

# **A Slightly Curving Place**

Wednesday, July 22, 2020  
Haus der Kulturen der Welt

as of July 22, 2020  
Subject to change

**HKW**

Haus der Kulturen der Welt

## Press release



### **A Slightly Curving Place**

Exhibition, digital discourse program, publication

July 23–September 20, 2020

2–8pm, daily except Tue

Free admission

Berlin, July 22, 2020

### **Press Release for Press Preview on Wednesday, July 22, 2020, 11am**

What does it mean to try and listen to the past? To ask this question draws awareness both to sound as a social event – music, theater, and dance as forms of lived collectivity – and to its absence which remains. Such listening is to confront a sense that the past cannot be captured. It is about that which is lost but nevertheless always with us – the simultaneity of the past in the present, a collectivity across time beyond possession and accumulation.

The exhibition *A Slightly Curving Place* derives its title from a Prakrit phrase in Jain cosmology: “Isipabbharabhumi” refers to a special place above the heavens shaped like a parasol where the disembodied souls of the perfected ones go to live in eternal isolation. Sealed off from the rest of the cosmos, they are unable to interact with other souls, unable to hear them or be heard. In this exhibition, a slightly curving place is to be found not at the apex of the universe but under an ambisonic dome of speakers. Here, an audience of listeners might gather to sense a past they cannot hear. The sound that arrives is a record of sound as it was. Elsewhere, on projection screens, the body of a dancer rotates in one direction as it makes an image of time that turns in another.

*A Slightly Curving Place* responds to Umashankar Manthravadi, a self-taught acoustic archaeologist who has been building ambisonic microphones to map and measure the acoustic properties of premodern sites of ritual and festival. He proposes that we can’t just look for theaters in landscapes of the past, we must listen for them. Centered around a multi-authored audio play and a video installation, the exhibition brings together writers, choreographers, dancers, actors, composers, musicians, field recordists and sound designers who engage and transform not just each other’s work but also that of many others.

The ambisonic dome, which comprises 21 speakers and produces a three-dimensional sound field, has been provided by the Audio Communication Group, Technische Universität Berlin.

### **Digital Discourse Program *Coming to Know* Sept 5 / 11 and 18, 2020**

Convened with Brooke Holmes (Professor of Classics, Princeton University), *Coming to Know* is a series of digital public events unfolding over three weeks in response to three modalities—tuning, recording, digging—proposed by *A Slightly Curving Place*. Setting aside the predominantly visual techniques of knowledge that characterize the archaeological site, the museum, and the larger project of colonial modernity to possess the past, the participants will release a cluster of concepts that refracts the process of listening itself as a mode of coming to know that never arrives at its object. Rather than a didactic supplement to an alien, premodern place and time, the program will experiment in fashioning a sound system for listening to one another that transforms our sense of knowledge held in common.

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**Press release**

With Vinit Agarwal, Anurima Banerji, Moushumi Bhowmik, Padmini Chettur, Nida Ghouse, Brooke Holmes, Alexander Keefe, Umashankar Manthravadi, Mark Payne, Uzma Z. Rizvi, Regina Sarreiter, Phiroze Vasunia.

**Publication:**

A volume accompanying the exhibition will be published by archive books in fall 2020. With contributions by **Umashankar Manthravadi, Vinit Agarwal, Moushumi Bhowmik, Padmini Chettur, Nida Ghouse, Alexander Keefe, Sukanta Majumdar, Maarten Visser.**

The **exhibition** is realized in collaboration with and with contributions by **Umashankar Manthravadi, Bani Abidi, Mojisola Adebayo, Vinit Agarwal, Sukesh Arora, Anurima Banerjee, Moushumi Bhowmik, Arunima Chatterjee, Madhuri Chattopadhyay, Padmini Chettur, Emese**

**Csornai, Padma Damodaran, Hugo Esquinca, Jenifer Evans, Eunice Fong, Tyler Friedman, Janardan Ghosh, Brooke Holmes, Alexander Keefe, Sukanta Majumdar, Robert Millis, Farah Mulla, Rita Panjatan, Ayaz Pasha, TJ Rehmi, RENU, Uzma Z. Rizvi, Sara, Yashas Shetty, The Travelling Archive, Maarten Visser** and others.

Curated by **Nida Ghouse**

*Part of [The New Alphabet](#) (2019-2021), supported by the Minister of State for Culture and the Media due to a ruling of the German Bundestag.*

*With friendly support of [Goethe-Institut e.V.](#)*

***Haus der Kulturen der Welt** is supported by the Minister of State for Culture and the Media as well as by the Federal Foreign Office.*

**Press Preview** *A Slightly Curving Place*

**Wednesday, 22 July 2020, 11 am**  
Exhibition hall 2 and lobby at HKW

Speakers:

**Nida Ghouse**

**Anselm Franke**

**Umashankar Manthravadi** (online)

**Brooke Holmes** (online)

**Press Photos** ready for download: [www.hkw.de/pressphotos](http://www.hkw.de/pressphotos)

**Further information** [www.hkw.de/press](http://www.hkw.de/press)

*To ensure comfort and security for our visitors and employees, health and safety protocols have been established. These include a reduced visitor capacity and a no-touch viewing experience. Please wear your own mouth and nose protection on site and maintain a minimum distance of 1.5 meters from others. We recommend to bring your own headphones.*

***A Slightly Curving Place: list of works***

***Audio play A Slightly Curving Place***

One use of an ambisonic microphone is to measure the acoustic properties of a space, to consider its potential for performance, for instance. What could be done with such a measurement? In principle—insofar as the mythology of technology goes—a dry studio recording can be processed to sound as if it were resonating in that specific location. Can one space be put inside another? Like an archaeological site into an exhibition? Can you be in open air but have your ears tell you you're in a cave? A kind of transportation across time and space, a listening for theatres in past landscapes.

This audio play takes up Umashankar's practice of listening to premodern performance spaces and stages itself as an exhibition (within an exhibition). Generated through a series of relays between script and voice and sound and movement, it extends the notion of an archaeological site to include text and technologies and the fields of recording. Writers produced narrative and conceptual scripts. Performers performed them. Sound designers approached the recorded material through their various understandings of sound as matter, meaning, and music. With each, a defined location emerges with no visible boundaries present.

The audio play comprises eight parts:

**2 BURROWING**

The Travelling Archive

Text: Moushumi Bhowmik

Voice: Moushumi Bhowmik and unnamed singers

Sound design: Sukanta Majumdar

**3 TUNING A CAVE**

Text: Alexander Keefe

Actors: Arunima Chatterjee, Janardan Ghosh

Sound design: Robert Millis

Site: Sita Benga

**4 MEDITATIONS ON RANIGUMPHA**

Text and concept: Anurima Banerji

Voice: Bani Abidi

Music: Madhuri Chattopadhyay, RENU

Dance: Katie Ryan

Sound design: RENU

**5 IT IS ABANDONED**

Text: Alexander Keefe

Voice: Mojisola Adebayo

Sound design: Hugo Esquinca, Farah Mulla

**6 I HEAR HER MASTER'S VOICE IN THREE DIMENSIONS**

Yashas Shetty

Voice: Umashankar Manthravadi

***A Slightly Curving Place: list of works***

**7 DIGGING**

The Travelling Archive

Text: Moushumi Bhowmik

Voice: Moushumi Bhowmik, the Mitra Thakurs, Oliver Weeks

Sound design: Sukanta Majumdar

**8 SITE VII A**

Text: Alexander Keefe

Voice: Sukhesh Arora, Padma Damodaran, Rita Sonal Panjatan, Ayaz Pasha

Sound design: Tyler Friedman

Site: Anupu

**9 TOWARDS A MEANING**

The Travelling Archive

Text: Moushumi Bhowmik

Voice: Sukanta Majumdar, Keramat Ali, Lal Miah Boyati

Sound design: Sukanta Majumdar

audio play

assistant producer: Eunice Fong

On-site recordings, Anupu und Sita Benga: Tyler Friedman, Sukanta Majumdar, Umashankar Manthravadi

Studio recordings Kolkata: Sukanta Majumdar

Studio recordings Birmingham: TJ Rehmi

Recordings Berlin: Tyler Friedman

Sound spatialization: Hugo Esquinca, Tyler Friedman

Light design: Emese Csornai

**Video installation**

***Padmini Chettur, A Slightly Curving Place – A Study 2020, 11'16"***

This is a study towards a film for six dancers. It is composed of footage from a research visit to a transplanted archaeological site in Anupu. Shot tentatively early one morning and the next evening, it is a discovering of light: its directions, its qualities, what it does to the textures and shadows of the space. It is a study of volume and proportion: a single body lost in scale to the vast landscape or filling the frame to propose itself. It is also a thinking about perspective: the image of a dancer's body moving in a space and the movement of a dancer's body making an image, in conversation. It is a study of how to frame space, how to bring different temporalities—ancient and contemporary—onto the same plane, how to evoke history without narrating it. The images are heard through a score that asks us to listen to the textures of a potentially unravelling time and timelessness—a slightly curving place.

Concept: Padmini Chettur, Maarten Visser

Performer: Padmini Chettur

Sound: Maarten Visser

Direction and editing: Sara

Camera: Anujan M.

