Chandralekha: Negotiating the Female Body and Movement in Cultural/Political Signification

ANANYA CHATTERJEA

The lights coming up from downstage left pick up a group of six women edging their way onto the stage from the diagonally opposite corner, their spines collapsed forward from their pelvises, backs jutting out to emphasize the broken line of the spine, knees flexed low, feet weighted to the ground, arms lying stiff and lifeless at their sides, but their heads still reaching searchingly forward. With their broken backs, they move painstakingly, slowly: the heel of one foot rises almost imperceptibly and drags the foot forward, the sole ever unable to dissociate itself fully from the ground. The weight shifts forward with this arduous endeavor as the body resigns itself onto the forward foot. Now the heel of the other foot rises in a barely visible movement and drags the foot, yet unable to lift itself from the ground, forward. The weight shifts one more time and another step is inched on. And again, the heel of one foot rises almost imperceptibly and drags the foot forward and another step is inched on. Each step speaks of weariness and pain, and a quest in spite of that. One by one, the feet pull themselves forward and haul the body across the stage in this terrifying, weighted effort. Halfway across the stage, the women are halted in this journey as if by some unseen attacker looming large in front of them. Acknowledging their arrested pathway, they begin to retrace their steps. One more time, their backs flexed over, the women drag their broken bodies across to the corner they came from, still searching for their spines, questing for recovery. One more time, the feet disengage themselves from the ground and shuffle back, pulling the body along. This relentlessly repeated walk of silently searching women, inexorably covering the stage from corner to corner, gives the impression of an arduous exodus every step of which must be labored through.

This section from the third part of *Sri*, choreographed by Chandralekha in 1990, where the women move with their backs "broken," creating the image of what happens to women under a patriarchal regime—of how, with their spines broken at base, their voices lost, their bodies weak, and rid of their will to protest, they survive in total submission—lasts only about six minutes. But, in the unremitting cruelty and tension it builds up, it seems interminably long. It is followed by more images of the humiliation and degradation attendant upon women in their contemporary society. As the women are gradually able to raise their backs upright, they continue to move, still huddled together in groups, in defined directions. But, in a unison movement, their heads turn over one shoulder, and they direct the pupils of their eyes back to a certain point in the darkened auditorium. No other feature of the face moves, but the sheer power of that directed look, multiplied manifold by being mirrored in the six pairs of eyes, spells the terror of pursuit and the possibility of assault. It is not safe to speak out yet.

In this essay, I will analyze sections from dance pieces created by Chandralekha, a contemporary choreographer working out of Madras, India, to comment

on the unique, embodied sociocultural-political critique in her work. It is as if the body, and particularly the female body, negotiates its way through a complex network of existent values and situations to signify resistance to, and criticism of, hegemonies and oppressions with which life conditions in contemporary India are ridden. I have chosen to focus on the work of Chandralekha not only because of the striking aesthetic that is bodied forth in this critical commentary, or because of the depth of intellectual discourse that is uniquely realized in the materiality of the practice. Chandralekha's work merits special attention also because, while her work critiques existent performance conventions, it is born out of a very re-envisioning of traditions, and because, in this amazing reconceptualization of traditional movement bases which are then used to comment on contemporary life conditions, she gives a new lease on life to the creative development of Indian dance.

It will be helpful, at this point, to specify the context in which Chandralekha works. Originally trained in, and an exponent of, the classical dance style of *bharatanatyam,* Chandralekha is better known today as a contemporary choreographer from India, who works innovatively to rework her classical heritages and to choreograph unique, generally evening-length pieces. Chandralekha is also widely known for her involvement in, and pioneering work with, the women's movement and with other left-wing political movements. At this point of time, she is the artistic director of the Chandralekha Group, a company which, more often than not, is composed of more female than male dancers. The dancers are usually trained in classical Indian dance, particularly bharatanatyam, and in yoga. Chandralekha also works with some dancers who are trained in specific movement forms and performance and martial arts traditions such as *kalarippayattu* and *chhau,* which fall outside of the classification of "classical dance." Chandralekha's audiences are diverse and both national and international, and the company spends a large part of the year touring both within India and outside of it. This is perhaps indicative of the quality of her work and its ability to reach widely different audiences despite its location in a particular Indian/South Asian frame of reference.[1]

