**Chanting in the Gallery: Ritual Sound and its Phenomenology in Contemporary Art**

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**Biography**

Megha Rajguru achieved her Doctorate in 2010 at the University of Brighton where she works as a Lecturer of Art and Design History. A practice-based researcher, Megha’s work is site-specific and examines the shift in cultural meanings with changing curatorial contexts. Megha has worked in gallery education at Tate Britain and at the Brunei Gallery and has exhibited her video installations and sculptures in the United Kingdom and the United States since 2004.

**ABSTRACT**

Artists Bill Viola, Meredith Monk, Janet Cardiff and Marcus Coates have employed ritualistic singing and chants as tools of critical expression in their practices. What types of experiences do sounds associated with religion and belief systems elicit within the viewers and listeners of the work? Are the causal factors of these experiences implicit in the music or present in the individual listeners? This article draws upon musical phenomenology, neuro-phenomenology, musical time, and Heidegger’s Dasein, in order to formulate an understanding of the role of ritual singing in art, and the ways in which art audiences access transcendental experiences.

**KEYWORDS**

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**INTRODUCTION**

For generations ritualistic singing has formed an important mode of musical expression in religious and belief systems across cultures. Artists such as Marina Abramovic, Susan Phillipsz, Janet Cardiff, Bill Viola and Marcus Coates have been employing the voice, and in some cases, repetitive chants and singing, as critical tools of expression in their art practices. The author of *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* Jacob Smith explains that the voice ‘can function as an index of the body, a conveyor of language, a social bond, a musical instrument of sublime flexibility, a gauge of emotion, a central component of the art of acting, and a register of everyday identity’ (Smith 2008: 3).

The physical and sublime qualities of vocal sounds emanated by the human body bring to visual art practices an intangible dimension that is commonly encountered and examined within world cultures and belief systems. This article seeks to study the meanings generated by the singing voice in a live performance or a recording, with particular focus on the ritualistic chant in the context of art practice. It addresses the spiritual qualities and religious associations the form of singing brings to the work and examines the nature of experiences it elicits amongst viewers and listeners. From this phenomenological position, it will compare the audience’s experience of repetitive ritualistic singing in the gallery with experience-based ethnographic research undertaken in the context of religion. Ultimately, this article seek to answer one question – What role does the primordial sound play in contemporary art and what are its phenomenological implications?

Whilst the multi-disciplinary nature of this enquiry poses certain theoretical and methodological challenges, the rhythmic qualities of the chant, repetition, tone, sound interspersed with silence and the musical time generated, combined with its phenomenological implications, offer a set of common factors for a critical and comparative discourse. The philosophical line of enquiry employed in this article allows for a linking of seemingly disparate arguments that examine the experience of music and time in the realms of fine art, musicology and ethnography.

Firstly, examples of artistic production that have employed chanting or ritual singing as a crucial method of communication will be reviewed. As an artist who has employed her own voice in her work, I will refer to my video artwork *Ganesh, circa 1900* at several points in this article. A recording of the dissolution of the Hindu God *Ganesh* in an upturned museum vitrine, the soundtrack to the looping video is my chanting of the *mantra* *Om* (Figure 1.). Created for the museum setting and exhibited at the Croydon Clocktower in Croydon in 2008, the video is a critique of the museological practices of re-contextualising worshipped Hindu deities as art and ethnographic objects, and their conservation for longevity.[[1]](#endnote-1) The role of the repetitive sound in the piece directly addresses the ritual function of the worshipped deity whilst alluding to the contrasting qualities of the museological linear time and Hindu cyclical time.

**CHANTING IN THE GALLERY**

Art Historian Ajit Mookerjee has described the role of ritual in Hinduism as ‘a means or a way towards spiritual identity, towards a state in which we can realize our oneness with the universe’ (Mookerjee 1985: 9).

