

Powell Street Festival Society  
Vancouver, B.C.

## Leaving it be: what we talk about when we talk about political shifts

Ashok Mathur  
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### **The invitation**

It is late morning on a warm September day in 2004 and I'm occupying myself with that 21<sup>st</sup> century part-procrastinative, part-requisite habit of checking my day's email. I'm sitting in my office on Granville Island, taking periodic breaks from the onslaught of messages by looking out at the cement plant across the road, reflecting on the academic term to come and the past two-and-a-half years I have spent at my job teaching and developing arts-based courses at the Emily Carr Institute. On this particular day, I'm remembering the phone call I had with the then-Dean who offered me my current position those years ago, how I tried to negotiate time so that I could co-ordinate, with other faculty of colour, the diverse needs of a campus like Emily Carr. My request was met with silence — not that of resistance or hostility, but of resignation. Faculty of colour, she told me, was me. That was 2001. Today, checking my email, is a note from a former Emily Carr student, Vanessa Kwan, wondering if I would be available to act as respondent for a Powell Street festival panel entitled "Leaving it Be: Apathy, Activism, And Ethnicity In Contemporary Practice." Its intent would be to investigate how the identity politics of the 90s have become passé in a contemporary art world, giving way, perhaps, to related expressions of diversity articulated through interdisciplinary models. And, if this is the case, how we might track the relationship between the interest in race and identity activism in the 90s and the contemporary interest in new media and cross-disciplinarity. I respond to her almost immediately, blathering on (as I am wont to do in email conversations) about the need for this panel and my delight in being asked to participate. Because while it is some thirty months since I was hired at Emily Carr, and in that time I have been joined by three more permanent faculty of colour, I want to make and hear noise about where we think we've come to in terms of equity. There have been seismic shifts in the last decade, more pronounced in some areas than others, but significant and troublesome to various degrees. So, yes, I write to Vanessa, I will respond to this panel. Lights up, let's talk.

### **The panel**

It turns out that several of the panelists participated in the IntraNation residency that I directed at the Banff Centre in the summer of 2004, an event that focused on artistic production in contexts framed by national and other forms of identity. So that residency makes for an easy transition to this panel, plus there is an overarching familiarity with the issues amongst all the panelists as their work, their ideas, have traveled within similar circles. As moderator, Ken Lum, nationally and internationally known for his large-scale photo installations, sets the tone by posing the question of the meaning of the nation-state in the context of diasporic populations. He bends this back to the local, suggesting the Vancouver conceptual arts scene made attempts to peer outside its borders, to incorporate internationalist concerns, but that this ultimately failed. Lum's introductory notes, delivered to an

obviously attentive and engaged audience of about 100, allow the panelists that follow – Cindy Mochizuki, Linda Sormin, Henry Tsang, and Jin-Me Yoon – to more fully explore, through their own practices and historical specificities, the intersections of identity, cultural activism, and art.

It's a well-orchestrated and polite panel, participants showing their work, raising pertinent points, and staying on time. Upon closing of the formal presentations, questions from the floor are equally polite and searching, and when the day is done and participants from the panel and the audience retreat to a nearby watering hole to continue the conversation. It is, as they say in organizing circles, a success. But, perhaps swayed by nostalgia and yearning, I leave the event with a sense of ennui. Where was the passion, the anger, the deliberate provocations that spilled the debates of the early 90s out of artist-run centers and gathering halls onto the culture-war pullout sections of the Post and the Globe? Where was the delight, too, the laughter and excitement as new cultural arenas were broached, old systems were at once obliterated and rejuvenated? And given that none of this was present, only slightly ironic in that *apathy* was the first-named subject of the subtitle, where are we, as an intellectual, activist, artistic community? Or, and this is more important, where are we going, on which trajectory triggered by which history? Far from being overcome by nostalgic longing, though, I find myself investigating the tactics of the panel and panelists further because these artists are most certainly responding to the climate we now endure, and while the immediacy of change-by-protest that delineated the 90s may now be, well, a thing of the past, there is still an urgency at work, albeit marked by uncertainty.

### **Identity Reformation**

If the mythic 90s were marked by an insistence of presence – disenfranchised groups and individuals demanding to be seen, heard, and included – the current decade, awash with the reemergence of unapologetic militarism and fresh new enemies in the mist of a globalization that means everything and nothing, is typified by a desire to keep up. But that keeping up often amounts to a type of shape-shifting, or, more accurately, the grand extension of postmodernity's desire to slip freely between identities. Not just an ability to rustle off one's skin in serpentine manner, but a type of reverse-ecdysis, a shuffling *into* another's shedded outer layers, embracing a type of passing through borrowed appearance.

