

Chapter Six: Mythic and Musical Structure

1. Memory Boxes

The project explores the narrative potentials of new electronic and digital technology in the production of non-sequential and non-linear creative work, specifically for the construction of *blackBOX*. Malcolm Le Grice's writing on the history of digital media in relation to cinema has informed the production of *blackBOX*. Le Grice describes the production of the digital creative work of art as "Hydra-Media" a many-headed beast.

blackBOX unfolds from a set of virtual *memory boxes* which are configured inside 'performative' frames, marking them as "ritual and that all things operating within these frames represent serious things."¹ The animation of collected *objects*, from the Russian, Indian and Greek 'imagined communities', are framed inside these series of *memory boxes*. The narrative trajectory of the story is triggered and controlled by the gestural actions of the player. The player's subjective intervention with the program, represented as Nina's hands opening the boxes, and interaction with the objects inside the boxes, produce an identification with the icons and symbols, and thus, with the means by which the story is told. Also, these *memory boxes* and their objects are configured to resonate with recollections and to reveal the creative research:

- (i) songs of Sorrow/ Absence (thesis) [The Father "Russia"]
performances from Russian jazz culture in China
- (ii) songs of Longing/ Presence (antithesis) [The Mother "India"]
performances from classical Indian dance/music
- (iii) songs of Love/ The Meeting (synthesis) [The Child "Greek"]
performances from *Rembetika* (the Greek Blues) culture

Inside these choreographed electronic spaces, I have developed a set of recollections which frame the subjectivity or point of view of Nina, a woman reflecting on her past. Recollection of events connected to the sets of objects displayed inside the performative memory boxes, through the use of voice-over, produce an emotional engagement in the player and

¹ (Ed), John J. MacAloon, *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Towards a Theory of Cultural Performance*, Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Philadelphia, 1984, p259-260.

evoke an emotional response. These factors have been considered in the design of these digital spaces, so as to manipulate the behaviour and interaction of the audience. This has been a strategy employed in traditional media and performance such as the theatre arts, literature, and cinema.

2. Overview of Areas of Content

PAINTING A DIGITAL PICTURE OF DOCUMENTED MEMORY

Interactive structure

...the Russian(Greek) girl explores her City
the City, Composition, & Migration
what does she discover?