The use of the singing voice to establish contact with a deity or supernatural force and as a method of praising God is consistent across histories of cultures, western and non-western, making the voice a powerful tool of primordial expression. The primordial quality of the ritual song has been adapted and applied in a range of ways in various forms in art practice, from Meredith Monk’s 1987 *Panda Chant* to a more recent example in Richard Grayson’s video installation at the Matt’s Gallery in London in 2009 entitled *The Golden Space City of God*. Some of the earliest forms of singing such as choral works, Gregorian Chants, Vedic mantras, and Shamanic chants have been appropriated or adapted by artists to critique postmodern society, create meditative spaces and offer experiences that transcend the here and now to a feeling of sublime.

Bill Viola’s *Anthem* (1983), a video of duration 11 minutes 43 seconds, commences with a single piercing scream emitted by an eleven-year-old girl. The sound gradually extends and transforms over time to produce a scale of seven harmonic notes. In his own review of *Anthem* for *A Journal of Performance and Art,* Viola described the soundtrack as a composition in keeping with the form and function of Gregorian chants, whilst simultaneously reverberating the primacy of tribal Buddhist chants (Viola 2002:15). This religious evocation is, however, juxtaposed with images that depict a fast-moving industrial and consumerist society contrasted with a tree in an ancient forest slowing down time. Heavy industrial machinery, surgery performed on a human body, cars, and supermarkets are interposed with the image of the lone girl standing in the vast chamber of Union Station in Los Angeles emitting the primordial sound. Viola has described the ritualistic quality of the work as a reminder of ‘our deepest primal fears, darkness, and the separation of body and spirit’ (Viola: 15).

Whilst *Anthem*, which adapts a form of the ritual sound to critique modern day living, creates a feeling of trepidation, Janet Cardiff’s *Forty-Part Motet* (2001) engulfs the audience in the exhibition space to generate a feeling of transcendence. The work is an audio installation, a recording of Thomas Tallis’s 1575 composition *Spem in Alium* performed by forty Cathedral Choir singers in Salisbury Cathedral. Exhibited first in the Rideau Chapel at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottowa, and in 2011 at the Fabrica Gallery, a church conversion in Brighton in the United Kingdom, visitors experienced the work within a building associated with worship. Forty speakers were installed on stands at a similar height as an average person of approximately 168 centimetres. They were divided into eight groups of five with each group composed of four male voices (base, baritone, alto, and tenor), and one of children’s voices. The piece commenced with muted conversations between the performers before the music intensified constructing both a human and divine world (Christov-Bakargiev 2003: 139-147). A live performance was thus substituted by a recording of the choir and played in the gallery setting repeatedly, where the audience was mobile and able to experience the music from various locations.

The presence of the voices in the space (instead of the singers themselves) and a mechanisation of the performance focused the audience’s attention on the music and the building. This aspect of the work is crucial. Albeit located in a religious building, its context as an art installation was secular. The purpose of the visit to the space by the art-viewing audience was also a secular one. The resulting experience generated by the soaring music, however, momentarily created a feeling of transcendence and spatialized the sound until the presence of the speakers and the recording of music returned as a reminder of the virtual nature of the performance.

Similarly, Richard Grayson’s 2009 video installation *The Golden Space City of God*, was a recording of a choral work performed by twenty-six singers. In this case, however, the performance was filmed and projected onto a large screen. It contained a narrative that combined elements from the Book of Revelation with science fiction imagery to describe the events leading up to the end of the world. Chairs placed in the space constructed a setting similar to that of a community hall directly referring to the tendency of cultures to congregate. The artist has described the work as an exploration of ‘current political, cultural, and ideological spheres where both political ideology and enlightenment modellings of the world are increasingly problematized and subsumed by totalizing subjective and supernatural belief systems’ (Grayson, 2009). The use of ritual singing here moves away from Janet Cardiff’s employment of the method to generate a transcendental experience towards a signifier of dominance and power. The power of the collective giving affirmation to organized religious systems through practicing ritual is made political. The presence of the performers in the video further illuminates religious group-ism and mankind’s obsession with Apocalyptic stories and narratives.

