

Nalini Malani: *Hamletmachine*.

Pat HOFFIE

The very title of this work seems to pose a conundrum. For what might a *Hamletmachine* be capable of producing? Surely Hamlet, that prince of vacillation, has throughout the ages offered an allegory warning of the perils of the irresolute. His inability to choose, his lack of direction, his procrastination have been held up as the (in)action that leads to inevitable chaos, decline and destruction. The idea of a machine to endlessly reproduce this inactivity is surely a cynical proposition. And the contradictory nature of this work is compounded when we consider its development: a contemporary female Indian artist borrowing from the work of a German playwright. When Heiner Müller wrote his play *Hamletmachine* in 1977, his candid portrayal of a Germany divided against itself shocked audiences. Müller's refusal to turn from the ugly horror of everyday incidents of betrayal and hypocrisy charged the more generalised mythologies of border conflict with more psychological and visceral nuances.

In her appropriation of Müller's play, Malani moves the focus of the grand narrative again - this time to the Hindu-Muslim conflicts of the present. She does this through unpicking certain mythologies - those that describe the axis of tension in strictly nationalistic and religious terms. In this work, as within previous work by Malani, the subject remains elusive - neither ethnically locatable nor decipherable in terms of easy association with 'other-ness', identity seems to fight for its indeterminacy; seems to procrastinate for more time. Here identity makes no excuses for its mutability or lack of decisiveness in terms of form or articulacy. Instead, it claims a no-man's ground for waiting until new grounds for communication might be established.

Hamletmachine was produced with the Butoh dancer Harada Nobuo in an installation that uses the dancer's body as a screen onto which the flickering images of history are temporarily tattooed. Johan Pijnappel describes *Hamletmachine* as

*four videos, three projected onto the walls and one onto a layer of salt on the floor - a reference to Gandhi's salt march... The images spread like stains, seemingly soaking the walls; the huge projected faces are manipulated with superimpositions to acquire the transparency of watercolours.*¹

In Malani's work, the pleas for reconciliation - between East and West, between the Hindu world and the Islamic world, between the First World and the Third World - are never uttered. Instead, the possibilities for first-hand, first-time conciliation are prepared. Each viewer is invited to examine

and weigh the costs that must be paid by both sides if the grounds for equitable engagement are to be attempted.

In this work the value of procrastination takes on a twist - the refusal to play the game according to the rules set by those in power harbours a potential that may not yet be tainted by the same sense of doom associated with Shakespeare's original anti-hero. Instead, Malani's work seems to suggest that we cannot begin to embark on processes of conciliation until we have taken the time to imagine new grounds on which to come together.

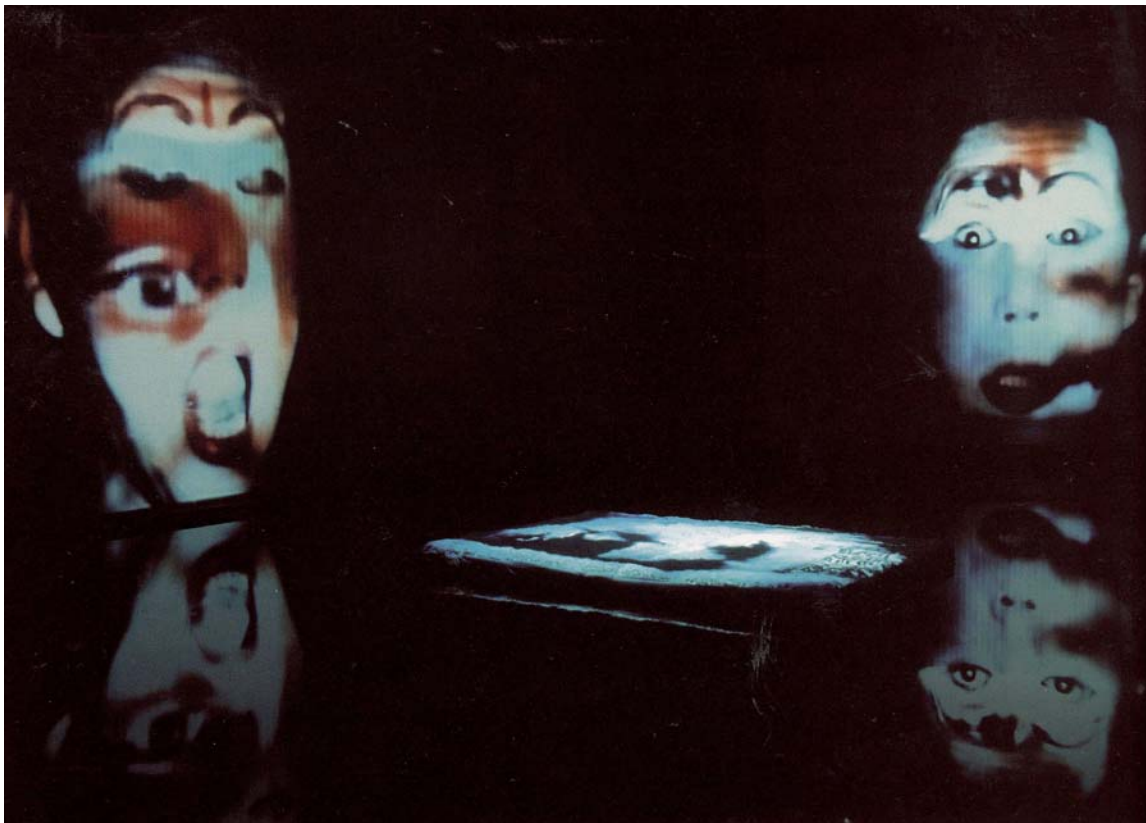
Malani's interest in the procrastinator as hero was evident in her 1999 project *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* - a video installation based on a story of the same name by Saadat Hasan Manto. In Manto's story the inmate of a mental asylum in the Punjab refuses to accept the directions to choose sides at the time of Partition in 1947 and, instead, elects to perpetually inhabit a no man's land of his own invention:

*There, behind barbed wire, on one side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh.*²

That strip of land with no name became, in the tale, the burial site for a man who refused to play the choosing game set by those in power. And if the anti-hero came from a refuge for the insane, then the world beyond was cast as the domain of true madness.

Malani's video installation of the same name shifts the grounds again - this time to the test-sites for Indian nuclear explosions. On the floor of a dark, cave-like space twelve uniform tin trunks, the kind used by migrants and travellers on the Subcontinent, are arranged in a rectangular grid on the floor, each containing a quilt and a TV monitor whose contents flicker and blink. Across their surfaces run a gamut of screened images loosely connecting a range of issues - the effects of radiation, an interview, a child being born, the puffs of mushroom clouds from nuclear tests. On the left and right walls of the installation space are images of women endlessly, futilely, attempting to tie a sari. In the endless repetition of the filmed images Malani casts a kind of stasis within that cave - one where the viewer is committed to forever witnessing. To re-thinking. To re-considering the implications of certain actions.

Within this collection of filmed images one in particular seems to epitomise the role of the procrastinator: the tiny brown child that eventually squeezes out from the body of the mother, helped by the hands of other women, arrives only to



Nalini Malani, *Hamletmachine*, 1999-2000, installation view. Image courtesy the artist.

remain for a moment, to hesitate and then to retreat, or seem to be sucked back in. As if it has made the decision to wait – to not enter this cacophony of confusion just yet. The image is both amusing and horrifying – the tragi-comic point where the impossibility of action becomes not absurd, but damning on those who are privileged enough to play the role of audience.

Malani's choice of medium is always a conscious one. Her use of technology is, for her, fraught with the kinds of contradictions that bind her role as a contemporary artist to one where witness must be borne with a kind of complicity. In an interview with me she described her ambivalence about the way in which technology is received in the West. She said:

The term modernism implies an imagined utopia that would emerge after the industrial revolution. Of course we're more aware than ever that it was never ever going to happen - that someone, somewhere else always has to pay. And in places like India, it's possible to be even more aware of the counterfeit qualities of such claims. So the syntaxes (of modernism) as applied to US developments have very different syntaxes here...³

However, Malani's willingness to engage with materials and subjects that are problematic is a long-established aspect of her practice. She was among the first Indian artists in Bombay to engage with installation as a more direct way of bringing

the audience into contact with the materiality of the issues that were being addressed. She describes her move into installation as having emerged from her long involvement with the practical and formal concerns of painting. Her need to more directly involve the viewer as a participant led to an urge to break through beyond the frame – to include the audience as part of the work's meaning and of its materiality.

Very soon after her first experimentations, other women artists, including Rummana Hussain and Pushpamala N, picked up the challenge. During this time an upsurge in religious fundamentalism raised particular threats to both Hindu and Muslim women; whatever the creed, fundamentalist rhetoric argued that women's place was in the home, and so it was in a spirit of the necessity to challenge that drove Indian women artists to be among the forerunners of those who experimented with installation.