**Objects in vitrines**

**Tuning**

The notion of tuning essentially assumes the presence of another. Even when a musician tunes herself to her inner ear, she is aware of something at once outside and larger. Tuning then is a way of being in relation, to a note, a person, a place, or an absence—such as a distant past that seems forgotten.

Galena crystal radio

*Altar of Fire*

by Robert Gardner and J.F. Staal, 1976, excerpt from film documenting one of the oldest surviving human rituals, the 12-day Agnicayana by Mambudiri brahmins in Kerala

© Documentary Educational Resources

Two Dwarves Sharing a Drum

artist unknown, fragment of rock carving from Nagarjunakonda, date unknown

Plate IX from T.N. Ramachandran, *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India No.71,*

*Nagarjunakonda* 1938 (New Delhi: ASI, 1999)

**Recording**

The act of recording requires a surface onto which a mark can be made. While a mark might have a referent, it is ultimately a record of its own making. A surface can be conceived of in a number of ways: a song can be recorded onto tape, and the memory of a summer onto a song as well.

*From a Previous Century*

by Umashankar, book of poetry self-published with lulu in 2007

*Meghaduta*

by Kalidasa, edited by E. Hultzsch, London Royal Asiatic Society 1911

*Gita Govinda*

by Jayadeva, love songs of Radha and Krishna, various editions and translations

- translated by Sir Edwin Arnold, New Humanity Books 1990
- edited by Herman Kreyenborg, Insel Verlag 1919
- edited by Eberhard Fischer und Dinanath Pathy, Museum Rietberg Zürich 2010

reproduction of manuscript page from the Gita Govinda of Jayadeva. On paper. Reproduktion einer Manuskriptseite aus Gita Govinda von Jayadeva. Auf Papier. Asset number 275730001

© The Trustees of the British Museum

reproduction of manuscript page, the fish avatar of Vishnu, from the Gita Govinda of Jayadeva. On paper. Asset number 275729001

© The Trustees of the British Museum

***A Slightly Curving Place: list of works***

Dancer carved into rock  
artist unknown, rock carving at Ranigumpha, c. 1st century BCE, photograph by Anurima Banerji

Pattachitra  
by Nirmal Shanti, lamp-black drawing on palm leaf from Charinangal, Odisha, c. 2020

*Haramoni*  
by Mahammad Mansooruddin, book of collected song texts published by the University of Calcutta in 1942

Wax cylinder  
remains and galvanic metal mold  
Courtesy Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv des Ethnologischen Museums und Norman Bruderhofer, cylinder.de

Sketch of Salabhanjika  
artist unknown, line carving on stone slab from Nagarjunakonda, c. 3rd-4th century CE, animation by Lilia Di Bella, 2020  
© Archaeological Survey of India, Nagarjunakonda Museum, mar-scu-0089

**Digging**

Digging is a mode of capitalist modernity. To accumulate the past as an object of knowledge, the archaeologist digs into the earth. Sound too is buried under layers of time. Can it be excavated? What tools would be needed? And what senses activated? When listening becomes a way of digging, there might be nothing to accumulate. Sometimes someone hears something, even though the sound itself is lost or faded.

Uzma's shadow

Conch  
3D reproduction of a shell trumpet  
Courtesy 3D-Daten: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, I C 34352 a

Astabhujasvamin's conch shell  
photograph of conch from Nagarjunakonda  
© Archaeological Survey of India, Nagarjunakonda Museum, aco-reg-0195

Listening to images  
constellation of photographs taken in Naogaon, 1932, as well as nearby, 2015  
© The Travelling Archive and courtesy Kern Institute Photography Collection, Special Collection of Leiden University Library

Umashankar at ARCE  
video by Daniel M. Neumann, 1982  
Courtesy Archives and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology (ARCE)

*A Slightly Curving Place: list of works*



**Sound as Surface**

When a sound reflects in a space, it is fundamentally transformed by the physical qualities of every surface it engages. When a sound refracts, some of it gets absorbed on the way. Materially speaking, sound and surface cannot be separated.

wax

shellac

vinyl

coal

sandstone

mudbrick

wood

copper

### **Nida Ghouse**

Nida Ghouse is a writer and curator. At HKW, she co-curated "Parapolitics: Cultural Freedom and the Cold War" (2017), is co-editing the accompanying publication (Sternberg Press, 2021), and is realizing an exhibition project on an archaeology of sound called "A Slightly Curving Place" (2020). A recent essay, "The Whistle in the Voice," appeared in the publication accompanying Natascha Süder Happelmann's presentation for the German Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale (2019). She began her practice with the curatorial programme at the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo, was the first recipient of the FICA-Delfina Research Fellowship in partnership with Goldsmith's Curatorial/Knowledge PhD programme in London, and has served as director of Mumbai Art Room, an experimental exhibition space in Bombay.

### **Umashankar Manthravadi**

Umashankar Manthravadi is a self-taught acoustic archaeologist, sound technician, sound recordist and poet. In the early 1980s, Manthravadi helped set up and maintain one of the world's largest ethnomusicology archives, Archives and Research Center for Ethnomusicology (ARCE) in Gurgaon. As part of the artist collective Umashankar and the Earchaeologists (with Lawrence Abu Hamdan and Nida Ghouse) he investigates how sound can influence our understanding of ancient and contemporary sites. He developed ambisonic technology to document the acoustic properties of archaeological sites in India, examining in particular social forms and their actualization in performance and sound.

### **Vinit Agarwal**

Vinit Agarwal is an artist, poet and researcher. He recently graduated from a research-based master's program on critical theory, curatorial studies and cybernetics at HEAD Geneva, where he focused on the intersection of oral traditions, post-colonial archival politics, avant-garde cinematic translations, and blockchain technologies. Since October 2019, he is a collaborator on a Swiss National Science Foundation-funded research project looking at the international entanglements of East Germany through visual cultures.

### **Anurima Banerji**

Anurima Banerji is Associate Professor in the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at the University of California in Los Angeles. She holds a PhD in Performance Studies from NYU. Author of the monograph *Dancing Odissi: Paratopic Performances of Gender and State* (2019), her research concerns critical historicizations of dance in India. She is also a poet and trained dancer. Her work has been supported by fellowships from the American Association of University Women, the Hellman Foundation, the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Advanced Study, and the International Research Center at Freie Universität.

### **Moushumi Bhowmik**

Moushumi Bhowmik is a singer, writer, and researcher based in Kolkata. Together with Sukanta Majumdar she created *The Travelling Archive*, based on field recordings from Bengal. Bhowmik collaborates with a range of artists, always stressing the continuity between diverse musical traditions and the relationship between various art forms. She has composed for Bengali documentaries and art cinema. She also conducts doctoral research at the School of Cultural Texts and Records at Jadavpur University on wax cylinder recordings from Bengal made in the 1930s, and explores the process and politics of archiving.

## A Slightly Curving Place: Biographies

### **Padmini Chettur**

Padmini Chettur began her contemporary dance career in 1990 as a member of the troupe of Chandralekha—the radical Bharatanatyam modernist choreographer whose opus dealt primarily with deconstructing the form. Breaking away from Chandralekha's work in 2001, Padmini formed a practice that shifted the choreographic tradition to a minimalistic language and visually translated philosophical concepts of time and space as they relate to contemporary experience. From *Wings and Masks* (1993) to date, throughout her oeuvre there is a deliberate concern with constantly refining form. Her work, highly abstract in nature, is rooted in the cultural fabric of the uniquely engaged dance community of Chennai.

### **Tyler Friedman**

Tyler Friedman is a composer working in diverse contexts and formats. His strain of lysergic-techno is tipped by fans of eccentric, detailed, and hyperwarped minimal club music. He frequently collaborates with contemporary artists, developing project-specific strategies and styles, always with the aim of translating and manifesting the relevant concepts and ideas into sonic space. Collectively, his practice operates somewhere in between the theory-oriented part of the art world, experimental club culture, creative sound-engineering, synthesis, and non-Western music theory.

### **Brooke Holmes**

Brooke Holmes is a professor at Princeton University in the Department of Classics. Her research interests lie in the history and philosophy of concepts, specifically in the behavior of concepts about the physical body, nature and life in ancient Greek and Roman textual sources and the problems these concepts create for attempts to theorize the subject and forms of ethical and political agency. She is equally interested in the long and tangled reception of these concepts and problems, especially in twentieth and twenty-first century continental philosophy.

### **Alexander Keefe**

Alexander Keefe is a writer and critic, whose works have appeared in *Cabinet*, *Bidoun*, *East of Borneo* and *Artforum*. In 2014 he completed *Sarkari Shorts*, a year-long online excavation of documentary films produced by the government of India during the Cold War. Keefe did graduate work in Sanskrit and Indian Studies at Harvard University. He currently holds the Inaugural Alan Erasmus Fellowship in Unpopular Culture at NYU's Colloquium for Unpopular Culture, and is working on research related to the career of Indian dancer Shanta Rao.

### **Sukanta Majumdar**

Sukanta Majumdar is a sound artist and audiographer specialized in field recording and sound design for films and theatre. A graduate of the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute of India, he co-created with Moushumi Bhowmik *The Travelling Archive*.

