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Research Article

Body Narratives and Identity Construction in Asian Performance Art across Cultural Contexts

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Abstract

Asian performance art has become increasingly visible in transnational exhibition circuits, yet scholarship on it remains divided between single-artist monographs and region-bound surveys, leaving few instruments for reading such work comparatively across the contexts in which it is received. This article proposes the concept of double legibility: the performing body in cross-cultural circulation must signify at once within a local semiotic economy of ritual, kinship, language and historical memory, and within a transnational curatorial economy that has inherited habits of reading Asian bodies as ethnographic evidence. The body carries inherited material of its own; what the two regimes govern is not whether that material exists but what it is taken to mean. Identity in this situation is produced relationally, in the distance between the two readings. The article develops a three-axis analytical framework of inscription, transmission and negotiation, sets out diagnostic criteria for applying it, and demonstrates the coding procedure on a worked example. It is applied comparatively to four works: Kimsooja's *A Needle Woman*, Melati Suryodarmo's *Exergie: Butter Dance*, Amanda Heng's *Let's Walk*, and Anida Yoeu Ali's *The Buddhist Bug*. The analysis finds that the artists' most consequential decisions are made on the third axis, where the terms of reception are anticipated rather than accepted. A final section examines what happens to the body narrative once its record enters digital circulation. What the four cases demonstrate and what the framework hypothesises for the wider field are distinguished throughout.

Keywords

Performance art, Asian contemporary art, Body narrative, Identity construction, Cross-cultural reception, Performance documentation

1. Introduction

In the exhibition circuits of the past two decades the Asian performing body has been unusually visible and unusually overdetermined. It appears in biennial pavilions, in museum retrospectives of live art, and in the documentation economies that both sustain and replace live work, and it arrives into interpretive conditions it did not set. As Jones (2021) argues of the wider global art complex, the international exhibition apparatus does not simply display difference; it produces a competitive economy in which identity claims are solicited, ranked and consumed. For an artist performing across cultural contexts this is the practical situation in which a gesture is made.

Scholarship has addressed this situation in two dominant modes. The first is the monographic study of a single artist or work, which produces interpretive depth but yields no transferable instrument. The second is the exhibition-historical or regional survey, which maps a field but tends to treat cross-context circulation as a setting rather than a constitutive condition. Between them sits a gap: no widely used framework compares how different practices manage being read twice, in two incompatible registers, at the same moment.

This article proposes such a framework, built on the claim that Asian performance art operating across cultural contexts is structured by double legibility. The performing body remains legible within a local semiotic economy of ritual vocabulary, kinship and gendered convention, inherited gesture, language and historical memory. It must simultaneously become legible within a transnational curatorial economy whose interpretive habits, as Vikram (2022) demonstrates in her account of the orientalist residues shaping the reception of Chinese American art during the pandemic, remain shaped by older ethnographic protocols. The two economies do not converge, and the artist's decisive material is the management of the distance between them.

Two research questions organise the study. First, through what formal means do these works make cultural difference visible, and what does each means cost the work, in exposure to typification and in interpretive control surrendered? Second, by what strategies do such works act upon the conditions of their own reception? These questions rest on an assumption worth stating. Most accounts of identity in performance treat reception as what happens to a work after it is made. If instead the anticipated reading is a material the artist works with, formal decisions and reception conditions cannot be analysed separately, and the pressing question is not what the body signifies but what the work does to the terms on which it will be read. The questions are posed in this order because the first establishes what is at stake in visibility and the second asks how the works respond.

1.1. Methodological position

The methodological contribution claimed here precedes the interpretive one, and stating it early clarifies what the rest of the article does. Three strands of performance scholarship are mobilised. From

work on the contingency of the performance record (Kaźmierczak, 2021; Kristberga, 2025) the study takes the premise that documentation is an interpretive construction rather than a transparent trace, so that any analysis built on records must declare the status of its evidence. From work on diasporic and racialised embodiment (Lee & Kim, 2021; Yim, 2023; Sutherland, 2025) it takes the premise that the body carries material the written archive does not hold, and that reading such material responsibly requires marking where interpretation exceeds documentation. From exhibition-historical scholarship (Hopfener, 2023; Park, 2023) it takes the premise that curatorial framing is generative rather than descriptive.

Each strand has produced close readings of singular material; none has produced an instrument that travels between cases. The contribution attempted here is to convert their shared insight, that meaning is produced in the conditions of reading rather than carried into them, into a coded comparative procedure with stated evidentiary criteria. Double legibility is a relational condition rather than a regional one, and this requires unpacking. The condition is defined by the relation between two reading situations, not by the cultural origin of the artist. A relation cannot be examined in a single instance, because a single instance supplies only one of its terms and the analyst must then supply the other by assumption. Comparison is therefore not a presentational convenience but the minimum condition for observing the object at all.

