

PERFORMANCE AS WORSHIP – CAN PERFORMANCE BE A MEANS
TO CONNECT WITH THE DIVINE?

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Abstract

In this paper I raise the question whether performance or performance-making at large can be considered an act of worship or a means to connect with the Divine. I delve into Sufi ritual music-making and movement practices such as the *sema* and *qawwali* to understand what is a Sufi doing and trying to achieve in these practices as well as the entrancing state they arrive at to be in communion with the Divine. I later dive into the pedagogy and practices of clowning to understand the experiences of performers as their clown and draw comparisons between ways of being of the Sufis and the ways of being of the clown. Finally I make the argument that these states of being and pleasure are essentially the primal nature of humans and perhaps the modern human is only misdirected from her “true-inner” purpose.

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I. Introduction

I recently interviewed multi-disciplinary artist Samita Sinha about her practice and work, and she mentioned how she had learned that in some indigenous cultures there is mention of 99 senses¹. That is 99 ways to sense, feel, embrace and relate to the earth and the universe, which have been lost over time to an ultra-mechanised approach to reality. This also made me wonder how in Islam, Allah also has 99 names. Each name not only represents an attribute of Allah but it also represents a way for humans to understand and build a relationship with Allah. A bridge to sense the Divine²'s omnipresence through Allah's 99 names. As a performance-maker I have been sensing and discovering moments; some very special, warm, energetic, stimulating, magical, surprising and pleasurable moments. I experience them when I am my most present in the here and now and in these moments I sense energies and frequencies I cannot name. Energies I have interpreted as the Divine, or perhaps my mom's prayers or an ancestral memory held within me or maybe my brain interpreting and decoding what a bird has to say to me. These moments cannot be explained by the logic of the 5 physical senses, which we have limited the modern human's sensate experience to. These moments, as best as I can describe, feel like giving myself up to the act of doing and opening myself up to the surprises and discoveries that may appear without my "ego" in action, something very reminiscent of my on-going clown training and my practice with writing. You feel consumed (by the act), somewhat like when you're feeling "one" with a 'sick' club beat and you surprise yourself with how good you can move. In that moment it's not about the 'technique' or 'skill' of your dance, rather what you're feeling in your soul and moving your body to it. In these moments you may feel like you're in a 'trance'.

¹This interview can be found towards the end of this document.

² For me the Divine always refers to Allah but it is also exactly what the Divine is to you.

Jerzy Grotowski, a Polish theatre director, describes the trance in his book *Towards a Poor Theatre* as “the ability to concentrate in a particular theatrical way and can be attained with a minimum of goodwill” (37-38). He further explains it as a technique for an actor to make use of to integrate all their “psychic and bodily powers which emerge from the most intimate layers of his being and his instinct, springing forth in a sort of “transamination.”” (16). In contemporary and secular terminologies, the trance may be referred to as “flow”. Positive Psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, coined the term “flow” around 30 years ago, he explains it as, “a harmonious experience where mind and body are working together effortlessly, leaving the person feeling that something special has just occurred.” (Silberschatz 13) When I think about performers in a trance I usually think about *qawwali* performers or *qawwals*. *Qawwali* is a form of Sufi devotional music that originates in South Asia, its purpose is to, through remembrance of Allah (or *dhikr*), poetry and sound/music-making, develop a closeness to the Divine by inducing a transcendental experience for both the doer and the receiver. Observing and even listening to the *qawwals* has often made me wonder, what is it that they’re feeling and experiencing? What are they so deeply attuned and connected to? How are they able to perform with such openness and presence, indecipherable technique and power, and be able to take and carry the listeners alongside themselves in this journey of transcendence where those who are open to receiving feel connected to something larger than themselves. As Katherine Hagedorn shares in her research on *qawwali*, even secular listeners of the music have experienced a spiritual connection in their experience, she writes, “one would expect a secular listener not to derive religious feeling from these musical performances, given their newly secularized and disembodied performance contexts, and yet listeners persist in linking their musical experiences with spiritual transcendence” (491-92). It is not to say that only *qawwali* performers are able to experience the

‘trance’ or this unexplainable state of ecstasy, you may have also experienced it during a Gospel choir performance or even during Nina Simone’s live performance of *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free* at Montreux in 1976.

When I experience these moments of trance in my own practice, I don’t feel I am in charge. I feel like I am only a physical body under control of my soul who shares a sacred connection to all beings—past, present and future; seen, unseen, visible and not visible; dead and alive; human or non-human—it’s this openness to receiving the unknown from the Divine which makes the act of doing exciting, surprising and enlightening. It’s in these moments of trance some of my best writing has emerged. It’s almost like my subconscious takes control of me and I am in an entirely different realm where I am a vessel for the universe to share what she has to through me in writing. Hungarian poet György Faludy has a ditto experience while writing. He “usually does not start writing until a “voice” tells him, often in the middle of the night, “György, it’s time to start writing.” He adds ruefully: “That voice has my number, but I don’t have his.” The ancients called that voice the Muse.” (124 Csikszentmihalyi). I have also begun to feel the Divine's presence in my relationship to my performance practice which is now highly informed by clowning techniques. Clowning techniques have helped me (re)discover parts of my soul that allow me to be imaginative, playful, curious and wondrous. It has helped me to become my most present-self and reconnect to parts of me that allows me to sense and receive all that the universe has to share and play through me; making the act exciting, pleasurable and surprising.