### **Uzma Z. Rizvi**

Uzma Z. Rizvi is associate professor of anthropology and urban studies at the Pratt Institute, New York, and a visiting researcher at the American University of Sharjah in the UAE. Uzma's research interests include decolonizing archaeology, ancient urbanism, critical heritage studies, new materialism, and postcolonial critique.

***The exhibition is accompanied by a publication***

***A Slightly Curving Place***

Edited by Nida Ghouse and Haus der Kulturen der Welt / archive books 2020

Ca. 180 pages, English

Prize: 20 €

The publication will be released in fall 2020.

Accompanying the exhibition, the publication *A Slightly Curving Place* explores the question of what “writing” is, both in relation to writing as a record of sound, and as a record of the past. Writing is the first sound-recording device. And the past is that which writing can’t touch, it is that which was never written. How do these two statements relate?

**With contributions by** Vinit Agarwal, Moushumi Bhowmik, Padmini Chettur, Nida Ghouse, Alexander Keefe, Sukanta Majumdar, Umashankar Manthravadi, Maarten Visser and others.

**From the contents:**

Essay by Nida Ghouse

Introduction and conceptual map of the audio play *A Slightly Curving Place*

“On how I became an Acoustic Archaeologist” by Umashankar Manthravadi

Score of the audio play *A Slightly Curving Place*

“Body of Stone” conversation between Nida Ghouse, Padmini Chettur and Maarten Visser

“Song as Site” by Moushumi Bhowmik

“Ways of Listening” by Sukanta Majumdar

“The book is drenched” by Vinit Agarwal

“The Cave that talked” by Alexander Keefe

**Reading sample: “The cave that talked”**

Alexander Keefe

If the British colonial policemen who made it their business to study (if not invent) the habits of India’s “dacoits”<sup>1</sup> are to be believed, these fearsome nineteenth-century highwaymen presented a singularly superstitious category of criminal. Auguries preceded even the humblest midnight raid, and even a chance encounter along the way was fraught with meaning. According to an account published in 1895 by a police administrator named W. Grierson Jackson, the dacoits of the Jhansi region kept a close eye out for harbingers of good or ill. Some of it seems like common sense: “If a snake passes across the way it is very bad, and if a snake is seen on the back of another, it is worse.” Or, “If they meet a leopard in the way it is a very bad omen.” Some of it, less so: “A corpse seen burning or being buried foretells victory.”

But given the *ḍākū* preference for working in darkness, it should come as no surprise that their high-stakes omenology — indeed their whole way of reading the world and its potential for success or

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<sup>1</sup> The word dacoit is an Anglicized spelling of the Hindustani word डाकू, or *ḍākū*, meaning “bandit.”

*The exhibition is accompanied by a publication*

failure — was in the main auditory, that is to say, built around the interpretation of sounds rather than sights. And the audible world of nineteenth-century rural India was rich with portent: if at the time of their expedition the cry of a hare was heard, for example, or an elephant screamed, it was a very bad omen. On the other hand, an owl hooting on the left foretold victory, as did “an ass braying behind the party at the time of departure.” A jackal howling from the right was a good omen, Grierson Jackson would have us know, and better still the sound of what he terms a “mad jackal,” or “a jackal that howls alone at night,” especially when heard from the left. This is the “solitary jackal, of which many wonderful tales are told,” according to a footnote.<sup>2</sup>

The range of the golden jackal’s habitation in South Asia, which spans the region from end to end, is almost matched by its near ubiquity in Indian folklore, where *Canis aureus* plays a coyote-like trickster, a wary and wily creature of Ulyssean guile — ever alert to danger, and keen to avoid it by any means at hand. This is the solitary jackal, or *pheall*,<sup>3</sup> of which many wonderful tales are told. In the wild, one is most likely to hear them in chorus, joining their eerie yowls into a hallucinatory weave of arcing sound; in stories, the animal most often appears alone.

This solitary jackal of folklore is an expert reader of signs, teller of lies, and knower of things, not to mention escape artist. But in the story of the cave that talked, a tale that first appears in the *Pancatantra*, a nested set of Sanskrit animal fables thought to date to the second century BCE, we encounter our canid anti-hero at wit’s end, trapped and unable to move, frozen in terror at the mouth of a dark and silent cave.

How did he get there? The story begins with a very hungry lion ...

*... named Roughclaw who lived, once upon a time, in a certain stretch of jungle. Mad with hunger and unable to catch any creature to eat, Roughclaw wandered about at the edge of starvation until finally he came upon a huge cavern, and slunk inside it, thinking: “surely come evening some tasty creature will return to this cave. Until then, I’ll hide and wait.”*

The cave is a place to wait, an eddy in the flow of the narrative time, a hollow where tension mounts and mounts, an area of darkness whose stillness belies its hunger as surely as the stillness of a crane poised over the froggy shallows of a pond. The sun crosses the hot sky filtered through forest leaves. The frogs begin their evening song.

*At dusk, a jackal named Curdtail came home to the cavern. He saw the tracks of a lion leading into its darkness; he did not see the tracks of a lion coming out. The jackal froze in terror.*

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<sup>2</sup> W. Grierson Jackson, “Jhansi: Omens used by the Dacoits” in *North Indian Notes and Queries, Volume 4* (Pioneer Press, 1895), 182–83.

<sup>3</sup> *Pheall* is an obsolete Anglicization derived from the obsolete and onomatopoeic Bengali word ফেয়াল, brought into Anglo-English through a process that was itself a kind of onomatopoeia. The pheall was distinguished from other jackals by its habit of traveling (and scavenging) alone alongside large predators; its lonesome cry meant a big cat was near, at least to those with ears to hear it. Other names for the solitary jackal include “Phao, or Pheeow, or Phnew, from its call, and in some parts Ghog, though that name is said by some to refer to some other (fabulous) animal.” Thomas Caverhill Jerdon, *The Mammals of India* (London: John Wheldon, 1874), 143.

*The exhibition is accompanied by a publication*

Now let's pause the narrative for a moment and ask ourselves, why isn't this enough information? The tracks should suffice, right? But simply reading what's written on the ground isn't enough for cunning Curdtail. This isn't a story about how to read tracks, it's a tale about how to make a cave talk, more specifically spill the beans, about how to trick the violent and mighty into revealing their hiding places, into announcing themselves so loudly and indisputably that they go hungry and we all escape. It's a story about tricking power from predatory silence into a sound like a siren, then hightailing it out of there.

Caves have so often served as theatrical settings for narratives like this one, fantasies about how knowledge must be coaxed out of the darkness that precedes it. Indian folklore is replete with holes in the hills concealing secrets dangerous and otherwise. Some promise treasure; others offer a place to hide one's self or one's things, or a place to go into exile; in others lurk monsters. The jackal at the cavern's mouth doesn't know what's inside: this fleetest and cleverest of creatures is uncharacteristically immobilized, uncertain, and incapacitated at the physical threshold between dangerous ignorance and terrible knowledge, between silence and speech, between fleeing and staying still. Frozen there in terror, he could stand in for any one of us.

This is especially true if by "us" you mean we modern aliens, such as the British and other European visitors to India in the nineteenth century, for whom subterranean settings held such an appeal that the architectural historian James Fergusson, when he set out to publish an illustrated guide to Indian building styles, felt compelled to begin his project not with the soaring edifices that delighted him most, but rather below ground and inside the earth, with "Illustrations of the Rock-cut Temples of India," from 1845:

Had it not been for this [interest], the Rock-cut Temples are certainly not those I would have chosen for a first essay; for neither to the artist nor to the antiquary are they so interesting or so beautiful as the structural buildings of the same, or subsequent ages. [...] At the same time it must be allowed that 'the Caves' are almost the only object of antiquity in India, to which the learned in Europe have turned their attention, or of which travellers have thought it worth while to furnish descriptions, or whose history they have attempted to elucidate.<sup>4</sup>

It was, in effect, a savvy business decision that ushered the ancient Indian cave into the age of mechanical reproduction. A successful pedagogue must know their audience just like any other mountebank — must know what they want, and strategize around what they'll pay to see, at first in the tinted lithographs<sup>5</sup> that accompanied Fergusson's words, then in other books slightly altered, in other drawings and steel-plate engravings, and in photographs and albums of photographs, in films and on television, in archives and art galleries and museums.

Here's one now: an image found in the archive of India's governmental Photo Division documenting

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<sup>4</sup> For all that, Fergusson laments, "little that is satisfactory has been elicited [...] and while the age of every building in Greece and Rome is known with utmost precision, and the dates of even the Egyptian monuments ascertained with almost as much certainty as those of medieval cathedrals, still all in India is darkness and uncertainty." See James Fergusson, *Illustrations of the Rock-cut Temples of India* (J. Weale, 1845), v-vi, 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> "Drawn on Stone by T.C. Dibdin from Sketches made on the spot by James Fergusson, Esq.," these plates present yet another illustration of the strange ways in which stone and reproduced image can interrelate, mirror, and translate for one another.

*The exhibition is accompanied by a publication*

Eleanor Roosevelt's mid-century visit to the profusely decorated Ajanta caves. Taken from her point of view, it shows a symmetrical arrangement of rock-cut pillars, guides, bodyguards, servants, and assorted hangers-on forming a double row that leads to a carved door framing a glimpse of a colossal image of the seated Buddha at centre: "Inside the Ajanta Caves — the Ancient national Art Gallery of India," the caption reads. "(Photo taken during the visit of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt there on March 10, 1952)."