These examples present common themes that shape our understanding of the ontology of ritual singing in fine art practices, namely, spatial, spiritual or religious, and political. One other key quality of ritual singing, time, is established through litany or repetition of sounds generated by the human voice. The rhythm of chanting creates pace, which commences the development of a beat (often used in African and Shamanic chants accompanied by drums), or a melody in which the interval between each uttering is as pronounced and crucial as the sound itself.

Marcus Coates employs chanting inspired by Shamanic rituals that are mimetic of animal sounds and birdsongs. Emulating wild animal calls whilst being buried under the turf of deserted moorlands in *Indigenous British Mammals* in 2000 and communicating with animals in a front room of a Liverpool tower block scheduled for demolition in 2004 in *Journey to the Lower World*, his work engages with social issues. In *Journey to the Lower World Coates* dressed in the skin of red deer and performed a series of rituals to an audience of Liverpool tower block residents, such as vacuuming and spitting water on the carpet, followed by emitting whistles, grunts and barks at various intervals. He stops and re-starts the sounds over the course of the journey into the *Lower World*. The work was exhibited in a gallery on split-screens; one, a filming of the performance and the other, the journey made by the artist through the lift of the tower block in a trance-like state (Griffin, 2007).

Marcus Coates’s work does not make an attempt at transferring the viewers into a trance-like state with him. The communion with the animal world through emitting sounds is limited to him, which is filmed and subsequently displayed in the exhibition space. Thus, the viewers perceive two time frames; one, a sense of ‘real’ time as the performance develops, and the other, ‘imagined’ time from the virtual world that unfolds in the journey as narrated by the artist to his audience. The emitting of animal and bird sounds functions as a link between the two time frames and as a phenomenon that performs the role of a threshold for the transference into the imagined space and its time.

*Panda Chant*, composed by Meredith Monk and first performed by twelve members of New World Symphony in 1987, functioned as a litany through the synchronized utterance of the word *Pan-Da*.[[2]](#endnote-2) The chant is accompanied by bold sounds of feet tapping on the floor. The entire piece contains a wide range of notes building up to a crescendo that stops suddenly to create silence. In this piece the bodies of the performers become instruments generating energy through the music between themselves and the audience.

Meredith Monk has described her work performed by groups of people as ritualistic and the vocal sounds produced by the human body as ‘a direct communication’ that deals with ‘a very primary and direct emotion’ (Duckworth 1995: 359). She referred to the metaphysical experience and time in her work in the following words in 1997:

I think Facing North (1990), Volcano Songs, and The Politics of Quiet are all pieces attempting to create a metatheatrical, metaphysical experience for the audience. I have been thinking a lot about how you make a contemporary sacred form. And what would that be? Not a form coming from a particular religious tradition, rather how to make a form that offers an alternative to the fragmented and speedy experience that we have in the world in which we live? How do we get a little rest from that? What is the function of live performance now? (Cunningham, Monk and Jones 1998: 77).

She continues to explain that she aims to offer her audiences a meditative experience and respite from discursive thought. She makes an attempt to slow down time, which is highly evident in *Panda Chant*. Through the use of abstract sounds, the work creates a pace and rhythm, which repeats, alters and repeats yet again. In moving away from the use of interpretive language that can elicit discourse and thought, the chants generate the experience of being in a state of mind akin to meditation. Furthermore, the chanting is followed by silence and stillness, and offers a sense of suspended time.

Whilst *Ganesh circa, 1900* also creates a meditative environment in its exhibition space, it, however, considers the cyclical nature of time, within which death is followed by re-birth and where the passage of time does not lead to eternal destruction. Created for the museum setting and displayed amidst collections, the video aims to critique the practices of curating objects of worship and the conservation of Hindu deities in the museum for longevity. A three-dimensional image of *Ganesh* is witnessed dissolving gradually in an upturned vitrine (see Figure 1). The work alludes to the annual *Ganesh* festival, a celebration of life, death and re-birth. Communities worship an image of the deity for nine days during the festive period and on the tenth day, they immerse the form in a natural body of water (see Figure 2).