In such a space, a voicing of identity-location is lost in an echoey chamber where claims bounce off metaphoric walls, amplifying themselves in creative and grotesque manners. Case in point, Tsang's "Orange County," a video-installation which takes viewers to a very different OC (yet frighteningly similar in a way that would do Baudrillard proud) than the one they may see on TV. Tsang documents a body, his body, a body-read-as-Asian walking through the streets of Orange County, California, and Ju Jun, the OC replica built by a wealthy Beijing development company for China's elite who want to live the American Dream, but still be able to commute to work. Tsang's installation has him walking through these two same/different neighbourhoods whereby the figure moves from one space to the next almost seamlessly. But there is the lag time in between; is it the time zone difference, the jet lag? Where does he go? When he re-appears, nothing has changed, the clothing is the same, the knee-length black jacket, the slightly scruffy black jeans that don't quite match but don't quite position him as a target for police questioning. He is Chinese, so he flows from America to China and back without restriction, without question. Twenty years ago, he would not have been able to pass; he would have been too western in one, too Asian in the other. But now, the worlds have collided, we are the world, there will be a Starbucks nearby soon.

Tsang goes on to question how the very nature of “normal” is shifting radically, dependent on information, perception, and power relationships. We may revisit the theoretical notion of the mimic men, whom Bhabha once cast as “white, but not quite,” although today’s mimic men, at least in certain circles of profit and wealth, might be read as attaining a quality of “whiteness” without leaving the comforts of wherever home may be. Identity reformed and re-situated.

For her part, Mochizuki frames the notion of interdisciplinarity and ethnicity in contemporary arts as a place of struggle with positive implications. She looks back to the legacy of artists such as Roy Kiyooka whose model of interdisciplinarity, Mochizuki suggests, informs a much larger practice, acts as a bridge between work as a cultural activist and visual artist. She proposes a revisitation of identity politics that pays attention to the theoretical construct of Mary Louise Pratt’s “contact zone.” In other words, as an artist whose practice emerged as public interest in identity politics were waning, Mochizuki sees the continuing contact zone between various cultural groups as a critical entry point to this discussion. By example, she refers to her co-performance with Rita Wong during the IntraNation residency where the duo, calling themselves “FeastFamine,” performed a perambulatory piece in downtown Banff. Strolling up and down the main drag pushing a dim sum cart filled with “decolonization wishboxes” the duo gave these away along with information sheets detailing First Nations histories in the geographic area of the park. Both Mochizuki and Wong have talked about how this performance was variously read as an act of intervention into the social fabric, a commodifying act (as in, what are you selling?), and a performance that placed their gendered, raced bodies into a place of contention. To have bodies that are read as young, female, and Asian addressing directly issues of colonized land and responsibility to First Peoples marks a categoric shift from the identity politics of old. Here we have not a representation of the self but, like Tsang’s reconsideration of how his body is read in different geographic and political climates, a representation that foregrounds neither its own particularities nor its specific histories, but a relational and ethical position.

The work of Mochizuki and Wong clearly indicates a shift from what Yoon calls the “stakes around identity” that prevailed when she was entering the field of artmaking. Yoon calls attention to the former valorization of marginalization and emphasizes that contemporary times call for new forms, among them a continued contextualization of the nature of identity. She expresses an interest in the “hauntings,” the spectres, that is, the notion of the body as cipher particularly as the racialized body is constituted. Following the gestures made by Mochizuki, Yoon notes that we need not shift away from taking positions, but that to be most effective we need to structure these positions within the material aspects of our work. Yoon exemplifies this in projects like her “Unbidden” installation at the Kamloops Art Gallery, in which the artist refuses to present literal representations of place or action but, in so doing, allows viewers to situate themselves in a space of their own memory and contemporary reality. The body is troubled, disturbed, but very much present in such a space.