2. Literature Review

The two tendencies named above are visible across the clusters reviewed here. Vikram (2022) and Mulyono (2022) are single-artist studies of exactly the depth the monographic mode produces; Hopfener (2023) and Park (2023) are exhibition-historical studies of exactly the reach the survey mode produces. Neither mode is deficient. What neither supplies is a procedure for comparison.

2.1. Body narrative and the performing subject

Recent work has recovered the body as a narrative instrument rather than a site of expression. Sutherland (2025) treats performance as knowledge sharing that operates outside monumental and archival custody, addressing histories that official commemorative forms encode selectively or not at all. Chouati (2025), through a dialogue with the photographer Hicham Benohoud, shows the body becoming at once an object of institutional power and an instrument of resistance, a doubleness registered in the image rather than resolved by it. Yim (2023) reads Korean American family photographs for a racialised embodiment neither wholly documented nor wholly recoverable, proposing speculation as a legitimate operation when the archive is partial.

These accounts converge on the claim that the conditions of looking belong to the work rather than to its surroundings. They diverge on what follows methodologically. Yim (2023) treats the gap in the record as licence for speculative reconstruction. Chouati (2025) works from a sustained primary source

and keeps interpretation tethered to the artist's own account. Sutherland (2025) locates authority in the performance event and treats the document as secondary. The disagreement concerns where interpretive warrant comes from, and it is unresolved. The present study takes a position on it in Section 4 rather than leaving it implicit, which is where it departs from all three.

2.2. Diaspora, hybridity and identity construction

A second cluster addresses identity as constructed rather than possessed. Lee and Kim (2021) apply Bhabha's account of hybridity to body art made in diasporic conditions, arguing that the diasporic body generates a third space neither culture fully authorises. Pan (2022) shows that in the practices of the Chinese women diaspora, cultural identity and gender modernity are negotiated in one operation. Furmanik-Kowalska (2023) asks at what point an inherited religious vocabulary deployed before an international audience ceases to be transmission and becomes kitsch.

That question marks the cluster's fault line. Lee and Kim (2021) treat hybridity as a generative position; Furmanik-Kowalska (2023) treats the same position as exposed to a reading the artist cannot control. The difference is the difference between a cultural formation and a reception risk. The distinction between transmission and kitsch is not a property of the vocabulary but of the reading, and the reading is performed by an audience whose competence the artist cannot verify in advance. The cluster supplies the apparatus of construction and hybridity, but it describes the artist's position more often than the artist's tactics, and it treats reception as the context a work is placed in rather than a force already shaping its composition.

2.3. Exhibition politics and the orientalism debate

A third cluster addresses the institutional frame. Hopfener (2023) argues that narratives of contemporary Chinese art as global art are substantially artefacts of exhibition history. Park (2023), reconstructing the presence of Asian artists at the 1993 Venice Biennale, shows how decisively a single exhibition can install a temporal frame that later scholarship inherits. Wang (2021) analyses the China Pavilion to show folk cultural material mobilised to reposition Chineseness. Bao (2022) demonstrates that curatorial framing can produce the very legibility it claims merely to present. Sharma and Kinsizer (2026) propose reorienting orientalism as a strategy of working on the frame rather than escaping it. Jones (2021) supplies the structural argument beneath these: an art complex in which ethnic difference circulates as competitive capital.

Convergence here is strong, since all five treat the frame as productive. Disagreement concerns agency. For Jones (2021) the economy is structural and the artist's room for manoeuvre correspondingly small; for Sharma and Kinsizer (2026) the frame is workable material. The cluster has not resolved this, in part because it reads institutions rather than works, and so positions the artist as the object of framing rather than as an agent who anticipates it. This article occupies that gap by treating anticipated reception

as a formal element of the work, which also puts the disagreement on empirical footing: Section 5 asks what, in four specific cases, the artist was able to do.

3. Double Legibility: A Conceptual Framework

Double legibility names a condition, not a strategy. A work circulating across cultural contexts is subject to two reading regimes that operate at once and do not reconcile. The local regime reads the body through ritual vocabulary, inherited gesture, kinship and gendered convention, language, and the sedimented memory of particular events; within it a gesture may be a citation whose meaning depends on recognition. The transnational regime reads through interpretive habits formed in the history of ethnographic display and consolidated in the biennial; within it the same gesture tends to be received as evidence of origin. Jones (2021) describes the economy that rewards the second reading, and Vikram (2022) documents its persistence.