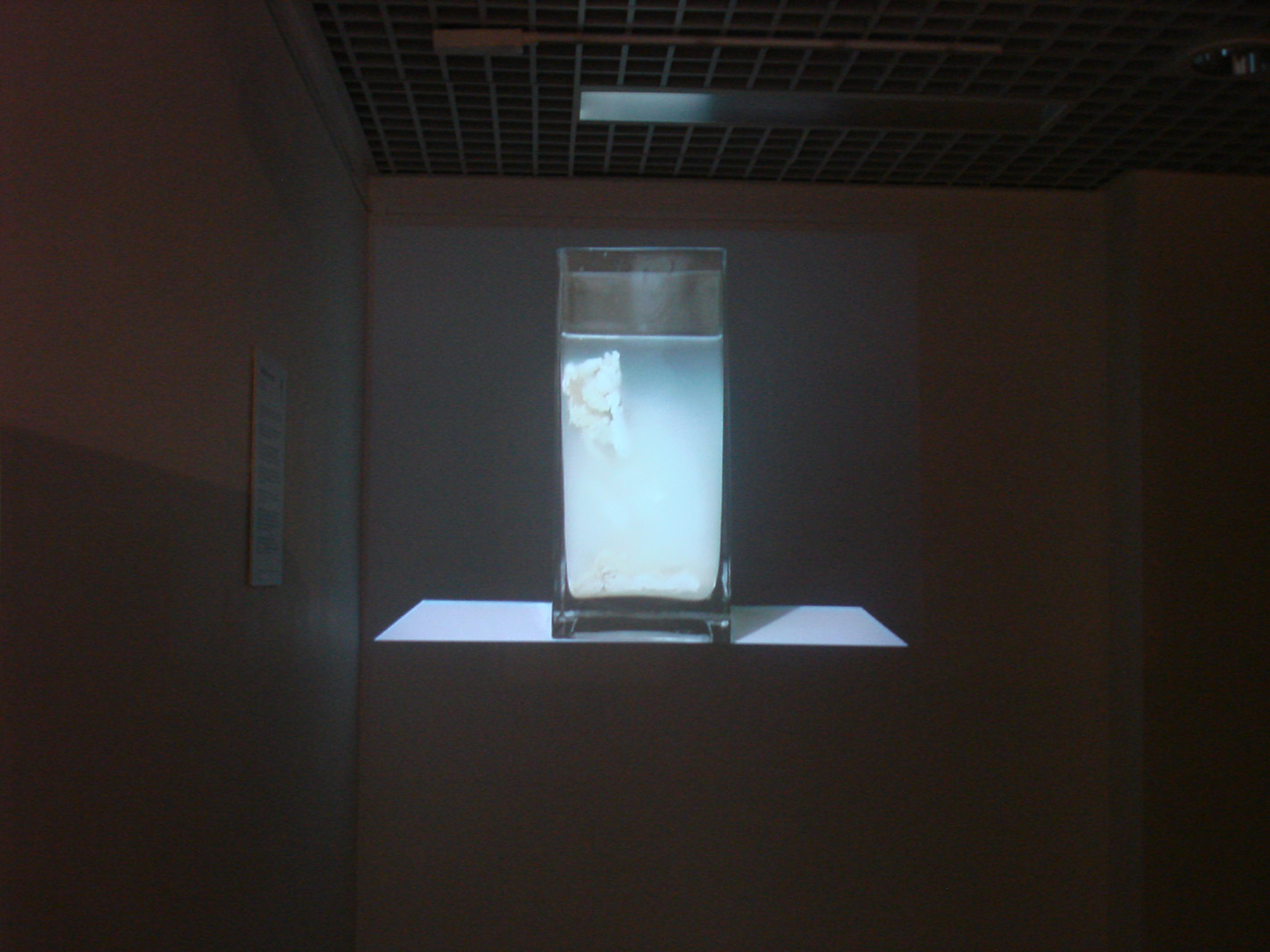


Figure 1: *Ganesh, circa 1900*, video projection, Space ‘C’ Gallery, Croydon Museum, Croydon. Photograph taken by the Author



Figure 2: *Ganesh* immersion in the sea after nine days of festivities, Southend-on-Sea, Essex, 2009. Photograph taken by Fran Wilde.