The methodology used in this research involves movement analysis based primarily on observations made during live performances and some re-viewings of the same pieces on videotape. I have also observed rehearsals, interviewed Chandralekha, and spoken with several of her dancers, and some of her collaborators, including Sadanand Menon, who is involved with her projects as lighting and/or set designer. Most of my quotations of Chandralekha's words are taken from these interviews with her, which were often continued through letters or phone conversations, and are specified as "personal communication." Other quotations and impressions about her ideas and work are gathered from published interviews or articles written by her. I have tried to intercut this anthropological mode of data collection with a more performance/cultural studies orientation in my analysis and interpretation, so that the performative event is viewed largely in the wider social-cultural-political-economic context, as cultural production. Further, in keeping with Chandralekha's own approach and my own belief in the inseparability of artistic creation and personal politics, my perspective is informed by an inquiry into the politics that inform the artwork. My analysis and interpretation, while informed by Chandralekha's philosophy and ideas and discussed with her, and contextualized by my own familiarity with the sociocultural climate in which she works, are my own.

There is not space here to elaborate on the varied contexts of oppression that are resisted in Chandralekha's work. However, as the analysis of specific movement sections will show, exposing the horror and violence in women's lives is an important motif in her artistic and activist work. For instance, I have referred to the embodiment of the terror and humiliation that dogs the lives of women in *Sri.* However, if anything, the piece rejects a tragic and pathos-laden picture of women's victimization. Within each of these sequences, there is a constantly emphasized pattern of re-

sistance in the midst of utter humiliation. The women fall, but they pick themselves up again and again. Their backs are surely broken, but they reach towards recovery. It is as if Monique Wittig's following thesis about the relationship between the fact of oppression and the recognition of its presence is brilliantly embodied and dramatized. In her essay "One Is Not Born a Woman," Wittig argues that:

> When we discover that women are the objects of oppression and appropriation, at the very moment that we become able to perceive this, we become . . . cognitive subjects, through an operation of abstraction. Consciousness of oppression is not only a reaction to . . . oppression. It is also the whole conceptual reevaluation of the social world, its whole reorganization, with new concepts, from the point of view of oppression . . . call it a subjective, cognitive practice.[2]

Sri is permeated with a similar consciousness. In this piece, Chandralekha reworks the history of the Indian societal structure and the condition of women who live within the system, and casts it in terms of the body and movement. The progression from a social structure where male and female powers are matched and accorded similar respect to a situation of increasing domination over women culminates, however, with a powerful move towards reclaiming of lost strength. In this, the piece looks towards an epistemological overthrow, to a situation where the very structures of knowledge have changed radically. Reminiscent of Homi Bhabha's characterization of "beyondness," a not-here, not-there, but somewhere in a presently unlocated zone, Chandralekha beckons to a space "real-ly" unglimpsed.[3]

Sri, however, is not unique in its deployment of the body in multiple zones of signification—aesthetic, cultural, political: it is typical of Chandralekha's choreography. Later, I will refer to instances from her work to argue that it is in its very location in tradition that the subversive power of her work resides. In fact, it is even through her adherence to the exact dimensions and contexts of Indian classical performance, understood through her own vision, that Chandralekha resignifies herself and the female body again and again against multiple produced narratives, repeatedly blasting the gendered-racialized representations that accrue around the female body.