The two regimes are better described as two different objects of attention than as competing interpretations of one. The artist's position is not between them but within the distance they open, and identity is the shape the work gives that distance.

Three axes make the configuration analysable. Inscription concerns how cultural difference is made visible on and through the body: dress and undress, skin, duration, endurance and pain, stillness, gendered and ethnic markers. Transmission concerns what non-archival memory the body carries and re-enacts: inherited gesture vocabularies, ritual citation, migration and intergenerational memory, the choice of language. Negotiation concerns how the work acts upon the conditions of its own reception: venue and framing, audience address, titling, documentation strategy, and the governance of circulation and re-performance. Bacci (2021) establishes that museum design is itself an interpretive instrument, so venue is never a neutral container, and Hopfener (2023), Wang (2021) and Bao (2022) establish that curatorial framing is generative rather than descriptive.

Applying the framework requires criteria for deciding when each term is in play. Three diagnostic questions, each with an evidentiary threshold, are used throughout.

(a) Local regime. Does the work incorporate material whose meaning depends on recognition by a specific, identifiable community of viewers? The threshold is a named practice, language, site or historical reference attested in an artist statement or in secondary scholarship, not an inference from the artist's nationality.

(b) Transnational regime. Has the work been presented in at least one institutional context in which that recognition cannot be assumed, and is there documentary evidence of how it was framed there? The threshold is a specific venue with its accompanying curatorial or critical text, not a generalisation about international audiences.

(c) Negotiation. Is there a formal feature of the work explicable as a response to the discrepancy

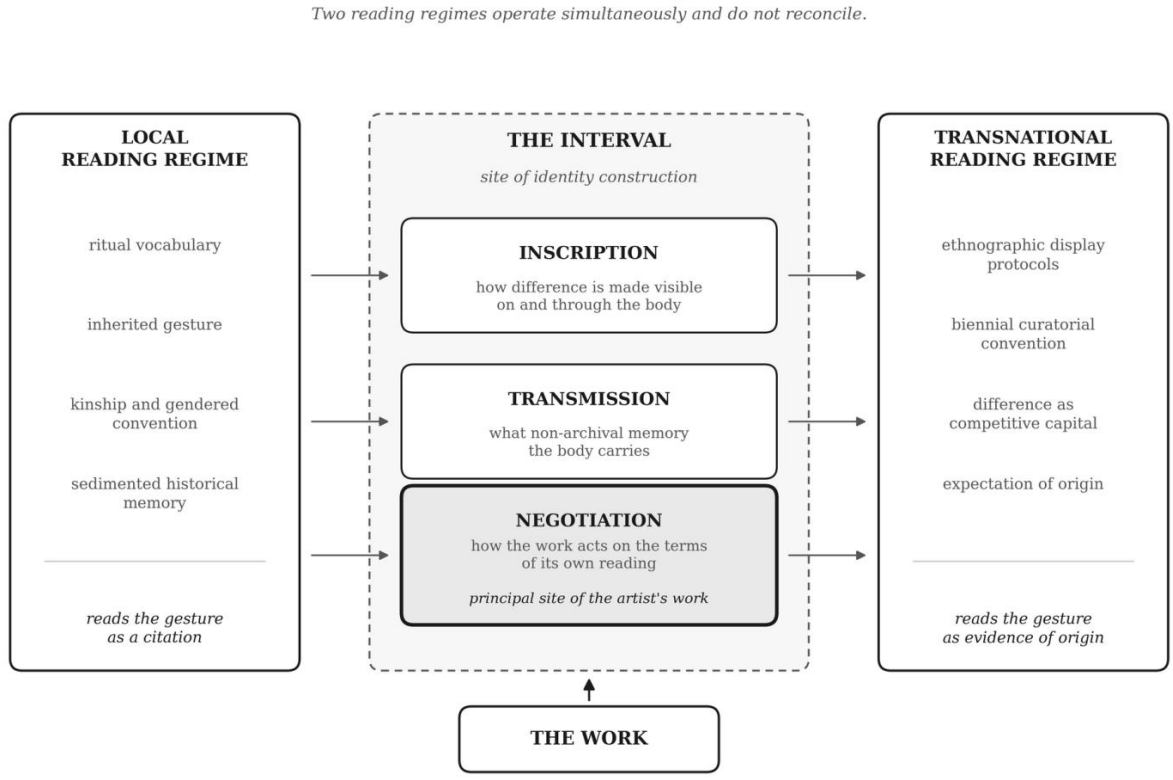
between (a) and (b), and redundant if only one regime were in play? The threshold is a structural feature such as serial form, choice of idiom, mode of address or documentation strategy, rather than an attributed intention.