I performed the ritual of the immersion of the deity in water and filmed its gradual dissolution. The soundtrack in the video is my chanting of the mantra *Om*. Amonosyllabic *mantra,* *Om* is believed to be a powerful sound symbolising the cosmos. Its visual depiction, the letter *Om*, when deconstructed, reveals five elements that are ever-present in the universe: water, fire, earth, ether, and wind. It is always chanted at the beginning and/or at the end of all other mantras: simple or complex.

The dissolved *Ganesh* is subsequently viewed being re-created in the glass container in the video. The renewal of the universe, which contains the five elements, is depicted through the repetition of image and sound wherein the form of the image changes, but the rhythm of the chant remains constant. The ritualistic sound in the work does not function as an accompaniment; it adds a vital dimension and meaning to the moving image. Thus, whilst time is speeded up in the image, the mantra is used as a tool to create a feeling of constancy and infinite time, directly contrasting with the linear quality of museological time, within which artefacts have a finite material existence, a beginning, middle and an end.

The role of ritual singing in art shifts between the creation of transcendental and meditative experiences, to a critique of its origins in religion and covers a range of positions that engage with cultural, political and institutional issues. Its associations with past and present religious and belief systems and cultures have an affect on the subjectivities of the audiences, however, they result in experiences that do not fulfil the functions of ritual singing as carried out in their original contexts – an affirmation of a belief system.

**RITUAL SINGING AND THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**

Research in the anthropology of ritual practice, and in particular, ritual singing and music-offerings provide accounts of ritual practices that externalize belief and establish conformity to social norms (Killius 2006; Merriam and Merriam 1964). Anthropologist Jennifer L. Dornan takes an experience/embodied approach for an understanding of the relationships between individuals and their cultures in her article *Beyond Belief.* The work, which aims to assess the role of rituals in maintaining state-level religious systems, considers the subjective experiences of individuals during the performance of religious rituals (Dornan, 2004).

The focus here will be on Dornan’s study of these individual experiences, which she has carried out through the employment of cultural phenomenological and cultural neuro-phenomenological approaches. It is crucial to address the research in this article, as it will assist in formulating an understanding of the nature of the ritual experience in religion for a comparison with the experience of ritual singing within the context of fine art.

Dornan discusses the interconnectedness between belief and experience, and refers to anthropologist Raymond Firth’s view which points out the element of emotion in any form of religious experience as important as it gives ‘the basis to the belief [and provides] it with a strong flavour of reality’ (1996 cited in Dornan 2004: 26). Rituals function as both symbolic performances of the belief, and as a mediating factor between shared beliefs and subjective experiences. Dornan takes this thought further and investigates the ways in which shared cultural experiences are mediated through the body, and refers to Thomas Csordas’s body/embodiment approach in order to understand the nature of religious experiences (1990 cited in Dornan 2004).

Csordas describes the body as a biological entity and the concept of embodiment as an indeterminate field of process defined through the perception of, and engagement with the world. One of the ways in which the world is perceived (apart from cognitively), is through ‘culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others’ (Csordas cited in Dornan: 27). The performance of rituals is a series of embodied actions, explains Csordas. He describes them as patterning of bodily religious experiences and through which shared experiences and meanings are constructed and defined. Ritual actions and experiences are thus developed through an embodied engagement with the world and through ‘culturally encouraged shifting somatic modes of attention to particular aspects of our bodies’ (Csordas cited in Dornan: 18).

Dornan continues to take a phenomenological view on the topic, and turns to cultural neuro-phenomenology, which draws upon the relationships between cognition, consciousness, experience, embodiment, and culture. She examines the role of neuro-physical organisations in providing an insight into shared experiences in religions and draws attention to evidence found in Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) research, of a neurological effect during a religious experience. It indicates that the region of the brain that distinguishes between ‘the self’ and ‘the other’, stops functioning, which has been analysed as a signification of a communion with the cosmos or God (Dornan: 28).

