Philosopher Alva Noë discusses a phenomenon that is related to my experience described above in his article "Experience of the world in time" (2006), leaning on a well-known debate on the topic of presence by Husserl: The example he uses is that of a tomato that, despite being present, cannot be seen simultaneously by a person from all its sides. Thereby, he draws the attention towards a fundamental problem of presence: the tomato may exist physically in a space of which a part is discernible to some of my senses, however, whatever I do, I will not be able, at a given point of time, from a specific location in space, to verify its presence with all of my senses,[6] as a whole – and not simply as a slice of a tomato. Yet, Noë asserts that an individual has "a sense of the presence of the object as a whole" (2006, 26).

This disposition, which concerns the ways in which we are functioning on a cognitive plane, opens up a great variety of questions regarding presence. Particularly, it clearly demonstrates that presence forcefully raises interrogations on its appraisement. For what is presence if it cannot be assessed by an entity that can, in whichever way, make some kind of declaration asserting that the object or living being in question is present? This is important: As a matter of fact, if nobody perceives the presence of the tomato (or any other thing, person), it (or they) may actually be assumed to be absent. And as the example of the unnoticed presence of the scorpion shows, the perception of absence does not preclude any effects of the present being – even acute ones. On the other hand, it is possible to perceive the presence of an object or a person which/who may be physically absent, and, therefore, assume that it, he or she is present. Noë states that "[t]he world is present, in perception, not by being present (e.g., represented depicted) in consciousness all at once, as it were, but by being available all at once to the skillful perceiver" (2005, 243). On behalf of these remarks, it is possible to say that, regardless of whether presences may be embodied

view themselves as both interpreters and transmitters of the dance, and many others, such as journalists and art lovers.

6 Noë pays quite a bit of attention to analysing through which means we perceive – a point which I cannot elaborate on here. For details, please consult his article.

or even real, they are actually active: When they are perceived, they trigger a variety of responses in the perceiver. And when they are not perceived, they still have an effect on people's lives. Let me, therefore, get back to my case example.

I acknowledge that Odissi dance practitioners are present both in virtual and physical manners: in discourses, in geographical spaces and on websites. It appears relevant to inspect these presences as well as others as, according to Layton, "our mind becomes manifest in the objects, traces, and leavings that we generate during our lifetime" (2003, 458). Accordingly, in the following inquiry, I will first direct my attention towards modalities of presence of Odissi in collective imagination. I will, therefore, expose some of the ways in which the practices of these dances are, or become, easily available in people's minds through common representations or by being advertised, for example, on websites. I will then concentrate on the manners in which presences of Odissi practitioners became manifest to me during my investigations, as I was, in my quest for truth, trying to cut through common sense constructions in order to assess the phenomenon of Odissi dance activity by looking at both disembodied and embodied modalities of their presences. Finally, I wish to reserve some space in this discussion to reflect upon the differences between the modalities of presence described and the ways in which this shapes our actions and reactions.

Disembodied presences and the question of truth

While it is not possible here to engage in an intricate theoretical discussion on this subject, it is appropriate to state that societies continuously generate imaginary constructions, and one thing these do is influence their functioning – and sometimes in manners that maintain and reproduce power relations. To underscore the importance of such processes, I would like to remind readers that Durkheim treats social facts as things (1895). However 'unreal' they may be in the sense that they are deprived of any corporeal existence, their presence exists in people's minds. It is, therefore, important to document how this happens, and identify at least some of the particular processes at work in relation to this.

Presence of the dance in imagination

Many individuals are actually aware that the disembodiment of social life described above in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic is only the enhancement of an already existing, commonly known phenomenon: Long before the advent of the Internet, presences have always been partly 'virtual', in the sense that they belong to the realm of imagination. Noë states that "[p]erception is the encounter with the world from a point of view" (2005, 243), and this, I hold, need not be the physical world.

I even advocate that what is perceived does not actually need to exist. In point of fact, we are used to encountering the presences of entities or beings, the existence of which we cannot verify. Take the example of ghosts: The answer to the question whether they actually exist may be different according to the cultural backgrounds in which it is taken up. Yet, independently of what the answer is and of the fact that such an answer may hold 'true' or not, some individuals feel the presences of ghosts and are affected by them.

It is not my purpose here to take any stance on how 'real' or 'fake' these presences may be, and whether these experiences should be tagged as "hallucinatory" rather than "perceptive" (Noë 2005, 254). It is sufficient for this inquiry to concentrate on their effect on individuals and groups of individuals, because "the occurrence of a distinct kind of state of consciousness – hallucinatory consciousness – […] is such that we can be unable to tell it apart from the genuinely perceptual state" (Noë 2005, 254). This is not true only for hallucinations, because phenomena that, in diverse ways, may be considered 'unreal' or 'inexistent' populate our existences in multiple ways. Social sciences have underscored for a long time that things do not need to 'be real' to generate 'real' effects on people's lives. This has been amply documented by social theorists. To cite an example out of my own research experience, in the 1990s, Odissi dancers, masters and musicians of the dance anticipated that female practitioners of the dance would, once they married, not be allowed by their in-laws to pursue their dance activity. This had consequences on the ways in which male dance masters would engage with their female disciples, as they would not include them in their long-term career strategies. In turn, women who did not face the expected opposition by their in-laws, and were actually able to continue their dance activity after marriage, encountered resistance on the part of their male colleagues: their capacity to act (Giddens 1984) was impaired by the common anticipation that they would not be able to be long-term participants in the development of the dance.[7]