What can you learn from a cave? From Fergusson to the former first lady and onward, this question is typically framed as one of looking closely enough, of seeing things as they are, of using artificial lighting if necessary, the brighter the better. The photographers and illustrators in Fergusson's wake, the archeologists, the restorers and conservators, the tourism officials, the tourists and their flashlight-wielding guides, the selfies and selfie-sticks, followed and still follow suit. They take photos of the images, objects, and themselves; edit them this way and that before sharing them with others — usually as many others as possible, which only expands and dislocates the site further, disassembling and reassembling it in visual bits on electronic screens that consume and control the eyes, that monitor and track eye movements as they take in the pictures of the cave.

But jackals know better than to trust sights like that. They know that a line of tracks on the ground, like a line of words on a page, are easily falsified. Instead they rely on their big ears. Just how big? So big they can hear a cave talk.

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Umashankar Manthravadi knows how to do that too. Or he came to know. He'd begun his young professional life as a journalist, in 1967, when he signed on as a subeditor at *The Indian Express* in what was then Madras. There he specialized in culture reporting, with a special focus on reviews of musical performances, with a strong preference for those by musicians who played without electronic amplification. That is to say, Umashankar began his career translating acoustic sound into letters mass-printed on paper, words written in haste, read in silence, or what passed for it, in the fast-changing India of the late 1960s and belligerent early 1970s. But it was the silence that followed that finally got to him, or the silencing: he quit journalism during the Emergency declared by Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, an eighteen-month-long suspension of democracy that began in June of 1975. The Emergency was, among other things, an exercise of control over reporting. "After a year of struggling with myself in relation to the ensuing censorship," Manthravadi writes, "I left *The Indian Express*. I knew I would not work in another newspaper but not what I would do next."

Uma was in front of the cave, uncertain but keen to escape. Wary of reading too much into the world's ambiguous tracks, he turned instead, like a jackal, to his ears. A longtime audiophile and amateur sound technologist, Manthravadi found work as the sound technician and archivist of what would become South Asia's largest collection of ethnomusicological recordings, and along the way transformed himself into an expert at the difficult art of making recordings of acoustic music in the field. Later he would master the even rarer technique of using sound to measure and map a space, to go into an empty and silent room or temple or cave and elicit and capture its unique sonic signature. Its voice.

***The exhibition is accompanied by a publication***

To do that kind of listening then (it was the 1990s), you had to invent your own microphone — your own everything — and you had to do it on the cheap, with the materials at hand. This was Uma's specialty. He got to work

*"PHUT!" interjected the jackal, employing a sound used in Sanskrit to indicate mild contempt or derision.<sup>6</sup> "Aho bila re! Now hey there you cave," he called, and then he paused for a moment of silence, allowing the tension to build before going on with a harrumph: "What — don't you remember the deal we made? When I come home in the evening and call to you from outside the cave, you're supposed to return my greeting. But since you don't, I'm off to find some other, more courteous cavern."<sup>7</sup>*

*Inside, the lion began to fret, thinking: "This cave must always return his greeting but now the damn thing's so terrified by me that it doesn't dare speak a word. It's true what they say:*

The feet and hands refuse to act  
When peril terrifies;  
A trembling seizes every limb;  
And speech unuttered dies.<sup>8</sup>

*"I myself will call out the greeting, and whoever comes in here after that is my dinner." Having plotted thus, the aged lion took a deep breath, opened his huge maw and ...*

Have you ever heard a lion try to impersonate a cave?

---

It's a trick question, of course. Caves are just holes, spaces. Sounds can occur inside them — the drip, drip, drip of a stalactite, say; the soft flow of an underground river — but left alone by themselves, they make no sound at all. And how could anyone impersonate that?

Before 1995, despite having spent nearly two decades making field recordings of everything from folk musicians to birdsong, Umashankar Manthravadi had never paid much attention to questions of space. "Like general background noises, they were something I coped with as well as I and my equipment could." That would all change when he was visited one day at the archives by an American historian of theatre named Cecil Thomas Ault, who hoped that Umashankar might help him on a research project. Specifically, he wanted to somehow prove that an elaborately carved, "rock-cut" cave site in eastern India called Ranigumpha, or "the Queen's cave," was in fact an ancient theatre.<sup>9</sup> Ault

---

<sup>6</sup> "Phut" has a near, if seldom used, English cognate in "pht" or "phht," an interjection that is used to indicate mild annoyance and belongs to the loose-knit "bah" family of interjections, which also includes *blech, fooey, fah, feh, foh, fough, gaw, pfaugh, pfui, piff, pish, poh, pooh, pshaw, psch, pshht*, and *harrumph!*

<sup>7</sup> One thing that occurs to me with regard to this plot point is that the jackal is, as usual, onto something very practical with his seemingly fantastical stratagem. An empty cave would echo his eerie cry back unhindered; if, on the other hand, a large animal were hiding inside, it would echo back somehow slightly muffled. An expert ear would know the difference and draw its conclusions accordingly.

<sup>8</sup> The translation of this verse comes from Arthur W. Ryder's *The Panchatantra* (University of Chicago, 1925), 362. The rest of the story is my own, somewhat loose, translation.

<sup>9</sup> The idea that Ranigumpha was once an ancient theatre was first proposed by Dhiren Dhash as early as 1976. See N. K. Sahu, *Kharavela* (Bhubaneswar: Orissa State Museum, 1984), 166-67.

***The exhibition is accompanied by a publication***

was keen on physically mapping the site; he wanted Umashankar to come along to try to make acoustic measurements in support of this theory. As for Umashankar, the fact that he had never attempted such measuring before hardly deterred him; he would read about the process and quickly grasp its basic elements: introduce some sort of neutral sound — a sine sweep, a balloon pop, white noise — as a signal into the space then listen to and record what results. Take it from there.

The only thing that bothered him about the project was this idea of Ault's about proving something; he recently explained to me that he never liked that word — "proof" — in the mouth of non-scientists. Umashankar's goal was to open new lines of inquiry into a site and its use history, not foreclose them. For the theatre historian, the site's interest lay in what (perhaps) used to be there, what (perhaps) used to happen there. For Umashankar its interest lay also in what was still indelibly, invisibly present: a shaped sound, a persistent rumor, a reverberation time.

He set to work on a project that would soon consume a year, then a lifetime. "I [...] began to feel that this something I should do. Take measurements wherever I could, store them in a central location, and use them to create simulations of the spaces."

—

*"I myself will call out a greeting," plotted the lion, "and whoever comes in here after that is my dinner." Then he took a deep breath, opened his huge maw, and let out what he took to be his gentlest "meow." But the sound began bouncing and echoing inside the cave gained amplitude and shot out of its aperture like a colossal megaphone:*

*"ROOOAARRRR," a sound so loud that every animal in the forest — even those many miles away — took fright and fell silent.*

*Then fled. Amid the confusion, the jackal skipped off to safety, chuckling:*

*I've heard a hundred thousand sounds or more,  
but I've never heard a cave that talked,  
I've never heard a cave that roared.*

You may note that the sound of that roar is the only truth to be found in this story. It's a dead giveaway. It's the truth, but just look at how many lies it took to get there. The jackal only acts affronted; his address to the cave is a lie, so too the deal that he alleges has been struck between himself and the cave. There is no such deal, no such society where such a deal is even possible.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the foolish but violent lion guilelessly concludes that only by pretending to be a cave — by lying — will he get his long-delayed meal. Deception follows upon deception as both sides

calculate each other's positions, each other's desires and fears, appetites and habits. And when the lion finally does roar, even the innocent audience of animal bystanders falls instantly silent, as though to say: "we are not here." Still another vast, self-serving, if innocent enough lie.

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<sup>10</sup> Everyone knows that animals can talk; caves, like other cavities, can merely echo.

*The exhibition is accompanied by a publication*

What can the sound from a cave prove to anyone in such a world? That a lion is really hiding in there waiting to devour you? That it's not really (just) a cave but an ancient Indian theatre, too? I find it striking that at the very outset of Umashankar Manthravadi's decades of research into the acoustics of ancient spaces there was this unresolved tension around what sort of proofs a sound might offer. Cecil Thomas Ault sought to prove that a certain cave was really a theatre, a prompt that kindled both a fascination as well as a stubborn resistance in Umashankar: you can't prove an X is really a Y, he thought, not outside a lab, not outside the realm of mathematics and logic. It's speculation. It was enough to listen to what was there, and to invent and refine new tools for doing so.

Anyway, ancient Indian sites have endured far too many of these proof games, have been discovered and uncovered under the spell of such games, have been conscripted into too many continually updated ensembles of tendentious information and propaganda about India's past and its bearing on the present, rewritten into too many new textbooks. This X was really a Y; this cave was really a theatre; this mosque a temple; this impoverished, conflicted India an undivided and great Hindu homeland, an ancient glory just peeking out from beneath modernity's ruins. Nearby a bulldozer engine idles in a dull ostinato.