This evidence calls into question the very nature of a ritualistic experience and whether it is universal as a result of its affect on the human body or culturally mediated. Dornan states, ‘…these experiences can be viewed as the phenomenological starting point in pre-objectified experiences that are then individually and culturally mediated’ (Dornan: 28). This discourse leads to the notion that the human body is biologically pre-conditioned to respond to religious/godly/spiritual experiences. Solo or collective ritual singing within a religious system could then be described as cultural mediators and situations for the accessing of these experiences, rather than as pure forms of vocal expression. The mechanisms to experience union with God or the universe through the music, thus, become tacit knowledge for individuals within the belief systems. The self-evident question raised by this argument is – how do the multi-cultural art audiences relate to and access the spiritual qualities of ritual singing in the aforementioned examples of artists’ works?

**RITUAL SINGING, TIME AND EXPERIENCE**

Before the factors that affect listeners of ritual singing in the context of fine art are examined, aspects other than biological constitution that might cause a cross-cultural understanding of the ritual sound need addressing.

Ethnomusicologists have turned to the works of sociologists Arjun Appadurai and James Clifford to better understand the universality of traditional forms of music. Ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice refers to the de-territorialisation of cultures that causes groups of people to be linked for certain periods of time due to shared belief systems, experience of the world, behaviours, tastes, and social status, rather than shared ethnicities (Rice 2003: 152). He posits that the modern world system obliterates the concept of societies and cultures as they have been traditionally understood. He refers to Clifford’s 1997 work *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, which focuses on *routes* rather than *roots*, on travel rather than dwelling and the encounters that take place in the process (1997 cited in Rice 2003: 153). Whilst this theory is a generalized one, it channels the discussion towards shared experiences of music amongst individuals of distant cultures. An investigation of the element of time in its different forms in ritual singing, and Heidegger’s phenomenological concepts of ‘Becoming’ and ‘Being’ allow for the development of an understanding of the methods in which art audiences access the spiritual and emotional qualities of the singing.

Viewers of Bill Viola’s *Anthem* are left with a feeling of intense emotion, whereas Marcus Coates’s video leads them into the ‘Lower World' with the artist. The combination of image and sound certainly contribute towards these experiences and emotions. In works such as *Panda Chant* and *Forty-Part Motet*, however, the experience of the singing voices without constructed visuals, lead the listeners towards similar intense emotions that are described as meditative or transcendental. The characteristics of time implicit in the music in the artworks – extended, fast, suspended, linear, and non-linear are experienced and have the potential to be understood by the listeners. Jonathan D. Kramer has referred to musical time as being unique. He has posited ‘if we believe in time that exists uniquely in music, then we begin to glimpse *the power of music to create, alter, distort, or even destroy time itself, not simply our experience of it*’ (Kramer 1988: 5). Kramer has described music as a series of events that both contain time and shape it. The role of time in music is key to understand musical experience, as, he states it is the ‘ordering principle of experience’ and ‘Time is a *relationship* between people and the events they perceive’ (Kramer: 5).

Kramer turns to Thomas Clifton’s analysis of time in music which posits ordinary lived time as the time a piece of music ‘takes’ and musical time as the time the music ‘presents’ and ‘evokes’ (Clifton 1985 cited in Kramer 1988: 7). The experience and understanding of ordinary time and musical time can occur simultaneously, causing one to lose the distinction between the two. Moreover, deep listening, ‘allows us to transcend the time the piece takes and enter the time it evokes’ (De Selincourt 1920 cited in Kramer 1988: 7).

