

## A PHENOMENOLOGY OF ORIGINS, August 2000

By Leon Wainwright

Sonia Khurana documents the scope of her recent work as 'video/photo/sound/installation/object/performance'. The range of her pieces includes a great deal of video installation, often the end result of performance work, that employ a command of gesture, bodily expression and movement in her own body. Though she sometimes pictures her own body, there is a sense in which her works aim away from direct self-portrait, and although recognisable as the artist herself, the manner in which her imaged faces and flesh appear points toward a concern with anonymity. This particular feature of Sonia's practice – the imaged body – is something she invites us to explore. Interpolated amongst her flickering installations are also concerns with the sex of the body. We are also drawn to the challenges of her technical apparatus and reformatting of time.

### **Newness and originality**

Like the word 'art' itself, newness is a term whose value is fluid and shifting. As such it deserves much qualification, by plotting its multiple appearances along an historical pathway through art criticism. Being a controlling metaphor and prescriptive concept within modernism, throughout the twentieth century, newness signalled progress with a capital 'P'. Subsequently, in the late 1970s and 1980s, questioning both the tenability and the desirability of modernist progress, newness was largely jettisoned within critical post-modernism. Then during the last decade, its enduring appeal – the appeal to the new – flashed up again. Yet alternative routes are emerging toward work that has a more enduring appeal, and is critically interesting, independent of the ebbing tide of appreciation paid to other flushes of newness on the art scene. This commands this very different signature of newness. Sonia's current exhibitions disclose the artist's fascination with phenomenal experience, and her art practice is in that sense an exploration of the uniqueness of disclosure in visual terms. These works, endorse an application to 'play' in a grounded, embodied form. They also, for the larger part, form an appeal to bodily expression, and to the interweaving of spatial, perceptual and bodily presence. In sum, Sonia Khurana's practice allows a great deal of newness to appear, demanding considerable speculation as to how that newness is achieved.

In order to be careful, however, about pointing up the contrast between newness or originality, and the fashions of the new in contemporary art, we ought to think in greater depth about the notion of originality itself, and more particularly, 'origins': the origins of movement or motility (what Merleau-Ponty called motricité); the study of the origins of spatiality or – in corporeal terms – of lived space. As we can see in many of her pieces, this implies an unmediated look at the original nature of the experience of the body.

One key experience of the lived body is the function of breathing. '**Breath 1**', a colour video installation, presents the midriff of the torso in its continuous rising and falling breaths. Flattened on a digital screen, this is a shifting form, an expanse of pink flesh fringed above with a narrow finger of white space. The undulating line separating fields of colour, two smoothed ridges at the base of the rib cage, is our only register of movement. And it is a steady movement, yet the

isolation of the body section within the frame gives little indication of whether it takes place in real time or at a slowed pace. Whether shallow breaths made deep, or deep breaths deepened, the breath, once imaged, allows a contemplation of gentle repetition in its most silent form.

Repetition and rhythm are measuring and orienting devices for another silent sequence, 'I'm tied to my mother's womb with a very long chord'. This two-monitor video installation, fixed one above the other, plays out two aspects of a hand-held camera carried along a shoreline. At the upper level, this appears as the shadow of a head and shoulders cast across shingle and muddy brown sand, interrupted by the utmost fringes of a lapping water's edge. Below, on the other screen, we see the lower body of a woman, stepping measuredly along a grey sand beach. Her feet, clad in red laced shoes, pick their way across a stark landscape of flattened green seaweed, dotted with smoothed, egg-sized pebbles. Intermittently, the camera also catches glimpses of a flapping red skirt. The steps pause, edited into a freeze frame, letting several seconds pass before resuming their stride. The figure's head, if these are indeed two aspects of the same body, remains at the margin of the upper frame. We look over her shoulder, effectively, at the field of sand and water trod below, by feet that are out of sight. The discontinuity between upper and lower body, top and bottom sequences, itself becomes a focus of interest, the linear stacking of the monitors willing us to make them meet, to be aspects of the same figure, both on the same beach, at the same time, joined by a common rhythm of steps and sea and sand. But they do not conjoin, and the very breaking of the body into separated frames of time and location excites the need to combine, to rejoin them, and the gentle pleasure of seeing that this can't be done. Stopping the wandering feet mid stride, pausing to let head and shoulders walk on, brings a shrinking effect, halving and narrowing the area of movement across the split imaged space.