Malani's concern with the rise of a gamut of fundamentalist reactionary 'regionalisms' corresponds with her fears about the effects of globalism on local, regional and national communities. She responds to such concerns through works that resound with energy and intelligence, and which are able to convey something of her own sense of place and her own perspectives on life. And yet, this artist whose work conveys such a strong sense of a presence so firmly connected to a particular site wrote the following words about that series of paintings and

drawings critics have defined as seminal to her artistic production, and about a place she knows so intimately: Lohar Chawl, where Malani has kept her a studio for years, and from which she produced the series *Hieroglyphs*. She says:

*Hieroglyphs is about my street, that is, the street where my studio is located. It is one of the small streets in the area of Lohar Chawl (the market for electrical goods in Bombay). ... I am an outsider, being neither a trader, nor a pavement dweller, nor a devotee of the Hanuman Mandir... (A temple devoted to Hanuman, the Hindu god with the form of a monkey situated at one end of the street).*⁴

Perhaps this sense of being an outsider has remained as one of the strongest aspects of that which drives her to understand, and to communicate that understanding to others. The fact that Malani has spent so many years living in and documenting Lohar Chawl does not override the fact that Bombay is her adopted city. Her family's flight from Karachi at the time of Partition has remained as the lower heart-beat experience that informs so much of her production. Her own responses are still those of the refugee. She approaches both her site and her subjects as though they are a foreign land – places and people where the possibilities of brief understandings are elusive. As a result, the authority of her work resonates through the humility of her approach.

She operates as an artist who claims to not-yet-know, and her works seem to make a plea for a pause - for a cusp of space where the viewer might also enter a state of not-yet-having-made-their-mind up. As such, her art seems to yet linger in those territories between the barbed wire fences of partitions sifting through the sands of no man's lands, and searching for the possibilities of new futures.

In the *Second Asia-Pacific Triennial* in Brisbane in 1996 in a small room the artist produced a series of images some of which were painted directly onto the wall. Titled *Mutant/Wall Drawing*, the androgynous hybrids she traced onto flattened milk-cartons, or onto the walls of the little makeshift room, were in part a reaction to the 'First World' dumping of hazardous wastes in the Pacific that had affected an entire generation of children born as 'jellyfish babies'. Despite the political specificity of the critical aspect of the work, somehow the noble though mutated presence of these beings seemed to occupy a dream-space that was not reduced by the particular focus of the references. They floated with a life-size presence that confronted the inhabitants of the room with a subconscious calling; simultaneously sexually powerful yet also abused, the peoples of this vestibule took on a range of identities; they appeared as:

...genetic mismatches or mediations of pan-sexual ambiguities, emblematic of those who

*are dispossessed and live perpetually on the fringes of life, marginalised.*⁵

In a gesture that evoked the erasure of her installation *City of Desires* in 1992, Malani also arranged that this work be partially erased at the end of the *Second Asia-Pacific Triennial* in a performance involving two Brisbane-based artists. This emphasis on the necessity of being there – of having borne witness to the work/event as a viewer-participant – had by this stage been an important part of much of the artist's work for some time. Her use of video, which had also become an increasingly important aspect of her installations, confirmed, rather than contradicted, this emphasis on presence. Video has been treated by this artist as a record – often the only surviving one – of a work's existence. Ashish Rajadhyaksha describes the way in which the artist has used video as a medium that continues the tension between the viewer and the presence of the work. He writes:

*What comes out is the relentlessly pro-filmic emphasis on the action which, when presented as a record, seems to lead in turn to a curious tension as the viewer is somewhere placed in between the more familiar tensions of the cinematic 'take' present in between two cuts, and video's resemblance to television and therefore to a seemingly neutral, as well as timeless, record of 'something out there', something objectively present.*⁶

Malani's *Hamletmachine* is neither a cynical proposition nor an idealistic call for moral or ethical piety – rather, the work invents a space and time-span where witness becomes an essential first response.

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¹ Johan A Pijnappel, 'doomsday oracle', *Art AsiaPacific*, Issue 30, 2001, p. 52.

² Chaitanya Sambrani, 'The possibilities of device: the work of Nalini Malani and Nilima Sheikh', *Text and Subtext: Contemporary Art and Asian Women*, Earl Lu Gallery, Singapore, 2000, p. 134, quoting Saadat Hasan Manto, 'Toba Tek Singh', from *Mottled Dawn: Fifty Sketches and Stories of Partition*, transl. from Urdu by Khalid Hasan, Penguin Books, India, 1997, p. 10.

³ Nalini Malani, interview with the author, 1999.

⁴ Nalini Malani, Catalogue, Jehangir Art Gallery, 1991.

⁵ Kamala Kapoor, Nalini Malani. 96 Containers, 1996, p. 7.

⁶ Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'Video, Art, Medeamaterial' in Nalini Malani: Medea projekt, 1997, p. 25.