

Matti Braun

IF I CAN'T DANCE,
I DON'T WANT TO BE PART OF YOUR REVOLUTION

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Matti Braun developed his project *The Alien* as a series of stages in which elements of dance, acting and music were explored and framed within the context of Braun's wider practice. Inviting the composer Li-Chuan Chong and the Kantele player Timo Väänänen to come to the Netherlands to compose the music for the play, the first public performance of the music took place at the **Lloyd Hotel** in April, 2005.

In May at **Festival a/d Werf**, Braun presented two choreographed sketches of *The Alien* featuring the meeting of the alien and the young boy Haba. During the festival, Braun performed himself with the lecture *Vikram Sarabhai* or *V.S.*. In this lecture performance Braun gave an extensive yet eclectic look at the cultural contribution and influence of this industrialist on his native city, being part of a community who advocated modernism. Braun looked at how Sarabhai was an inspiration for the writing of Satyajit Ray's film-script *The Alien*.

At **Theaterfestival Boulevard** new sketches were developed with the choreographer Henriette Hale and performed at the Verkadefabriek with a series of amateur actors. Here a full day of the **If I Can't Dance...** programme was devoted to Braun's oeuvre and interests, so the local audience could tap into the wider context of the work. The lecture performance *V.S.* was performed again and the film *The Music Room* by Ray was screened in the evening.

At **De VeenFabriek** in November the completed play was put on. Music was performed live by Anna-Karin Korho-

nen and Matti Braun designed the stage set and props which fluctuated somewhere between a theatrical landscape and an autonomous art work. A full cast of amateur actors gleaned from friends and acquaintances in the art world acted in the play.



The Alien



The fact that Satyajit Ray once wrote the transcript for a science fiction film may come as a surprise. And yet *The Alien* includes many characteristics familiar from Ray's other works. Like *Pather Panchali* it is set in a village, its main protagonists are children and its plot unpacks the dynamics of class, caste and occupation played out in a small community in rural India. Like *Home and the World*, it explores these dynamics in relation to the imposition of forces, which come from outside, bringing radical change in their wake. In all of these instances, the arrival of Western modernity, the imposition of colonial rule, the flow of international trade are examined through the microcosm of a small cast of characters whose actions take on a particular significance.

The story of *The Alien* recounts how one night an extraterrestrial being crash-lands into the lotus pond of a small Bengali village and goes on to examine the manner in which its inhabitants respond to this unexpected event. The farmer Pramanick notices dramatic changes to their crops, Battacharji the astrologer reads that something untoward is afoot in the heavens, while the unscrupulous entrepreneur Bajoria tries to convince the foreign engineer Devlin to dredge the pond - thinking that the spaceship is a golden temple. Meanwhile Mohan the journalist from Calcutta reflects on the alien's presence in relation to wider considerations, which are perhaps, more in line with Ray's own interests. His musings weave together the miracle of modern technology, "they are getting ready to land the first man on the moon", with India's early

role in the development of science and mathematics. "We discovered that Zero, way back in the time of the Upanishads [...] and that changed the course of history." To a certain extent the figure of the alien and its actions represent the transformative potential of technology and its application in India - a theme which has run through the nation's political culture from the time of Independence. Mahatma Gandhi stressed the importance of indigenous craft traditions, but India's first prime minister Nehru was an advocate of industry and technology as primary tools of development, setting up five year plans to modernise the country and to make it self sufficient. And today of course any discussion of India will include a mention of its burgeoning high tech industries. However Ray's story is not a straightforward hymn to science. His alien is capricious and impossible to control. Like technology itself, its actions are beyond the level of everyday comprehension and represent an essentially haphazard and amoral force. Apart from effecting a series of minor miracles, such as making crops ripen overnight and wakening the dead, the alien's main intervention is to whisk away the young beggar boy Haba - who as the only child in the play, can be seen to represent the figure of future generations. Whether Haba's departure is a rescue operation or abduction, it is hard to say.