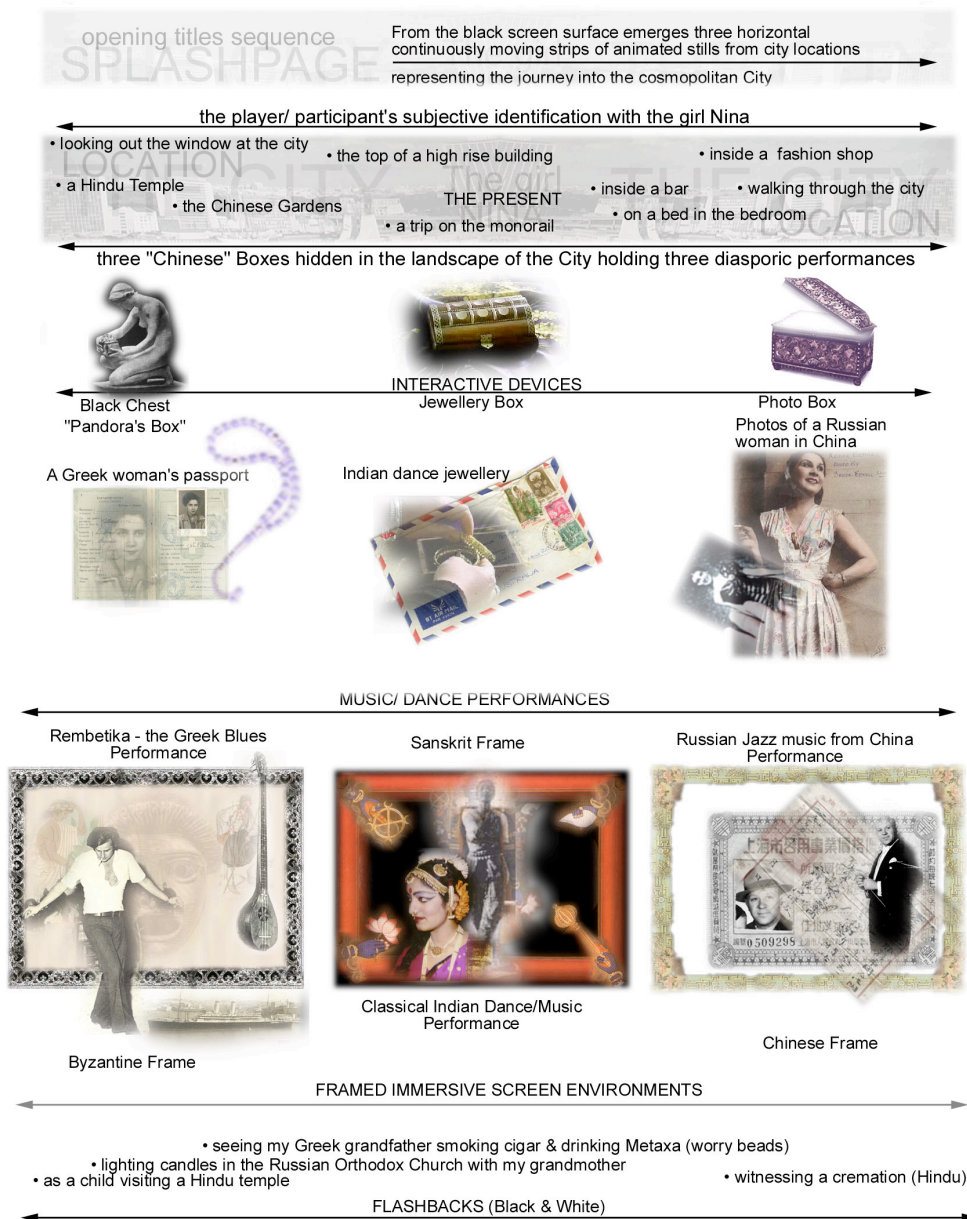


Figure 30. Overview of *blackBOX* CD-ROM areas of content

3. Script Development and Production

blackBOX interactive multimedia work is an exploration of three genres of dance and music: *Rembetika* the Greek blues; *Odissi/ Kuchipudi* classical Indian dance and music, and émigré Jazz and pop tunes from the Russian diaspora via China. *blackBOX* aesthetics and history draws on the ‘imagined communities’² that exist in contemporary Australia in song and music, and on mythic and religious texts influencing these cultures for inspiration in the interface design. The representations of culturally diverse Australian ethnic identities are encapsulated in the icons of the various musical instruments, which act as artefacts and entries into the narratives and performances.

In writing the script for *blackBOX* I wanted to metaphorically dance across the musical genres of *Russian jazz* and *Chinese pop* tunes from Shanghai in the 1930’s and 1940’s; classical *Indian* dance/music; and *Rembetika*, the Greek blues. I approached the process of script writing through social and cultural research into these various genres of music/dance to find a way to create a structure that would integrate these forms. *blackBOX* is the exploration of my own cultural origins, so it became relevant to speak from the first person, that is my own perspective and subjective experience. My overarching point of view and perspective binds these fragments together into a cohesive narrative, and this led to the writing of a voice of reflection, Nina’s voice, which transforms into an Indian woman’s voice and includes an older Greek masculine voice.

(1) *Metropolis*

Metropolis is the first electronic chapter of the interactive narrative. The character Nina stands in for my own hybrid cultural experience and looks through my eyes. I wanted to use the motif of *Shanghai* in the 1930’s as the metropolis that the girl moves through in the work, though the

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1987.

metropolis could be any city in the world, a metaphoric and an imaginary virtual city.