Indeed, the hallmarks of Chandralekha's choreography are her radical re-envisioning of the classical body of Indian dance and her seamless overlaying of the aesthetic and the political in movement. Disillusioned with the codification of the body in the current forms of classical dance, Chandralekha dissociated herself from the field of dance to work with the women's movement for ten years. When she re-entered the field in 1984, it was as a choreographer-dancer who had fully explored the classical dance idioms that her gurus had made available to her, had relentlessly questioned the meaning of every movement in the contemporary context, had stripped away the adornments and the sentimentality, and had necessarily reconceived the classically trained body in terms of the stark classical delineations of line, space, and time.[4] Moreover, having deconstructed the bharatanatyam idiom to its bases, she worked with those bare classical tenets, combining them with movement forms like yoga and martial art forms like kalarippayattu. Simple movements from our daily repertoire of gestures—the lifting of a hand, the quick turning of a head, the slackening of a tired back—also make their way into the classical base of this idiom as and when Chandralekha needs to expand the movement base to embody experiences unrepresented in the classical movement forms. Thus, in Chandralekha's work, which searches for the forms of the body lurking behind the layers of internalized construction that govern gendered enactment, distant elements of dance idioms are juxtaposed to create a different significance; dance is often dropped away in preference for less stylized versions of movement and martial arts; unhindered by artificial separations of genres, the power of movement is sought to be understood anew. This re-envisioning of idiom, fired with her radical political consciousness, marks the unique-

ness of her art. Chandralekha then confronts the bejewelled, smiling, semi-divine *nayika* or heroine of classical Indian dance with a female dancer entirely human, whose body seeks release from the shackles of sociocultural conditioning, whose imbibed inhibitions have been superseded by an understanding of the potential power of the body, and who, resonating with the beauty of her realized strength, sensuality, and spirituality, has discarded the jewels, flowers, and silks. But the minimalist nature of her movement, its rejection of all that is decorative to her, has to be understood as more than a celebration of the ancient concept of *saustabha*—purity of line—and a reconceptualization of bharatanatyam. It is best understood in terms of her exploration of the contextual location of the body and her recasting of its history.

In refiguring a movement base, then, Chandralekha had to work through a complex relationship with tradition. While she rejects the "diabolical smiles" on the vacant faces of today's classical dancers and the pretensions with which the classical dance has become laden, Chandralekha also insists that she is "an uncompromising traditionalist" (Chandralekha, personal communication). Researching little-known texts and prehistoric traditions, she came to her perception that the ancients had always known about the body as the starting point of life. With this understanding, she contests a reading of the Vedic scriptures whereby primacy is placed on the soul, transmitted from body to body through the cycle of rebirths. For her, the body, endowed with multiple energies and powers, stands at the center of the principle of life. This embodied understanding of spirituality is not new to Indian philosophy, or to Indian classical dance, where one of the modes of expressing human love for the divine is through the metaphor of longing for sexual union and erotic fulfillment. However, Chandralekha focusses upon this concept of the non-duality and interdependence of body and soul and explores it as one of the basic aesthetic/philosophical and idiomatic/technical concerns in her work.

The idiomatic refashioning that marks Chandralekha's work is inspired by the mission of renewing the energies inherent in the body, which have been gradually debilitated in the process of socialization. (It is worth mentioning that while Chandralekha is adamant about stating her ideas in terms of "the body," and insists that men suffer similarly shackling conditions under patriarchy, it is my perception that Chandralekha's comments apply more specifically to the bodies of Indian women.) In historicizing the body, and in searching for ancient powers it is imbued with, however, Chandralekha is not locked into a modernist search for origins or for a unitary notion of truth. History is envisioned imaginatively, through an exploration of forms and shapes which are rendered dynamic and three-dimensional, of lines which are charged with energy and mobility, and of the kinesthetic revelation of emotional states. In Chandralekha's conception, the body is an integral part of the cosmos, and the basic position of most styles of Indian classical dance, the *mandala,* is the ultimate realization of this relationship.[5] It is "a holistic concept integrating the human body with itself, the community and the environment . . . a principle of power, balance, stability, of holding the earth . . . of squaring and circularizing the body."[6] In this brilliant conception of the mandala, Chandralekha imbues what has become just a position for many contemporary classical dancers with dynamism and power. With ultimate regard for its classically prescribed dimensions, which provide the starting point for her explorations, Chandralekha proceeds to make it anything but a flat or fixed shape—she upturns it, the feet thrusting up towards the sky; she makes it unstationary, a way of covering space; she takes the principle of opposed but balanced energies, one reaching down through the pelvis, the other reaching up through the spine, and emphasizes it in her versions of the mandala.