This is a story about how a powerful lion, tricked by a jackal, reveals his hiding place and loses his dinner, but it's also a reckoning with just how fluid and even interchangeable the roles really are in this audio-drama, in this acoustical escape fantasy with its cast of deceivers. Who, after all, is the jackal and who is the lion? And who's the audience of animals? And who isn't? "To every question about each person, the response is that he played every role. Each one is simultaneously the murderer, victim, the innocent bystander; loyal, lying, silent, and unaware."<sup>11</sup> The only thing that the lion's roar really proves is that we are still all of us here.

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<sup>11</sup> Michel Serres, *Rome: Book of Foundations* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1991), 22.

**Service info**

## A Slightly Curving Place

**Press Preview**, July 22, 2020, 11 am

**Exhibition**

Jul 23–Sep 20, 2020

Opening hours: Daily except Tue

2–8 pm

Exhibition hall 2, lobby

Free admission

Audio play in English

Video installation without language

**Digital discourse program:** Sat, Sep 5 / Fri, Sep 11 / Fri, Sep 18

**Publication** will be published by archive books in fall 2020

**Press information** and download of the **press kit** download via [www.hkw.de/press](http://www.hkw.de/press)

**Press photos** ready for download: [www.hkw.de/pressphotos](http://www.hkw.de/pressphotos)

Further installation views and impressions from the press preview upon request

Further information can be found at: [www.hkw.de/en](http://www.hkw.de/en)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/hkw.de](http://www.facebook.com/hkw.de)

Twitter: [twitter.com/hkw\\_berlin](https://twitter.com/hkw_berlin)

Instagram: [www.instagram.com/hkw\\_berlin](http://www.instagram.com/hkw_berlin)

*A Slightly Curving Place is part of [The New Alphabet](#) (2019-2021), supported by the Minister of State for Culture and the Media due to a ruling of the German Bundestag.*

*With friendly support of the Goethe-Institut e.V.*

*Haus der Kulturen der Welt is supported by the Minister of State for Culture and the Media as well as by the Federal Foreign Office.*

## Service info

### Important Information for Your Visit

By following the guidelines below you can help protect yourself and others.

We request that all HKW visitors:

- Wear your own face coverings while inside the building. This is not necessary on the roof terrace and outdoor areas.
- Maintain a minimum distance of 1.5 meters (approx. 5 feet) from other visitors and employees at all times
- Sneeze and cough into the crook of your arm or into a tissue and then dispose of the tissue in a trash can with a lid
- Avoid touching surfaces if possible
- Wash hands regularly with soap and water for a sufficient time (at least 20 seconds) – especially after blowing your nose, sneezing or coughing
- Pay attention to the signs on site and the employees' instructions
- Use the Corona-Warn-App

### What other sanitary measures are required of the visitors?

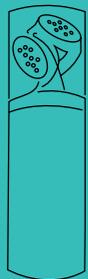
Limited numbers of visitors will be permitted at all events and in the exhibition rooms; these numbers will be checked and monitored by the entrance staff. The seats at the events on the roof terrace will be arranged in groups of two with distance between the rows. The elevators may each be used by one person – or members of one household – at a time. We ask that you pay attention to the distance markings in the respective areas.

The exhibition [\*A Slightly Curving Place\*](#) provides a contactless exhibition experience. We recommend that you bring your own headphones or earbuds.

Admission to the exhibition [\*A Slightly Curving Place\*](#) is free of charge. If there are large numbers of visitors, there may be waiting times; we apologize for any inconvenience.

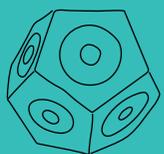
### Cleaning

The house is cleaned and disinfected throughout the day, in particular frequently used areas such as door handles, elevator buttons, cash desks, restrooms and handrails. Hand sanitizer is provided for visitors at the main entrance.



## BRAHMA AMBISONIC MICROPHONE

I had known about ambisonics from 1975. I had been building microphones, in particular array microphones, from 1983. The two came together for me only in 2001, after my third visit to Ranigumpha. I had been using binaural measurements and sine sweeps. Now I needed a low-cost but reliable ambisonic microphone to record the test signals on four channels. The patents had expired and I knew the theory, so I decided to build my own. In early 2007 I was still struggling to make tetrahedral arrays when Zoom Japan released the Zoom H2 Handy Recorder. Eureka! Here was an inexpensive recorder which I could modify. It had reasonable though oddly arranged microphones built in, but if I could remove them and construct a true ambisonic array on the wand instead, I would have a good portable system for my acoustic measurements. I designed and made a stem and a not very good holder for the four capsules, and mounted it with a five-pin DIN connector on top of the recorder. The name Brahma popped up almost immediately! He's the creator god and has four heads currently (he had a fifth, but Shiva cut that off—you can find that whole story in *Ka*). UM



## DODECAHEDRON SPEAKER

We cannot have a loudspeaker that has a perfect frequency response and is also perfectly omni-directional. The nearest we have is an array of 12 speakers arranged on the faces of a dodecahedron. This speaker is often used in acoustics research to play a sine sweep into a space with mechanical precision, using its large frequency and dynamic range to expose the sound of a space. Paired together, the ambisonic microphone and the dodecahedron speaker comprise an acoustic researcher's measurement tools. As the speaker sings, its song and its echoes are recorded. UM

### 1 FRAGMENTS OF A NOMAD MORNING

Concept: Anurima Banerji  
Song: Arabhi Pallavi, recorded in Kolkata (1995)  
Music direction: Guru Muralidhar Majhi  
Singer: Tarit Bhattacharya  
Musicians: Bamdev Biswal, Sukhomoy Bhattacharya, Dulal Das, Chitrasen  
Sound design: RENU

### 2 BURROWING

The Travelling Archive  
Text: Moushumi Bhowmik  
Voice: Moushumi Bhowmik and unnamed singers  
Sound design: Sukanta Majumdar

### 3 TUNING A CAVE

Text: Alexander Keefe  
Actors: Arunima Chatterjee, Janardan Ghosh  
Sound design: Robert Millis  
Site: Sita Benga

### 4 MEDITATIONS ON RANIGUMPHA

Text and concept: Anurima Banerji  
Voice: Bani Abidi  
Music: Madhuri Chattopadhyay, RENU  
Dance: Katie Ryan  
Sound design: RENU

### 5 IT IS ABANDONED

Text: Alexander Keefe  
Voice: Mojisola Adebayo  
Sound design: Hugo Esquinca, Farah Mulla

### 6 I HEAR HER MASTER'S VOICE IN THREE DIMENSIONS

Yashas Shetty  
Voice: Umashankar Manthravadi

### 7 DIGGING

The Travelling Archive  
Text: Moushumi Bhowmik  
Voice: Moushumi Bhowmik, the Mitra Thakurs, Oliver Weeks  
Sound design: Sukanta Majumdar

### 8 SITE VII A

Text: Alexander Keefe  
Voice: Sukhesh Arora, Padma Damodaran, Rita Sonal Panjatan, Ayaz Pasha  
Sound design: Tyler Friedman  
Site: Anupu

### 9 TOWARDS A MEANING

The Travelling Archive  
Text: Moushumi Bhowmik  
Voice: Sukanta Majumdar, Keramat Ali, Lal Miah Boyati  
Sound design: Sukanta Majumdar

### CURATOR

Nida Ghouse

### EXHIBITION TEXTS

Nida Ghouse, Umashankar Manthravadi

### AUDIO PLAY

Assistant producer: Eunice Fong  
On-site recordings, Anupu and Sita Benga: Tyler Friedman, Sukanta Majumdar, Umashankar Manthravadi  
Studio recordings, Kolkata: Sukanta Majumdar  
Studio recordings, Birmingham: TJ Rehmi  
Recordings, Berlin: Tyler Friedman  
Sound spatialization: Hugo Esquinca, Tyler Friedman

### LIGHT DESIGN

Emese Csornai

*A Slightly Curving Place*  
23 July 2020 to 20 September 2020  
Part of the HKW project *The New Alphabetw*