Matti Braun's interpretation of this script is a world away from anything that Ray could have imagined. Ray had Hollywood ambitions for *The Alien* and touted it around several studios coming within a whisker of realising them. But even though there were casting ses-

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sions with Peter Sellers and Marlon Brando, for several reasons the film was never made. Decades later Braun has translated Ray's project into an entirely different medium. The plot itself remains intact but it unfolds within an utterly changed vocabulary. The forms used are from the theatre, but the rules come from the milieu of contemporary art, and employ its particular codes and its histories of performance, installation and abstraction. The piece is pared down to a number of components which include speech, gesture, costumes, lighting, set and live music from an electric Kantele player. The actors are untrained and drawn together from a constituency of artists and employees connected to the host institutions, with the proposition that they will be able to formulate a sense of group identity for the short period of rehearsals and performances. The stiffness of their movements and the uninflected delivery of their lines give the play its particular texture and tone, working against a believable sense of dramatic narrative. This and the set (which is a proscenium arch and backdrop of black and white striped fabric reminiscent of Daniel Buren) produce a feeling of unfolding tableaux, a pictorial space in which elements shift but the overall effect remains largely static. Night follows day in a transition heralded by the hypnotic and rhythmic tones of the Kantele player. And the actors perform their roles like characters in a mystery play, each one an archetype, with individual personalities slipping out from time to time connecting the actors to their friends and family who are present, and breaking the distance between the audience and the stage. Even though this is a massively reduced operation compared to shooting a film, it has involved the artist collaborating with an extended network of individuals and organisations. First initiated as an idea in collaboration with **The**

Showroom in London, Braun was able to start piecing together *The Alien* in the context of the programme **If I Can't Dance...** developing along the way some of the attributes of a theatre director and a community organiser. The curators allowed space for a 'work in progress' to take shape, with audiences having access to what were essentially, sketches or rehearsal situations - made public. Meetings in the Netherlands between the artist, the choreographer and the Kantele player were followed by a dance workshop with children (Haba and the alien) and a subsequently by two scenes containing dialogue. *The Alien* had its first entire run through at **Project Arts Centre** in Dublin, followed by another full run through in **If I Can't Dance...** in Leiden. In the near future it will be performed in Bonn and London.

Shot on location, Ray's films come with a readymade context, which is the backdrop of India. But in Braun's adaptation, visual references to India are largely jettisoned in favour of a cultural ambiguity. However as is so often the case in his work, a simple motif can open up a much larger network of ideas and cultural practices. In this instance the set provides one such entry point, as it is loosely based on a design by the Indian artist K.G. Subramanyan who was a contemporary of Ray's and a fellow student at the Art College established by Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan. Here artists were intensely involved in the process of formulating the vocabulary of a modern Indian art, a process that extended directly from Tagore's own practice. Not only a poet, Tagore was a songwriter, novelist,

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playwright and essayist and towards the end of his life he also began a career as a visual artist. Within this eclectic range of activities, Tagore attempted to fuse together and give voice to the contradictory experiences of an ancient culture trying to shake off the imposition of colonial rule and confront the modern world as a newly independent state.

This was the context from which both Satyajit Ray and K.G. Subramanyam worked and both in their different ways bear testimony to its influence. Many years later Ray said of this experience: "I consider the three years I spent in Santiniketan as the most fruitful of my life..... Santiniketan opened my eyes for the first time to the splendours of Indian art and Far Eastern art. Until then I was completely under the sway of Western art, music and literature. Santiniketan made me the combined product of East and West."¹ For Ray, who was greatly influenced by Renoir and the Italian realists, the Santiniketan model provided him not only with this newly found respect for Indian culture but also stimulated an attentiveness to the Indian environment and a notion of "oriental naturalism"² - that gives his films their distinctive character. In them there is a relay between the specific and the general, in which the "simultaneous value of the indigenous and the universal" is demarcated and laid out. K.G. Subramanyam developed his practice along more conventional lines grafting together legacies from East and West, high and low, through expressive gestures couched within a fine art tradition. As well as easel painting in oils, Subramanyam painted on glass, made murals, produced several series of terracotta tile reliefs, made toys and designed sets for theatrical productions. Both Subramanyam and Ray contribute differently to the question of national culture and to what Sunil Khilnani has called "The Idea of India."⁴