A work satisfying (a) and (b) operates under double legibility; a work satisfying all three is also negotiating it. The distinction matters because the article's claim concerns the third condition, and the third condition is the one that can fail.

Two clarifications follow. Double legibility is not a synonym for hybridity: hybridity describes a cultural formation, double legibility a reception structure, and an artist of no hybrid formation may work under double legibility the moment a work crosses contexts. Nor does the framework assume conscious strategy. The claim is formal rather than psychological, established from the work rather than from the artist's intentions, with artist statements used as corroboration where available. Figure 1 sets out the framework.

Figure 1

The double legibility framework



Note. The two reading regimes are represented as non-intersecting interpretive fields. The work enters the distance between them, where the three axes operate. Axes are analytically distinct but empirically overlapping, and a single formal decision may load onto two at once. The diagram is schematic and is not derived from any single work.

4. Sources and Method

The study is a qualitative multiple-case comparison. Four works were selected against four criteria: the work is a body-based performance rather than a performative installation; it has been presented or circulated in at least two substantially different cultural contexts; documentation and artist statements are publicly available in sufficient quantity for close reading; and the four together span East, Southeast and diasporic Asia, so that the category Asian is not silently narrowed to East Asian. The resulting set comprises Kimsooja's *A Needle Woman*, Melati Suryodarmo's *Exergie: Butter Dance*, Amanda Heng's *Let's Walk*, and Anida Yoeu Ali's *The Buddhist Bug*.

The corpus for each case consists of four source types: performance documentation in video and still image; artist statements and interviews; curatorial essays and exhibition texts; and published critical reception. Mulyono (2022) is used as a secondary source on Suryodarmo, providing an account of the interaction between Javanese cultural formation and Western contemporary art training that is not available in the English-language literature.

Because the analysis reads records rather than events, every substantive claim in Section 5 is assigned one of three evidentiary tiers, and the tier is marked in the prose. Tier 1 claims are grounded in an artist statement or other primary source. Tier 2 claims are grounded in secondary scholarship. Tier 3 claims are the present author's reading of the visual documentation and are introduced with an explicit marker. Tier 3 claims are not weaker in kind, but they are the claims for which a reader is entitled to see the reasoning, and they are therefore stated together with the feature that prompted them.

Coding proceeded deductively from the three axes, with sub-codes developed inductively in a first pass and stabilised in a second, and treats visual documentation as systematically codeable material rather than as illustration. Si (2026), mapping the spatial and temporal evolution of imagery in Tang poetry through computer vision and geographic information systems, demonstrates the gains available when a corpus of cultural images is handled as structured data. The present study does not compute, but it borrows the discipline of an explicit scheme applied uniformly across cases. Table 1 sets out that scheme.

Table 1

Three-axis coding scheme

Axis	Sub-code	Coded features
Inscription	Visibility	dress and undress, skin, ethnic and gendered markers
	Duration	length, repetition, endurance, stillness
	Cost	pain, exhaustion, risk of failure
Transmission	Citation	ritual reference, inherited gesture vocabulary

	Memory	migration, intergenerational and historical reference
	Language	spoken language, title language, silence
Negotiation	Frame	venue, curatorial context, accompanying text
	Address	audience role, participation, direction of gaze
	Record	documentation strategy, circulation, re-performance

Note. Sub-codes were developed inductively in a first coding pass and applied uniformly across all four cases in a second pass.

Table 2 shows the procedure in operation on one case, so that the relationship between particular sources, particular coding decisions and particular inferences can be inspected rather than taken on trust.

Table 2

Worked coding example: Exergie: Butter Dance

Source	Coded feature	Sub-code	Inference	Tier
Video documentation	formal dress, high heels, repeated falling	Inscription / Visibility, Cost	inscription is maximal and carries physical cost	3
Mulyono (2022)	Javanese formation alongside Western art training	Transmission / Citation	trained endurance is present as inherited material	2
Artist statements on durational practice	work conceived in durational terms	Negotiation / Frame	the European durational idiom is selected, not default	1
European exhibition and critical reception	reception emphasises endurance, not Javanese reference	Negotiation / Frame	the selected idiom steers the reading away from the ethnographic	2
Absence of surface marking	no citation legible to a local viewer	Transmission / Citation (negative case)	the tactic costs legibility in the local regime	3

Note. Tier 1 denotes a claim grounded in a primary source, Tier 2 a claim grounded in secondary scholarship, Tier 3 the present author's reading of the visual documentation. The negative case in the final row is discussed in Section 5.3.