Surveying the breadth of her works dealing with the body, there is a great deal that may be said about how the body might bear out particular shades of meaning for the artist. The body as it is known and used in her works clearly betrays what (in my view) is a rightful conviction in its very centrality as the locus of experience. The crucial enabling feature and point of departure for expressing this view is a critical sense in which the nature of that locus radically differs from the traditional philosophical conceptions of body. The 'intellectualist' assumption of a dichotomy of body and mind, or the objectivist, empiricist view of body as a simple sum of its parts, are typical of those traditional schemes. With these in view, phenomenologists argue that philosophical thinking on bodily experience has for too long been prejudiced by biased abstractions of our sense of the body itself. That bias arises from an inability to grasp an awareness of lived human experience, and to articulate that experience, particularly the world of perception. The alternative is to aim at the disclosure of the world, and to do so with renewed attention to the body.

Sonia Khurana's projects can be recognised as attempts "to reveal the mystery of the world and of reason" from the starting point of our bodily encounter with the perceptual field. Her descriptions of the body in its world – demonstrated, for instance, through the sketching of bodily movement in space – play out the famous declaration of Edmund Husserl to 'return to things themselves'. For more recent thinkers after Husserl, such as Merleau-Ponty, this is taken to mean:

to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in

relation to which all every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learned beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is. (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* p. ix)

In a significant sense, the open-endedness of her visual sequences, such as **'Breath 1'**, allows Sonia to have opted for an alternative to the "derivative sign-language" that too easily structures 'figurative' works. It is as if by isolating the moving rib cage, or as in her sand and sea locations, fragmenting body parts, we escape the need to use visual devices that suggest body, and instead go directly to the body itself. Her walking feet have weight, and in their stride they measure out stretches of sand, weed and shingle. The dipping, swaying shadow of a figure's head touched at ground level by the washing waves presents an outline impenetrable by sunlight, the solidity and yet fluidity of a living form.

To gesture toward these two poles of our experience of the body, as a natural, living object in the first sense, and in its abstracted, cultural guise in the second, is to investigate two related conceptions of the body in its world. Sonia's commitment to this further demonstrates the inadequacies of traditional objectifications of the body, urging us to abandon them. In their place, as her representations suggest, we are to regard the body as a dynamic synthesis of intentionalities, that is, as capable of responding to the solicitations of its world, of coming into being and having meaning in a plurality of settings. As the body responds to its world, it also makes sense of that world, bringing perceptual structures into intelligibility and exploiting their usefulness. The body then comes to hold meanings in relation to the structures it sets up. In this ceaseless dialectic both body and objects are constituted as such.

Having persuaded us to recognise this 'intertwining' of self and world, we find the artist involved in a contemplation of self, where the direct object of perception is oneself, and that self becomes the localised horizon of her attention. In 'Lone women don't lie', again using split levels with upper and lower monitors, dual appearances of the head and naked shoulders of the artist herself against a white backdrop perform a mutual adoration. Nibbling 'herself', the sometimes erotic, sometimes childlike bobbing face of the artist engages in a nuzzling, sniffing, pecking apprehension of an original image or object that lies off screen. The focus of that apprehension, turned back on itself, now gently gnashes her teeth, now rapidly laps and flicks her tongue. The whole asymmetrical sequence ends with a sudden meeting of lips in a frozen, fleshy kiss.

This is an amusing performance, a playful display of the exaggerated affections of the artist, ostensibly for her own image. Yet its perceptual significance lies in the fact that the sharing of a perceptual field and represented space across the monitors presents both a distinct simultaneity – two women playing in almost identical ways – and discontinuity, with performances happening at staggered times. By elevating time in this way, the artist sets forward a view of the body-subject as minutely differentiated by its changing situations in various temporal horizons. The implications this will have, then, when the digital medium allows the two performances to be overlapped is to turn our attention to the novelty of adoration and of the visual medium.

### **Playing with time: duration**

To have duration, we must entrust ourselves to rhythms, that is to say to systems of instants. Exceptional events must find resonance in us if they are to mark us deeply. (Gaston Bachelard, *The Dialectic of Duration*, p 21)

The open-endedness achieved in Sonia Khurana's installations depends upon her awareness of the technical effects of time manipulation.. Taking various forms, the time element in many of Sonia's pieces ranges from a slowed or slower-than-real-time, through to real time, to accelerated time. Manipulating time in this way, their discreet differences help to orient the viewer's awareness of such things as sequence and repetition in her represented performances. Relating to these, we might look more carefully at the role of time in enabling Sonia's foregrounding of bodily experience.