It is not only the mandala that is subject to such exploration. Chandralekha had always insisted that the *Natyashastra,* the ancient Hindu scripture of performance, with its conceptualization of the centrality of the body, is "a very modern text."[7] In searching for a movement base she returned to it, and discarding most of

the ways in which its precepts have come to be crystallized and treated as lifeless forms, abstracted the principles and ideas, and reinterpreted them in her own terms. In this way, the three basic tenets of classical choreography besides the mandala, the *bhramari* (turns), the *chaari* (walks), and the *utplavana* (jumps) are taken, explored, and reconceived to form Chandralekha's technical base. Bhramaris are aerialized, for instance, chaaris are floored with the body parallel to the ground, floor positions are inserted into utplavanas. Hand gestures, which comprise an entire vocabulary in Indian classical performance, are never used as decorative, but explored more in their capacities to enhance and dynamize forms, to extend the lines of the body, and sometimes, in their classically defined role of signification.[8] In this way, Chandralekha also extracts the principles and technical hallmarks of *abhinaya* (the tradition of dance drama in Indian classical performance)—the use of a detailed repertoire of eye gestures, for instance—but resituates them in an abstract context, not to tell unilinear stories, but to convey ideas.[9]

It is in defamiliarizing and revolutionizing the familiar then, in deconstructing both the classical and the neoclassical modes of Indian dance in spite of its location in tradition, that the subversive power of her work resides. In this, it also implicitly uncovers the power politics of cultural production and reception in national and international arenas. In fact, Chandralekha's work is built out of a core of resistance: resistance to hierarchies of gender, race, caste, class, and state domination, understood in global and local terms. This resistance, which also always reads as a recreation, marks itself in at least three distinct modes: idiomatically (grounded as it is in the bases of traditional dance and movement forms which are available to her as an Indian woman), choreographically (embodying an exploration of the contemporary relevance of ancient concepts of space, time, and self), and thematically (filtering layers of inherited notions through her painstakingly theorized political consciousness). And in at least these many ways, Chandralekha's work can be understood in terms of a resistive postmodernism which "is concerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition . . . a critique of origins, not a return to them . . . it seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations."[10]

Thus, there is no search for "newness" in her creation of a contemporary Indian dance, but instead a quest for understanding the ancient legacies of the body as they come to be refigured in today's world.[11] Here, where the most radical, the most avant-garde, is based on a recycling and revisioning of roots, past history and present creation coalesce and comment upon each other. Hence, Chandralekha draws on the ancient precept of *Tantra* philosophy and yoga that the spine, along which the *chakras* (energy centers) are located, is the source of the body's strength, to comment on the contemporary degradation of women in Indian society. The comment contains its own looping critique: the image of contemporary women with broken spines in their labored walk challenges the silences of the very past, from which she has drawn, about the suffering women must have endured even then, about the patriarchal hegemonies with which that past is ridden. In the same way, she uses the *sachi* (sideways) look from the classical repertoire of eye gestures to convey a mood unrecognized in the realm of classical dance: women's fear of imminent assault, clearly recognizable in the context of the hideous attacks on the women's movement in contemporary India. The movement sources used by her are thus critiqued, discarded or expanded, and ultimately reborn, in the embodiment of her work.

I will now refer to one of Chandralekha's earlier pieces, *Angika,* to support the above discussion. One of the most important aspects of this work is Chandralekha's effort to recast dance history divorced from the usual sentimentality and religiosity that have come to be regarded as inseparable from it. Thus, while the *Natyashastra*'s delineations of the body and movement were to be valued, Chandralekha insisted on discarding the classical theory of the divine origins of the dance, which shrouded the body in mythology and mystery.