Trustworthiness was pursued by three means. Source triangulation required any coded feature to be supported by at least two of the four source types. Negative-case attention required features contradicting the emerging pattern to be recorded rather than set aside, and Section 5.3 reports one such instance. An audit trail linking each cell of Table 3 to its supporting sources was maintained and is available on request.

Two limitations bear on everything that follows. The analysis reads records, not events: Kaźmierczak (2021) argues that performance art documentation is contingent and partly fictional,

constructed through framing decisions that are themselves interpretive acts, and Kristberga (2025) shows how thoroughly the record shapes what can subsequently be said about the work. Four cases cannot support generalisation to Asian performance art as a field. The analysis establishes what these four works do; the framework is offered as a hypothesis to be tested against further cases, not as a description of the field.

5. Analysis

The analysis is organised by axis rather than by artist, so that comparison operates horizontally and the four works remain in contact throughout.

5.1. Inscription: making difference visible and paying for it

A Needle Woman, begun in 1999, is a video series in which Kimsooja stands motionless, seen from behind, in the crowded streets of successive cities, among them Tokyo, Shanghai, Delhi, New York, Mexico City, Cairo, Lagos and London. Inscription is minimal. The back of the head withholds the face, the primary surface on which ethnic legibility is ordinarily read, and what remains is a still vertical form against horizontal movement. On my reading of the documentation, the work does not decline visibility but relocates it, transferring the burden of difference from the artist's features to the relation between her stillness and each city's motion.

Exergie: Butter Dance, first performed in 2000, takes the opposite route. Suryodarmo, in a black dress and high heels, dances on slabs of butter to percussion, falls, rises and falls again. Inscription here is maximal and it is expensive: the body is marked as feminine, as formally dressed, as subject to gravity and to repeated public failure. Mulyono (2022) locates in Suryodarmo's formation a tension between Javanese cultural background and Western contemporary art education, and the work's structure carries that tension, since a disciplined body performs its own undoing in a European durational idiom.

Let's Walk, first performed in Singapore in 1999, inscribes difference through encumbrance. Heng and her participants walk backwards through public space, a high-heeled shoe held in the mouth, a hand mirror raised to see where they are going. Femininity, class aspiration and the apparatus of self-presentation are rendered as physical impediments. Difference is not displayed on the skin; on my reading it is staged as a constraint on movement.

The Buddhist Bug, an ongoing project begun in 2012, inscribes difference as excess. Ali's saffron-coloured tubular form extends across landscapes, doorways and waterways, exceeding the human outline entirely. The colour cites Buddhist monastic robes while the body inside it is not the body the citation implies, and that mismatch is the point at which the work's identity question opens.

Across the four, inscription operates as a governed quantity rather than a constant. Chouati (2025) shows how the photographed body registers institutional power and resistance to it within a single frame, and Sutherland (2025) shows that what a performance makes visible is often what the official record has

declined to hold. Furmanik-Kowalska (2023) supplies the risk that all four works negotiate: an inherited vocabulary presented to an international audience may be received as cultural depth or as decorative kitsch, and the artist does not control which.

5.2. Transmission: carrying what the archive does not hold

On the second axis the four works carry inherited material that no document records.

Suryodarmo's work transmits a trained relation between body, weight and endurance that Mulyono (2022) locates in Javanese performance formation, and it transmits this at the moment the training fails. The falling is the residue of technique under impossible conditions rather than its absence.

The Buddhist Bug transmits a religious vocabulary and simultaneously displaces it. Its vignettes are sited among everyday scenes in Cambodia, where the saffron citation is immediately recognisable and the artist's Cham Muslim heritage makes that citation visibly ill-fitting. When the project was presented as *Hybrid Skin, Mythical Presence* at the Seattle Asian Art Museum between January and July 2024 (Seattle Art Museum, 2024), the mismatch was no longer available on the same terms, since a viewer who does not read saffron as a monastic sign receives the form as invention rather than as misfit. This is the third space Lee and Kim (2021) describe: not a position between two identities but a form that neither authorises.

Let's Walk transmits generational and linguistic memory. Re-performed in Singapore with different participant groups over two decades, the work addresses viewers for whom the shoe, the mirror and the backwards walk carry specific associations of feminine self-presentation and upward mobility; carried into an international programme, the same objects read more readily as generic feminist properties. Pan (2022) argues that in diasporic women's practice cultural identity and gender modernity are negotiated in a single operation, and the shoe in the mouth is at once a gendered object, a class marker and a gag.