Jacques Pouchepadass reminds us that "to represent the other, is to manipulate him" (or her) (2000, 172). Representations, as we know, take many forms, some of which have a large-scale outreach, as the work *Orientalism* by Edward W. Said (1978) has amply documented. In the case of the dance form Odissi, powerful imaginary constructions present the dance as "an alluring and mysterious art, situated in ancient Orissan temples through a myth sustained by archaeological narratives" (Lopez Y Royo 2007, 159). Such discursive constructions make it appear as something very shiny, and associate its practices with the highest strata of society. It is not my purpose here, though it is worth exploring the subject, to analyse how such antiquity discourses have been thriving or often been linked to nationalism in some historic contexts. Let me, however, remind readers that, as Susan A. Reed points out, "[s]ince

7 This example reminds us of the theoretical proposition by Robert K. Merton (1948), who considers that anticipation plays a role in the production of social dynamics.

the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the rise of cultural nationalisms in Europe and its colonies, dance has figured prominently in the creation of many ethnic and national 'cultures'" (2010, 5). Regarding the Indian case, Odissi and its representation as an inheritance of an antique practice holding a high cultural status concerns a whole group of dance and music practices belonging to the Indian "classical" genre. Several authors have documented the emergence of this genre during the twentieth century in the context of rising Indian nationalism striving to free the country from colonial rule (e.g. Erdman 1996; Fratagnoli 2010; Gaston 1996; Leucci 2008; Shah 2002; Soneji 2012; Subramanian 2006; and for the specific case of Odissi: Carli 2000; Čurda 2013; Rodier 2004; Schnepel 2005[8]). Yet, the common representation of the associated practices as being 'antique', despite the abundance of work unearthing their status as reinvented traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and being designated by some researchers to be a "modern myth of ancient heritage" (Erdman 1996, 299), continues to circulate amongst the general public and inspire individuals.

I have discussed elsewhere some of the manners in which such imaginary constructs, though they may be 'unreal', are socially efficient (Čurda 2022). As a matter of fact, antiquity discourses on Odissi and other dances are linked to moral values. One famous example is the figure of the female temple dancer of antique times represented as "a pure and holy, chaste woman […][9]" (Bharucha 1995, 45–46[10]), a representation that is commonly seen in nationalisms, where "feminised images […] define the *iconography* of the nation, [while] the *practice* of nationalism is reserved for the male" (Silva 2004, 21[11]). Such constructions serve the purposes of specific social groups involved with the dance practices, and contribute to upholding and legitimizing a specific social order. In addition, dancers actually physically enact these narratives, for example, by including them repeatedly in their choreographies (e.g. Čurda 2013, 2017, 2022), thereby, endowing them with an embodied existence. The presence of such constructs in collective imagination is, therefore, in no way neutral, as they are based on social values and contribute to reinforce and re-actualize these.

8 These are in no way exhaustive, and I wish to apologize to any contributor to this debate whom, due to the constraints of this writing, I may not have mentioned.

9 I wish to specify that Bharucha is concerned with Bharata Natyam. However, Odissi has adopted this representation as well.

10 Quoted in Čurda, 2013.

11 Ibid.

Presences on internet sites: conventions and individual choices in self-representation

Now one thing that the Internet is useful for is to publicize and disseminate such discursive constructions. Not surprisingly, conventional representations of Odissi dance and its networks are most readily "available all at once" (Noë 2005, 243) on many websites, notably those of Odissi dance schools. A look at some of them permits one to spot typical contents. In fact, it is quite remarkable to what extent such websites reproduce what I will call a ritualistic stereotypy, suggestive of a great amount of agreement between practitioners on what their dance has to be all about.[12] Schools commonly assert on such websites that they are committed to "popularize Odissi and also retain the purity in this classical dance form",[13] to "preserving and popularizing the rich culture of Odissi",[14] and to "holding firm to the values and traditions"[15] of the dance. One can feel that the agenda with which these write-ups align is very prescriptive, as their authors appear to be driven by a preoccupation to conform to a pre-existing mould. The reader learns that the dance is "pure", "rich" and "traditional" – imbued with values evoking the aspiration to a high cultural status. But beyond that, there is a binary logic underlying these terms. One which often serves the purpose of distinguishing what is conformed to from what is not. The sentences above definitely convey a sense of distinction and exquisiteness, and clearly associate this quality with Odissi. The same websites also carry forth representations of the schools as "a premier training institution"[16] or "one of the leading dance institutions",[17] and of individual practitioners as "one of the most celebrated Odissi Solo artists".[18] Through these expressions, their existences seem to be bound within prescribed modes of action that appear to consist of "ritualistically climbing a ladder" (Van Zile 2001, 56) towards a goal that appears evident, shiny and highly desirable. They are presented in their self-representations on the net as if they were the accomplished embodiments of that goal. Consequently, these types of phenomena do not appear so different from the processes described above: imaginary constructs, whether stigmatizing or enhancing, raise expectations in people's minds. The reader is prompted to react in sensory and emotional manners in accordance with the values they evoke.

12 While my inquiry concentrates on practitioners in India – and for the present discussion, in Bhubaneswar – many Odissi dance schools situated elsewhere in the world – even in the US – actually carry along the same type of discursive content.

