

(Ghosting)

(For the panel discussion convened on 12 May 2018)

(Provocation posed: How do we continue to speak about Asian-ness in dance today? In claiming an Asian identity, what is at stake and which agendas are we validating? What are some choreographic strategies to circumnavigate the landscapes of aesthetics, politics and/or the arts market, which remains significantly dominated by the West?)

(The panelists, artists/arts practitioners/participants in the room, have just returned from a lunch break, or have just joined in from elsewhere. The room has been reorganised. We are no longer meant to be facing the projection screen and guest artist/presenter Mandeep Raikhy. Instead, the couch in the studio has been shifted, with chairs placed facing it.)

(Daniel Kok, current Artistic Director of Dance Nucleus, talks about the above provocation, and shares some of his thinking and experiences. He is seated in a chair, next to Mandeep, who is also seated in a chair. They are stage right of the couch.)

(The panelists Nirmala Seshadri, Chloe Chotrani and myself are settled comfortably.)

(Soultari Amin Farid is in a chair, stage left of the couch. It is coincidental that the women are in the couch and the men are in chairs.)

(After Daniel speaks, we all exchange glances, we try to figure out who speaks next. We had decided to determine the order organically. I figure I'll speak first. I fail to remember why.)

(Below is the document I prepared beforehand, with minor edits. It is not a verbal transcription. It is not precisely the draft I prepared either.)

**START.**

I'll be focusing on the first question, and hopefully in doing so I'll be providing some responses to the next few questions.

This seems like an obvious statement to make, but in responding to this I will and can only speak from my personal experience as a dancer, performer, and artist.

In my work as an artist, I've not had to deal directly with the word "Asian" until it became a matter of creating marketing material, or of applying to grants, here in Singapore.

In my study of dance history while a student of Modern Dance at The Ohio State University — which is in the US, though some people have instinctively thought Japan — "Oriental" was the word used to describe some of the work by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn around the time of WWI. The professors and TAs made it clear that they were exoticising parts of Asia. They emphasised, as historians and scholars, that it's fantasy. St. Denis and Shawn also made works that created fantasies of America, and in those situations the work was labelled by historians as "Americana" - not, "American".

A couple years into my undergrad life, Pichet Klunchun came to the art centre next door to my school building — nobody said "Asian", he was "Thai". We had artists visit our school whose practices came from Japan, Korea, and nowhere did the label "Asian" appear.

I was very sensitive to the fact that Singapore, MY little national state, doesn't stake a claim that says, we originate any so-called classical dance forms, nor traditional forms - I'm aware that these were all brought along by immigrant cultures, or are from the archipelago rather than necessarily from this particular tiny piece of heavily reclaimed land, land on which we live. I'm aware that in my personal upbringing, I would walk up the stairs in Waterloo Centre, past the music of Bharathanatyam class, to a ballet class taught by my Shanghainese teacher. I was later told that she was a principal ballerina in the days of Communist propaganda ballet in the PRC.

In my working life as a performer and creator, I've done things independently and also through companies here in Singapore. I've participated with others in the building up of the companies Frontier Danceland and Maya Dance Theatre - and those are really growing pains, not just for myself as an artist, but for the collective, and I believe for the scene in general.

The picture of what's going on in the development of a scene looks really different from where you stand, and for how long you have been standing there.

I can try my hardest to take off my hats in different roles, and just be myself. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] What I find is the impossibility of the task - the hats and roles and performances we enact every day start to affect the decisions we make, the things we say, the dances we make. I've become very interested in focusing the gaze in my choreographic practice, the gaze that tells a story, remembers a history, sees a person, the gaze that looks outwards

and inwards at the same time. But what I've found is that in foregrounding "gaze" as opposed to words like "drishti" or "liang xiang" or any other word, I reference a particular discourse that is problematically Eurocentric. But, I'm using the word "gaze" right now because I'm making assumptions, given that we are speaking in English now, that most people would have some sense of the critical theories involved.