Michael Dear discusses some of these ideas in his text:

...Cities - large and small, global and local, north and south - have become (for better or worse) the principal material expressions of contemporary human civilisation...what happens when the representational cities of cyberspace displace urban reality. Yet virtual realities perforce remain grounded...³

The idea of a fixed geopolitical location and the notion of the stable text both get disrupted in the electronic virtual environment. The problem I wanted to investigate was precisely this, and the objective was to produce a creative work that could articulate these polemics. Helen Hilton's words seemed to strike a chord in me, particularly her writing on the computer text, once this was redirected to the multimedia text:

...If the computer text is in essence unstable, will this not have two consequences; (i) a redefinition of the relative temporal status of experience and representation; (ii) a challenge to the concept of [representation/thinking] itself...? In this sense the knowledge base seems to resemble much more closely the human memory system than the remote storage device of the book...In this way text may actually rediscover some of the properties of oral narrative (one of the modalities of performance) which in its formulaic nature offers an infinite number of ways of telling the same story...⁴

The voice of Nina (my voice) provides the perspective in *blackBOX* through which the player makes sense of the story. The player gains access to cultural memories, which in turn provide Nina's with a sense of self.⁵

(2) *chineseBOX*

...Sergei and Xenia Ermolaeff never really fit in Sydney. Their fancy suits, fur coats and heavy Russian jewellery seemed out of place in the Australian suburbs. So did their outrageous yarns about living it up on the jazz-club circuit in pre-revolutionary Shanghai, where they supposedly rubbed elbows with the likes of Chiang Kai-Shek. Even family members never really believed their stories... That is, until granddaughter Tatiana Pentecost, a multi-media artist, began sifting through the Ermolaeff's belongings after their deaths. What she found – hand-dyed photos, music scores, letters,

³ Michael J. Dear, *The Postmodern Urban Condition*, University of Southern California, Blackwell, USA, 2000, p7-8.

⁴ Helen Hilton, "The Three Dimensional Text: Computers, Writing and Performance", in *The Machine As Metaphor and Tool*, Springer Verlag, Berlin, 1993.

⁵ I am indebted here to the seminal work of new media artist Megan Heyward, *I Am A Singer*, CD-ROM, produced in association with the Australian Film Commission, 1996.

vinyl records and documents in Russian, Chinese, Japanese and English – confirmed their tales. The memorabilia became the inspiration for Pentes' CD-ROM, *Strange Cities*.⁶

I was interested in developing, in an electronic context, the themes that were explored in the *Strange Cities* CD-ROM. I wanted to re-figure Sergei and Xenia Ermolaeff, focusing on the objects they brought with them to Australia, the traces of their past experience. The material objects represented in the virtual environment became the visual icons that opened up the various stories within this chapter.

The virtual exploration of the digitised objects produces a playful environment for the player to interact with. As a child learns through discovery and play with its world, the adult (or indeed child) player of this game/ story pieces together a coherent understanding of the narrative structure, revealing the history of Russian jazz from Shanghai, China.

The narrative unfolds from a virtual 'Chinese Box' containing a set of virtual émigré objects: (i) Jade ring; (ii) Soviet passport; (iii) Pathe photograph; (iv) Willow pattern plate; (v) Chinese cabaret dancer; (vi) Silver bracelet; (vii) Red chinese fan; and (viii) Russian ballerina. These icons are real objects obtained from my Russian grandparent's home that trace their history back to Shanghai, China. Through interaction with these artefacts a non-sequential narrative is revealed.

⁶ Rose Tang and Yasmin Ghahremani, "Forgotten Exiles", *Asiaweek*, September 1999.