Knowing how these experiences and outlook makes me feel, as well as understanding my relationship to the Divine in context to both my Muslim upbringing as well as my cultural roots

to Hindustani culture (which centers performance-making as a means to build a relationship with the divine), I explore Sufi devotional performance practices as a site of analysis to understand the relationship Sufis have to performance practices such as *qawwali* and the Divine and also use clowning as a site of analysis to determine if the same feeling of transcendence (as experienced by the Sufis) can be applied or experienced in other performance practices, and if that's true, would that make performance-making a possible avenue to worship and build a relationship with the Divine?

II: The Trance in Sufi stages

I felt a rush of adrenaline in my chest, like I was on the edge of a cliff, wondering when I would jump and how well the ocean would catch me: two questions that would never be answered until I experienced the first leap. That is the sensation and the character of Qawwali music, the music of the Sufis, as best describe it.

– Jeff Buckley, *Liner Notes for Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's 'The Supreme Collection, Volume I'*

To describe a Sufi to Jeff Buckley, an American Musician, *qawwal* Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan narrates a story about his father, “A man came to my father and said, “I want you to perform for me.” The man said, “I only have one rupee, that’s all I’m going to give you.” And my father said, “O.K., fine.” So they went to an open field, just him and the old man, and when they started singing, suddenly there were people everywhere. They never knew where they all came from. That is a Sufi. He wasn’t in love with money, he was in love with the music and was totally lost to it.”³ We learn something very important about a Sufi from this story and that is the act of seeking pleasure. In my understanding, a Sufi devotes themselves to tasks that give them

³ This anecdote is from an original interview of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan by Jeff Buckley printed in the Interview magazine in Jan 1996.

pleasure and in that pleasure they sense the Divine. Which in the case of Khan's father is Music. Khan's father makes music not to earn money but to be in the company of the Divine. Because when Khan's father makes music, it is to achieve that transcendental state—a moment of divine pleasure—and that's a larger pay off for him than money. Sufism is an unconventional esoteric sect of Islam which offers “muslims a spiritual path in their quest for divine knowledge and closeness to God” (Valente-Quinn 425). Sufism makes use of *dhikr*, an Islamic practice of worship which is essentially remembrance of Allah through ritualistic and repetitive vocalisation of Allah's 99 names to invoke a trance. *Dhikr* is practiced to establish a (re)connection to one's soul, “to remember their innate but usually forgotten link with the divine” (Kapchan 69). For Sufis a trance state is described as a “communion, a revelation, or an illumination” (Gilbert 26). This essentially means that through *dhikr* the Sufi is able to (re)discover their soul, invoking a state of trance which has the ability to reveal their truth to them, their true-inner self; present in the here and now, ungoverned by the ego's expectations. And in this invoked state, the Sufi experiences a Divine communion in the other ‘unseen’ world—in another psycho-physical state.

In Sufi traditions there is a concept of two worlds, this world and the other world. When one enters a transcendent state they are in the ‘other’ world (Newell 652). This essentially means that when we give into our souls and let it take charge of our bodies, and not our ego (which can also be described as our socialised bodies) we experience a trance and feel connected to the other ‘unseen’ world and all the Divine knowledge, ancestral memories and the unknown it carries.

Dhikr can be performed through the *sema*⁴ which is commonly practiced by the *dervishes*⁵ in Turkey. *Dhikr* can also be *qawwali*, most commonly practiced in South Asia, specifically

⁴ The *sema* is described as “the Sufi ritual wherein the initiate approaches unity with God through active audition in a musical context.” (Deborah)

⁵ A *dervish* is a member of a Sufi order

Pakistan and India. However, I am of the opinion that *dhikr*, which as mentioned above is essentially remembrance of Allah, can be done through any creative practice or action, such as clowning, if done so with that intention.

Sufism heavily relies on how one's body feels in a sensory experience. To have a trance it is important to know how one's body responds to stimuli—a body should know what provides it pleasure. Audre Lorde describes this recognition as the 'erotic' in her essay *The Erotics of Power*. She describes the erotic as, 'an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire (54).' Lorde says the 'erotic demand' has been stripped away from every other aspect of our lives by the system⁶ which has been a cause of our dissatisfactions. Perhaps the erotic lies in the soul. And a reconnection with our soul through sensing its needs and desires is a practice that will allow us to identify the erotic and subsequently work towards achieving pleasure. Although Lorde isn't coming in from a Sufi perspective, this idea is similar to seeking the Divine the way Sufis do, because Sufis seek and sense the Divine in experiences that give them pleasure. This also serves as a callback to how once humans had 99 ways to sense and relate to the universe but how those ties have gradually been severed and limited to 5 physical senses. This should remind us that humans are capable of sensing, feeling and in turn expressing so much more than we can imagine, we just have to intentionally open ourselves to those possibilities.