These three possible shades of temporal alteration in digital editing - slowed, real and accelerated time – betray the artist's interest in creating a sense of duration. As the quote above from Gaston Bachelard suggests, entrusting ourselves to rhythms, allowing ourselves to recognise in a digitally imaged sequence the measure and number of 'instants' or moments, raises duration to our awareness. For Sonia's 'Anhad: the 'Original' sound', continuity is achieved in at least two ways. A still image, a black and white photographic print of an aged, hairless navel area, is placed to the left of a colourless surface of trickling sand and water, from a back projected video. There is no sound. Rifts and valleys left by water running across a sandy surface are shown enlarged, allowing the details of light and dark grains of sand to be picked out. The sequence is cut in places, overlaid with other aspects of the scene. From some aspects, the grains ascend, from others they descend, slipping across the channelled surface in a hypnotic cascade. Across from the sand, in a strong light source, the ridges of wrinkled skin remain unmoved.

In 'The waters, forgotten of the foot', a two part video and sound installation, continuity and duration are established in the form of falling objects. A man and his shadow, juggling balls or perhaps fruit appear in slowed time. Yet these spheres seem to have buoyancy, not weight, for the image is turned upside down, so that falling objects rise, and what is thrown into the air first travels downward before coming up. The juggler seems not to throw but to push his tools, caught in a perpetual cycle of keeping them out of and lower than his reach. In Part II of the installation, more spheres, apple shaped and sized are dropped one by one from an extended arm. We can't see where they land. A hollow striking noise persists, like the beat of a drum, sounded every few seconds. Below, on another screen, the artist herself is sleeping. Framed around her head and supporting arm, her sleep is interrupted, as she intermittently wakes letting out a silent scream. She twists her head to face upward, over her shoulder and, as we view it, toward the screen above, her wide open mouth empty of sound. The repetition of these actions and the overlapping of their different cycles, provide a continuous admixture. It is unclear when they begin or end. Duration, in that sense, is properly achieved within flashes of instants. This same application of cyclical movement is made possible in another of Sonia Khurana's works, her 'Zoetrope'. This interactive object demands of users that they themselves contribute to its path of repetition. Sonia's piece is much like the original zoetrope design, the drum-like object that once provided one of the few ways to bring movement to static images before the introduction of cinema. Spinning around, images arranged in series inside the drum can be spied through the narrow viewing slits within its circumference. The drum is to be turned quickly enough for the numerous images to merge into one under the illusion of movement. The subject of the display is Sonia herself, drawn into various poses, arms raised and open-mouthed, with head to one side, as if delivering a song. She is dressed all in black, with lace gloves and wig. At

her waist is a reflective disc, tied in place with an elaborate bow.

'Zoetrope' represents a notable and striking departure from the other ways in which the artist orders the time element of her pieces. Here, the input of the object's users determines the duration of its sequences, and the point at which movement of the drum and its contents might be returned to stillness. This extension of agency to the user or viewer of the drum is a development on the representation of duration in Sonia's digital and video installations. Duration is given its resonance for us since, as users, we establish it. And this means that 'Zoetrope' enters the perceptual horizon of the viewer in alternative ways. Its tactility, its demand to be touched, its need for energy from those who apprehend it, means that its rhythmic effects are the rhythms we ourselves command it to produce, and its materiality is in this sense conjoined with ours. Interweaving our interests with the object and what it might show, in its potential to capture and deliver movement, means a closing of the gap between the object and what we would make of it. Introducing movement to the 'Zoetrope', we relate and inhabit it, in a spinning 'interworld' of experience.

### **Flight / gravity...body/gender...**

Phenomenological art making means emphasizing the inseparability of self and world. We are inserted into the world through the body with its range of perceptual acts, its movements and expressions. The intimate relations of body and world take place in an 'interworld', where body meets lived environment, and is confronted by it, as flesh meeting with flesh. The intimacy and intertwining of "the flesh of the world" is something artists representing their bodies in lived space urge us to consider.

