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# UNPACKING THE FIGURE OF THE ARTIST-FIELDWORKER

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This paper argues that the meeting of practice and academic scholarship constructs the figure of the artist-fieldworker in critical ways, while also giving rise to particular kinds of ethical, formal, and procedural questions of art-making and research.

## 1

My art practice has been largely informed by fieldwork, and this has led me to think about the relationship between art practice and fieldwork. In fact, one of my central concerns in this paper and as a practitioner is to understand the manner in which the artist-fieldworker can be imagined not only as a person engaged in the practice of amalgamating art and fieldwork processes but also as an embodied methodological framework within the practice as research/artistic research discourse. Questions around constituting the body will interlace the process of unpacking of the artist-fieldworker.

This paper comprises two sections. In the first section, I briefly lay out the trajectory of the processes of fieldwork and art-making that has come to constitute my practice. This forms the basis for the second section, which includes brief theoretical derivations, wherein I think through some of the questions emerging from my practice, and attempt the unpacking of this embodied figure of the artist-fieldworker.




Figure 1. Fieldwork image, Kotada, Kutch, Gujarat, India, 2018, photograph by the author/artist.

I discuss three of my projects wherein, apart from focusing on the aspects of fieldwork and its place within the project, I will also be noting the position, contribution, and links of site and spectatorship involved in all three. This will help form the basis of my theoretical configurations in the following section.

To give a brief background, my art practice has centred around articulating the body. My concerns during my undergraduate degree, from which I draw heavily, were located around the permeable body, the body in the constant process of change, and as a site where the inside and outside meet. I became involved with questions of the body through an engagement with painting, on the one hand, and Hindustani Classical music, on the other. My enquires were made primarily through analysing the processes of singing and painting as well as an engagement with the 15th-century poet Kabir. Singing Kabir, engaging with his text, and attempting to render his metaphors in visual media, opened out the idea of the body as temporal and relative to the world. My undergraduate final display project was drawn from Kabir's work as a weaver poet, unfolding a metaphor for the body—a finely woven cloth—and attempting to house this metaphor within the material world. My fieldwork was centred around ways of locating the metaphor of cloth/body. How do I look at the materiality of the metaphor? Where in this world can I house it? The cloth, as it plays out in one of Kabir's famous songs *Jhini Chadariya*, takes us through the entire process of the making of the cloth, the dying of the cloth, exchanging the cloth through various hands. My fieldwork—conducted in Kutch, a region in Gujarat state, western India, and known for its weaving, yarn, cotton fields, dying, and embroidering—comprised of documenting the whole journey of the cloth, the sites it emerges from, and the people who contribute to its making.



Figure 2. Kathyayini Dash, 2015, walk-through installation titled *Body-House*, Maharaja Sayaji Rao University, Vadodara, India, photograph by author/artist.

The installation/performance was twofold.

The first part, housed within the space of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayaji Rao University was a walk-in installation comprising of 12 large double-sided painted panels and two sculptures. The sculptures were a split body and, in between the split, stood the panels.

The outer panels composed the outside, material body, and the inner panels composed the inside, metaphoric body. The cloth became the visual link between the inside and the outside of the body. Here, the site and the people in the site became referential images: a recalling within the painted space. The fieldwork, in this case, served simply as a process of documentation, a resource pool from which I could derive my compositions and visual images. The images of the outer panels, in particular, were seeking to understand and connect with the world/society/lived sphere.



Figure 3. Kathyayini Dash, 2015, detail of double-sided inner and outer panel from walk-through installation *Body-House*, photograph by Mahesh Padiyar.



Figure 4. Kathyayini Dash, 2015, still from *Kahat Kabir*, performance at the Vadodara Kabir Ashram, Vadodara, photograph by Gulam Mohammed Sheikh.

What made the question of spectatorship more complicated for me developed from the second part of my display, housed in a Kabir Ashram, which brought with it a whole different audience, with whom the connection formed through Kabir and music.

The panels were rearranged and, during the course of the performance, the line between performer, performance space, spectators, and audience space blurred. The exhibition bordered a local event and an art performance. Interesting ideas emerged: how sites mobilise spectatorship and how both the site and spectatorship redefine the way the artist is positioned and how the art form plays. It was here that I also observed how music combined with visual work, built an affectively engaged and affected audience.

