

# a\_m\_m\_s: is zero no.thing?

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## Introduction

This paper concerns a contemporary enquiry in new 'technological practices', commencing with a mapping of how 'zero' originated. Zero, conceived in South Asia around 2,500 years ago, is a prerequisite for the Information Age and for Digital Art. Researchers in the Indus area were integrating mathematical and scientific ideas with philosophic concepts and with artistic investigation. For example in certain Indian temples you would find at their centre, their inner sanctum, not ornate, symbolic religious statues or paintings, but an empty space with a book only: and the book was a book of mathematics. The mathematical attempt to understand the universe, the philosophic attempt to grasp it, and the artistic conception of it, went hand in hand. This is highly significant and pertinent as the Information Age, and the Age of Digital Art, essentially begins with the conception of the zero, through inter-twining of mathematical, philosophical, artistic innovation.

This research is a transnational, tele-epistemological investigation of South Asian and Japanese notions: *akasha*, *ma*, *mu*, *sunyata*, (*a\_m\_m\_s*) and their inter-relating pertinence in a contemporary art context, beyond immediate cultural and religious specificity.

*a\_m\_m\_s* engages with media art themes. Re-interrogation of ontological concepts and processes provoke questions about interfaces between 'virtual' and 'real'. Cultural inputs, and the notion of the 'trans-local' are central questions in its processes, as is the nature of its ultimate realization: highlighting the significance of location.

## Unthinking and rethinking technology

Through exhibition and intervention processes, one is exploring the way one may think about art and technology and 'technological practice' today.

'Technological practice' is being used in a particular and crucial sense: referring to what might be thought of as an integrated epistemological process where art, philosophy, craft/technique, and science are considered part of an integrated thinking-practice.

While there are parallels with Heidegger's discussion of *techne*<sup>1</sup>, this enquiry's roots are in Buddhist and Tantric philosophy, as well as in the re-conceiving of South Asian and Japanese philosophic and aesthetic concepts through transnational/trans-local processes. Ajaykumar discusses this in several articles<sup>2</sup>, and Nandi talks about presence and the illusion of immersiveness.<sup>3</sup>

The enquiry considers a broader history of technology, considering 'technological practice' as ontological practice. It scrutinises possibilities of earlier ontological and epistemological activity as paradigms for contemporary thinking-practice. While inter-disciplinarity has been considered a recent phenomenon, this particular South Asian approach was already a sophisticated enquiry 2,500 years ago, offering contemporary insights.

## The meaning and significance of *Akasha, Ma, Mu, Sunyata, Enso, Kyo*

The Japanese term *ma* has multiple meanings and resonances, including 'space-time', 'emptiness': an emptiness that has presence, 'interval', and 'pause'. It is a cultural and aesthetic term that has profoundly imbued Japanese cultural and social practices. Before encountering Europeans, Japanese had no word for space that was distinct from time: space-time — a four dimensional realm. *Ma* exists in hundreds of compound forms in the Japanese language. Pertinently a term for an idiot in Japanese is *ma-nuke*. While In English an idiot is sometimes called 'empty headed', in Japanese *ma-nuke* has the sense of someone who is 'too full', who has 'no space'. The problematics of this kind of cultural, linguistic intersection are being investigated.

*Ma* is not a religious term yet there is overlap with Zen concept *mu*: understood as ‘void’, ‘nothingness’, ‘emptiness’. Zen has had a profound influence on Japanese art for around 700 years.

*Ma* corresponds in part to a Sanskrit term, *akasha*: signifying ‘space’: a space that has presence, ‘ether’, ‘sound’. In Hindi, *akash* from *akasha* means sky.

*Sunyata* is a Buddhist concept, and Sanskrit word, which means ‘void’ or ‘nothingness’. *Sunya* of *sunyata* means ‘emptiness’, important also in Brahmanism. In Sanskrit ‘zero’ is written as *sunya*. *Sunya* also means ‘emptiness’. *Sunyata* from *sunya* is a Buddhist concept which signifies ‘void’ or ‘nothingness’ or ‘emptiness’: an emptiness that has presence. *Sunya* is important also in Brahmanism. While discussing ‘emptiness’, it should be noted that *su* of *sunyata* has the meaning of something that is ‘swollen with possibility’: like an empty womb that eventually fills with a child.

In terms of iconography and the development of the notion of zero, and with consideration of zero’s shape, it is important to think of two iconic images: the *mandala* and the *enso* Zen circle. The *enso* circle refers to ‘nothingness’, ‘void’, and ‘enlightenment’. The original meaning of *mandala* is ‘healing circle’: a circle and space of healing. One has here less a two dimensional image on a wall, and more *mandala* as a dynamic, architectural and transformative four dimensional space-time. The installations to be created will have the potential for being a transformative space.

## Exposition on Zero — Approaching Praxis

*Exposition on zero — is zero no.thing?* is a practical research that attempts to synthesise the artistic, the mathematical and the philosophical. Through algorithmic process, installations are constructed that are interactive and reactive, as well as spaces of immersion and contemplation. Moreover it is an architectonic space with vital kinaesthetic processes. South Asian architecture such as Ellora rock-cut edifices were strongly influenced by Tantra. Here the voids created in the humanly constructed caves were considered a part of the totality of the sculpture, a sculpture that came into

being at the moment of spectatorial inter-action<sup>4</sup>. Here again is the pertinence of ‘inter-face’ and ‘inter-val’ (*ma*).

In Japanese Buddhist schools, the term *kyo* signifies sound and vibration. Buddhist ideas state that all phenomena in the universe are considered sacred, and that all phenomena exist in continuous dynamic inter-relation and inter-action, and that this relationship is manifest through sound and vibration. Sound and vibration processes are important elements of the contemporary practical research processes.

An ‘a-spectatorial’ approach is critical. ‘A-spectatorial’ here means a re-envisaging of spectatorship: one that is not about ‘looking at’ but about inhabiting a space. This conceptual approach allows a re-exploration of the notions of stillness and presence, and the relation between body, time and space.

## Conclusion

no.thing is the illusion of emptiness. Here one is trying to understand the added value of zero in knowledge. Is zero really zero? How far can one go in re-presenting zero from the symbolic modes of representation to other modes of re-presentation? Moreover there we may discover that zero is not as empty as one may think.

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- 1 Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.
  - 2 Ajaykumar. 2007. “Towards other epistemologies of interface culture: dependent origination, tantra, and relational being in an age of digital reproduction.” In *Leonardo, Journal of the International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology* 40 (4). Cambridge MA: MIT Press, pp. 475-481.  
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Ajaykumar. 2007. “Relational Being, the Being of a Space, Spectatorship, and Technological Practice.” In *South African Journal of Art History* 22 (1). Pretoria, pp. 91-116.
  - 3 Nandi, Alok. b. 2003. “Mixed Reality Story-telling: Story-setting and Story-sharing.” In *Proceedings of the Fifth International Digital Arts and Culture Conference*. Melbourne: RMIT, May 19 - 23.
  - 4 See Ajaykumar. 2005. “Dynamics of Psycho-Spheres- Ellora Caves and Tadao Ando.” In *Context: Journal of the Development Organisation for Nature, Arts and Heritage* 2 (2). New Delhi, pp. 37-50.