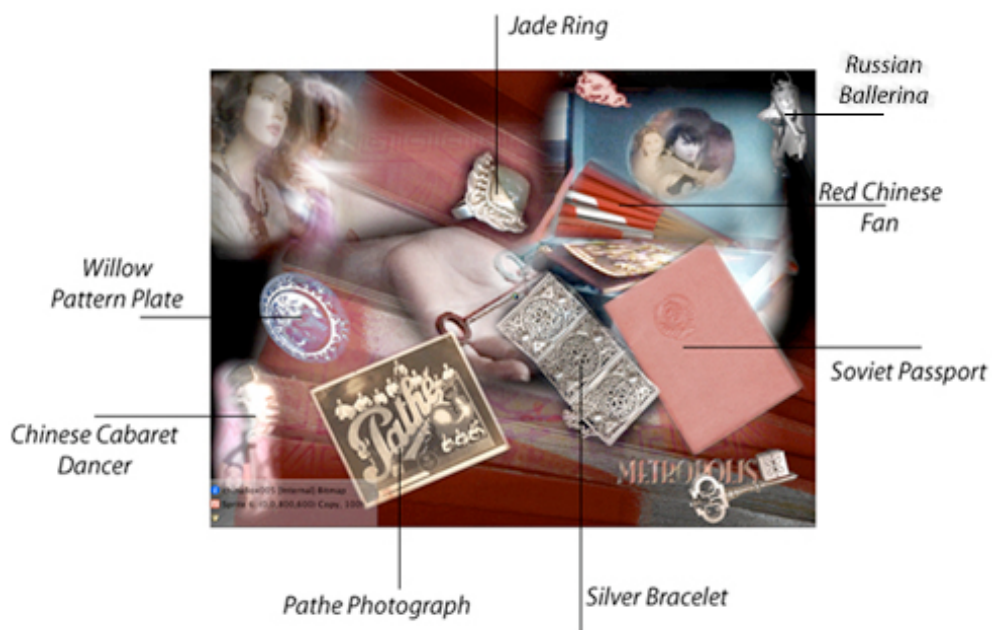


Figure 31. *chineseBOX* interface still detailing virtual objects

chineseBOX Visual and Audio Research

The ‘imagined’ Jazz community is visualised in fragmentary sequences of simulated film footage, composed from digitised photographs and includes some Super 8 footage of Sydney suburbs. The moving image documents Russian émigrés from China, my grandfather *Sergei Ermolaeff* and his son *Serge Ermoll Jr.* Both musicians and composers of jazz, they are imaged through portraits and relics of their musical paraphernalia. The *chineseBox* narrative is constructed through the eyes of a young Chinese woman. We gain access to the *chineseBOX* narrative through images of the Chinese girl opening a *box* and examining the émigré objects which belonged to my grandmother *Xenia (Vladimirovna) Ermolaeff*. They consist of studio portraits of the possessions she brought to Australia. The objects imaged refer to her passage to Australia and evoke memories of the Russian jazz music. Also, the visual material is composed through the digital re-construction of a 1930s Chinese cabaret performance by Rose Tang; and the digital animation of archival photographs of Russian taxi-dancers in Shanghai circa 1930s. This visual material has incorporated elements from an

archive of photographic portraits of émigré musicians and materials sourced for my previous production *Strange Cities* CD-ROM.

(3) *jewelBOX*

jewelBOX is the second electronic chapter of the interactive narrative. Through Nina's eyes, the player engages with a silver spice box⁷ from India. The dance jewels open up narratives revealing classical Indian dance performances, across the forms of *Kuchipudi* and *Odissi*.

In developing this storyline, I worked with some footage shot in Sydney of my friend Padma Raman's *Kuchipudi* performance *Krishna Shabdam*. I researched this tradition in classical Indian dance more broadly to understand its roots and origins. This chapter of the creative work is about engaging with difference and attempting to understand a non-Western culture, so that I could incorporate and translate elements of these performances into the fabric of *blackBOX*. I began this journey by looking into the *Kuchipudi* dance tradition and found numerous Internet sites that offer some different perspectives on this classical Indian dance form. However, these are more useful as resources for searching hardcopy publications, historical and cultural papers, and books.

Of all the Internet sites I researched www.abhinaya.com provided the most detailed information. Though one is always skeptical about material sourced from the Internet, it did give me some broad themes to investigate in relation to the particular religious and mythological subjects for the dance. The existence of this Internet site, and the proliferation of many others like it, provided evidence that a virtual community of classical Indian dance lives. *Kuchipudi* originated in a small village of the Andhra Pradesh state in India and dates back to the South Indian devotional (*Bhakti*) movement of the 17th century.⁸ It was generally performed in the open air at night, and is literally named after the place

⁷ This silver box is a traditional North Indian *spice box*, loaned to this project by Dr Devleena Ghosh, and provides the signature motif for *blackBOX*.

