



This talk between Sunayana Shetty [SS] and Yvon Chabrowski [YC] took place in April 2021 and is part of a series of conversation pieces.

YC Sunayana Shetty, in the video sculpture *The Appropriate Body* you appear life-size on a 50-inch upright monitor, assuming yoga poses within its demarcated space. You breathe calmly and deeply as you move through some postures.

You've been living in Berlin for a few years now. How would you describe your points of contact with the practice of yoga? Where did you grow up and what importance did yoga have in your life before Berlin—in your family?

SS I was born in Abu Dhabi, UAE, and lived there for 7 or 8 years. After that, most of my upbringing was in Bombay, India. I don't have a very defined relationship with yoga. I haven't studied it in depth or practiced it sufficiently regularly yet to define it clearly. It can be a physical practice for some, or a way of approaching day-to-day activities for others.

At the moment my only exposure to yoga is seeking to understand or learn about the relation of breath to body. Yoga is an old tradition with varied facets of theory, practice, teachings and probably also the relations between the body and the mind or spirit. I had different points of contact while growing up, such as listening to people talk about yoga as a spiritual process or in relation to meditation, or sometimes also doing sets of exercises that stimulate or strengthen the body. There was no hype or pressure around yoga for me while growing up. It was probably part of my life, present by default in a culture that is also mine. Hence, it is semi-transparent, I don't necessarily see it and so have been more unaware than aware of its presence until now.

YC When we met to discuss the performance I found it very interesting that you have a different approach to yoga. I practice some yoga poses daily to heal a spine injury, find meditative moments and leave stress and pressure behind. I started yoga in 2008 in New York, where often the asanas—physical yoga postures—were taught in very energetic ways. I currently see this energetic type of yoga on apps, where it is presented as a challenge to perform, repeat and count poses and a means of comparing oneself with others. It reminds me of the culture of fitness that has developed since the 1980s in industrial countries. Exercises to shape the body came into fashion. At the same time, an economic approach was increasingly viewing profitability and productivity as the top priorities for individuals. States were becoming leaner and the bodies of their citizens were also supposed to be fit and powerful to foster self-determined lives. In this socioeconomic system, the fit body stands for autonomy and self-empowerment, and accords with the norms and value systems of global capitalism.

Yoga was shaped and changed in the western world by trends and society. The physical practice was brought to western countries by British soldiers during the colonial period in India.<sup>1</sup> Around the turn of the 20th century various yoga practices were shown at demonstrations, courses and workshops in Europe, as well as at colonial exhibitions that featured Indians and yogis.

In Germany yoga became more popular in the 1920s and 1930s—with various supporters on the one hand and radical critics on the other. Its advocates included people interested in hatha yoga and meditation, but also theosophists who took a syncretistic approach and mixed Buddhist and Hindu elements with esotericism and occultism.<sup>2</sup> And it is astonishing that writings associated with yoga were used to legitimize racism, anti-Semitism and antisemitism during the Nazi period.<sup>3</sup>

As I understand it, yoga was originally a philosophical doctrine or rather a part of Indian philosophies that includes a series of mental and physical exercises and practices. It is impressive how fragments of this very extensive and versatile practice have been used and shaped within different worldviews and ideologies. People take what fits or reinforces their own concepts of the world and their perspectives.

Right now there are many yoga studios in Berlin with different approaches. I found one that combines yoga philosophy with feminism, critical theory and postcolonial thought. How do you see and experience the processes of appropriation in western societies?

SS The extreme seriousness or sense of devotion or oneness that people seem to experience with practices like yoga, qigong or tai chi is something I have yet to understand. When practices come from totally different cultures than the one we live in, they are received, conceptualized, intellectualized or spread over time in connection with a sensation of either being enamoured of them or distanced from them. Of course this doesn't apply to all systems of practices or to all people. But sometimes there is an urgency in accessing, defining and 'living' the practices that I have yet to understand or see the value in.

YC What you call the urgency in accessing and defining a foreign cultural practice is what I would most like to understand, namely why should a process that could be a rapprochement turn into appropriation? This is a naive question, of course, and perhaps my own attempt to escape the crisis Europeans are in. European cultural workers and politicians need to take responsibility for the Eurocentric world view that has developed over history.

Last year you told me you do not prefer Indian society to German or Western society, or vice versa. What advantages and disadvantages do you see in the two societies?

SS Having been raised primarily in India gives me a sense of community and safety because of my family and friends there. The food, traffic, air, festivals and social mannerisms resonate with me more because I've experienced that lifestyle for most of my life and also thoroughly enjoy it. Germany exposes me to a very different culture, one I am still discovering and learning about. It has given me the space to explore and study dancing and I value that deeply. I think Indian and western societies are fundamentally different in their histories, languages, cultures, ways of being and so on. Each society stands on the grounds it chooses. I could have preferences based on my experience but am not able to voice them as advantages or disadvantages. Living in Germany makes me think it's a society driven by individual growth. There is a deep sense of personal space, of developing a rational mind, of the self that seems rooted from within. Back home is more community driven, and the sense of self is therefore probably an amalgamation of elements like what society expects from you, what you need, and the culture you're raised with.

YC I would love to have a clearer image of the society in which you grew up. You say it is more community driven, and we spoke about traditions. I would also love to know what your own sense of space and mind are like.

SS Most of my formative years were spent in Bombay which generally has strong summers and an intense monsoon season. I was raised in a very protective and pampered environment with lots of food and love. Several things were always happening at the same time. That was the general mood and pace when I was growing up. I think the sense of my own space or mind will always be a work in progress. It depends on which factors in life are taking priority at which moment. For now the focus is on maintaining a balance between building a life in relation to my needs while being answerable and responsible to the wishes of my family.

YC What would be an individual self or individualism for you? Which set of values is individuality linked to?

SS I think I am still in the process of understanding individuality. I guess it has to do with growing and listening to the self in relation to people, work and society. It is probably always in relation to something and comes from a deep sense of instinct, spontaneity, intellectual curiosity and emotional availability. I think it needs time and support to develop and find comfort and confidence in. The values I associate with individuality are recognizing the voice from within, learning to share it, develop it and probably not take it too seriously either.

YC Are there narratives, perspectives, voices or images you identify with, or aspects thereof that you appreciate?

SS I don't know if there is any specific artist, voice or perspective in which I find myself. However, there are many sources of my strength, starting with my parents who truly believe in the goodness of human beings, and including my sister who always encourages me to develop a mind of my own, as well as the teachers and peers at my school the Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz Berlin who introduced me to a way of living and working with one's head held up, heart wide open and feet on the ground.

YC It sounds good that you have a stable relationship with your family and a supportive network here in Berlin. You give the impression of being a very self-determined and autonomous person.

I often feel taken in by the perspective from which I am encountered. Maybe that is why in my artistic practice, I research how the media represent bodies. I want to understand perspectives, narratives and gazes on bodies because we are interconnected with them. Visual representations show us what roles bodies should play in a society, and how they explore this relationship.

For a long time I had no role models and then I realized that I had grown up with idealized socialist images of female bodies—with images of strong working women in the centre of society. I now wonder where these strong women's bodies are represented in the visual economy of global capitalism.

It is from this experience that I look at the bodily images we encounter in spiritual, religious, ideological or utopian narratives in painting, photography, sculpture, drawing, movement, gesture, song, performance or choreography.