13 https://www.pragnyanrutyayan.com

14 https://www.srjan.com/

15 https://www.rudrakshyafoundation.org/

16 https://www.srjan.com/

17 https://www.rudrakshyafoundation.org/

18 https://www.pragnyanrutyayan.com

This self-proclaimed magnificence evidently aims at convincing the audience that is potentially virtually present on the net. However, virtual presences could also be quite misleading if our aim is to assess factual phenomena. What could be the concrete situations lying behind such affirmations? Is the goal achieved or achievable? Does it constitute the central theme of ongoing existential struggles? Who are the embodied counterparts to these disembodied presences? But also, one may wish to wonder, who, beyond this selection of individuals who have the power to advertise their activity via the Internet, is present in Odissi networks? In other words, what is the gap between these virtual presences and physical existences? In order to explore this point, I propose to have a look at embodied presences.

Assessing factual presences of practitioners

One of the most common problems the social scientist continually strives to solve is to find ways to generate evidence on things 'as they are'. This, in some way, is not unlike the problem that Noë analyses regarding the tomato. The problem I faced in the particular case of the state of advancement of my research project in September 2021 may be formulated as: How to obtain evidence on the existence of dance activity that does not exclude, in arbitrary ways, some particular groups of participants – or, we may say, specific 'slices of the tomato'? This question is much wider than the divide into embodied and/or disembodied presences allows us to take into consideration.

As I had participated in the networks of Odissi dance as a practitioner in Bhubaneswar since the 1990s, I had ample knowledge on their prior modes of functioning (call for footnote [19]). But I had been out of touch since 2009 and needed to assess recent developments. Since then, the city of Bhubaneswar has continued the explosive expansion that had been initiated ever since this originally insignificant temple town had been declared the capital of the state in 1948.[20] By the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it had turned from what had in the 1990s been a rather laid-back city into a much busier one, one which, in addition, had been transformed through India's relatively recent impressive economic growth.[21] In parallel, the technological revolution the country had known brought new ways of experiencing social relations. As such rapid developments must have had an impact on the dance networks, it seemed obvious that an investigation promised to uncover many new

19 Čurda, 2013.

20 For a comprehensive account of the transformation of Bhubaneswar into a capital city, see Kalia (1994).

21 As a consequence of being nominated as a state capital, the population of Bhubaneswar evolved from 16 512 according to the census of 1951 to 837,737 according to the census figures of 2011 (the latest census figures are estimated to 1,161,000 in 2023: https://www.census2011.co.in/census/city/270-bhubaneswar.html).

facts. Therefore, my first task was to find out what the activity in this dance field had turned into by 2020. This implies that I focused on existence, considering that some presences may very much escape common perceptions. And it also means that, at this stage of my research, I tended to exclude presences that were part of common perceptions but did not exist.

There are many discriminative factors in social life that render some individuals more noticeable than others. This is of particular importance in relation to a dance practice such as Odissi, in which practitioners spend a lot of energy trying to get into the field of perception of different audiences, for example, art lovers, cultural institutions and journalists. The evocation of the contents of websites above is also a result of individuals' efforts to show their 'best' side to a public, expose their conformity to a set of codes. Not all of them resort to the same means nor do they enjoy the same success rates in obtaining an efficient acknowledgement of their being present as contributors to the Odissi dance field.[22] Their efforts towards obtaining symbolic rewards are even, quite often, linked to a politics of exclusion. The presences of certain people – or of certain types of people – tend not to be taken notice of, while others are perceived more readily. Again, these discriminative practices are actually of scientific interest, and I advocate that it is necessary to examine not only why, but also how certain 'slices of the tomato' rise into higher prominence than others. Accordingly, looking at the prominent 'sides of the tomato' is good scientific practice – provided one takes into account both the less visible and invisible slices. However, I aimed at assessing factual presences in my inquiry, at looking at phenomena that existed – and for this, it was necessary that I did not let myself be influenced by those who might have had more power than others in the dance's networks.

Thus, in my quest for uncovering scientific truth during my recent ethnography in Bhubaneswar from September 2021 onwards, I searched for ways to circumvent the difficulty posed by the fact that many sources of information on practices of a dance form such as Odissi were most likely to be selective. Government bodies dedicated to cultural activity, for example, would provide information based on the level of recognition of individual practitioners. Though this was definitely of interest, it was also insufficient. I also refrained from searching through my own, previously well-known networks in this first stage of my research, as it appeared important to challenge and verify the accuracy of the knowledge of Odissi dance networks I had acquired previously. I did not resort to registering websites, as it was evident that those who could create and maintain a website were, either on their own or through the help of their network, proficient in English, and had either direct or indirect

22 Of course, computer literacy and access to computer equipment are not distributed equally within societies, more so in countries like India where inequalities between social groups are particularly prominent. There are many other social criteria, however, that come into consideration regarding such a question.

access to technology and the resources the maintenance of a website requires, all of which are certain types of privileges they enjoyed over others. Of course, no tool existed that would allow one to gain a view of the phenomenon as a whole, as any potential source of information could only provide a view of 'selected slices of the tomato'. Some methods, however, were more likely to hide from me what could potentially be quite interesting facts on dance practitioners' existences.