Haus der Kulturen der Welt is funded by



John-Foster-Dulles-Allee 10  
10557 Berlin

hkww.de



Minister of State  
for Culture and the Media



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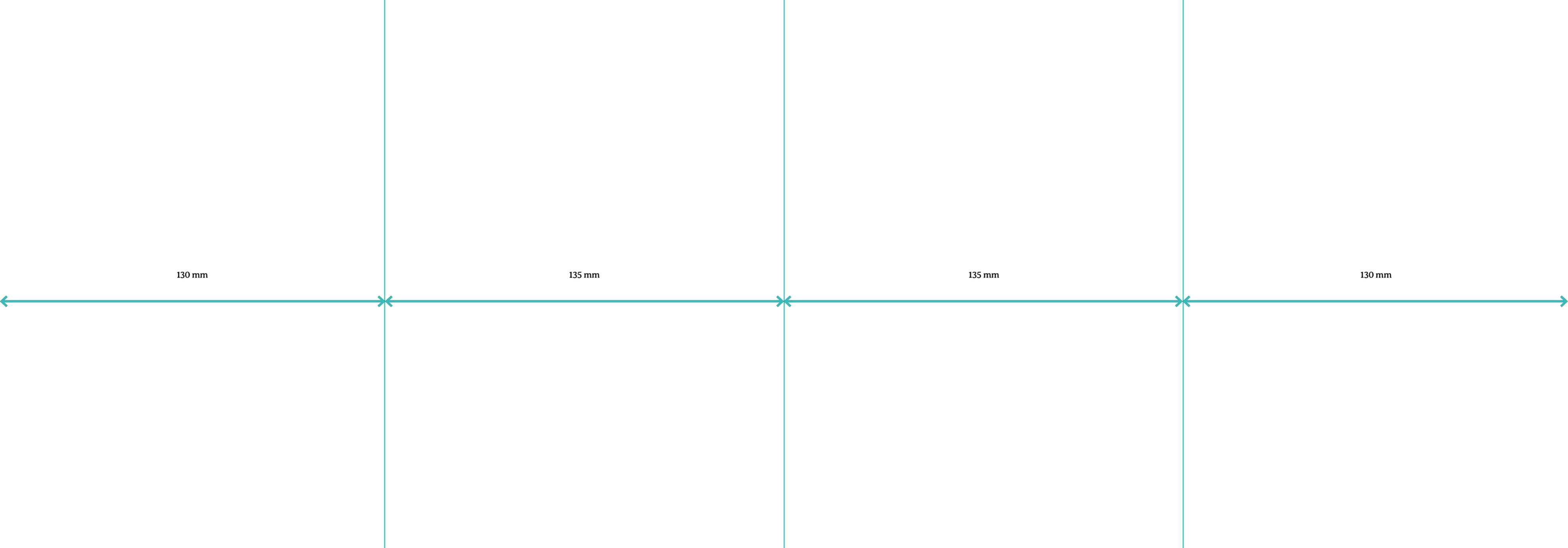
# A SLIGHTLY CURVING PLACE

One use of an ambisonic microphone is to measure the acoustic properties of a space, to consider its potential for performance, for instance. What could be done with such a measurement? In principle—insofar as the mythology of technology goes—a dry studio recording can be processed to sound as if it were resonating in that specific location. Can one space be put inside another? Like an archaeological site into an exhibition? Can you be in open air but have your ears tell you you're in a cave? A kind of transportation across time and space, a listening for theatres in past landscapes.

This audio play takes up Umashankar's practice of listening to premodern performance spaces and stages itself as an exhibition (within an exhibition). Generated through a series of relays between script and voice and sound and movement, it extends the notion of an archaeological site to include text and technologies and the fields of recording. Writers produced narrative and conceptual scripts. Performers performed them. Sound designers approached the recorded material through their various understandings of sound as matter, meaning, and music. With each, a defined location emerges with no visible boundaries present.

This is a map of time. A sign in the space tells you when you are in the audio play.





# A SLIGHTLY CURVING PLACE

23 JULY

20 SEPTEMBER 2020

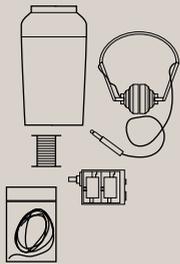
The life and work of Umashankar Manthravadi is a history of sound and technology through the second half of the 20th century. As a self-taught acoustic archaeologist, he has been building ambisonic microphones since the 1990s to measure the acoustic properties of premodern performance spaces. This exhibition responds to his practice and proposes possibilities for listening to the past and its absence which remains.

Centred around an audio play and a video installation, *A Slightly Curving Place* brings together writers, choreographers, composers, actors, dancers, musicians, field recordists, and sound, light, and graphic designers who engage and transform each other's work. Elements from Umashankar's biography serve as a compass amid the material in vitrines, as a dancing body positions the endlessness of time in relation to a series of ruptures that is history. Under a dome of speakers an assembly of listeners gathers to sense a past they cannot hear. The sound that arrives is only a record of sound as it might have been.

The exhibition draws its title from Jain cosmology. Isipabbharabhumi is a Prakrit phrase referring to a special place above the heavens shaped like a parasol. It is where the disembodied souls of the perfected ones go to live in eternal isolation. There, sealed off from the rest of the cosmos, they are unable to interact with other souls, unable to hear them or be heard.

## TUNING

The notion of tuning essentially assumes the presence of another. Even when a musician tunes herself to her inner ear, she is aware of something at once outside and larger. Tuning then is a way of being in relation, to a note, a person, a place, or an absence—such as a distant past that seems forgotten.



selected parts:  
galena crystal,  
variable tuning  
capacitor, copper  
wire, Horlicks  
bottle, wooden  
board, aerial  
wire, Air Force  
headphones

T1 ◆

### GALENA CRYSTAL RADIO

If memory serves, Umashankar built his first radio at the age of seven. Or maybe eleven. What is certain is that it was a galena crystal radio. Invented at the turn of the 20th century and commercially obsolete by the 1920s, the non-electric crystal set remained in use through World War II and reemerged as a craze among hobbyists and children in the 1950s, which is around when Umashankar came to it. As the antenna picked up radio waves from the ether, he used a cat's whisker—a fine metal wire shaped like an S—to find a point of contact on the surface of the crystal from which a current could flow. That is to say, he tuned in to a mineral by hand in order to listen. Broadcast from various distances, the sound was only ever as loud as its signal and relied on the labour of listening to be heard. Audible to him alone, the faint waves from All India Radio were all it took for a young boy to get hooked on an old technology. Soon he could distinguish stations not through content but audio properties. When Radio Moscow tried to sound like the BBC, he could make that out too. From his family's noisy living room, Umashankar had begun his practice of tuning into the spaces of nearly imperceptible far-away places.

## ALTAR OF FIRE

T2

The hymns of the *Rig Veda* were orally composed and mnemonically transmitted by communities of Brahmins over millennia in an archaic form of Sanskrit that, unlike the later classical idiom, was distinguished by three tones: “raised,” “unraised,” and “sounded.” It is thought that the slightest error in pronouncing these phonemes during a ritual may produce disastrous effects, hence the importance assigned to the preservation of perfect sound in Vedic pedagogy. To aid the body in memorization, an instructor manoeuvres the head of a pupil learning the tonal system: raised, lowered, and lifted then bent to the right. A skilled reciter may feel these phantom movements, but not exhibit them.

AK

### TWO DWARVES SHARING A DRUM

T3

Sometimes I think about those two little figures and their shared drum, and think of myself as sharing one too—with not just y'all but who knows who.

AK



excerpt from  
film by Robert  
Gardner and J.F.  
Staal, 1976



artist unknown,  
fragment of rock  
carving from  
Nagarjunakonda,  
date unknown

## RECORDING

The act of recording requires a surface onto which a mark can be made. While a mark might have a referent, it is ultimately a record of its own making. A surface can be conceived of in a number of ways: a song can be recorded onto tape, and the memory of a summer onto a song as well.



book of poetry  
self-published  
with lulu in 2007

R1

### FROM A PREVIOUS CENTURY BY UMASHANKAR

Umashankar began composing poems at the end of his teens. Three decades later, around the turn of the millenium, he found himself wondering how he had gone from being a newspaper journalist to a sound recordist for film. What set off this thinking was a conversation with a cameraperson, who as an image-maker could trace a lineage all the way from cave paintings. In that moment Umashankar felt short of a past. He could only reach back a century to the invention of the phonograph. But what was the pre-history of modern sound reproduction technology? Sound had always been recorded in text as well—ever since speech and song were engraved in stone, for instance. Letters are but signs for sounds and words are intrinsically sonorous. A poem is a means of drawing out a voice even today. And how did this relate to a needle etching a groove on a wax cylinder? As he started to consider that writing was the first sound recording device, he saw a line that made sense of a life.

## MEGHADUTA BY KALIDASA

⊙ R2

A cave gives shelter to a lovesick exile. Sent thousands of miles from wife and home as punishment, he is driven to near madness and begs a passing thundercloud to bear a message to his beloved high in the distant Himalaya. Addressing the cloud in slow song, he describes the long route it must take to reach her, a hypnogogic itinerary that becomes an erotic play of atmosphere and landmass. Over many verses, the words within this fifth-century Sanskrit poem by Kalidasa layer themselves in repetition, concatenated, to create a sound texture reminiscent of a rolling soft thunder on a slow approach. AK

## GITA GOVINDA BY JAYADEVA

⌋ R3

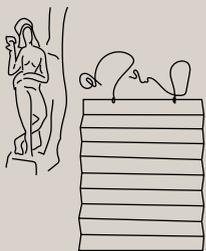
If infinity stood up it would look like eight. Two big nothings—one form, the other content, one space, the other time, one text and the other drawing. Jayadeva's 12th-century poem is about the inexhaustibility of an illicit springtime love affair. Using all kinds of metric resources, it brings ordinary language as close to musicality as possible. Its a-modern mathematical organization of eight-line compositions in 24 sections invites infinite mimesis. A percussionist picks up the eight-beat rhythm and a dancer draws meaning from the text, until at some point they synthesize in a pattern of three. Through the dramatic vernacularization that occurred across South Asia and Europe in the early centuries of the second millennium, the text migrated to many Indian languages, before English, French, and German translations in the 18th century retroactively established a source text in Sanskrit, attempting to override the legitimacy of those mutations. The mimesis of song and dance from culture to culture is only one of the many paths *Gita Govinda* has taken. VA



edited by E. Hultzsch,  
published by London  
Royal Asiatic Society  
in 1911



various editions  
and translations



artist unknown,  
rock carving at  
Ranigumpha, c. 1st  
century BCE

lamp-black drawing  
on palm leaf by  
Nirmal Shanti,  
Charinangal, Odisha,  
c. 2020