⁸ <http://www.delhitourism.com/dance/> [accessed 17 January 2005]

from which it originated.⁹ It was established by two Telugu speaking Brahmins of Andhra Pradesh, Tritha Narayana Yati (master) and Sidhyendra Yogi (pupil) from the study of the ancient texts, *Natya Sashtra* (Dramatic Science)¹⁰, *Abhinaya Darpana* (Mirror of Gesture by Nandikesavara)¹¹, *Vishnu Dharmottana Purana*, and the *Bhagavata Mela Nataka*, and inspired by the *Gita Govinda* stories of Jayadeva built around the legendary life and exploits of *Krishna*, the Blue God. Sidhyendra Yogi codified everything into his own dance drama technique. He is said to have had a vision of *Krishna* the Blue God after which he composed the *Parijatapaharana* (Sacred Flower dance). It was also said that with the performance of this dance, in true *Bhakti* (devotional) tradition, the dancer, other participants and the audience would attain spiritual liberation and salvation.

The region of Div Taluq where Kuchipudi village is situated has been the centre of music and dance for many centuries. The name Kuchipudi is a contracted form of Kuchila Puri – the village actors (derived from the Sanskrit *kusilava-puram*). The *Kusilavas* were wandering bands that sang and enacted episodes from the Ramayana epic. The itinerant actors living in Kuchipudi village came to be known as Kucheelu (actors).¹²

Krishna Shabdam is a typical middle item in the *Kuchipudi* repertoire and is based on a play written by Usha Parinayam. A ‘*shabdam*’ is a pure dance item (aesthetic movement or rhythm), accompanied by a poetic composition in praise of some deity or patron.¹³

Krishna Shabdam depicts the *nayika*, or beloved, all dressed up waiting for *Krishna* to come to her. This theme is interconnected with the

⁹ Ragini Devi, *Dance Dialects of India*, Vikas Publications, Delhi, 1972, p67.

¹⁰ (Trans.) Adya Rangacharya, *Natya Sastra*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1996.

¹¹ (Trans.) Ananda Coomaraswamy and Gopala Kritnayya Duggirla, *The Mirror of Gesture: Being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesuara*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1917 – a shorter compendium to the *Natya Sastra* (Dramatic Science). “The dramatic scriptures of India were framed by *Brahma* at the request of lesser gods, at the beginning of *Treta Yuga*, the last aeon before the present. This event is described as follows in the first chapter of the *Natya Sastra* of *Bharata* (India)...the other *Devas* said to *Brahma*: We desire a pastime to be seen and heard...*Brahma*: so let it be...let me make a fifth *Veda*, to be called *Natya* (Drama), combined with epic story, tending to virtue, wealth (pleasure and spiritual freedom), yielding fame – a concise instruction setting forth the events of the world...” p 1.

¹² Ragini Devi, *Dance Dialects of India*, Vikas Publications, Delhi, 1972, p67.

¹³ Mohan Khokar, *Traditions of Classical Indian Dance*, Clarion Books, New Delhi, 1984, p160.

‘the Cowherd *Krishna*’ as depicted in the *Bhagavat Purana*. *Radha* and the *gopis*’ longing for their Lord is usually depicted as the *Ras Leela*¹⁴

...Hearing the love-call of *Krishna*’s flute, the *gopis* (milkmaids) left their husbands and went in search of him...The allegory concerns the response of the human soul to a call to the Divine...the dance dramas of Andhra Pradesh, known as the *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* are recorded in sculptures and manuscripts, of 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries...Built in the 12th century by Chalukya Kings, the Thousand Pillared Temple sculptures, ceiling, and carvings depict the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*...The *Yakshagana* (*Ramappa* Temple Sculptures) are inspired by the *Gita Govinda* stories of *Jayadeva*, built around the legendary life and exploits of *Krishna*.¹⁵

