

Padmini Chettur, Philosophical Enactments 1, Anadam Dancetheatre, Toronto

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Numéro 97, automne 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/91477ac>

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Éditeur(s)

Les éditions esse

ISSN

0831-859X (imprimé)

1929-3577 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Maltais-Bayda, F. (2019). Compte rendu de [Padmini Chettur, Philosophical Enactments 1, Anadam Dancetheatre, Toronto]. *esse arts + opinions*, (97), 113–113.

**Padmini Chettur***Philosophical Enactments 1*,
performance, 2019.

Photos : Greg Wong, courtesy of the artist

Padmini Chettur

Philosophical Enactments 1

Padmini Chettur's *Philosophical Enactments 1* is rotational. While the work's title suggests a starting point in a series, its choreographic logic is circular rather than linear. The piece begins with a ticking metronome and a recording of Chettur conversing with collaborators. The first words we hear, "I also think," assert that this entry point is not a beginning. We are mid-exchange, and both thought and discourse flow circuitously.

Chettur's choreography moves with subtle precision. Slow, sustained, and deliberate, the dancer's articulations fold and unfold, leading her body in ongoing rotation. Pronating, supinating, flexing, unfurling, Chettur activates multiple axes of her anatomy, while slowly, consistently, turning about the vertical axis of her own uprightness. A recorded voice seems to describe the motion, "a body of spirals, speaking, speaking, to itself." These words form part of a script, developed with writer Aveek Sen, which we hear throughout. It is allusive and sonorous, and in a work where the audience's attentive faculties are tested with many-layered material, the text effectively employs literary techniques to foreground fragments of texture and meaning. The assonance/consonance of the repeated words, "break the embrace, return the urn, learn, unlearn, reverse the turn," not only highlights their affinity with Chettur's choreography, but also amplifies their vibrational quality. The text also integrates the line "the centre cannot hold" from William Butler Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1919). Again, even with so much to attend to, most audience members would snap to recognition at this frequently cited phrase.

The poetic reference leads me to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 1980 essay "Finding Feminist Readings: Dante-Yeats," from which I want to cherry-pick two important concerns: the sexist conventions of canonical art, and the effectiveness of deconstruction, the critical approach proposed by Jacques Derrida, when operating within the structures it addresses. Working amid genealogies of Bharatanatyam, Chettur's choreography interrogates formal

hierarchies and interpretive functions. In her video work *Varnam* (2016), the many elements of abhinaya, aesthetic expression, are unseamed and performed separately, challenging the communicative potential of Bharatanatyam's sign systems. *Philosophical Enactments 1* seems to extend this project further. The ever-shifting alignments and spatial relations of Chettur's movement disrupt legibility, eschewing the grammars of Bharatanatyam in favour of figural ambiguity and open-ended time.

Many writers and artists have investigated the gendered machinations of Bharatanatyam canons; this is a terrain too massive to enter here. In the candid conversation that initiates *Philosophical Enactments 1*, Chettur describes wanting to escape her art form's "beauty trap." She seeks a "movement from the seductive to the discursive." I want to suggest that rotation is essential to this project. Much as filmmakers Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen use 360-degree pans to disrupt the camera's voyeuristic gaze in their film *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), Chettur deploys rotation to undo the seductive dynamics of Bharatanatyam's, and indeed most concert dance's, conventional frontality. As its program notes detail, *Philosophical Enactments 1* began in response to critics' writing on Chettur's oeuvre. Things seem to have come full circle, then, with my writing here. And yet, as Chettur's work demonstrates so vividly, any orientation between two points is subject to change.

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Contemporaneity 3.0, **Anandam Dancetheatre**, Toronto
April 3–6, 2019