R4 ▼

## DANCER CARVED INTO ROCK AND PATTACHITRA

In popular discourse, the classical Odissi dance traces its representational origins to the ancient archaeological site of Ranigumpha (circa first century BCE), where its early antecedent called Odra-Magadhi was allegedly cultivated and performed. The footsteps resonating at Ranigumpha later migrated to cloth and palm-leaf scrolls through the labour of skilled pattachitra artists, who promulgated their visual style over a thousand years ago and transmitted it on a hereditary basis, ensuring its continuity into the current day and age. This distinctive art tradition often features elegant ekphrastic renditions of the dance, limning its lyrical postures and gestures. Besides existing on their own as miniature dance portraits, pattachitra choreographic illustrations also frequently ornamented poetic and aesthetic manuscripts. As Odissi dance was once suppressed by British colonialism, pattachitra served as significant archival sources for its reconstruction and re-vivification in the 20th century. Odissi is part of the canons of Indian performance, so these exuberant images conjure a dance foundational to the mythography of classicism in India. They summon up the aura of the dance's antique past and link that aura to its vibrant present. AB



book of collected  
song texts  
published by the  
University of  
Calcutta in 1942

R5 ✕

## HARAMONI BY MAHAMMED MANSOORUDDIN

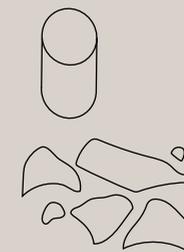
The Bengali folk-song collector Mahammed Mansooruddin came from a small village in Pabna, now in Bangladesh. Around 1920, as a schoolboy, he came across a selection of songs by the mystic poet Lalon Fokir that he found in an old issue of the literary journal *Probashi*, collected by poet Rabindranath Tagore. These were songs sung in villages all around him, and it struck Mansooruddin that what

was commonplace for them could be very special to others, especially in urban literary circles. He wrote down the words of some Lalon Fokir songs as given by a wandering minstrel, Premdas Bairagi, and sent them to the same journal. He was over the moon with joy the day they were published. A decade later he released his first volume of *Haramoni* (Lost Jewels); in another decade the second volume came out. Mansooruddin could see himself in league with folk-song collectors of the past; he knew that what he was doing was no less than Percy's *Reliques* or Child's *Ballads*. But would the world ever know? In the painter Abanindranath Tagore's calligraphy for the title, the Bengali alphabet meets the Persian and the mind journeys through history, bringing Bengal's Mughal past into a cosmopolitan future. Mansooruddin, the real haramoni, hidden treasure of Bengal, remains forever small-town and local. MB

## WAX CYLINDER

⊗ R6

The phonograph, invented in the late 19th century, worked much like the human body. It listened, then sang back. Its membrane vibrated to movements in air caused by the sound emitted into its horn; a needle attached to this membrane vibrated in turn, cutting grooves on the wax cylinder rotating below. On the return path, the needle read back that inscription on the rotating wax, like running a finger along writings on old cave walls, stirring the air again, making sound from signs. The phonograph was used to record sonic patterns of human expression of a time and place, for the future. Yet as an object of sound the wax cylinder was incredibly fragile. For permanence, its grooves had to be transferred to a metal cast in a process that destroyed the wax master. Is preservation contingent on destruction? Is sound necessarily ephemeral? Recorded or unrecorded, sound gets inscribed on the surface of time; some we can hear and some we can't. MB



remains and galvanic  
metal mold



artist unknown,  
line carving on  
stone slab from  
Nagarjunakonda,  
c. 3rd-4th  
century CE

R7 ■

## SKETCH OF SALABHANJIKA

The salabhanjika is an ancient sculptural convention of portraying a woman standing against a tree with one arm aloft. According to legend King Bhoja, who ruled over central India in the 11th century, was also an amateur archeologist: one excavation into an unusual mound he'd spotted yielded a magical throne, made by Indra and buried by the primeval King Vikrama. Its pedestal was adorned with 32 salabhanjika statuettes, such that together they seemed to hold the throne up. In awe, he placed it at the centre of a bejeweled palace, and just as he prepared to mount it with great ceremony, one of the salabhanjika cried out: "Stop!" She began to tell the first within a cycle of 32 stories, each offering a prohibition and delay to the king's ascent. We learn that the salabhanjika were once celestial maidens and that they had angered a goddess, who'd cursed them to support Vikrama's throne and speak these stories.

What tale does this salabhanjika tell? One of 61 limestone slabs discovered amid ruins of a sculptors' workshop at Nagarjunakonda, during hasty excavations before inundation by water, it begs questions but provides few answers: an emergent form suspended in eternal delay, muted at the edge of speech. The hands and tools that made it, with their taps and scrapes, left these marks as a trace of their movement and a sketch for something yet to come; it stands between them like a hinge in time. Did the sculptor's ear pick up some ill-boding anomaly in the stone, and stop? The ancient unfinished is uncanny, a reminder that nothing is ever really done, not as long as its material endures. AK

## DIGGING

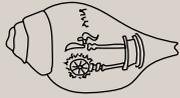
Digging is a mode of capitalist modernity. To accumulate the past as an object of knowledge, the archaeologist digs into the earth. Sound too is buried under layers of time. Can it be excavated? What tools would be needed? And what senses activated? When listening becomes a way of digging, there might be nothing to accumulate. Sometimes someone hears something, even though the sound itself is lost or faded.

### UZMA'S SHADOW

D1

While working at a a third-millennium-BCE site on the east bank of the Euphrates in Syria, I often stood on the Tell to see wall alignments in the trenches. On one such day, I caught sight of my shadow cast on the side. The form of a loosely clothed individual leaning on a shovel caught me off guard. It reminded me of Albert Memmi, who described how we often picture the colonizer proudly leaning on a shovel, laboring selflessly for mankind, striking a pose of a noble adventurer. On that day, my elation that I might have appropriated a colonial image, that there might have been some reclamation of power, was overshadowed by the outline of my own form in the sand becoming a metaphor for the colonial structures maintained in a neocolonial framework. An active acknowledgment of identity allows for an investigation of politics and power, based on models of interaction, social systems, and codes of conduct, rather than a reliance on imperial and colonial models of interaction based on histories of oppression. UR

based on Uzma Z. Rizvi, "Decolonizing Methodologies as Strategies of Practice" published in: Uzma Z. Rizvi, Matthew Liebmann (ed.), *Archaeology and the Postcolonial Critique*. Lanham, MD: Alta Mira Press, 2008

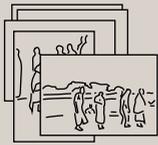


3D reproduction of Astabhujasvamin's conch shell

D2 •

CONCH

Upon attaining enlightenment the Buddha hesitates, uncertain whether to teach others, until a delegation of gods persuades him to set the wheel of Dharma in motion, marking the occasion with the gift of a conch that embodies the clarion-clear quality of his message. A conch makes a bolt of sound like a natural fact, a reverberation you can feel moving through your skin. Shell trumpets have a long history in South Asia, where they are typically fashioned from the species *Turbinella pyrum*, or sacred chank, renowned for its durability and bright, loud sound. By the common era, they were found in temples from Kanyakumari to Tibet. Astabhujasvamin's conch was the largest from the dozens excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India in 1958 at Nagarjunakonda, a site soon to be submerged by a dam. Lifted from the seabed; killed, carved, and polished; blown as a blessed aerophone; lost; dug from ruins in the nick of time—silent and glassed. AK



constellation of photographs taken in Naogaon, 1932, as well as nearby, 2015

D3 ⇐

LISTENING TO IMAGES

Photography “can be sensitive to sound as it is to light,” writes Geoff Dyer. “Good photographs are there to be listened to as well as looked at; the better the photograph, the more there is to hear.” And these are photographs about music and musicians, and journeys made in search of them. In February 1932, the Dutch scholar Arnold Bake made a field trip to Naogaon, now in Bangladesh, to record songs by men working at a ganja plantation and fakirs who gathered there. We have some clear black-and-white photographs from that trip, some hazy wax-cylinder recordings, and some letters Bake wrote to his mother and the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv, which had lent him phonographs to use. More than eight decades later, those are the leads that we started to follow as The Travelling Archive, on our own search for Bake's singers and their songs. Since 2015, a map has been

unfurling, marked by railroads and estuaries, devotion and madness. Song is written over song, image listens to image. It is now hard to tell what is old and what was new. These pictures extend several decades, even centuries, to include what was and what will be. MB

UMASHANKAR AT ARCE

D4

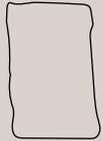
In 1982, Umashankar became the first employee of the Archive and Research Center for Ethnomusicology in Delhi. By the time he retired in 2015, the archive had moved to Gurgaon, and he had listened to approximately 15,000 hours of oral and performance traditions from across the country. Firsthand, and not through theory, he came to recognize what was common and resilient across these practices—such as the non-metrical introduction in much Indian music. The labour of such listening brings the interiority of the body and its duration into focus. What he heard is all mixed up with everything else he knows. Over the 30-odd years that he helped maintain the archive, Umashankar announced metadata ahead of every recording he catalogued. Is ARCE a record of Umashankar's voice over time? And is Umashankar a living archive of listening?



video by Daniel M. Neumann, 1982

## SOUND AS SURFACE

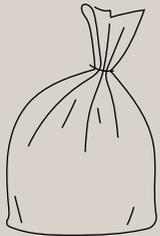
When a sound reflects in a space, it is fundamentally transformed by the physical qualities of every surface it engages. When a sound refracts, some of it gets absorbed on the way. Materially speaking, sound and surface cannot be separated.