In order to characterize more accurately the phenomenon of Odissi dance practices in Bhubaneswar in the early 2000s and widen the scope for reaching out to practitioners belonging to a greater variety of social groups, I resorted, for this stage of my research, to a combination of a search on Google Maps, followed by physical visits to addresses identified, as complementary tools for assessing Odissi dance activity in the city. Google Maps appeared interesting because the web mapping platform is not controlled by the practitioners' networks. Therefore, it seemed to be, potentially, relatively insensitive to some discriminative patterns used by Odissi practitioners amongst themselves. Certainly, it could not give an all-encompassing picture of Odissi dance activity, but the criteria by which it registers presences promised to be more inclusive than others.

I fed the search engine with the words "Odissi" and "Bhubaneswar", and the platform returned results of what I broadly circumscribe to be "dance schools". This deserves a bit of elaboration, as I use this expression in the same manner as Odissi practitioners do – and this is, of course, a context-specific use. Without going into the details of the history of the dance and the local concepts of pedagogy,[23] let me mention that practitioners habitually use the term "dance school" each time they relate to a dance class taking place. A part of this happens in places that are officially registered as schools, and another part in places that are not. Amongst registered schools figure not only proper institutional structures but also individual initiatives that deploy their activity in other manners. Thus, a school, in the view of Odissi practitioners, can be a building (i.e. an institution), a private house in which somebody opens up a space to welcome learners, or even a person – because, in some cases, teachers do not have the means to provide a specific space for their dance classes, and may be teaching in diverse locations by soliciting their networks to temporarily provide rooms for practicing dance in all kinds of places. Google Maps, by the entries

23 The vernacular concept of *guru-śiṣya-parampará* (tradition of masters and disciples) is based on the idea of a one-to-one relationship. Even though the actual practice differs from the theory, this idea is valued by individuals.

it indicated as a reply to my search, appeared, to a good extent, to follow the lines of such a conception.[24]

Interestingly, the somewhat hazy typology that resulted from this search excluded a couple of government bodies belonging to the higher education infrastructure of the city, which deliver diplomas that are recognized by the higher education system. However, the results broadly corresponded to what I have above circumscribed with the term "Odissi dance schools", and this context-specific idea of a school appeared appealing in relation to my scientific endeavour. Notably, it comprised the promise to spot, with each new finding, a cluster of people, including dance teachers, dancers and learners. A first survey made me register more than 35 addresses. Given the amount of data produced in this manner, the results were, despite its imperfections, representative. Out of those, as I followed up with physical visits to the locations that had been identified, about 25 were actually found.

In the physical world

While the websites I referred to earlier had led to the identification of discursive constructions, the search in the material world confronted me with a rich variety of corporeal sensations. These frequently seemed strangely withdrawn from the impressions the writings inspected above generate. Many of these sensory experiences were not the ones I would have spontaneously associated with the idea of a high cultural status.

Sensory disturbances

The first spectacular effect the physical activity of making myself present in different places in Bhubaneswar had on me was to update my physical experience of the city, thereby informing me of the impact my embodied presence in the field had on me. I turned into being the observer of how the spectacular changes the city had undergone within about twelve years of my absence affected me, both physically and emotionally. In many ways, this town did not seem to be the one I had known even a decade before. It appeared to me to be alien in various ways, and now, this experience, with all its impressions, became the lens through which I was to perceive Odissi practitioners' existences.

24 It would, of course, require an in-depth analysis to demonstrate whether, and also how, the artificial intelligence reproduces people's intentions or conceptions. It may be sufficient here to accept that the patterns of the results matched common conceptions of dance schools sufficiently well.

I could easily cover Bhubaneswar by bicycle during the 1990s and even in the first decade of the 2000s. This would have been absolutely impossible in 2021. To go to particular places, I now frequently had to cover distances that could amount to fifteen kilometres, reach out, in the hot, damp climate, to locations that, in my previous encounters with the city, had been situated beyond its outermost margins. I had to suffer the sensory disturbances generated by the density of the traffic on the streets, which has evolved impressively since I had left. Narrow roads had been replaced by imposing, busy highways in some parts of the city, making me wonder how I could have ever cycled there. The localities that were closer to the city centre looked much neater than in the past. An effort by the Bhubaneswar municipality to make the city look agreeable was visible in many details: the pavements, which had previously been in a miserable condition, presenting holes and fissures, had been upgraded, partly decorated on the outer borders with paint, flower pots and ornamental lanterns. Outer walls visible from the street had been covered with paintings, presenting many different motives (photo 1).

Photo 1: Bhubaneswar 12 February 2022 © Suko Lam

When one reached the outskirts of the city, however, things were quite different: many roads in the new housing colonies were unpaved and uneven. On rainy days, they were often flooded. Some of the individual houses in these parts of the city looked rather neat, others miserable. In both cases, they were surrounded by plots of unbuilt land, paddy fields and, sometimes, the temporary shelters hurriedly put up by workers working on local construction sites. There was frequently a lot of construction work going on in these areas, adding to an overall precarious look. Thus, the first effect of my inquiry was that it shook up my preconceptions of the city, based

on my prior experiences. This clearly potentiated the scope of the research. And it is the encounter of my entire body with the material conditions in which inhabitants of Bhubaneswar evolve that enabled this process to take place. Let me, therefore, describe some of it.