It made me think of ways viewership and spectatorship are different, and how sites determine ways of thinking about what your work/practice do.

During my postgraduate studies, my enquiries acquired a historical salience as I discovered the body to be socially, culturally, and politically manufactured. Moving beyond notions of life and death, I looked at bodies that were dead bodies walking—historically de-humanised, humiliated, marginalised, bodies that are hoarded and segregated at the will of power. Cultures of seeing these bodies, the histories of violence, the political manufacturing of bodies, the production of production, became subjects for my practice. I began to work with the idea of a world-encompassing body. This was derived primarily from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's "desire machine,"[1] Deleuze's logic of the senses (the subject and sensorium),[2] and Judith Butler's materialisation of the body.[3] They, among other explorations in my practice, pushed me to visualise the body as historically dispersed and "dismantle-able" at any given instance.

My final semester work was, yet again, twofold. The first part, titled *Floating Integers, Bound Serialities*, was an installation of many enactments of the body, each one embodying different historical costumes drawn from multiple sources—news



Figures 5, 6, 7 & 8. Kathyayini Dash, 2017, pop-up book paper sculptures from the installation *Floating Integers, Bound Serialities*.

material, Facebook posts, music, personal/public images and experiences, and art history and literary texts—taking the form of life-size pop-up books, scavenged together using packaging material/rag cloths (Figures 5, 6, 7 & 8). These were suspended in cabinets/shelves. The ambience built with sound and light was something between a library and a mortuary. The work resonated with the then-socio-political circumstance of the Dalit student suicides, lynched Muslim bodies with identity passes, bodies of women, and two-dimensional citizenship. I performed within the space, fragments from the poetry of Kabir, which attained a different colour within this context.

The second part was titled *An Archive of Miracles* (Figures 9, 10, 11 ,12, 13). This was a project born out of a six-month-long association that developed into a long-lasting friendship with five women from Ward No. 2, the Chudha colony in Mehrauli, Delhi (*dalit*, sweeper caste). We met during the course of fieldwork I had conducted for a neighbourhood pop-up community museum project. The fieldwork involved the documentation and analysis of their community singing, an investigation into the contextual quality of their music, and their repertoire of *bhajans*. I continued meeting them even after the community museum project had concluded, every Friday over six months, where they assembled for evening prayers at the Balmiki Mandir, and then, slowly, the process of documentation led, in time, to a process of collaboration,



Figures 9, 10, 11, 12 & 13. Kathyayini Dash, 2017, fieldwork and performance/event images from *An Archive of Miracles*.

where we exchanged *bhajans*, recomposing them in each other's styles. After my experience at the neighbourhood museum project, I had rejected a trickle-down approach to collaborative art practice, and I wanted to rethink the boundaries of the artist and of the artwork. I had in mind that I would not go in with an agenda and that the project must be born out of truly collaborative interaction and motive.

This engagement with each other brought to the surface suppressed social hierarchies and the perceptions we had of each other. Some of this was questioned, while some remained on the surface. There were aspects of my own social composition, of which I had never been aware, that surfaced during this project. This gave the project an interesting dimension where the fieldwork was not done in order to create a resourceful archive or in a manner that objectifies the subject but, rather, with all of its complex processes, the fieldwork was digging out the detailed subjectivities and embodied historical infrastructures in that very moment!

The fieldwork lent itself as a framework and emptied itself in order to accommodate certain artistic motives. What was produced was what Alan Sekula calls a shadow archive.[4]

The project took the shape of a local event organised within the premises of the temple and the making of a video archive of miracles that the women had witnessed in their lives (it was interesting for me to look at "miracles" as a social phenomenon). Using the loose framework of what a Friday looked like in the site and lives of the five women and I over six months, we worked out the components of the event as comprising various interactions, discussions, and ideas around the body, the singing of

each other's exchanged and re-composed songs, storytelling sessions, and a projection of the video archive.

This helped me realise how the form of fieldwork is affected because of the involvement of the artist and vice versa.

Drawing on this project and some theoretical analyses, in my postgraduate dissertation, titled 'Installing the Body: Study of the Artist, Site and Spectatorship,' I explored ideas surrounding the artist as a fieldworker, both theoretically and practically.