Before moving further it is also important to briefly highlight the concept of *majdhubiyat*, which is an intense 'attraction' to God. A *majdhub* is a madman, akin to the 'holy fool' as noted by Michael Dols (Newell 650). He further explains the *majdhub* as shared by Newell ". . . the

⁶ The all encompassing word to include: Imperialism, colonization, patriarchy, white supremacy etc.

mystical call of the Sufi or dervish may be so sudden and the person may follow it so quickly that he is believed to have become mentally deranged. In fact, this state, being *majdhub*, was believed to be the normal beginning in the careers of many dervishes. The *majdhub* forgets all earthly things⁷ and follows only the internal call, living —so to speak — with his Caller. Being completely absorbed by his inner life . . .” (Newell 650-51). A *majdhub*’s concentration is drawn into the ‘other world’ “so much that he appeared to be mad to the uninformed observer” (653). We learn that a *majdhub* is essentially always in a state of trance, it is the soul in full control of the outer physical body. The *majdhub* identifies their inner purpose as destined, and is therefore no longer governed by their ego or the illusions of society hence coming across as fools, or clowns, to the delusional observer.

III: The Contemporary Clown 🤡

The clown is your connection to the pleasure that you get from performing. I believe that the investigation of the clown is fundamental to the work and training of the actor. If you can find your fun again, let it lead you, and allow yourself to be open to the mystery of what comes next, then you can begin to play without worry. You begin to quiet your critic and let your body drive.

– Christopher Bayes, *Discovering the Clown, or The Funny Book of Good Acting*

The clown is not a character a performer creates. The clown lives inside you, and as Bayes puts it: “Reclaiming your innocent sense of wonder and enthusiasm brings you closer to your personal clown” (65). The clown lives in the realm where magic is real, where dragons sore the skies, where souls reside, where all is full of wonder. The clown lives under a trance of

⁷ read: consumerism

everything spectacular. You are most connected to your clown when you're your most present self—ungoverned by your ego—when you are entranced by your clown. Laurel Butler in their research on clowning and pedagogy states that clowning is “a process of unlearning something—namely, a “mechanistic view of reality””(64). The clown is a manifestation of one's soul—one's truth—and to identify her requires a deep internal engagement and a shedding of the socialised self or the ego, similar to the Sufis who have to let go of their socialized worldly-selves to connect to their soul.

The playful self or the “inner child” are often terms used to give a name to the clown's energy and clown pedagogy makes use of child-like play to invoke the body's clown. To discover your clown is to recall what it was like to always be in a state of not-knowing, in a state of constant discovery—of wonder and surprises. It's to recall the pleasure one felt when every big and small thing was a moment. As Bayes notes “I often ask, “Why are you doing that?” The only answer I ever need is, “Because I like it!” If it's true, that's all the sense it needs.” (Bayes 80). Donald Winnicott in his book *Playing and Reality* shares, “it is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self (72-73).” When you're a clown whatever you do is because it gives you pleasure, similar to a *qawwal* who performs music because it also gives him pleasure. Both the *qawwal* and the clown seek to perform from the soul—the self—not the ‘ego’ or not ‘what the audience would like to see’. And it's during that seeking they sense a connection to their soul, that they experience a ‘trance’. Hence, what really sparks my interest in understanding the clown's ways is to look back, study and acknowledge the

lineage from which the clown emerges from; the one of holy fools, jesters, tricksters and even the *majdhub*.

The clown is a recurring figure present throughout history. They were not just goofy entertainers (which we might associate or ‘limit’ the contemporary clown to) but also active members of society. They were wise. They knew more than the ordinary person. They could bring to attention the flaws in society to the common person. They were connected to something larger than themselves which shared its readily available wisdom with the clown. Michael Bala shares in *The Clown: An Archetypal Self-Journey*, that clowns can be traced back to 4500 years ago in Egypt, 4000 years ago in China and there is also evidence of these sacred beings present in the royal courts of Mughal India, which dates a few hundred years ago (50). The clowns have been known to serve a larger purpose, which includes their socio-religious contributions to society. Bala shares their research on the existence of at least four clown societies that served a “cultural psychological need” in their communities, these included “the Mimes of early Greece; the Joyous Societies of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in France and the Commedia dell’Arte of the same period in Italy; and the Pueblo Indian clown societies” (1945, 30)” (50).