Originating in prehistory, the piece begins with an exploration and expansion of yogic positions, which are practiced not as virtuosic body positions or as demonstrations of remarkable flexibility and balance, but as archetypal and shifting forms which set out the body on an exploration of its own capabilities. This is the beginning of the conscious formalization of movement, the tuning and centering of the body to realize its capacities for line, flow, balance, marking the material origins of the dance. The next sequence, marking the next stage in the history of the performing body as Chandralekha envisions it, explores the principles of the martial arts through movements which integrate the modes of attack and defence, and show the body's progression to develop movements around the concepts of control, balance, coordination, endurance, alertness, lightness, tension, and relaxation. This is followed by a section where the connections between life and work activity and the development of physical artistic traditions become clearer. Drawing one more time on movements from different styles of martial arts and kalarippayattu, the dancers develop walks from their observation of animal movements. These walks are neither realistic imitations, nor are they identical with the more stylized walks later described in the classical scriptures of performance. As they are embodied here, in *Angika,* they are ways of discovering the body and the rudiments of how it operates, of discerning the basic principles of pace, level change, and body attitude, and how they affect movement.

The next sequence moves the piece into the zone of historicity, the Vedic age, when the *Natyashastra* was written. The dancers delineate the development of sophisticated body language, the beginnings of dance, detailed by Bharata, the author of the *Natyashastra.* Chandralekha focusses on the basic elements of the style—she explores Bharata's categorization of movements; his development of repertoires of movements for each body part, all of which can be used to signify variously in different contexts; his refinement of the concepts of body positions, jumps, turns, and gaits into a highly evolved repertoire of dance movements—all of which define the grammatical base for a classical dance form such as bharatanatyam. Moving on to longer dance units, the dancers perform *adavus,* basic movement phrases of bharatanatyam, with variations of speed, order, and direction. This pure dance *(nritta)* section marks the transition from martial arts and yoga to artistic engagement with the body where aesthetics, not functionality, becomes the prime concern.[12]

It is only fitting that this reference to the development of pure dance should be followed by Chandralekha touching upon the tradition of *nritya* or expressional dance, where dramatic elements (abhinaya) are woven into dance movement. Here, Chandralekha choreographs a scathing comment on the development of the classical dance in a patriarchal society, and the process of commercialization of women's bodies which come to be denuded of the brilliant energies that distinguished the initial development of the dance. Without taking recourse to a simplistic linear narrative, the sequence shows that the energies which celebrated the potential of the body were subverted, fragmented, and ultimately negated, through the socialization of the dance.

> First, the transformation of the body as a vehicle to serve gods, religion, priests. Then, the transformation of the body as a vehicle to serve kings, courtiers, men. The shift of the dance from the temple to the court, of its content from "*bhakti*" (devotion) to "*shringara*" (eroticism), of the focus from the abstract divinity of gods to the concrete divinity of kings. Then the transformation of the body as a vehicle and victim of moralistic society. (Program notes, *Angika*)

The cosmic, martial, and material origins of the dance are thus obscured in the religio-mythical shrouds that are cast over the dance, the art becomes increasingly divorced from real-life concerns and becomes inscribed in a system for the subjugation of women's bodies through the later Vedic ages, the eras of repeated foreign invasions, of colonization, and through the post-colonial era up to contemporary times. In a striking choreographic venture, Chandralekha sets up a stage

within the stage, and duplicates the structure of an audience on stage. The two women dance for a double audience: a group of men are seated on either side of the stage, observing the dancers. At one point in the sequence, some of the men turn their focus outward towards the audience, as if to return to them the same scrutinizing and objectifying gaze with which they behold, and have beheld for ages, the performing body of the woman dancer. Chandralekha also improvises on the structure of a *varnam* (traditional abhinaya or dance drama piece in the bharatanatyam repertoire), where the dancer interprets in multiple ways the lyrics of the song that accompanies her, by making the traditionally solo piece a duet danced by two women. More importantly, through an ironic tour de force, she invokes the familiar elements of a classical dance performance such as *pushpanjali* (offering of flowers) and varnam to intervene in and question the institutions surrounding the traditional classical dancer and the systemic support of the appropriation of the dance from her body on the very stage where, and through the very forms through which, she had been appropriated through the colonial and post-colonial years.