S1

WAX

Sound waves were first etched into lampblack that had been smoked onto tinfoil tubes. Thomas Edison claimed that these cylinders which could record and play back sound would “bottle up for posterity the mere utterance of man.” Ten years later, in 1887, the Volta Laboratory pioneered wax cylinders. Here wax referred more to texture; the waxy material itself was made of several compounds. Eventually cylinders were made from celluloid, an early plastic. Calling audio recordings “records” and LPs “wax” goes back to these days, to making a record of a sound by tracing a groove in a soft material. To wax is also to grow full (like the moon). RM



S2 ●

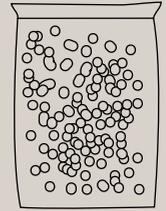
SHELLAC

Shellac comes from a resin secreted by the tiny lac insect, native to Northern India and Southeast Asia. Mentioned in the *Atharvaveda*—the Veda of magic formulas—and the *Mahabharata*, lac had myriad traditional and medicinal uses. By the 18th century, its role in industry became paramount and its trade was controlled by the British East India Company. Shellac was used by Emile Berliner when he developed the flat round record in around 1890 from Edison’s tubular cylinders. The cylinder was first, but the shellac disc came to define how we listened. This is metamorphosis: of insect into sound, of vibration into voice, of the intangible into the solid. RM

## VINYL

S3

World War II can be seen as the dividing line between a world dependent on renewable resources—such as the insect-derived shellac—and one dependent on petrochemicals. Vinyl—or poly vinyl chloride—had been discovered in 1872 by a German chemist named Eugen Baumann, five years before Edison recorded sound; vinyl records would be introduced only in 1948. During the war, shipping routes and the traditional processing of shellac were interrupted. A more stable and controllable system was needed. Petroleum products—oil, PVC, and more—were already feeding the booming growth of the West and interlocking with new global power dynamics. Shellac was soon left behind, just as wax had been. RM

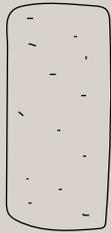


## COAL

S4

The last few centuries can be said to have been centuries of furious digging. Many an archaeological find in the 19th century was first documented by mineral-hunting geologists under orders from the British Raj to survey remote places for potential extraction. Archaeology and mining seem then to be bound to each other as colonial practices whose violence spans material and epistemic dimensions. As well as specific forms of rupture and loss, the mining of minerals has generated noises and silences. Over time extraction led to the clatter of machines and the beeps of electronics, the music that constitutes the modern urban soundscape. VA





S5 ✘

## SANDSTONE

The western edge of the Chota Nagpur Plateau is studded with forested, basalt-capped mesas that rise thousands of feet and, in places, expose cliffs whose buff sandstone is riddled with caves, several of them artificially enlarged, inscribed with letters nearly as old as any in India. One's interior seems smoothed by tools, as though tuned. Inside, voices amplify. It was the stone's softness that attracted humans there some two millennia ago, providing not just sanctuary but a medium for architecture, and with it, the preservation of a sound: whoever made Sita Benga shaped it to reverberate a certain way. You can still hear it, though differently: an impossibly long decay ... fading in slow, petrified waves. AK



S6

## MUDBRICK

"Listen to the mudbrick. It will tell you where it begins and where it ends," the excavator Chacha Nawaz told me. "Be wary of falling into the trap of the wash. The wash sounds like mudbrick but it is not a wall. It is only the wash of a wall. You must learn how to recognize the walls." From the moment I held a trowel in my hand, I was taught how to feel. There is something lovely about the sloping nature of mudbrick that slowly accumulates at the foot of walls. It is promiscuous and unfixed, rendering invisible systems of control that walls impose. UR

based on Uzma Z. Rizvi, "Theorizing Deposition: Transitional Stratigraphy, disruptive Layers, and the Future," *e-flux journal* 56th Venice Biennale, 2015

## WOOD

S7

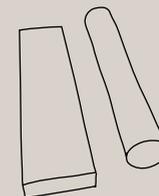
The night before cutting down a tree for lumber, a carpenter makes an offering to appease the spirits haunting it, requesting that they leave their abode for another. Wood is a material that is easily repurposed, but also quick to decay. Despite leaving little physical evidence of its presence, it is commonly agreed that the earliest architecture in South Asia was made of wood, a theory supported by the visible influence woodwork had over the material traditions that followed, as craftspeople imitated the texture and grain, the timbre of timber in stone.



## COPPER

S8

"You know when you pick up the piece of ore, it tells you what it can become," said metalsmiths outside of Tiskola village. "You just have to listen to it. You have to take the time to listen to it. This is what our children do not have the time to hear." Crafting copper is a communication between humans and nonhumans; an engagement, a pragmatic exchange, an entanglement, an acknowledgement of each other. The copper labours—changing states from solid to liquid and back to solid—in the process of its crafting. Both copper and the human body are engaged in this communicative action, which crafts copper, senses of belonging, and resonance through repetitive practices. UR



based on Uzma Z. Rizvi, "Crafting resonance: Empathy and belonging in ancient Rajasthan," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 15/2, 2015

## A SLIGHTLY CURVING PLACE – A STUDY

Padmini Chettur

2020, 11' 16"

This is a study towards a film for six dancers. It is composed of footage from a research visit to a transplanted archaeological site in Anupu. Shot tentatively early one morning and the next evening, it is a discovering of light: its directions, its qualities, what it does to the textures and shadows of the space. It is a study of volume and proportion: a single body lost in scale to the vast landscape or filling the frame to propose itself. It is also a thinking about perspective: the image of a dancer's body moving in a space and the movement of a dancer's body making an image, in conversation. It is a study of how to frame space, how to bring different temporalities—ancient and contemporary—onto the same plane, how to evoke history without narrating it. The images are heard through a score that asks us to listen to the textures of a potentially unravelling time and timelessness—a slightly curving place. PC

## AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF SOUND

It was in the mid-1990s that Umashankar Manthravadi began his research in acoustic archaeology by mapping and measuring the physical dimensions and acoustic properties of Ranigumpha—a double-storied structure of rock-cut caves dating back to circa third century BCE, generally believed to have been a monastery, but arguably a theatre. One day he was on site, cooped up in a corner in front of a bulky desktop computer that had been lugged along to the Udayagiri hills and was being powered by rerouted overhead mains. He had been making some tests with his headphones on when an officer of the Archaeological Survey of India came up to him and pried, “So, can you hear them?”

The question echoes throughout this project, which is primarily concerned with what it means to try and listen to the past, to that which will forever remain outside the range of our hearing. Hear whom, exactly? Or what? The people who built the place. The sounds once made. Implicit in the officer's inquiry was a strange conviction in a technological positivism that the past can be accessed, that it is for our taking. But an archaeology of sound is not about finding facts in the acoustic reflections of architectural surfaces so as to reconstruct a once-audible event in a space as accurately as possible. It is a fundamental confrontation with a sense that the past cannot be captured. Umashankar for one had already been certain that his measurements could prove nothing but themselves. What he came to know is that we can't just look for theatres in landscapes of the past—we must listen for them. An archaeology of sound is then about that which is lost but nevertheless always with us—the simultaneity of the past in the present, a collectivity across time beyond possession and accumulation.

To ask what it means to listen to the past draws awareness both to sound as a social event—music, theatre, and dance as forms of corporeal relations—and to its absence which remains.

This attention to absence disrupts the focus on material evidence that has, at least since the advent of archaeology in the 19th century, structurally conditioned the ways in which the past has come to be known. As a vector of modernity that evolved as a primarily visual study, the discipline of archaeology can be charged with colonizing the past by collecting it for display. But an archaeological site is not only about ruins and artefacts; it is also a record of everything that happened there. Measuring sound waves moving between the muted material archive of architecture shifts the archaeological gaze towards reflection. Echoes that bounce off of walls, floors, columns, chambers, and ceilings carry a trace of bygone events that have not entered history, like a latent memory of a collective experience that defies ownership.

Recognizing the potential for performance inherent in ancient and medieval sites of ritual, festival, and theatre, an archaeology of sound redraws the frontier that has posited orality against inscription, bodily movement against physical architecture. Listening for lost memories of social imaginaries challenges the dominant way of conceiving the premodern against the modern, and disrupts contemporary mythologies that ceaselessly partition the past into isolated languages, designating certain sovereignties as matters of history. Tuning in to the static of the past so as to reckon with the noise of the present is also an invocation to listen to the dramatic changes in our own acousmatic landscapes. Can we hear that which is unavailable to us, namely the historical transformation of our senses in modernity?

*A Slightly Curving Place*  
23 July 2020 to  
20 September 2020  
Part of the HKW project  
*The New Alphabet*

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Nida Ghouse

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Nityananda Mitra Thakur and  
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