Entanglements and disruptions between virtual and physical spaces

Some things require physical experiences to be known. They are beyond imagination. A wild, uncontrollable city growth has plenty of curious effects on the environment. As I was heading towards many different locations in my aim to physically encounter the places I had spotted in the virtual space of Google Maps, I quickly found out that this presented difficulties. One of the most trivial amongst these was that often no one knew how to find a particular address. Conditioned by western modes of locating places in an urban area, I had first searched for a map of Bhubaneswar. I rapidly realized that I could not find any map in the local book stores comprising the details of the localities and of their streets. The owner of a popular book shop presented me with a couple of imprecise maps of the city, simultaneously claiming that nothing better existed on the market, and asserted that no editor had produced any city map that would be conform to what in western Europe would have been common expectations.[25] Furthermore, as I undertook my visits using a local taxi service, I realized that most of the drivers did not have much knowledge of the local topography. Moreover, they were a bit unsettled by my somewhat unconventional demands. It was noticeable that they were not used to having to find a series of addresses in the city. Some of them adapted rather well, and some resorted to the voice direction services on their phones to head out towards the places I was asking them to find. Once again, I was dependent on a virtual tool, but this time in my search for embodied presences. The phone generally turned out to be of uttermost importance as a regulator of not only the drivers' but also other people's sense of geographical space. In instances in which I had difficulties in finding a place, for example, individuals I would ask for directions would advise me to call the people I was to meet on the phone.

I quickly found myself confronted with unexpected peculiarities that the margins of the city presented. I found it particularly difficult, for example, to reach certain places when, arriving in a locality after having made many rounds with my driver, I had to face the fact that all the houses of the street I was heading to share the same plot number. Which one, then, could be the house I was looking for? Another variation of this consequence of the rapid rate of construction was a chaotic

25 Reading geographical maps does not appear to have been a common or valued practice among the local populations in different parts of India. I thank Kannan Muthukrishnan for pointing this out with reference to the State of Tamil Nadu.

distribution of plot numbers: sometimes, finding a house would turn out to be particularly difficult, because numbers in a lane did not follow each other in numerical order, so that one could not spot a house by logical deduction.

Another point that turned the visits of the outskirts of the city into a sensory challenge were gaps between the physical and the virtual world of Google Maps. It seemed that space could not be explored easily. In a few instances, the mismatch between the virtual topography and the concrete environment forced me to modify my itinerary. In one situation, for example, after having inspected several lane in a part of the city, I found myself unable to locate the house number for which I was searching. After having toured the place for a while, I finally realized that a small bridge that had crossed a stream was broken, so that the lane ended abruptly. The bridge still existed on Google Maps, and this is why the voice direction application that my driver had used had lead us to the particular spot in which we had landed. The house for which I was searching was actually on the other side of the broken bridge, and it was impossible to get there from where I was situated.

Even more mysterious was my encounter with another street when I returned to a location after a gap of about two months. The main street of a new residential area, situated at one edge of the city, was fully blocked. Some construction work was occurring on a section of it (photo 2). That part was completely covered with some vegetation that had been disposed there, lying on the ground, as if it was to be planted. It was quite a strange sight: the way to the location I was heading to was obstructed, and the street seemed to be transformed into something other than a street, and yet, it was the main thoroughfare providing access to this particular locality.

Photo 2: Bhubaneswar 25 December 2021 © Suko Lam

Such peculiarities could appear and disappear with great rapidity in relatively short time spans. In the case of the broken bridge, when I returned to the same place a couple of months later, a new bridge had already been built there. Construction work was still going on, and the surroundings looked unruly, as there were piles of sand all over the place. The virtual mapping system and the physical world were, however, coherent again.

These situations made me associate the experience of the outskirts of the city with a strong sense of uncertainty. Yet, what counts here is that the wild growth of Bhubaneswar constitutes the spatio-temporal context in which the lives of Odissi practitioners unfold. Wherever in town they are situated, and whatever their socio-economic backgrounds may be, their lives, and their lives as dancers acting within and reacting to the environment in which their dance practices develop, be it in their corporeal or economic dimensions, are imbricated with the dynamics of the urban development.

Socially situated spaces

Material spaces provide hints to many factors that shape the lives of individuals, including the socio-economic conditions they may be experiencing, their gender and cultural backgrounds. In some cases, the materiality is in itself sufficient to come to certain conclusions, while in others, it requires a reading of this materiality, an interpretation based on knowledge about its social significance in the local context. I give some examples here to illustrate this – notably, the question of the distribution of Odissi practitioners in the urban spaces, the relation between material spaces and gender, and the question of what was at stake when presences turned out to be difficult to spot.

Patterns of Odissi dancers' presence in town

City margins are often, in many places, commonly associated with lower income groups. But this does not always hold true, and in the quickly growing city of Bhubaneswar, even the outskirts provide shelter to a great variety of social groups, both underprivileged and advantaged. However, similar to elsewhere, some of the physical characteristics of the residences in which people live hint at their belonging to particular classes. One physical evidence of the impact of urbanization is the distribution of the dance schools within the topography of the city: Odissi practitioners are actually found to be present anywhere in Bhubaneswar, from the city centre to the outermost limits of the newly urbanized areas, where paddy fields coexist with new constructions of either individual or collective housing. These spatial elements give some type of feedback on their existences and the constraints in which they evolve. The choice to shift to newly urbanized areas indicates a good degree of mobility. Thus, those dance practitioners who seize the opportunities of

such rapid city developments evolve in inconstant settlement conditions. Additionally, one of the most common motives to move to the outer margins of the city is to avail themselves of comparatively better living conditions at a better price. Another point is that several indications such as this one, added together, contribute to providing insight, step by step, into emotional, economic and relational aspects of the existences of Odissi practitioners.