The irony is finally heightened in a direct glimpse into the tragic consequences of this history for the dancer herself. The lights focus on the two women who stand huddled together: their bodies are weighted down, held diffidently, shoulders drooping and eyes downcast, bent in gestures of shame. In a vignette that lasts for a few seconds only, we see one woman lowering her head, her neck drooping before herself, while the other woman raises her arms and crosses them to cover her face. Chandralekha's succinct comment points to the violence of a system where, by an unacknowledged slippage, those who are victimized have been persuaded of their own criminality, so that they subsist with complete loss of self-respect, unable to argue for their rights. However, the comment is made in silence and without sentimentality and melodrama: the issues stand out stark and clear for an audience who might prefer to blur them over. The lights black out on this vignette with the dancers still moving.

As if acknowledging the need for resuscitation after this devastating comment, Chandralekha breaks the historical continuum of this piece to recall images from pre-history one more time. This is also the most celebrated sequence from *Angika,* perhaps the most threatening for conservative audiences, choreographed as a collage of images drawn from the ancient pre-Vedic Harappan culture and inspired by Tantric ritual practices. For Chandralekha, these are important sources of inspiration in "reapprising ourselves of the power and potency of the human body—a memory of the past vibrant and alive with images, symbols, cults, rituals" (Program notes, *Angika).* As the lights come up one more time, a man crawls onto stage on all fours. Astride his back, one leg folded in to rest on his back, the other hanging over his shoulder, sits a woman, tall and powerful. This is the *naravahana* image, where the woman rides the man. Though it can be linked to a series of goddess-images in the Hindu tradition where she is portrayed riding on ferocious animals, it remains difficult to read this sequence in religious terms and as a deification of women, particularly because of its positioning in the piece. Also, because of the indigenous traditions from which these images are drawn, where *Shiva* and *Shakti,* the primal male and female energies, are balanced powers, it is difficult to see this as a naive reversal of hegemony. Besides, clearly, the woman is being carried by the man who offers his back as seat of dignity: he is not treated as her victim, nor she as his master.

As she sits atop her human carrier, she uses hand gestures to symbolize the weapons she wields—spear, bow and arrow, sword. She also wields objects more related to cultivation than sophisticated warfare, scythe and chopper. This links her to fertility cults, agricultural traditions, as well as to martial traditions, in which she reclaims her active participation and central role. The remembrance of these images reawakens the originary female energy inherent in women, and we see the coupling of Shiva-Shakti to combat the forces that imperil survival. Importantly, these images are performed without the traditional abhinaya that would

accompany the portrayal of any goddess, or without invoking the *veera rasa,* the valorous mood, that might be expected in a classical rendering of a military sequence. This contributes to secularizing the images: the man and woman on stage are just that, and while she is divine-like in her confident power and grace, and reminds us of the goddess-strength in her, her translation from awesome womanhood to goddesshood is difficult.

I would like to conclude with this image where, one more time, Chandralekha celebrates the timeless energies of the woman's body. One more time too, the choreography reveals itself as a celebration of energies which move through and in the body, and as an embodiment of multiple layers of signification. Specifically, this is an image which originates in a reactivation of memory and legacy, working through a performative reimagining of the present, to insist upon a reconfiguration of the political and ideological landscape of the future. Stitching together the prehistoric/past, and the postmodern/future, through the transformative vision inaugurated in the performative now, Chandralekha insists upon an understanding of performance as a space where, and a mode through which, political and personal meanings can be simultaneously resisted and rearticulated.

Notes

I wish to acknowledge the invaluable research of Rustom Barucha on Chandralekha, published in his book, *Chandralekha: Woman, Dance, Resistance* (Delhi: Indus, 1995). While I have not quoted directly from his comments, and while my reading of Chandralekha's work differs substantially from his in some ways, my familiarity with his text may have affected my perspectives and word choices in several places.