Music consists of linear and non-linear time through which a structural knowledge of the co-existing elements of music and time lead to an understanding of its phenomenology. Kramer defines linear and non-linear time thus:

Let is identify linearity as *the determination of some characteristic(s) of music in accordance with implications that arise from earlier events of the piece.* Thus linearity is processive. Nonlinearity, on the other hand, is nonprocessive. It is *the determination of some characteristic(s) of music in accordance with implications that arise from principles to tendencies governing an entire piece or section.* (Kramer: 20)

The experience of linearity in a ritual song, for instance, is governed by its tonal composition and as it develops, it is understood and remembered based on prior experiences of the piece. Linearity offers an experience of a series of events and ever-changing implications. The increasing tempo in *Panda Chant* and the changing beats through the course of the piece followed by a sudden silence offers one a linear experience of the music. Non-linearity, Kramer adds, is a less familiar concept in western cultures within which language is linear. While the principles of the piece would be revealed gradually, they are not based or built upon on earlier principles. He offers the example of a composition for a string quartet, which is scored for four string instruments as a non-linear piece. Non-linear musical time is abstract, it does not grow or change and does not contain a progressive narrative. It ‘implies permanence’ (Kramer: 21).

As a monosyllabic mantra, *Om* functions on the principle of non-linearity. The chanting of *Om* is endless and unanchored. It does not have a beginning, nor an end. *Ganesh, circa 1900* plays with linear lived time through the gradual processes of dissolution and re-creation, whilst simultaneously offering the experience of non-linear time through the mantra. The repetition of the image as a result of the looping video, however, elicits an overall experience of non-linearity and a phenomenon rather than a narrative with a beginning, middle and an end. Richard Grayson’s choral piece in *The Golden Space City of God* and Janet Cardiff’s *Forty-Part Motet* indicate a progression that is harmonious, rhythmic and led by the voice leading to a goal or cadence that is more or less predictable. By contrast, Marcus Coates’s emitting of feral sounds and birdsongs is unpredictable, thematic, and functional. The narrative to the piece is provided by the image, as is the case with *Anthem*.

The linear or non-linear experiences of ritual singing, thus, obliterate the limitations of belonging to certain cultures and belief systems. The response to the song becomes a subjective or an individual one, based on the experience of the proportions and duration of the music. The revealing of these to individuals leads this discourse towards the phenomenological thought of Dasein, Becoming and Being, and can be found in moving image and sound theory.

Scholar of Cultural Studies Gabrielle Hezekiah has provided an insight into the phenomenology of moving image and sound. She has compared three experimental videos made by Trinidadian filmmaker Robert Yao Ramesar by assimilating the phenomenological positions of philosophers Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty (Hezekiah, 2010). One of the videos examined by Hezekiah *Journey to Ganga Mai*, is a filming of a series of rituals performed on the banks of the river Ganga. She draws upon the concept of Heidegger’s Dasein (being there) and its openness to the possibilities of the future due to its very nature of being ‘the entity I myself am in each instance’ (Kisiel, 2002: 53). The worshippers chant *Om Namah Sivaya* as the rituals progress in each frame of the video. The sound here, states Hezekiah, is vectorized, causing a feeling of movement or progression towards the future. The chanting, however, repeats, and the scenes of rituals with the flowing river as the backdrop offer a sense of continuum as well as timelessness. The chanting is incantatory and produces a dream-like state (Hezekiah: 67). At this stage, the viewers are drawn into the scene and become part of the events, when suddenly a boy aims a camera at the filmmaker and takes a picture, making the viewers conscious of their position as outsiders.

The sound and image create a sense of time and a distinction between past, present, and future, and heighten the feeling of ‘being there’. The ritualistic singing in *Journey to Ganga Mai* presents the feeling of removal from temporality or durational time, obscures any distractions and ‘opens up the possibility of recurring, indivisible time’ (Hezekiah: 69).

Similarly, Heidegger has discussed the concept of transcendence, which is associated with religious experiences, in relation to temporality, within which past, present, and the future unify within the Dasein in the world. He has argued that the process is not one of extra-worldly experience, rather a process through which the meaning of being or existing is made intelligible. Transcendence, ultimately, is not being outside the world but a unity with oneself.