Similar to *qawwali* performers who through their deeply attuned performances have the ability to carry the listeners on their journey of transcendence by invoking their souls. Clowns have the ability to invoke laughter through humor. Lucile Hoerr Charles explains laughter in *The Clown’s Function*, as “one of the purest and most spontaneous expressions of the sudden happiness of release, of rebirth into consciousness and acceptance of an element needed for personal balance and progress” (32). “Rebirth into consciousness” can be described similarly to

invoking the soul or as identifying the self. Pure laughter, not-held-back, is a manifestation of the soul—the person enacts their desire to express joy without letting their socialised self take over and determine how the person should laugh instead of just simply laughing. The clown has the special gift of spreading pleasure and it all lies in being entirely present with its audience, connecting with them, allowing themselves to let their guard down and playing specifically with the sole intention to make the audience laugh or get a reaction out of them. As Bala also shares “The Clown, by evoking laughter, can serve as a bridge uniting neglected, enshadowed, and unconscious elements with prevailing conscious attitudes through the vehicle of his antics, his dress, and his personality”. (56) Through laughter the clown can facilitate the witnesses' connection to their soul.

However, making the audience laugh isn't the only gift of the clown. What makes clowning as a technique so powerful is the demand of being present in the here and now which means the clown cannot over-rehearse or be prepared with what she has to say to her audience or how she would react to them. It demands vulnerability from the performer. It demands them to be fully present with their whole sensate-self and be open to listening, receiving and obeying. And in that presence of the here and now; physically, mentally, emotionally, intellectually, physiologically; the clown or the 'Fool' has the ability to as, Bala notes, present “the unseen possibility or expresses the unthinkable thoughts; the Fool “speaks” of profound truth sometimes clearly and plainly, sometimes in mythic or poetic fashion, and sometimes in language that at first seems to be nonsense.” (56) It's in these moments of sensorial play that the clown must be open to receiving and sharing what flows through her, and sometimes play is discovered which is so true to the clown's self that it comes across as revolutionary. When connected to their soul, the

fool has the ability to disillusion themselves and achieve a sense of purpose or enlightenment, similar to the *majdhub*, the Sufi ‘fool’ who when entranced, identifies their soul and purpose and dedicates their life to the love of the Divine and not be distracted by the material illusions of society. Bala further shares that in Tarot, the Fool represents every individual who is on a journey of self-discovery, he further notes how the Fool is said to have “an “inner sage,” with an intuition he can follow when he attunes to the inner workings of the world—to meaning (Kaminski)” (56). The fool or the clown is simply not of the ‘real’ world, but is also of the ‘other’ world. Enid Welsford in her book *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*, shares about the clown “As an historical figure he does not confine his activities to the theater but makes everyday life comic on the spot. The Fool, in fact, is an amphibian, equally at home in the world of reality and the world of imagination” (3). The world of imagination? Or perhaps the other unseen world that the Sufis feel connected to in their moments of trance.

Much like a Sufi, a clown must engage and utilise her senses beyond ‘logic’ to protect its sacred ties and (re)establish its connection to the ‘clown realm’. David L. Miller believes that the ‘clown’ is dying because humans no longer feel or sense the way they were once able to—they’re losing their ties to the ‘clown realm’. Bala shares Miller’s research from *The Death of the Clown: A Loss of Wits in the Postmodern Moment*, “with the coming of the age of reason by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—the so-called age of enlightenment—came a profound split in culture and in our psyches when we lost our wits. In the twelfth century, man was understood to have five wits: “(1) phantasy or common sense, (2) imagination, (3) imaginative or cognitive virtue, (4) estimative ability, and (5) memoria and reminiscence” (75). By the sixteenth century, these wits transformed into the more rational five senses. In the seventeenth century, our

wits became the singular—wit.” (60) Similar to what Samita Sinha shared earlier, the human sensate experience has been limited to just the 5 senses which has greatly endangered the human ability to sense not just physical beings in close-proximity but all beings of the universe and beyond. It’s these sacred ties that are being lost to colonisation and the tech-oligarchy’s push for a hyper-tech lifestyle, and it’s through deep attunement, and rediscovering of the self and the human ability to sense beyond what’s rational that makes performance a decolonial practice, and potentially an avenue of connecting to the Divine.

IV: Performance is Worship

In order to understand the dance one must be still. And in order to truly understand stillness one must dance. There are many ways to the Divine. I have chosen the ways of song, dance, and laughter.

– Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī

One cannot worship the Divine without embodied practices of ritual. Muslims are required to pray five times a day which is both a physical and auditory practice of worship. It is a ‘performance’ albeit not necessarily in the sense of performing for an audience of people. Contemporary Muslims would assert the importance of following the Quran and Hadith as the ONLY way to Allah. While I acknowledge that those might be one way to Allah, or maybe even a starting point, it is also important to acknowledge the importance of seeking knowledge in Islam through deep consideration and thinking. That doesn’t mean knowledge that’s acquired through socialisation but rather inquiry, exploration, experiences, seeking pleasure and actively ‘sensing’. It is important to recognise the Divine’s encompassing existence, the Divine’s

omnipresence in Islam. When I perform, or write or embody my clown to seek pleasure, to seek a state where I feel one with the universe, I sense the Divine. Not just Her, but also ancestors, other magical beings, other wonderful unseen things which we have been made to believe don't exist. And if sensing that presence solidifies my belief more and more in a Higher Being, how is that not worship?