My research allowed me to explore the figure of the artist by establishing linkages with the ideas of "site" and "spectatorship".

I engaged with lament in my rendering of Kabir's poetry in previous visual performative work, tracing the lament as part of the Re-Centering Afro-Asia Project—Human and Musical Migrations, leading by the ear and following up on sonic hunches, the idea of a shared grief, cutting across land and sea, which resides within people through their oral traditions and systems of music. This process demanded a different strategy and approach for historicising/archival work, which I felt could be sought in the artistic research/practice-as-research methodology and framework. Furthermore, it would be an interesting procedure to explore the discourse around embodiment and body-world relationships.

This became the starting point for my fieldwork carried out between August 2018 and July 2019. My involvement as a research associate in the Re-Centering Afro-Asia Project gave me the opportunity to install myself as an artist-fieldworker and, through its practice, really think about what this figure is and why constitute such a figure?



Figure 14. Fieldwork image, Kotada, Kutch, Gujarat, India, 2018, photograph by the author/artist.



Figure 15. Fieldwork image, Kuran, Kutch, Gujarat, India, 2018, photograph by the author/artist.



Figure 16. Fieldwork image, Gorewali, Banni, Kutch, Gujarat, India, 2018, photograph by the author/artist.

Is the artist-fieldworker-researcher a figure, a position, or both? What constitutes my work as a researcher and how does my being an artist complicate the position of being a researcher? What constitutes the field? How does the process of artistic research and fieldwork, when brought together, set up confrontations for the artist/researcher, bringing up the social and political implications of the artistic process?

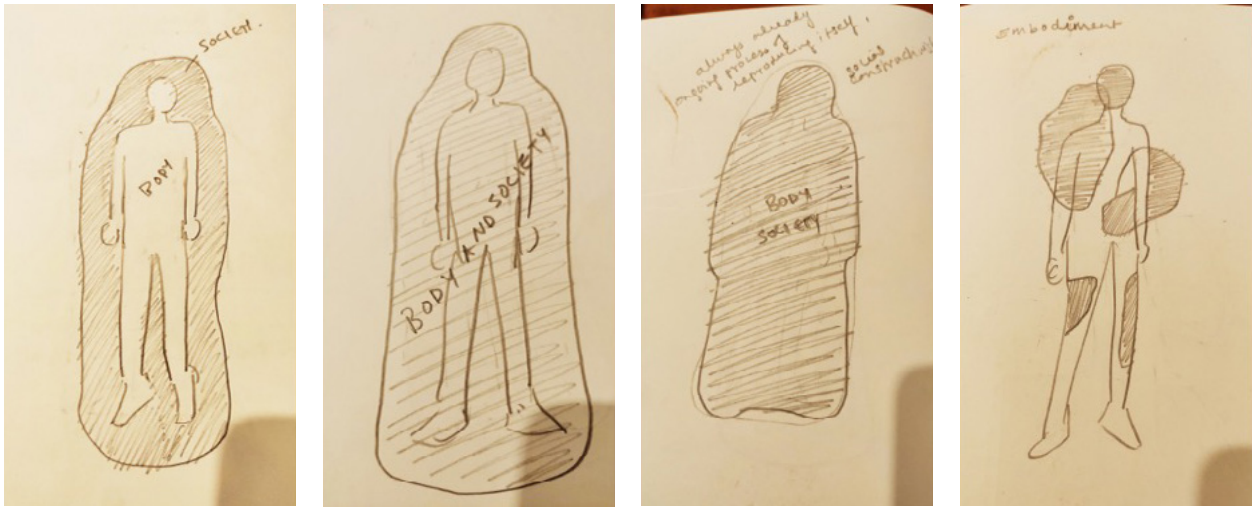
This project has suggested that, when we seek to elaborate on our own configuration, we realise we are inextricably linked to the site in which we work and the spectators/participants that compose it.

## 2

These engagements with questions surrounding the body, site, and spectatorship, and their constant affective and procedural interactions, led me to think of the body as an interface, as something that is defined by the way it is affected, or by the affective infrastructures it embodies to build and define itself.[5] The body is located between affects and effects as a constructive process and pushes us to look at it as a constant ongoing discourse.