Bird is an attempt to establish the limits of those actions her body is capable of performing given her shape, size, strength and the force of gravity. Sonia shows us how gravity keeps her from leaving the ground, as she spreads her arms and lifts a leg in preparation for flight. The details of her failed flight signal the worldly forces that form a horizon of possibilities and limitations for the artist's experience of incarnation, that is, of being a body. These are careful poses, thoughtfully struck, as the artist looks determinedly skyward and upward. Lying on a block placed on her studio floor, she struggles to rise, helplessly rolling and kicking her legs. At other moments she spins, dancing across space in a twisting pattern of steps.

Leaving her clothes behind, Sonia is conspicuously female. Presenting her gendered body, rolling and bending under the rhythm of movement, reminds us that the body is always also sexually specific. Extending our attention to sexual specificity is one way for the artist to link her concerns with body to those of the politics of its representation. I would like to suggest that Sonia's treatment of the female body – directing our gaze toward her own – displays its shifting form as a place of interest. At moments throughout her 'Bird' sequence the artist both places her body at points around her studio, and also remains a place or site of interest in herself.

Sexual difference emanates from and is located on the body, and in that sense, being a sexed subject and having subjectivity depend upon both having and being a body. And that body is always in a particular place, is always somewhere. For woman, the 'place-ness' of that body has its own unique features. For those such as thinker Luce Irigaray, our understanding of the

female body depends greatly on our ability to appreciate the nature of its existence as a place. The female body is a form of vessel, a container regarded as being open, and with a porous nature. Irigaray writes: "Woman, insofar as she is a container, is never a closed one... The boundaries [of her body] touch against one another while still remaining open."

Irigaray's account of woman eventually leads into an ethics of sexual difference by thinking through the 'two-ness' of woman as place. For Sonia, 'Bird' sets up a space in which we might think of the special status of her own sexed and placed female body, and the ways in which this might orient and shape some of the artist's wider attempts to situate phenomenal experience, as we have seen in her other works. If amongst her installation and performance pieces we can isolate a centrally important work, it is in her 'Bird'. This is an investigation of two kinds of limitations: the body confronting its own flesh and the forces of gravity, and a discrete questioning of accounts of the body which overlook sexual difference. Both these sets of limits are crucial features of "the flesh of the world", brought together in one brief imaged performance.

There is yet another framework; within which artists dealing with the 'identity' have come to be placed. This is the cultural political framework, a frame that marks artists who have encountered discontinuous experiences of belonging, migration and exclusion, through their location within a history of colonialism and imperialism and their (after)effects. Roughly the past twenty years have been marked by the emergence of a large number of artists of various backgrounds- in Britain, these would be Caribbean, African, Middle Eastern and South Asian- whose visual practice has substantially altered the way in which art making in a gallery setting is conceived. That intervention has been structured in the form of a discourse which emerged within literary criticism: post-colonial theory, and its special attention to the way in which works of art can be made out of the very experience of cultural difference itself.

The arts environment when Sonia began working in London in 1997, and, I suppose, since then, has held in focus a set of art practitioners from diverse backgrounds who are conversant with concerns over identity. Yet they are not always prepared to be wholly compliant by expressing those concerns.

Situating Sonia's work within an art historical horizon is not easy, as her work demands that her recent context ( her recent appearance in Britain, the formative context of her studio practice in London, and her deep connection with home-India...) ought not to be taken taken naively as determining features for mapping and historicising her works. The breadth of her practice shows that any analysis which places her within a critical paradigm that focuses solely on the cultural political aspects of her works – in the form of a post-colonialist fascination for cultural difference and identity – would need to be radically problematised and reworked. I would suggest that by drawing attention to the phenomenal experiences circulating through and between her works, we might invigorate our understanding of the artist's multiple concerns. And as such, the phenomenological understanding of her works gives us access to details of her experience of art making that would otherwise be overlooked within a structured post-colonial analysis. While Sonia has avoided simple references to the fact of her having spent most of her life in India., her concern with identity amounts to displaying and representing the sexed body, emphasizing sexual rather than cultural differences, and referencing relationships of filial belonging rather than national or ethnic ones. As she has moved through a plurality of settings

and art environments, exchanging with them, Sonia's perceptual experiences, familiarity and command of art discourses have dynamically broadened. Caught within their poetic sweep, Sonia Khurana presents a complex package of not one art practice, but many.