In the *Apu Trilogy*, Ray does this with an allegory of a nation's becoming, in *Home and the World* (a film based on Tagore's novel) he does it discursively, addressing issues such as the impact of global trade on Indian producers and communal tensions between Hindu and Muslim groups. For his part Subramanyam examined these questions as an artist and a writer but also as a teacher of successive generations of art students.

To what extent does Braun in his play engage with and make visible these debates, and how important is it for contemporary Western audiences to understand them as part of experiencing the work? Interesting as they might be, the history of the screen play and the backstory of people and places briefly sketched in this text, are eclipsed by the experience of watching the piece unfold live in the theatre. Narratives which in India would be recognised as part of the 'national story' are absorbed and taken up into an aesthetic regime that is defined by the artist on his own terms, rather than on terms set for him by the material. In the most positive sense, this is not a work that negotiates between cultures in order to find a happy medium, but instead stakes out a new space by radically territorialising its content, and (without a by your leave) creating "its own medium of existence."⁵ The effect is experiential rather than explanatory. Like looking at a book with pictures but no captions and no text - a format that is often used by the artist in his publications. The opportunity to unpack the play and consider what it might have meant in its original context comes in a different form. Braun does some of this work him-

self, across the spectrum of his practice, allowing for a more coherent picture to emerge over the course of time. For example, the exhibition *R.T.* at **The Showroom** in London (2004) made the link between Ray and Tagore (the title is based on Tagore's initials) and included reproductions of Tagore's drawings shown alongside an artificial pond - conceived by Braun as a set design for *The Alien*. In the work *V.S.* (a slide lecture) Braun produces a scattered constellation of reference points that connect the Indian scientist Vikram Sarabhai and his family to a Western avant-garde, taking in along the way: science, architecture, Bharatanatyam dance, the work of Linda Benglis and of John Cage. Braun also likes to collaborate with institutions and curators in the process of contextualising his practice. At **Project** in Dublin, a film programme was organised that included works by Ray such as *Home* and *The World* and *The Inner Eye* (a documentary about K.G. Subramanyam's teacher, the artist Binodebehari Mukherjee, that included footage of Santiniketan).⁶ In **If I Can't Dance...** the work was contextualised by the presentation of the lecture performance *V.S.* and the screening of Satyajit Ray's film *The Music Room*. Braun's practice can only benefit from an elaboration in regards to one of its major sources - an eclectic take on aspects of Indian cultural history from roughly the middle of the last century. Western audiences are often not familiar with this subject, or of the role that culture played in the development of a national discourse. Braun's work also provokes a consideration of the power relations between cultures, which could be further teased out and explored. At the same time it is important to acknowledge the right of artists to take what they will and make of it accordingly. On the basis that forms have always migrated between different cultures in a promiscuous and often random fashion. After all, a

general sense of license seems to have been the principle that Tagore brought to his work in its various guises and then passed on to his students and admirers. Ultimately Braun's version of *The Alien* stands on its own merits as a singular artwork and not in relation to any argument, justification or clarification in terms of its genealogy.

- 1 Sen, Amartya, *The Argumentative Indian*, Penguin/Arlen Lane, London, 2005, p115
- 2 Kapur, Geeta, *When Was Modernism*, Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2000, p 207
- 3 Ibid, p 207
- 4 Khilnani, Sunil, *The Idea of India*, Penguin Books, London, 1997
- 5 Hallward, Peter, *Absolutely Postcolonial*, Manchester University Press, 2001, p xii
- 6 The film programme was called *Ghare - Baire (Home and the World)* and it was co-curated by Suman Gopinath and myself. As well as films by Satyajit Ray it included works by Madhushree Dutta, Ayisha Abraham and Aparna Sen.

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