Furthermore as highlighted earlier in the paper, the human sensory experience was always beyond just the 5-named senses we have come to accept as a 'fact'. Prior to colonisation, the severance of indigenous ties to the earth and the ultra-mechanisation of our lived realities, humans were experiencing themselves, their bodies and everything around them much differently. Humans had a much more advanced sensorial relationship with the earth and hence were perhaps able to reconnect with their souls more easily. They were able to identify what gives them pleasure or as Lorde would call it, 'the erotic' much readily and in turn found their connection to the sacred or their purpose (if that's what they were seeking). As observed through the lineage of the clown ancestors, the clowns of eras past were experiencing a much deeper and spiritual connection with their clown persona that it would eventually become their everyday self. Perhaps the 'flow-state' or trance we experience as performers in contemporary times is our body under control of our soul. Maybe the more we try to identify our soul's needs and desires the more pleasurable our experience in this life would become. Maybe this magical, unexplainable, ecstasy that we call the 'flow-state' or the 'trance' is the primal condition of humans which we should all be seeking at all times in everything that we do. Deborah Kapchan in her essay *Learning to Listen: The Sound of Sufism in France* mentions how Shaykh Sidi Hamza shares that "materialism has created such an imbalance between body and spirit. Sufism

attempts to rectify this imbalance by the practice of invocation and the concurrent creation of beauty”(79). Similarly Laurel Butler shares “By grounding our clown practice in the principles of Freirean pedagogy—namely, critical awareness, inquiry-based discovery, empathy, and presence in a state of not-knowing—we cultivate the fertile conditions for collective creativity and reflection that are crucial not only to theatrical performance practices, but to all students’ participation in, and transformation of, their own realities.” (71) Both Kapchan and Butler are asserting the importance of reconnecting to the souls which requires a deep internal engagement of decolonisation. To really look within and determine how we feel, and to respond to that instead of letting the laws of the material world dictate how we should be experiencing and relating to the earth and everything around us.

What we learn through studying Sufism and clowning as sites of analyses is that they both require the presence of the whole sensate being in the here and now, they both require a (re)discovery of one’s inner self (or child) and an active stripping away of the outward socialized body controlled and regulated by the standards of society that limits and hinders are connection to pleasure (or the Divine). It is not to say that performance is the only avenue to discover one’s soul or sense of purpose. The idea is to always be on the lookout for that. What is it that makes me feel connected to something greater than myself? And once you find it, you should respond to it, and when you respond to it you should make room for it to emerge in everything else that you do. This is why performance can be a means of worship, because it is through performance a performer can identify their innate link to the sacred—the Divine (again, whatever that may mean for you) and then find ways to make room for Her in everything else that they do to seek that same experience of ecstasy and pleasure.

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Artist Interview

Samita Sinha is an Artist and composer who creates multidisciplinary performance works that unravel Indian vocal traditions through the body to create a decolonized, multivalent language of voice and vibration. Sinha's works have been commissioned by Asia Society, Performance Space, Danspace, Rubin Museum, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Queens Museum, Gibney Dance, and Western Front, and presented by The Kitchen, Wexner Center for the Arts, REDCAT, PICA, National Sawdust and others. She has received awards from National Endowment for the Arts, Fulbright Foundation, National Performance Network, and New York State Council on the Arts.

This interview took place over zoom on March 10th, 2025.

Hasan Haq: Hello!

Samita Sinha: Hi, Hasan! How are you?

HH: I'm good. How are you?

SS: Good! Good to meet you.

HH: Good to meet you too, thank you so much for agreeing to this [interview].

SS: Of course. No, I was very moved by your email.

HH: [laughs] Because we have this little time together, we could just jump into the interview if you want? Awesome, I was reading upon your work, and attunement seems to play a very vital role in your work, both in the performance, and prior to the performance. How would you describe that for yourself? When you're attuning, what kind of state are you seeking to get into?

SS: Those are wonderful questions. Yeah, attuning is for me, very, very complex. And initially the depth of it, I would say, came from the Hindustani music training. And so that gave me a portal. I think when you start with something very specific and very deep, then you have that anchor. You understand or, in my experience, I understood the non conceptual profundity of it, over years and years and years of what this meant; to practice tuning, to tune a *tanpura*⁸, to sing *sa*⁹ and especially because my ambition was never to really accomplish the form of *raga*¹⁰ or Hindustani music. At some point, I realized that I was more moved by studying the elements of it than I was wanting to really become a performer of this music. And so I started to, I would say, quite intuitively expand. This sense of attunement to the tanpura suddenly expanded. Instead of the tanpura becoming the thing that I listened to, it became the room, or it became the bodies of the audience, or it became people that I imagined, or it became a sense of ancestors, all kinds of things. So the attunement just became very vast. Now at this point in my practice, many years into it, I might sit and suddenly perceive a suffering in some corner of this world that's very far away, and it's kind of like an opening of the heart enough to be able to listen. I remember going to see the sculptures of *Avalokiteshvara*, the *Bodhisattva* ... And you see all these postures of the statues from the seventh century, and they're listening. So I think attunement is quite broad, a kind of listening to something very, very far, something very intimate, sensations, breath, micro cells, soma, all of it.