### **Courting Risk**

How does it look, then, to inhabit a racialized body in a racialized world that is largely informed by events that affect us locally and globally? If Yoon, Mochizuki, and Tsang are correct in pursuing a critical analysis that, on one hand embraces a continued awareness of subject positioning but, on the other, wants to engage with political and artistic concerns beyond the frailties of the skin, the question of strategy comes into play. Of course, employing multiple strategies in the pursuit of

theorizing a minoritized discourse is hardly new, but what does take on an urgency is the question of how to work this so that such strategies have a progressive, political effect. Sormin talks about moving to an abstract narrative, seeking out ways of embodying a physicality that becomes a metaphor for living in a particular body. Her ceramic sculptures epitomize this movement. “At once aggressive and vulnerable, the massive, precarious forms have the capacity to injure me, and I to destroy them,” Sormin writes.

My practice is an attempt to persuade the clay to behave (and misbehave) in ways that are new to me. The possibility of ceramic material moving, distorting or “failing” in the firing is something that excites me. This speculative approach offers a high level of drama and delight for me as a maker. The bravado involved with my working large scale, and the macho – and oxymoronic – activity of “orchestrating risk” is at odds with the compulsive, fussy, dolling up of my pieces with gold, copper and silver leaf, ribbons and flowerets.

Sormin’s work and critical approach may not represent the body in any literal way, but like the projects of her contemporaries – Tsang’s “OC,” Mochizuki’s “FeastFamine,” Yoon’s “Unbidden,” where the body clearly *matters* in a visually represented way – Sormin situates the body in relationship to her precarious sculptures. It is impossible to stand beside her labyrinthine sculptures without being enticed to slip a finger, a hand, into the foreboding lattices and thereby inhabit the physicality of the work itself, and, in so doing, read one’s own body into the art.

### **Palimpsestry and overwritten narratives**

Some months after the panel and here I am poring over notes, both those I jotted down during the event and those sent to me by panelists in response to my desperate plea for language that will help me address the critical topics of the panel that, at once, excite and confuse me. No, not the panel itself, which was clear, cohesive, and as I suggest in the opening of these maanderings, quite polite – but the ideas that brought the panel into being. This is what the Powell Street organizers were intent on investigating:

In the contemporary art world, identity politics are said to be *passé*, a theoretical and practical model associated with work that had currency through the 1990’s. Contemporary art institutions, funding bodies and critics now emphasize work that is “interdisciplinary”, work that embraces “new forms”, work that, having sufficiently dealt with the inequalities of the past, looks firmly to the future. This panel is concerned with the point at which identity politics and its embedded struggle for new modes of expression intersects with the emergence of interdisciplinary practice as an increasingly legitimate (and appropriate) approach to art-making. In a context where many young artists seem reluctant to tackle “cultural issues”, but embrace cross-disciplinary practice and new media freely, it seems an appropriate time to address the place of ethnicity and activism in contemporary art practice.

During the question period of the panel, there was considerable focus on seeking out the narratives that describe where we are, who we are, in a contemporary reality. It was Yoon who summed this up succinctly when she noted that such a desire for meaning could only be satisfied by looking at what lies underneath our constructed realities. This palimpsestic process is not as evident as it might first seem, for Yoon’s comments suggest not an existential search for meaning in the depths, but a peering *through* and *at* the layers of history and practice. We might readily acknowledge that we construct ourselves through various histories, written or unwritten, well-known or rumoured, authentic or questionable. But in particular, how do we learn (and what remembrances do we bring forward) from our evolving past, that is, a past that is constantly rewritten as we reflect upon its

value and substance? Such a palimpsestic reading, a squinting, peering, microscopically-intense gaze, allows us to pick out fragments of what once was, not to reconstruct them wholly, but to take them in proprioceptively, pull them into our bodies directly, let those fragments inhabit us as much as we might inhabit a Sorin sculpture.

If the recent past is a palimpsest, partially erased but readable in its remnants, then we cannot help but view the identity movements of the 90s — full of bombast and righteousness as well as acute criticality and political awareness — as historically significant and omnipresent. We have not left the politics of identity behind us, nor constructed an elaborate camouflage to continue working in the same old ways. What we have done is build upon the tremulous ground beneath our feet. Certainly, there has been some loss of political will and there have been compromises made in the name of leaving it be and getting on with our collective lives. But the narrative I want to suggest is one where we have not turned our back on our past but have scrutinized it, sorted carefully through the bits and pieces and cobbled together a comprehensive response. Call it new forms that owe their existence to previous ones, or interdisciplinary practices that developed out of oppositional politics, this is still an artmaking that comes from urgency, from political need. Our strategies might shift, our causes might mutate, but we will continue to read our pasts into our contemporary lives, and in doing so, will write out our potential futures.