Gendered presences

In some cases, insider knowledge is needed to decode certain social characteristics. When identifying dance schools, for example, I associated those that were located within collective housing buildings with femininity. As a matter of fact, each time my search unearthed a collective housing building, the person behind that particular school turned out to be a woman (photo 3). Again, when I spotted a school in a somewhat desolate looking area, located in a precarious looking construction consisting of one floor, with an asbestos roof, my presumption that the person leading it was male turned out to be correct (photo 4). This is due to the combined facts that multistorey buildings, a relatively recent addition to the architecture of Bhubaneswar, are locally considered as more classy than individual housing.[26] In addition, Odissi's development, from its onset from the 1950s onwards, has been based on a sharp social divide between male practitioners from relatively low income groups, who recently migrated to the city, and female practitioners belonging to diverse strata of an earlier urbanized population (for a detailed account see Čurda 2013, 67–122). Consequently, the women practicing the dance, on average, still belong to higher status groups than the men. Male and female practitioners are, therefore, present in spaces that convey very different sensations, and these have strong connotations regarding their social status.

26 The facades of such buildings did not always match that idea: in one case, one building presented a facade that had been fully washed out by the monsoon rains; in another, I entered a spooky staircase which I would in no way have associated with higher living standards, before entering a rather elegant looking flat; and in two cases, these buildings were situated in the very far outskirts, surrounded by rice fields and greenery, where I would not have suspected to be able to find comfortable middle- to upper-class housing.

Photo 3: Bhubaneswar 14 February 2022 © Suko Lam

Photo 4: Bhubaneswar 14 February 2022 © Suko Lam

Discreet presences

I here turn my attention to what, following Noë's logic, are the "hidden sides of the tomato". Some presences turned out to be discreet, others were even elusive. Yet, knowing about them made a difference to my assessment. In many ways, a good number of Odissi dance schools I looked up did not leave any prominent imprint of their presences on the environment. This, again, is an indicator of the actual conditions within which the dancers organize their activity. This particularity contrasts

sharply with the discourses found on Odissi dance schools' websites, which were so suggestive of a high level of recognition for the dance and individual practitioners.

A lot of schools had no signboards. Nothing indicated their presence in the streets in which I searched for them. Later, in the course of my research, some dance teachers told me that because they were teaching in their homes, which they occupied on a rented basis, their landlords objected to their putting up a signboard in the street. Not having the means to unfold one's activity within what would be a 'professional' environment suggests that the practices evolve, amongst others, via non-formalized relationships. This has many reasons. One of them is that historically, relations between practitioners are not necessarily tied to formalized institutional structures. It is socially perfectly acceptable that even a teacher who has a good reputation may give private classes rather than be tied up within institutional structures. But the landlords' attitudes are relevant too: there is a stark contrast between the fact that Odissi is represented to constitute national heritage, and that the people practicing this dance do not seem to have the authority to get their activities advertised and officialized. Additionally, I was amazed by the low level of response when frequently I asked people on the road for directions while searching for a school. Many individuals on the streets did not know about the dance schools – even schools which, from the point of view of Odissi practitioners, were the most prominent. It seemed that dance practices were not of concern to the general public.

Some schools were also discreet in other ways: In some situations, the address indicated for a school was not the address of the location where the dance activity took place but that of the domicile where the teacher lived. In such cases, the actual teaching activity often took place in several parts of the city. Certain practitioners do not have the means to rent a space for teaching dance. It is not uncommon that they commute to different locations in the city. Some of them partly impart their teaching in the form of individual classes, and even when they teach a group of people, it takes place in all sorts of locations that are temporarily made available either on a rented basis or without financial counterpart, at the initiative of diverse well-wishers. I could confirm in the subsequent phase of my research that, in specific cases, this type of unsettled teaching activity was an indicator of a rather low socio-economic status. Among the situations I encountered, there was a person who used to commute to several places in town to get her work done. Her rehearsals for a show took place in a centrally located ashram – it turned out that she had a privileged relationship with its religious leader – and she was giving some of her dance classes in a school for disabled people in a part of the town situated far away from the ashram. In the school, a room was temporarily transformed, a few evenings a week, into a hall for dancing. This particular type of activity was most circumscribed when I started my research in September, and only picked up when the sanitary situation slowly relaxed. So, many presences were unstable, not connected to a constant place in space,

distributed over several areas of the town – which constitutes a kind of precariousness.

Elusive presences

It was easy to make out that the pandemic had a strong impact on Odissi dance teaching in the city. In quite a few cases, I ventured upon people whose schools were temporarily closed. The interior of one government institution I visited appeared ghost-like to me, as only a few administrative staff members were present in its otherwise empty, huge spaces. In other situations, some of the people I met told me that they had resorted to teaching in virtual ways, mostly by using apps, such as WhatsApp. Most of them told me that they were not very enthusiastic about this way of teaching, yet it helped them overcome the material aspects of the crisis.

In some instances, when I found an address, I was told that the school had existed, but had moved. In one such case, the physical encounter allowed me to discover an economic fact, as I learnt that the reason why one school had disappeared was the economic distress the pandemic had caused for its teacher.