**CONCLUSION**

Evocation of emotion through listening to ritual singing posits two explanations: 1) prior experience of the ritual song and a triggering of memory to produce recurring emotion; 2) the physical characteristics of the song (such as tone and rhythm) composed to generate a particular type of emotion. The latter situation prompts the question if the ritual sound generates the particular emotion in the composer, which subsequently enters the chosen treatise of the piece.

Ritual singing in the religious context or within a belief system is employed as a method to articulate the abstract concept of ‘being with God’ and in phenomenological terms, being one with the self. Ritual singing employed by artists in their art practices, too, can generate a feeling of transcendence in the audiences. It, however, functions as a method of revealing the underpinning concepts or the critique undertaken in the artworks. The voice used to emit particular types of sounds becomes the material in the making of the work, a tool for expression, and lastly as a metaphoric device. The sounds generated locate the work and construct a narrative for the viewer as found in Bill Viola’s *Anthem.* The young girl’s piercing scream followed by primordial vocal sounds in seven scales, generates an emotive response that allows the viewer/listener to interpret the work. This emotional response, essential for a complete experience of the work, becomes a crucial part of the work, rather than as a result or a mode of reception. Similarly, it was my intention to create a meditative atmosphere through the chanting of *Om* in *Ganesh, circa 1900*. The experience of non-linear time and the underpinning quality of permanence gave meaning to the work. It was a method of allowing the audience to understand the dialectic of deterioration and conservation in the museum setting through experiencing two time frames in one location.

Thus, are artists using ritual singing as a mechanism to return to primordial realities to review, question and ultimately critique contemporary living? This being different to using the ritual song as representational or metaphorical, it is a retreat into historical time or into alternative realities to acquire new perspectives on the present. By slipping into Marcus Coates’s *Lower World*, the viewers begin to view their own *real* world from the position of the animal world. Through the experience of the *Forty-Part Motet*, the virtual singers in a cathedral-like setting, and the whispering of the choir members, the focus of the listeners of the piece shift between ordinary lived time and musical times, offering a distorted view of reality, as pointed out by the artist herself.

Thus, the very nature of ritual singing and its associations with past and present religious systems, world cultures, and belief systems, allow for its adaptation in visual arts to depict different modes of time offering a non-chronological understanding of the world and its realities. For instance, ancient shamanic rituals co-existed with the ordinary lived time in the Liverpool tower block as experienced by the residents. The impending demolition of the building simultaneously projected the attention of the audience towards the fate of the residents into the future. The choral performance in *The Golden Space City of God* lead the audience towards the experience of a religious ritual, which is short-lived as the narrative of the fate of the earth unfolds with the lyrics. The tone of the song is predictable, however, its meaning transports the audience to an unexpected futuristic place, far removed from the memory of the ritual experience.

In *Anthem*, the experience of time shifts between the linear and non-linear frameworks. As the images of the industrial world and the mechanisation of human existence reveal themselves, a narrative begins to unfold. This is interspersed with the image of the lone girl standing in the vast chamber of the Station bringing back the focus to the one image, emphasising the vulnerability of the human being, and simultaneously creating a sense of suspended time. Thus, repetitive ritualistic singing in art allows for a juxtaposition of multiple time frames. It has the capacity to exaggerate the end of time and fear of death or the permanence of time. The components of image and the exhibition further add to the experience of the ritual song and the construction of meaning.

Ritualistic singing in religious and belief systems is implicitly phenomenological and experience-led. The very de-contextualisation from the setting and re-contextualisation into the visual arts intensifies both its meaning and experience. Therefore, the ritual song in the secular art space can generate emotions similar to those experienced by performers of the ritual in a religious setting without aiming to validate a shared cosmological belief.

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1. **NOTES**

   *Ganesh, circa 1900* was exhibited in the Croydon Clocktower as part of the exhibition *From Shrine to Plinth*, 26 July-4 September 2008. Croydon Clocktower houses the Croydon Museum, a social history museum tracing the history of Croydon. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. To view a video of the performance of the *Panda Chant* in Guildford Concert Hall, United Kingdom, visit [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). Accessed 15 January 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)