A Needle Woman transmits least explicitly. Because each recording names its city, the local term of the relation is specified within the work rather than supplied by the venue. What the still body carries is a relation to place that is not an inhabitant's, and repeated across cities this becomes a portable condition rather than an origin.

Yim (2023) provides the warrant for reading these transmissions: where the archive is partial, speculative reading is the appropriate operation provided its status is declared. Under the scheme set out in Section 4, the readings in this subsection are Tier 2 for Suryodarmo, Tier 1 and Tier 2 for Ali, and Tier 3 for Kimsooja and for the comparative claim that follows.

In all four works the inherited material appears in a damaged, interrupted or displaced state rather than in successful reproduction. An intact inheritance would be maximally available to ethnographic reading; a damaged one resists conversion into evidence. Transmission here is thus already partly a negotiation tactic, and the axes are correspondingly less independent than their separation in Table 1 implies.

5.3. Negotiation: acting on the conditions of reception

The third axis is where the four works diverge most and where the argument of this article rests.

Kimsooja negotiates through serial relocation. Because *A Needle Woman* exists as a set of city recordings rather than a single event, no individual context can claim to be the work's proper frame, and origin is displaced by repetition. Park (2023) shows how decisively a single international exhibition can install the frame through which Asian artists are subsequently read; the serial structure obstructs that mechanism directly.

Suryodarmo negotiates through idiom. Durational performance with repeated failure is a form the European art institution already knows how to receive. Working within it, the artist obtains a reading that is not primarily ethnographic while the material of the work remains inseparable from her formation. Mulyono (2022) reads this as the consequence of a doubled training; in the terms proposed here it is an anticipatory move on the negotiation axis, in which the frame is selected so as to constrain the reading.

Heng negotiates through address. Because *Let's Walk* invites participation and has been re-performed with different groups in different places, the work redistributes the position of the body under scrutiny, and the spectator who joins cannot occupy the position of the observer of difference. Bacci (2021) argues that museum design is itself an interpretive instrument, and Heng's work makes the point in reverse by operating largely in streets and public space, where the apparatus of interpretation is weaker. Because the work is renewed at each occasion rather than fixed at the first, its negotiation is re-performed along with it.

Ali negotiates through siting and scale. *The Buddhist Bug* is made for landscapes and for photographic circulation, so the artist retains considerable control over the images through which the work is known. At the Seattle Asian Art Museum it was presented as video and photography rather than as live performance (Seattle Art Museum, 2024), which means the institution framed images the artist had composed rather than records made by others. Given that curatorial framing is generative rather than neutral, as Bao (2022) shows in the European exhibition of queer Chinese art and Hopfener (2023) argues for exhibition histories more broadly, controlling the image is a substantive form of authorship. Wang (2021) demonstrates the stakes at the level of the national pavilion.

One case runs against the pattern. Suryodarmo's selection of a durational idiom secures a non-ethnographic reading in European institutional settings, but the same selection reduces the work's legibility in the local regime, where the Javanese formation supplying its material is not marked anywhere on the work's surface. The tactic that protects the work in one regime costs it legibility in the other. This is a specification of the framework rather than a failure of it: the two regimes are not symmetrical, and a gain in one is not automatically a gain in the other. The distance can be shaped, but it cannot be closed.

Table 3 summarises the dominant operation each work performs on each axis.

Table 3

Cross-case comparison across three axes

Work	Inscription	Transmission	Negotiation
Kimsooja, *A Needle Woman*	minimal; face withheld, difference produced relationally	portable relation to place rather than to origin	serial relocation denies any single context the status of frame
Suryodarmo, *Exergie: Butter Dance*	maximal; gendered, formal, repeatedly failing	trained endurance transmitted at the point of its failure	selection of a durational idiom the institution already reads
Heng, *Let's Walk*	encumbrance; femininity staged as impediment	generational and linguistic memory, transmitted through participation	redistributed address; public space over institutional space
Ali, *The Buddhist Bug*	excess; the form exceeds the human outline	religious vocabulary cited and displaced	siting and image control retain authorship over circulation

Note. Cell entries summarise the dominant operation on each axis and are not exhaustive. Axes overlap; entries record where each work's principal decision falls.

The pattern is consistent: in each case the most consequential decision falls on the negotiation axis, and the decisions on the first two axes follow from it. This holds for these four works under the reception conditions described. Whether it holds more widely is the framework's hypothesis rather than its finding.