Now I want to propose a new word. The word is "skinhole". Think of your eyes not as your eyes but as your skin that forms the barrier between your body and the outside world. Your skinholes need to exist so that your eyes can actually see. I'd like to redirect the sense of the gaze not just to the ocular, but to the tactility of skin. I'm in the middle right now of trying to figure out how else I can talk about my work, about this relationship of the "gaze" and the "skinhole", and how that plays out in the body, our leaky memories, in choreographic practice.

In my dancing life, I've subjected myself very willingly to dance for quite a broad range of individuals, from "everywhere" in the world at different stages of their artist careers, and it's only quite recently that I've been feeling that I want to place myself at the centre of my universe again. This feels like a choice that I need to make now.

I've worked very relationally here in the last 7 or so years, and I've also deliberately done things like be part of the PARAGRAPH platform, or the MISI space, spaces which I see as artist-initiated, and even, in joining companies and trying to get under the skin of what their artistic goals are - what I've personally found is that in a cramped space like Singapore, with all its anxieties as a young and stupidly successful nation state, agendas start to overlap, deliverables start to overwhelm, and crowd our minds — in quite the same way that our jungle wants to grow.

One of the ways I've sought to gain perspective is to leave for residencies, to follow a mentor to Burkina Faso, or to bring work to festivals like Fang Mae Khong Festival in Laos — but those often come with personal price tags, even when there is some funding. It's not a choice everybody can make, and it's not a choice everybody is willing to make.

Recently I was just in Australia for Time Place Space (TPS) Nomad Residency. This residency did not cost me personally because, I believe, of all the other work put in by funding bodies and individuals in institutions to set things up, such that there would be support for this residency.

For TPS we were in the outback, on aboriginal country, where they were grappling with "decolonisation" - not "postcoloniality" or "postcolonialism". The word I introduced there was "plurality" - which, in a nation like Singapore, seems like an

obvious word to use - but which, in a circle of very politically aware artists there, seemed to open up a whole new world.

~~Now I can try to be a nomad and get to know what else is going on, participate in what else is going on. In my artistic practice I've looked at avenues for performing improvised work, and one of the key things that happened for me coming back from college, was talking to Li Yong Wei, and also meeting the work of Lim Chin Huat and ECNAD. They are people whose value systems and artistic practices don't always surface clearly in a framework like this one.~~

Let me come back to the word "Asian". What I've found, in all the projects and programmes that I've had interaction with, is that it's only through working with companies that the word "Asian" has been used. I suspect I understand why - when artists stake out a space and decide to build an institution, their brands need to be created. The artists and their companies need to have a hard-hitting vision and mission statement - a manifesto of the artistic work that they are stepping forward to do.

Why not use the word "Singaporean"? I imagine it's too specific a word, potentially limiting, and also politically it speaks quite clearly about a group of let's say 5 million people who hold the same passport. And that's a very strong claim to make. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

On the other hand, if I simply say "Asian", well, that's a large land mass plus many islands, centuries of diasporas and dynasties — an almost-meaningless, ambiguous term that at the same time, captures the imagination. I know when I use the word "Asian" it means something slightly different to different people, and that's also, potentially, where the power of using this word lies.

**END.**

(I should hope that when historians look back, the word to describe this period of our history would have changed. I should hope that, when artists use the word generously, it opens up the imaginary worlds instead of closing doors and re-enacting cruel boundaries. One of my personal strategies of rethinking Eurocentrism and new American imperialism, is this: I problematise so-called whiteness as much as I can. I try not to assume someone who looks a certain way

therefore thinks a certain way. I flip the mirror back, as much as is possible. As artists, we perform unseen functions as cultural diplomats. Even in small ways - when we appear on stage, we can represent a type of vision and background and imagined space - even when we don't want to. It leaves a trace and memory (if the art is impactful) in the minds of our audience, and perhaps in the recorded pages of history.)