In some cases, I did not find the school I searched for at the address indicated, yet the result of the investigation was informative. In one situation, for example, I met a family at an address indicated in Google Maps. They showed great surprise on hearing that a dance school appeared to exist at their home address on the virtual map. However, they guessed that a male dance teacher who had been giving private classes to their daughter in their home might have used their address in order to register a school. The presence of this school on Google Maps was a consequence of the fact that this person did not have the means to register an address of his own. In this case, instead of finding a school, I found out about a network of interconnected individuals and learnt about its way of functioning.

In some cases, my search did not return any result at all. Many times, I toured all the lanes in a housing colony, searching repeatedly for a place without any success. I would generally ask a few people in the street whether they knew about any dance school. Sometimes, even though a school was difficult to find, some people appeared to have some awareness of the existence of something of that sort. However, very frequently, they would not know anything. This added further to an overall impression of inconstancy.

Bridging the gap between virtual and physical presences

Discreet and elusive presences, as well as absences, constitute data and contribute, alone or in relation to virtual findings, to a process of interrogating continuities and discontinuities of individual activities, generating an understanding of the state of Odissi dance networks in Bhubaneswar in the 2020s. My research methodology then

was part of a process "of gathering or assembling content" (Noë 2005, 249), witnessing the sensory aspects of the everyday lives of those who teach Odissi dance. These were loaded with indices about the environmental conditions in which people live, with their distinctive roughness, indications about the social backgrounds to which they belong and about the impact of the sanitary crisis on their dance activities. The sensory experience of encountering locations, the roughness associated to their physicality, disconnected me from the idea of magnificence that is found in common representations of the dance. Virtual presences of Odissi practitioners on the net seemed to be a mismatch with the surroundings of the city.

Yet, it is in one of my informal meetings with a male dance teacher at his home, a small, insignificant looking individual house with a little garden, situated in a commercial area of Bhubaneswar just across from a slum, that the discourses on recognition within the networks of Odissi practitioners and by the local cultural institutions reappeared with force in relation to himself. Looking at this man in conversation within the surroundings of his small living room overloaded with furniture, the words he pronounced in order to situate himself as one of the established teachers of the dance appeared to me in another light. In the situation of our face-to-face presence, the contrast between what he said, and how and where it was said, indicated to me his struggle to maintain a position in Odissi's circles. This underlined the importance symbolic rewards could have for him in the context of the hardships of material life.

It is then important to consider that both these phenomena – the harshness of the physical world and the smooth representation existences of Odissi practitioners find in the virtual one – are not necessarily exclusive of each other. These findings are, instead, reminiscent of a more analytical view on artists in societies in the West, where, as Zukin suggests, the mass media circulate "images of cool" (1995, 9) about artistic practices, which are "divorced from their social context" (Ibid.). In reference to New York, Zukin states that "'high' cultural producers are supposed to live on the margins; and the incomes of most visual artists, art curators, actors, writers, and musicians suggest they must be used to deprivation" (Ibid., 13). Are artistic trajectories in Bhubaneswar, the places of artists in society, comparable to that? It would be premature to jump to conclusions, given the great differences in the cultural backgrounds of the two locations. Moreover, the data provided here on the existences of Odissi practitioners would deserve to be completed by more detailed information on their economic situations. Yet the idea that culture serves the purpose, for those who engage with it intensely, to transcend the hardships of their lives, as they view "their 'real' identity" (Ibid., 13) as connected to their artistic practice, is seen in both societies. In the Oriya, and even the broader Indian context, it is encapsulated in a vernacular conception according to which an artist has to dedicate his or her full life to the artistic practice – an idea that is not void of a sacrificial dimension.

Though "culture is a system for producing symbols" (Ibid., 12), the contrast between the precarious aspects of the immediate environment and a glimmering imaginary life are not limited to artistic practices. In many ways, the visual dimension of urban life in Bhubaneswar carries forth this contradiction. A common example is that of publicity slogans, such as the phrase "this 2022 Bhubaneswar will dawn a new era of high living" on an advertising poster at the foot of which lies some minor waste, raised in the middle of a dusty street lined with desolate-looking walls, in the middle of busy traffic (photo 5). The slogan seems to promise relief from the too evident weight of unkempt surroundings, left to gradual decay by the municipality. This type of sight is perfectly characteristic of the outer aspects of Indian cities, a point which underlines the importance of utopias of prosperity in people's emotional lives.

Photo 5: Bhubaneswar 29 December 2021 © Suko Lam

I would like to get back to the sentence by Layton quoted earlier in this article: "our mind becomes manifest in the objects, traces, and leavings that we generate during our lifetime" (2003, 458). This statement is based on Gell's concept of "distributed personhood" (1998), which leans on the idea that artefacts bring forth the intentions of their creators, as the object created has significance in relation to the position of its creator in a relational network. In fact, the lines above make me wonder: Is it the Odissi dancers' minds that become manifest in the conventional write-ups on their practices?

This relates to the question of agency. In the sense brought forth by Giddens (1984), agency refers to people's – but in our case also non-human's – capacity to act. From the point of view of Gell, agency is relational, and involves not only an agent

but also a patient (1998). This implies that in a relationship between "persons, things, animals, divinities, in fact, anything at all" (Ibid., 22), someone or something, at different points of time, is temporarily either an agent or a patient – the actant or the one who is being acted upon.