HH: My sub question to this is, how aware are you of the audience during your performances? Because it appears to be very deeply internal, in the sense that you would want to stay in that state so that it doesn't break. At least that's how I was perceiving it as a viewer. So to what extent

⁸ The tanpura is a long-necked, plucked, four-stringed instrument originating in the Indian subcontinent

⁹ *Sa* is the first note on the scale in Hindustani music

¹⁰ *Raga* is a melodic framework for musical improvisation in Hindustani music

are you aware of the presence of the audience? And keeping that in mind, how do you remind yourself that you're not clicking into the performer side of yourself?

SS: Yeah, for sure. I would say that this entire realm that I'm working in is another kind of sense. And so I heard somebody wonderful said in indigenous cultures, they spoke of 99 senses. Instead of five. And so if you think about, especially with technology and the way we live now, all of the things we don't sense anymore, the thing that that Indian traditions have helped me with is it gave me a rigorous form to practice, a sense that otherwise would be lost, I think, to our place and time. It's sort of a vibration sense. And so I'm aware of the audience, like a cat. You know you walk into a room and the cat doesn't have to look at you, they don't have to do anything for you, but they feel you very deeply and very sentiently. [laughs]

HH: I get you, I get you, I get you!

SS: So, yeah, I would say there is a deep awareness. At some point though there's no distinction between the inside and the outside. But it takes some time.

HH: Do you feel like you have to attune yourself prior to the show, or does it happen during the performance?

SS: A bit of both. I think that life is the preparation you know, you trust in the practice, in the decades of all kinds of experiences, and also, for my work, there's a good deal of unknown. There's a lot of opening into the unknown, in a way I don't want to be too worried about

preparing, because then it goes off by not knowing. So there's a kind of strange state before that where you're just sort of there. And the best thing is to be with people like Cecilia Vicuña, whom I was with that day, and Ricardo and Daniel, all of whom are phenomenal. Cecilia is another echelon; she's really a master of that space. So it was really fun beforehand, being near her, because I felt actually quite held and supported by her. Her experience transmitted to me both the mischief of it and the fun of it. There was extreme love and openness that you don't always find in performance ... This is not easy. This work of bringing something namelessly sacred, into the world of regular life and of the "art world". And it is really hard to say the least. It's very tricky. It's very important to have, I mean, even just to speak to you, it's a pleasure to build community, you know, and build that strength. It's quite intense work. So the preparation, in part, is to be able to open and to trust the people that I'm working with, if that's available, and sometimes it's not. Sometimes that hasn't been available in the past and that's very painful. And when it is available, it's the source, in a way.

HH: I obviously don't know what your relationship is with the divine or the unseen or the sacred in your work, but how would you name it? What would you call it, if anything? And what is that sacred energy for you?

[short pause]

SS: There are many, I'm actually finding many roads into this. One of the things I'm working with is energy, energetics and the energy of sound, and so that itself is something between a science and something more metaphysical, but it's quite concrete on some level. There's physics to it, and gravity and rotations and spirals and shapes and velocities. And so there's that aspect

which is actually quite a profound portal into what's not visible and to what's invisible. And I would say my relationship to the Divine is quite vast. I have a very strong relationship to the Goddess, which actually was quite healing many years ago, when I created that relationship, when it revealed itself, you know, in my 20s, really, in my late 20s, at a time of great pain. Since then it's evolved into wild formlessness, and so it's becoming less and less attached to any form or tradition, and it feels more just like this wild emptiness. That and the rigor for me, one of the life rigors that I feel committed to, is to connect to something that I cannot name, and what that does to the mind and how that shapes the mind and tames the mind's aggression to know and to have and to possess. For me, it is a really important life commitment. I mean, there's such immense beauty I feel in that not named place. And my sense, even though I have no scholarship to back this up, is that the divine in every culture, every religion, actually began without a name. That's my sense, is that it starts there.

HH: Yeah, and I also feel in my pursuits of sensing the divine I have begun to understand it's the same across [every culture/religion] There are different ways to the divine which are the different cultures and different religions, but it's essentially the same feeling that we're all striving for. I was watching one of your interviews with BK live, and you spoke about tuning into the different parts of the body and the organs, and tapping into ancestral memories and uninformed thoughts. Can you please speak more on that?