6. Digital Circulation and the Custody of the Record

Once the performance record enters digital circulation the negotiation axis extends beyond the artist's reach. Kristberga (2025) traces the convergence of performance, photography and archival practice to the point where the record functions as the work for most audiences, and Kaźmierczak (2021) shows that the record is already an interpretive construction before it circulates at all.

The re-framing operates through identifiable mechanisms rather than in general. Cropping removes the relation on which an inscription strategy depends: a still from *Exergie: Butter Dance* separated from its duration becomes a photograph of a woman falling rather than a record of repeated failure. Captioning supplies a frame the artist did not choose, and where no caption is supplied the recommendation context supplies one. Decontextualisation removes the site: a frame of *The Buddhist Bug* separated from its Cambodian siting becomes an exotic object rather than a misfitting citation. Reposting detaches the image from the artist's own account of it. Most consequentially for the cases here, participatory structure does not survive transmission at all. Milovanovic (2022), comparing screened with live contemporary dance, finds that the viewer's bodily situation is precisely what the screened version fails to reproduce, and a photograph of *Let's Walk* accordingly returns the viewer to the observational position the live work had displaced.

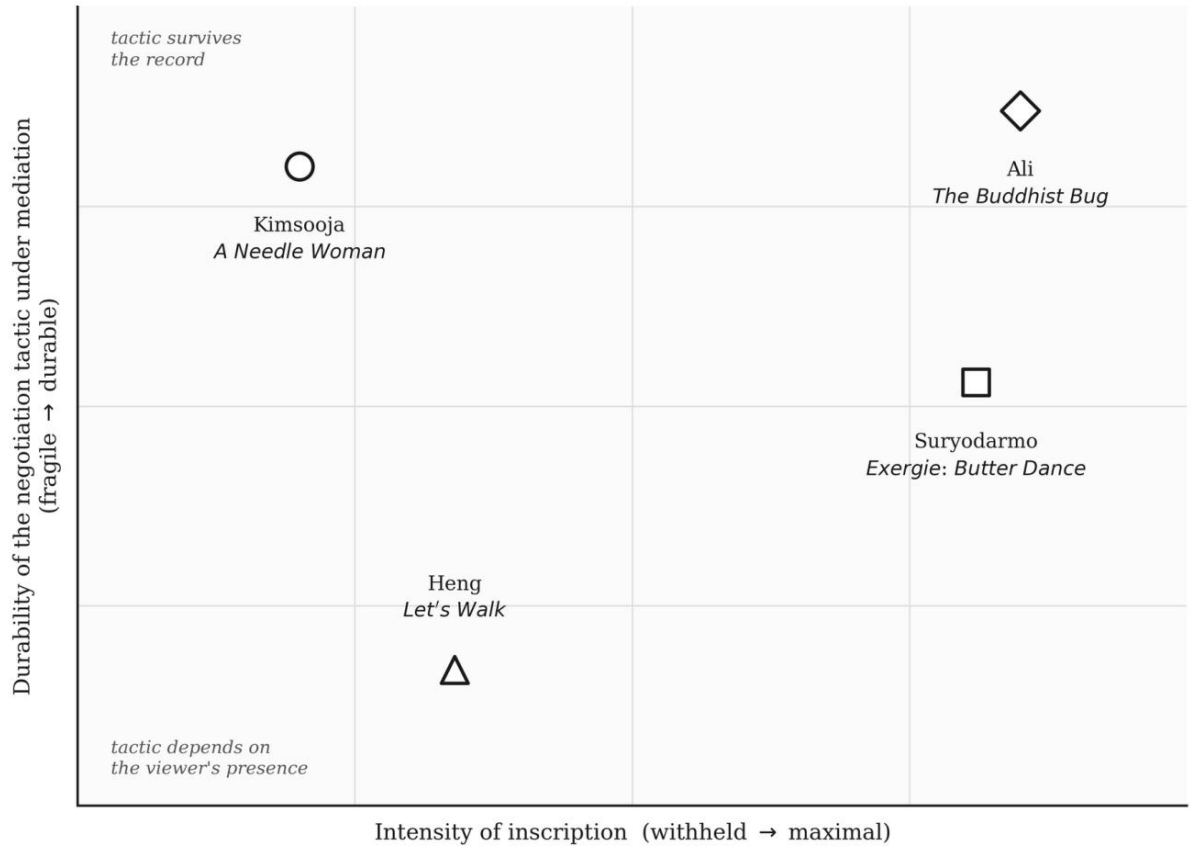
The question of who holds rights over a circulating body-image has in addition become less settled

with the spread of machine-assisted reproduction, where frameworks premised on identifiable human authorship accommodate distributed contribution poorly (Si & Zhu, 2024). The point is registered here as an adjacent problem rather than developed, since the available doctrinal literature addresses contexts other than performance documentation.