With the idea of the body lying at the heart of my artistic practice, what happens when we unpack the body of an artist-fieldworker? How do we conceive this body?

The relationship between body and society/world/mind has been theorised in many ways. I present to you a broad selection through the following diagrams:




Figures 17, 18, 19 & 20 (from left). Kathyayini Dash, 2019, Diagram for Cartesian Duality. Diagram for Butler's concept of Performativity. Diagram for Bourdieu's concept of the Habitus. Diagram for the wide-ranging discourse around embodiment.

I draw on Butler's idea (Figure 18) that the construction of the body as subject,[6] in this case the artist-fieldworker, happens through the process of materialisation, where the construction is an act, a constant ongoing process. I also work with Pierre Bourdieu's Habitus (Figure 19) where structural processes help in entrenching the system physically and mentally, as well as the embodiment discourse (Figure 20), which has proposed that knowledge is materialised through and within the extent of the body.

It brings the system out of the realm of the abstract into an embodied, implicit present.

For example, when an upper caste person enters a lower caste community's village for conducting research, all the feelings of being an outsider, of being treated either with more respect or disdain based on your status, all of these things, which are usually passed off as "difference in environment/privilege" or dismissed as the repercussions of the "tragedy or inequalities of the past," are actually the ongoing process of materialisation taking place, of each other's caste/race bodies. It is through our socio-bodily interaction in the ongoing present that the historical system of caste gets reproduced, materialising into our bodies, taking visual and tangible form. As an artist-fieldworker, this is not just about the purity of personal intent or how we may personally reject caste/race as individuals living in a post-colonial, secular nation.

These systems—be they of caste, class, gender, race—are not only constantly being reproduced and reinvented by their encounter with heterogeneous moments of modernity, they are also reproduced as relative, interactive, embodied processes.

Take this image (Figure 22) of a landscape of ruins.

One can attempt to locate and simultaneously define the body/oneself either as *Flâneur* (the almost invisible observer walking across the debris of the world) or imagine every stone/remaining trace of this ruin as a body, which can be dispersed into past or pulled into present, or the landscape itself as the body composed of instances (these instances being various vantage points).

We can, then, be imagined to be self-producing, performative systems, dispersed across history, time, and region.

A piece of Walter Benjamin's exploded prison house, telescoped from the past to the present. If the body is imagined to be so flexible and dismantle-able, it could surely integrate multiple subjectivities who keep interacting with and informing each other, born out of the body's continuous time travel. If there is a line that one wants to draw between the body and the world, the affect and effect, there is not only one place to draw that line. There are, in fact, many lines that one must draw. Thus, we can be imagined as a site that houses multiple interactions and subjectivities, located at multiple places, and born out of different temporalities and interactions.

Taking this conception of the body as a premise, can we think through embodied practice in the context of a socio-eco system built of the symbiotic relationship between processes of materialisation that constitute the figure of the artist-fieldworker, and the processes of materialisation that constitute the field on and in which the figure operates, composed of the site and spectatorship?

Take for example this one instance of the body of an artist fieldworker, that I have configured with three theoretical figures emerging out of different sites that could be pieced together and integrated at the site of the artist-fieldworker body. First, Susan Buck Morss' "exploded flâneur," which draws from Benjamin's exploded prison-house.[7] However, in Morss' text, the *flâneur* emerges as the debris of the explosion, historically, temporally, and regionally dispersable. Second, Geeta Kapur's "citizen artist/secular artist" that emerges from the site of the nation, wherein the site of the nation provokes a re-assessment of particular social subjectivities of the artist in the face of the emerging secular and global nation.[8] Lastly, Partha Chatterjee's



Figure 21. Fieldwork image, Kuran, Kutch, Gujarat, India, 2018, photograph by the author/artist.



Figure 22. Fieldwork image, Ruins of Kotada, Dholavira gaam, Kutch, Gujarat, India, 2018, photograph by the author/artist.