SS: Not sure which interview that was, but from where I am now. Yeah, *Qi Gong* has been very formative for me. Giving me access to organs, and helping give me a system. I don't know if you've done any of that embodied practice, but every organ has its own element and sound and

quality. And so you do work with the different organs, and you get to perceive these different energies, essentially. So as I connected that to sound, and then started to take my own training apart through the body, I started to just feel things ... I don't know. I don't really know how to describe them, but I would say definitely things in my lineage that needed to be heard, needed to be acknowledged, and didn't necessarily come in the form of stories, but were still very present as feelings, as experiences somehow, residue of experiences ... or I wouldn't even call them memories, and I wouldn't name it. This is part of my spiritual practice. Again, people speak about intergenerational trauma quite a lot these days, which is profoundly important. And yet I feel that this practice, when you touch those things, it's like, is it mine? Is it? Is it from next door? Is it from, you know, who? Who is this? Whose voice is this? It's not quite, you can't put your finger on it. And so, you know, you just let it live in this. You let it breathe in that mystery. And so, ancestral is one word, but it could also be the neighbor. [laughs]

HH: Yeah, I think I get what you're saying, because this is something sometimes I feel with my writing when it's just so deeply subconscious or of another "realm" where I feel like I am not writing any of these thoughts, that I'm just a vessel in the moment just transcribing these thoughts and I cannot claim ownership and I've said this many times, that I don't feel like claiming total ownership of my writing. So I do, I really do understand what you're saying,

SS: And I think that's so profound, that the things that we do not own and to be attuned and to say ... I don't even know how to speak of it, but I think when it does come, or when it picks you or something, your job is to kind of shut up and say yes [laughs].

HH: Yes, exactly, exactly!

SS: There's a kind of obedience to it and I find that very special.

HH: I totally agree! Do you think you have any role for the audience or the listeners in your work, or do you have any hopes or wants that you think they should take away from the space that you create?

SS: I do feel there is a demand in the work to listen, and maybe the work itself is teaching the audience how to sense again, or how to feel again. Some things I feel have been clogged or numbed or ignored or brutalized. Now that you're asking me, it helps me to say it, because it's not something that I pre think so much but I do realize that there is a powerful desire to share the transmission. I do it in my own space every day, but something else gets fulfilled when it's shared. And so, of course, the desire is ... the hope, you could say the hope, a hope is that someone feels something. The hope is that the people are moved, that something is transmitted, and the thing being transmitted is received. It's as simple as that, but it's a big ask actually, and which is why you know an email like yours is such a blessing, because all you need is one perfect receiver to feel fulfilled. And I know there was more than one in that room ... Yeah, so nothing too pushy, but a hope that it's received.

HH: For sure. Like I do sense a lot of vulnerability in the space which you create and share because it doesn't appear to be something that you've prepared prior. In that moment you're sharing your vulnerabilities, and I think that vulnerable energy was taken in by the listener in

that space.

...

Have there been moments where someone in the audience has reacted in a way that was surprising to you, like maybe starts to create their own sound or moves in a certain way.

SS: You know, that's a bit of a utopian dream. I've heard it from quite a number of people, that Federal Hall was a very particular space that you know, of course, with that big, giant, crazy, beautiful height ... but I've done versions of *Tremor* in other spaces that are more tight, and especially in those places, I've heard from people that they really wanted to join, that they really wanted to but they stopped themselves. So it's never happened that I've heard a sound back, but I know at the same performance you were, I heard from a dear friend of mine that she and the man next to her, who was a total stranger, held hands and just smiled at each other. She said, totally this platonic love, you know. And then they spoke afterwards. And I've heard people, lying down and releasing things in their body, reaching places in their body that they've been working on with their therapist for a week which they couldn't release until the performance. But yeah, there is a horizon of research for me, of the question of, what does it mean for people to be there, to witness, to partake.

HH: While making new work, what inspires you, or what impulses drive you, like, what's that thought that comes up that takes you on this path?

SS: Sometimes I work with myth, I feel very turned on by myth. The sense of the archetypal experience inside of them, how much it speaks to very real life. *Sati* is one of them that I worked

with. And *Sati* was kind of this strange daughter of *Daksha*, and then she married *Siva*, who was not cool, you know, he was not the right kind of guy. He was a crazy, dreadlocked, ash-smearing yogi who lived on the mountain and so anyway, I could go on and on with this myth, but I love the way they're both so profound and so relatable. You can really relate to it as a human and also sense the Divine. So myth has been very inspiring to me as a sort of mediator, especially when there's like with *Sati* that she burns herself in an act of self immolation. And so there's something so powerful about what it also says about 'femaleness' in that part of the world. So, yeah, potent myths have been a very strong inspiration. Emotion and energy especially where emotion can become energy. I love working with states and seeing how much that they can be held and how much further they can go. So a lot of inner states.

HH: What would a rehearsal or workshop process look like for you, and then following that, how much of the work that you create for yourself is left for improvisation or momentary impulses?