In the representation of this desire (in painting, sculpture, and literature):

...the lover might express his longing by cryptic references to Nature, the Indian artist employed poetic symbols to charge his subjects with romantic ardor. Flowers were never merely flowers, nor clouds, clouds. The symbols of Indian poetry – the lotus swaying in a stream, the flowering creepers suggest passion-haunted ladies. The mingling of clouds, rain and lightening symbolized embraces of lovers and commonplace objects such as dishes, vases...lamps were brought into subtle conjunction to hint at ‘the right true end of love’.¹⁶

Krishna is characterised by a crown of peacock feathers, he is clad in a golden (male cloth wrap) *dhoti*, he is blue skinned, a lady is often bowing at his feet, the setting is a forest with flowering trees, his companions are cowherds, illustrations are often inscribed with *Sanskrit* text where the “blue skinned lover *Krishna* is an incarnation of God and there is ecstatic release in his worship.”¹⁷

The *Gita Govinda* by the Bengali poet Jayadeva composed towards the end of the 12th century describes *Radha*’s longing and *Krishna*’s love-making with glowing sensuality.¹⁸

If in recalling *Krishna* to mind there is flavour
Or if there is interest in love’s art
Then to this necklace of words – sweetness,

¹⁴ “...both dance and its static interpretation in sculpture should convey *rasa*. *Rasa* pervades all classical Indian arts...and results from awakening of latent psychological states (*sthayi-bhavas*) in the beholder by the use of appropriate formalized imagery.”, from Anne-Marie Gaston, *Siva in Dance, Myth, and Iconography*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1982, p14.

¹⁵ Kay Ambrose (revised by Ram Gopal), *Classical Dances and Costumes of India*, Adam and Charles Black, London, 1983, p17.

¹⁶ W.G. Archer, *The Loves of Krishna: In Indian Painting and Poetry*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, London, 1957, p13.

¹⁷ Archer p13.

¹⁸ Archer p76.

Tenderness, brightness - The words of Jayadeva, listen.....

And later....

Sandal and garment of yellow and
lotus garlands upon his body of blue,
In his dance the jewels of his ears
in movement dangling over his smiling cheeks,
Krishna here disports himself
with charming women in love.
He embraces one woman, he kisses another,
and fondles another beautiful one.
He looks at another one lovely with smiles,
and starts in pursuit of another woman.
...The sweet nectar of lips kept flowing
notes of his luring melodious flute,
...Whose brow had a perfect sandal spot,
as among dark clouds the disc of the moon

I continued this journey by looking into the *Odissi* dance tradition. In 2003 I recorded a live performance of classical *Odissi* dance by the Italian born protégé of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, Ileana Citaristi in Sydney. Her item *Mangala Charan* (Invocatory Item) provided a powerful link between the genres. I had access to a recording of the *Odissi Dance Company School* performances at The Performance Space, Redfern, Sydney 1993, where I had been a student. To create a contrast with the *Kuchipudi* form of dance, I recorded a version (rehearsal) of Nirmal Jena's *The Power of the Feminine*, performed at the Studio Theatre, Sydney Opera House, as part of the *Asian Music and Dance Festival 2002*. Nirmal Jena has described this performance as a parallel performance, as distinct from *fusion* work, incorporating the *Marta* style of *Odissi* with contemporary Western dramatic theatre.

Playwright John Hughes developed *The Power of the Feminine*, a three act *multimedia* play composed of projected film sequences, projected textual elements and performance work with actors and non-actors. The sets are a series of contemporary paintings by John Wolsley. The piece, as the title suggests, is worked around the idea of a universal feminine power and juxtaposed with three traditional *Odissi* dance items. The play involves numerous art forms or references to these forms in the performance text (dance, poetry, painting, music, literature, sculpture) and employs many media in its diagesis. It amalgamates, appropriates and expropriates, different cultural expressions, drawing them together to

create meaning derived from both eastern and western traditions. In this form of new theatre, the western play appropriates the classical Indian dance form while the classical Indian dance performance appropriates the western play. This theatrical dialogue between cultural forms influenced the production of *blackBOX. The Power of the Feminine* employed multi-media in a more physical real time sense, whereas *blackBOX* translates these many media into virtual objects.