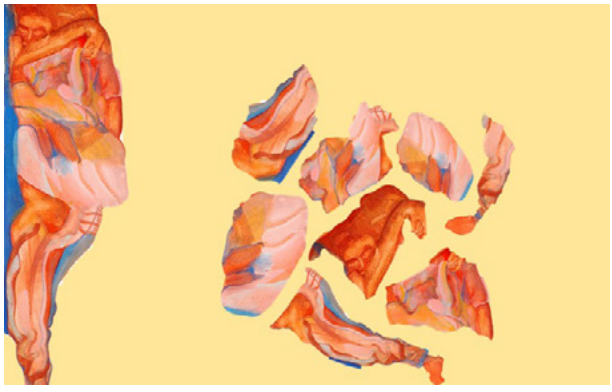


Figure 23. Kathyayini Dash, 2016, *The Dismantle-able Body*, digitally modified image from watercolour painting.

*Masterjee* (village school master) who emerges from what he calls the political society, mediating and negotiating between the "common folk" and the civil society, living in the post-colonial heterogeneous time of the nation.[9] All three exist in themselves, yet within the site of the body, and often end up contradicting one another or producing certain knowledges within and outside the body simultaneously. The field is, itself, a space composed not only by its own present site and spectators, but is symbiotically being constructed in relation to and along with the body that occupies it.

Theoretical figurations as embodied vantage points could become one of the ways of identifying affective infrastructures within the body of the artist-fieldworker/practitioner. Therefore, while we speak of the artist-fieldworker, rather than a personification, it seems useful to think of it as a mode of functioning.

I am interested in the potential of practice as a process of problematising history as we know it. This process opens out the real possibility of articulating and theorising as we make, on-the-go, and renders history as interpretable, advocating multiple "truths," with the potential even of decolonising the body. How can the framing of the body, help re-think the way we look at our histories that inherently reflect artistic methodologies? Framed thus, my body can be envisaged as the site where different kinds of histories and systems reside, heterogeneous, composed of multiple moments of time, and region, and histories, of systems that are pulled into the present body of my being, forging itself into my skin, my laugh, my feelings, all my affective infrastructures. It would be a body always becoming and, in doing so, one that refuses the colonisation by singular systems, hegemonic approaches and processes. So, when one speaks of the black body, or the lower caste body, or the upper caste body, one doesn't speak of them as a result of an old system or event or regime of the past, but a system that constantly reinvents itself and materialises into the present through permutations of site and spectatorship.

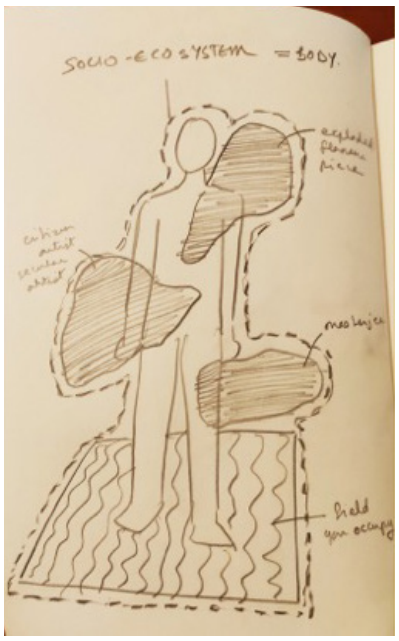



Figure 24. Kathyayini Dash, 2019, An instance of the socio-ecosystem configured with the Masterjee, Exploded Flâneur, Citizen Artist.

To conclude, I propose looking at art and artistic research as not merely performing a social function, but to look at the artwork, artist, and the field as a symbiotic socio-ecosystem, composed of double binds, multiple realities, and as continually being involved in engaging these double binds, bringing them up to the surface, and problematising the sanctity of some histories over others. By opening ourselves and making ourselves more vulnerable, this engagement with double binds, through acknowledged vantage points, exposes the continuation of violent colonial histories within all bodies, and the continued hegemony of some histories over others. The field here is considered as the present dispersed into the past and then pulled back into the present. The interstices of practice and research can give us the opportunity to engage with the form, outcome, and the process at the same time, and to respond both urgently and contemplatively, conceptually and practically, to histories in the making, by dispersing ourselves, all at once.

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## Notes

1 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*.
2 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*.
3 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.
4 Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive'.
5 Sharma and Tygstrup, 'Structures of Feeling'.
6 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.
7 Buck-Morss, 'The Flâneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore'.
8 Kapur, 'Secular Artist, Citizen Artist'.
9 Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*.

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