1. This is not to effect a slippage between the descriptors "Indian" and "South Asian," but to indicate the commonalities between these identifying categories, especially as they operate in diasporic contexts.

2. Monique Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman," *Feminist Issues* 2 (winter 1981): 52.

3. In his introduction to his collection of essays *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), Homi Bhabha reflects on the peculiar destabilization and shiftiness that characterize the contemporary notion of "post-" or the "beyond": "The 'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor leaving behind of the past . . . we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (1).

4. Classical delineations of space and time, for instance, are understood in terms of the prescriptions specified in the *Natyashastra,* the ancient Hindu scripture of performance, written between the second and fifth centuries by Bharata Muni. There are, also, very detailed conceptualizations of *angasuddhi* or purity of limb, and *saustabha* or lines of body-in-movement, which govern performance.

5. The mandala is basically defined as a body position. More specifically, it refers to the basic body position from which the dance begins and in which it ends, and in which way of holding the body is encapsulated the aesthetic and idiomatic preferences of that dance form. Compare, for instance, the first position of classical ballet: the mandala in Indian classical dance is defined as strictly, marked by a full turn-out of the hips, a deep flexion of the hips, knees, and ankles, and a fully extended spine above the grounded pelvis. However, each school of classical dance has its own version of the basic mandala which can be regarded as the marker of that style. In bharatanatyam, it is the *araimandi* or *ardhamandala* which is the basic body position. Here, the feet are joined at the heels, though other mandalas where the feet are placed one and a half feet away from each other, or where the feet are placed wide apart, in a stance somewhat wider than the second position of modern dance, are also used. What is typical of the mandala of Indian classical dance, and what makes it different from the plié of classical ballet, is the energy which initiates it: here, the dancer does not go down as a preparation for aerialization, but in order to mark the groundedness that characterizes the dance styles.

6. Chandralekha, "Choreography in the Indian Context," in pamphlet *Indian and World Arts and Crafts* (April 1991): 3.

7. Chandralekha, personal communications with the author 1995–96.

8. *Mudras/hastas* or hand gestures are a vital part of the *angika abhinaya* of Indian classical performance (see below). Each hand gesture has several connotations or *biniyoga,* which are defined according to the context of their use.

9. One of the reigning concepts in Indian classical performance is that of abhinaya—where music, movement, and words are used for the expression of emotions or telling a story. Abhinaya can proceed through several modes: that which uses the limbs *(anga)* is referred to as "angika abhinaya." One of the modes of angika abhinaya is an elaborate repertoire of eye gestures *(drshtiveda)* which can signify variously depending upon the context of their usage.

10. The reference is to Hal Foster's introductory essay in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), a collection of essays on postmodern culture edited by him. Here, Foster makes a critical distinction between resistive and reactionary postmodernisms: "A postmodernism of resistance, then, arises as a counter-practice not only to the official culture of modernism but also to the 'false normativity' of a reactionary postmodernism." Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic,* xii. For Foster, then, the primary intent in a postmodernism of reaction is opposition itself, while the intent in a postmodernism of resistance is opposition specifically directed at resisting the status quo and refiguring the concerns.

11. I am referring specifically to the March 1975 edition of *The Drama Review* where Michael Kirby drew attention to the new developments in dance, what he then went on to describe as "The New Dance." While Kirby's is certainly not the definitive view on postmodern dance in America, he is still an influential cultural critic and *TDR* still retains a position of primacy among artistic/cultural journals. Further, Kirby is not isolated in his point of view: this idea of "newness" continues to dominate much popular thinking about "postmodern culture" in America.

12. Classical performance in India can be classified in terms of two broad categories. That part of the repertoire which uses abhinaya is known as *nritya,* which refers to the expressive and dramatic genre of dance and is distinguished from pure dance or *nritta,* which does not have a narrative intent, but is more an exploration and celebration of the aesthetic.