The four cases are unevenly exposed. Ali's practice, built for the photographic image from the outset, carries its negotiation into circulation most successfully, because the image is the work rather than a trace of it. Kimsooja's serial structure is comparatively robust, since the series is constituted by video and survives as video. Heng's participatory address is the most vulnerable. The general principle, on the evidence of these four cases, is that negotiation tactics dependent on the viewer's bodily situation do not survive mediation, while tactics inscribed in the visual structure of the record largely do. Figure 2 positions the four works accordingly.

Figure 2

Analytic positioning of the four cases



Note. Positions are analytic, not measured, and no quantitative claim is intended. The two dimensions were selected because they are the two on which the four cases were found to differ systematically. Horizontal placement follows the ordering established in Section 5.1, where inscription was coded as withheld, encumbered, maximal or excessive. Vertical placement follows the single criterion stated in Section 6: whether a tactic is inscribed in the visual structure of the record, in which case it survives

mediation, or depends on the viewer's bodily situation, in which case it does not. The figure summarises the two preceding sections and carries no information not argued there.

7. Discussion

Identity in these works is negotiated rather than simply expressed. The evidence is the consistency with which the decisive formal decisions fall on the negotiation axis: Kimsooja's serial structure, Suryodarmo's choice of idiom, Heng's redistribution of address and Ali's retention of image control are all decisions about the terms of reception, taken ahead of the question of what the body will show. This is not a claim that the body expresses nothing. It carries inherited material, as Section 5.2 shows at length. The claim is that what the material comes to mean is settled relationally, in the distance between two readings, and that these works act on the distance.

Engagement with the inherited frame is double-edged. Sharma and Kinsizer (2026) propose reorienting orientalism as a practice of working upon the frame rather than attempting to exit it, and the four works here can be described in those terms. Furmanik-Kowalska (2023) marks the risk precisely: the gesture that reorients may be received as the confirmation it meant to disturb, and the artist cannot determine which reception occurs. Jones (2021) explains why the risk is structural rather than accidental, since the art complex rewards legible difference and thereby creates an incentive toward the very legibility the artist may wish to withhold.

A third implication concerns the stability of the conditions the framework describes. Double legibility presumes circulation, and circulation depends on mobility infrastructures that can contract without warning. Zhang et al. (2023) document the severity of that contraction for Chinese travel during the pandemic years, and Vikram (2022) records what happened to the reading of Asian bodies in the same period. Reception is therefore less a stable background than a condition with its own volatility, and the negotiation tactics catalogued in Section 5.3 are responses to a moving target rather than to a fixed one.

8. Conclusion and Limitations

The argument, restated: Asian performance art in cross-cultural circulation is structured by double legibility, a reception condition in which the body must signify at once within a local economy of recognition and within a transnational economy that reads for origin. Identity is produced in the distance between the two, and the artist's principal material is that distance. A three-axis framework of inscription, transmission and negotiation was proposed, with diagnostic criteria and a worked coding example, and applied to four works spanning East, Southeast and diasporic Asia. In all four the most consequential decisions fall on the negotiation axis.

What the cases demonstrate and what the framework hypothesises should be kept apart. The cases

demonstrate that these four works, under the reception conditions described, concentrate their formal effort on the terms of their own reading. They do not demonstrate that Asian performance art does so. The corpus is confined to East, Southeast and diasporic Asian practice; South Asian and West Asian practice are untested, and the framework's applicability there is a hypothesis.

Three further limitations bound the claim. The study reads documentation rather than events, and the documentation is itself an interpretive construction (Kaźmierczak, 2021). Four cases establish applicability without establishing sufficiency. The digital circulation discussed in Section 6 is treated analytically rather than empirically, since tracing the actual re-framing of these records across platforms would require a different method and a different corpus.

Each limitation indicates its own remedy. A larger and more regionally distributed case set would test the framework's reach. Artist interviews would establish how far the decisions catalogued on the negotiation axis are deliberate. Empirical study of how performance records are re-framed in secondary circulation would address the custody question raised in Section 6, at present the least understood stage of the process described here.

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Author contributions

Yehong Li individually undertook all roles including conceptualization, methodology, software, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, original draft writing, review & editing, visualization, supervision and project administration for this study, and has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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