Dance Item (1) Matru Pranaam (Invocatory item)

*aradhya parama shakti
sarbe rapi sura sure
nadang param taram kinche adhika
bhubana traya satyam satyam pura satyam
veda shastradi nirnaya
puja niya para shakti niguna saguna thaba*

Translation from the Sanskrit (from the program notes)

Oh! The reverent, divine absolute mother power, you prevail in gods
and demons alike. You have spread yourself to this unlimited vastness
and yet you are so little and limited
You have prevailed through all three worlds
(physical, emotional, spiritual)
I come to the conclusion this is the only revealed truth
...as all the holy scriptures
Speak of your glory
Again I bow down Oh divine absolute mother, you are the formless,
you are the form, you are the darkness and you are the light...
So seek beyond that good and evil

Dance Item (2) Aatman (Soul)

This traditional dance item depicts “the path to self realisation of the experience of the inner, and its relation with the outer, which prevails in infinity...known as *Aatman* or Soul. It evolves and seeks union with the self and the supreme. This is the dialogue between Heaven and Earth (between *Krishna* and *Radha*), where Earth is trying to reach Heaven. In dance, the imagery of *Vedas* and *Upanishads* is translated into concrete principles and form. The body and the senses are most abstracted into pure design to suggest and evoke in the listener and onlooker the ideas of the universal, the cosmic and the infinite.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Program Notes, *The Power of The Feminine: Parallel Performances, Untitled: A Play in Three Acts* written and directed by John Hughes, Three Dances by Nirmal Jena in

This dance item included *Konarak Kanthi*, an ode to the great Sun temple of Konarak²⁰ in Orissa, India and is inspired by the temple relief sculptures.



Figure 32. The Konarak Sun Temple at Konarak, Orissa, INDIA²¹

The physical forms represented in the dance item are interpretations of the ancient temple sculptures, displaying various bodily postures. These postures signify a repertoire of motifs that create a language in dance, for example

(i) placing a dot on the forehead whilst combing the hair; (ii) playing the horn; (iii) lighting the lamp. These bodily gestures have everyday as well as great spiritual significance. At one time they would have been performed inside the temples as a form of devotion to the deity.

Indian Odissi Style, Asian Music and Dance Festival 2002, The Studio, Sydney Opera House.

²⁰ Konarak Sun Temple at Konarak (Orissa) is dedicated to the Sun God *Surya*. “This temple, now in ruins, is a colossal monument, a temple to the Sun God built in the 13th century. An original structure dating back to the 9th century once stood here. In its original form, the *deul* was 235 feet high and the *jagamohana* was about 150 feet high. The temple was representative of the Chariot of the Sun with 12 pairs of huge wheels and 7 horses. This temple, massive in scale, is considered to be the masterpiece of Orissan architecture. The temple abounds in sculptural work.” From *Templenet* <http://www.templenet.com/Orissa/konakona.html> [accessed 10 June 2005].

²¹ Image from *Templenet* <http://www.templenet.com/Orissa/konakona.html> [accessed 10 June 2005].



Figure 33. *blackBOX* interface still from *jewelBOX* pathway picturing dancer Chitritta Mukerjee, performing *Konarak Kanthi Odissi* dance item.

The narratives unfold from a virtual ‘Jewel Box’ containing a set of virtual émigré objects: (i) Dance bells; (ii) Gold necklace; (iii) Earrings; (iv) Gold bracelets; (v) Red powder; and (vi) Hair comb. These icons are real objects obtained from my classical Indian dance studies and trace a history back to India. Through interaction with these artefacts a non-sequential narrative is revealed.



Figure 34a. *jewelBOX* interface still detailing virtual dance objects