The presences encountered during my inquiry in the physical world show how the living conditions in a particular place exert their agency on individuals who, in relation to these, become patients. Things, by their presence, act on people, constricting them at times, modifying their ways of being in the world. Individuals are bound to react, immediately, to their concrete situations. And this overall context speaks about them being male, female, forced to respond to economic imperatives, at times able and at other times unable to make a difference. What is sure is that their being dancers cannot be thought without their being people experiencing the impact of their environment – physical and social – on them.[27] Yet, the dreamlike exposition of the dances' exquisiteness may still be part of their ways of experiencing the world. The teacher mentioned above utilized it in his discursive exposition of his achievements in order to reclaim agency over his existence, even while he occupied the position of a patient regarding his immediate living conditions. This situation, in which imaginary constructions place an individual into the agent's position, can, of course, not be generalized – as the same discursive patterns may also be used in order to make a person occupy the place of a patient. However, in all these examples so far, it is the physical person's presence which defines their state as an agent or a patient. Does not the idea of distributed presence – the presence of a person in something else than the person herself, bring to this discussion dimensions that are much more complex? I would like to illustrate this with an example.

This anecdote dates back to May 2022. I am sitting in my office at my research institute in India. The room is comfortably big. All the walls are covered with shelves containing innumerable library books. I am surrounded by five colleagues who, like me, work silently throughout the day, as if they were tied to the spaces of their specific desks. In this place, we hardly talk or make any sound which could potentially disrupt the others' activities. An untold rule seems to exist that makes us avoid engaging in any activity that generates noise. I sometimes get so engrossed in my tasks that I become unaware of my colleagues.

27 Julien and Rosselin (2003), in their discussion on the production of French Chinese lacquered furniture in Paris, argue that the production of a technical object can in no way be separated from whatever objects or circumstances – be they historic, geographical, spatial, social – impacted its final shape. This furniture's production, for example, started thriving when, in the 1930s, Chinese students who had no prior experience in the production of furniture took up small jobs in order to finance their studies, and provided an air of authenticity for the furniture by their embodied presence. The examples brought up in relation to Odissi practitioners reveal the same type of connectedness between, for example, human beings, objects and socio-economic situations.

Sometimes, during this period, I receive an e-mail from a colleague in France: the person says that I am connected to a seminar session in my home university in France, and is demanding that we have a videoconference. She seems discontent with not having been able to videoconference with me. I am, in fact, unaware of being connected to any virtual meeting. It is only through the e-mail that I am made aware of the fact that something she considers to be me is present eight thousand kilometres away, in this very moment. I suppose the connection to be real, however, I have not activated it knowingly. The experience of my presence by my colleague in a virtual seminar further contradicts my own experience of my physical presence, in a room where my body is surrounded by other bodies, and obeys the corporeal order imposed by their presences – and this order does not allow me to engage in activities that generate sound, such as videoconferencing.

The distribution of my presence constitutes, in fact, a multiplication of it. Moreover, that which is multiplied has, in my perception, nothing at all to do with me. In fact, while my colleague may be in a position to say that my presence exerts agency on her – I am feeling overwhelmed by what presence in the twenty-first century does to me. The impact of virtuality on my life that I experience through this episode seems to have robbed me of my agency. This example seems to talk about my distributed presence – distributed simultaneously in two locations situated about eight thousand kilometers from each other. But it is also about me manifesting a certain distress about being represented to be present somewhere in a way that contradicts my perception. From my subjective point of view, it questions how true the allegation of me being present eight thousand kilometers away might be. It has some characteristic that make it resemble hallucinatory presences. This example highlights how powerful perceived presence can be. And it puts up questions that are highly relevant for our existence, which revolve around not only the sense that we may find in the different ways in which we are made present to others, but also, the question of the factual existences of what is being perceived.

Conclusion

My underlying line of thought throughout these pages was the question of what presences do to us, how what they do to us differs according to the type of presence and how this affects what we are able to know. In relation to this, I have been mentioning the suggestive dimension of virtual or imagined presences of Odissi practitioners, and the way these underline the magnificent aspects of their activity. I have been demonstrating how their physical presences, be it just in visual ways, contradict such assertions. The encounters with school buildings, with the people who are leading those schools, and with the town areas in which they are evolving, constituted confrontations with a physical environment, generating sensory expe-

riences. So, the presences of people became manifest not only through their own bodies, but also through the materialities that constituted their living environment. These added density to the experiences of listening to people's words, and inferred their interpretation. Encountering embodied presences was a process which made apparent individuals' embeddedness in social, urban, relational and environmental contexts by physically encountering the networks of living and non-living beings that were part of their daily experiences of life. It made them appear more trivial, less in command of their destinies, a particularity which made me react in a much more empathetic manner.

Examining these presences led me to note to which extent virtual and physical presences may, at times, be entangled – this is prominent, for example, when individuals use phones to find a place. In such circumstances, virtuality has by now modified the cognitive modalities they use in order to orient themselves in space. In other situations, virtuality and physicality appear less dependent on each other. They may even be in opposition – this is the case, for example, when a person asserted that I was present in a place in which I was not; in another manner, the imaginary constructions about Odissi appeared to be in contradiction with the physical conditions in which practitioners live. What seems to separate virtual encounters from physical ones is the density of sensory experiences involved in both ways of meeting. Whether presences are virtual or physical, the examples have shown that perceived presence – or the subjective experience of presence – has, to extents that vary from one case to another, its degree of social efficiency. However, and this may be a central point of these lines, different ways of being present – virtually or physically, in human, non-human, alive or inert ways – contribute to a different reading of social life, and are, therefore, highly relevant to people's lives.

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