SS: I would say, rather than rehearsals, the word that I really use is practice. What my work is, is really a lived practice, ongoing, really as close to daily as it gets. And then when it comes time to kind of work with others, I have over the years, it's taken me a long time, you know, to find what I call my *Sangha*¹¹ of collaborators, my community of collaborators, and they're very trusted. They're very attuned in their own extremely special way. Each of them is seeking the 'oneness'. Each of them is attuned to something quite mysterious and sacred. I'm not sure everybody would use that word themselves, but in their own way. And so then it's a matter of just having enough meetings, conversations like this, where we talk about the work, then we get into the room and

¹¹ A *Sangha* is used to describe a community of Buddhist monks, nuns, etc.

we dive right in and we explore. It's very important not to overwork, which is something I've learned the hard way. So on the one hand, there's the practice, which is so consistent and devotional, and the rigor, and it's constantly evolving. And then when you come together with people, you're both. You already trust each of us as practitioners. And so we're coming together from our depths in our work. And when we come together, it's like a little fire. And then you research what happened, and you leave each other, and you give it some space, and then you come back again. Or you have a very intensive period of, like, one week, 10 days, one month, and you go really far into that work, and then you leave each other for a year until you come back again. So that's sort of the rhythm. But I think it's very important now that you ask, rehearsal, workshop, performance, these words, I feel it's really important to bring in a different word ... The word practice feels increasingly important to me. Rehearsal implies, you know, you're trying to get it "right".

HH: So would you say, like in the moment, a lot of it is momentary impulses?

SS: Absolutely, it's very spontaneous. I work with a lot of extremely deconstructed, taken apart forms of Hindustani music. So somewhere, in the far, far distance, there's a skeletal structure which is like a rope that comes down to pull you up from a void. So I kind of work like that, to have these very, very, very loose, but very deeply practiced forms that I've taken far, far, far, far apart, and so those are present as kind of a structural support. But outside of that, it's totally spontaneous and relational.

HH: Do you think your artistic practice or the states that you've discovered for yourself have found their way into your everyday life?

SS: Yeah, absolutely, it's, it's so much life, and also kind of a guide to help you navigate life. You know, it's a partner, it's a teacher of love. It helps you alert to danger, you know, all of those things. I think that work is also a huge form of knowledge of how to work with pain in an extremely clean way, which I think our world needs so much. How to not fear pain, and how do you really move towards it and also not get lost and caught in it at the same time? That takes time to mature. In the beginning, I was, you know, completely lost and just sort of exploring and didn't know what I was doing. And the only teacher is, is the work itself, which is the energies that's coming and running through that teaches you. So I really have found that the work has been a guide. I would call it my work, just like you were saying about your writing. And yet I would always feel like, wait, this work is so far ahead of me. So for a long time, I was chasing, you know, I felt like in my personal life and in my own everyday life, I was less evolved. The helped show me a way. And now later on, I feel a little bit more like, okay, I think I'm catching up. That the profundity of the work and my own maturity are finally coming to some alignment. Which is a pleasure!

HH: Did you, in your experience, have to unlearn the expectations of the capitalist material society, to rediscover those links with the energy and for deep attunement?

SS: Yes, oh my gosh, a huge struggle. It took me a long time to claim this as a valid mode of being a performer. Especially in the performance world, with people doing so many kinds of

things and receiving different kinds of attention, and you feel like, wait, should I be more like that? So like everything, it's just staying true to yourself and just accepting your work. And it's a process to just really embrace what the work is and what it needs to be conjured, and how vulnerable it is and how misunderstood it is. How I'm also standing on the backs of a long line of incredible artists, practitioners, women, queer folks, and met all kinds of amazing humans who have done this. I think about Alice Coltrane. I think about Kazuo Ohno. He was, for me, a very important guide when I couldn't find anything around me in the New York World. So staying grounded, I think, in one's own truth of where the work comes from and what it is, is crucial and is also a huge act of resistance. It's an enormous act of resistance.

HH: How would you describe the decolonization of voice?

SS: Oh, boy! [laughs] One way is what I said in the beginning about senses. I feel like growing those senses back is an enormous part of decolonization. I actually feel that that's the missing part more so than you know language and language has its limits. And I think the real depth of the decolonial work has to happen beyond language, so in that realm of senses and sensing. My relationship with voice begins with space more than sound. So I really sense space and then feel the emergence of sound through and in space, which feels like an entire logic that is decolonial in nature, in relationship to sound, in relationship to music, in relationship to the body and how we produce sound and in relationship to voice. So one way is the sensing. The second aspect is, I would say, the internal politics of the body. The liberatory effects of what happens when you go through the inner and inner, deep, deep into the soma, when you go there, you're really changing yourself and changing yourself for those around you, you're changing the air, you're changing the

space, you're changing each other, you're changing the possibilities of relation. The most profound horizon of decolonial life is to be able to relate differently, as we are doing.