

# **DIGITAL DISCUSSION: RESPONDING TO MIGUEL GUTIERREZ'S ARTICLE, 'DOES ABSTRACTION BELONG TO WHITE PEOPLE?'**

## **CHAREMAINE SEET AND PARTICIPATING ARTISTS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Charemaine Seet**

Welcome everyone and thanks everyone for participating the digital meet-up.

The digital meet-up today is a conversation about Miguel Guterrez's article "Does Abstraction Belong to White People?"

We are all from different places; Taiwan, Beijing, Singapore and Sydney.

Ting-Ting Cheng is a visual artist based in Taiwan. I met her because she was working on a discussion, I was part of in 1998 in London which was called 'A New Vocabulary for Chinese Arts' and she used the material for her residency in Manchester last year.

Lu Shirley Dai a dance artist and filmmaker based in Beijing and New York City.

Anna Kuroda is a dance artist based in Western Sydney.

Bernice Lee is a contemporary dance artist based in Singapore and Faye Lim is also a dance artist based in Singapore.

Justine Shih Pearson is a Sydney based designer, creative producer, and scholar of contemporary performance and dance.

Let's begin!

## CONVERSATION

### Charemaine Seet

I was reading Miguel's article again and two sections spoke to me and made me feel emotional. One of the lines in it is 'Who has the right not to explain themselves?' That is really interesting as a question but also a very emotional statement. I also like the end of the paragraph which is 'Dissolve, appear, dissolve'.

It has always been a problem for me jumping between identities of being someone involved in Western contemporary dance and also being Asian and being brought up in Asia, feeling all those different things and becoming confused about the way that the art work I make is seen or not seen.

### Justine Shih Pearson

I was just going to say, I think Miguel is writing within a certain racial politics being a Latinx man, living in the United States.

Which I feel I kind of get, I grew up in America and that is a lot of my experience; but then I also think, there are lots of different things that influence my context. Now I am living in Australia and it is a very different context. For me personally, I am mixed race and that's always an issue that baffles people—mostly that is what I get—but also it's about a kind of privilege or non-privilege to certain kinds of knowledge that I think is different in America, in San Francisco where I grew up or New York where I used to live, versus here in Sydney. I'm also half Chinese. My mother is from Hong Kong. So that is a very particular relationship to Chinese-ness as well. I am noting too that we are having this conversation across Taiwan, Singapore, Australia, Japan and in that context there is a relationship to Chinese-ness and that is a very broad term in the world and has a relationship to Chinese imperialism, which does not get talked about very often.

### Lu Shirley Dai

I relate to what Justine just said. I grew up in China, went to America for college at 18 and stayed in New York for seven years. Because of the homogeneity of Chinese culture and a sense of collective unity, I was not familiar with the idea of racial culture and identity when I was in China, nor did I pay attention to the racial construction of Asian-ness. However, after living in New York for a long time, I started to feel the complexity of my Chinese-ness while being introduced to the discourse of identity politics. It was through my learning and understanding of abstraction that I started to cultivate my cultural and national consciousness. So, I have complex feelings towards the emotional aspect of Miguel's article. Partially because yes, I am part of the conversation as a person of colour living in New York City, dancing and performing; but in another way, I am also not part of the conversation, I don't feel the emotion or even the rage that Miguel was referencing to.

## **Charemaine Seet**

I have a similar background, being half Chinese, first living in Asia and then living in Australia. I felt rage in the past about being pigeonholed or catalogued based on my perceived Asian-ness but until this kind of digital technology it has been difficult for me (and us) to communicate to people in similar situations in different parts of the world.

## **Ting-Ting Cheng**

I found it interesting that I am the only person having a visual art background, rather than a contemporary dance one. I don't know if it makes any difference in terms of our relationship with our bodies, which is related to race. I lived in Taiwan until I was 22, and then I moved to UK for 11 years. I just moved back to Taiwan this year. I also feel that "racial-related discussions" are not commonly seen here. Taiwan is "relatively" mono-ethnic, even though there are aboriginal Taiwanese and immigrants from Southeast Asia. I feel like the article is a part of my narrative. I feel quite emotional towards Miguel's writing, but I can't pinpoint why. It does not mean that I felt pushed into a certain direction. I guess my emotion could be related to moving back to Taiwan, seeing how different the concept is here compared to how it is in UK. I find it interesting that how it raises different issues in different cultural or national contexts. I guess this is my initial thought.

Like Charemaine, I also really like the quote "who has the right not to explain themselves?", I think that is the point for me. I also really like what Miguel said, "who is not here". I feel we need to ask the question every time we make art or host art events.

## **Justine Shih Pearson**

For me the most emotional part in the article was not so much that end comment, although I totally agree with it and I actually read it as very political. The thing that really resonated with me is when Miguel describes his experience at a workshop at Movement Research where there is an older white critic who he is respectful of and his feeling of stunned-ness when she says, 'Well, but how are we going to dance these things?' or 'What is this? How can we take these issues of race and injustice and whatever and put them into dance? Dance is about motion!' And my understanding of his reaction is, 'how naive of her' as he is stunned into silence. I feel like I have some of that every week, and that's probably specific to living in a country in which I am a racial minority. But I am thinking of something that Sara Ahmed wrote in which she talked about the labour of maintaining comfortableness for the white majority and the work that people of colour do to maintain kind of just going along with it and not raising a fuss. That moment to me was very much that.

## **Charemaine Seet**

If you make a fuss it can kill your career!

## **Anna Kuroda**

I was born and grew up in Japan and moved in Sydney 7 years ago. In the Japanese dance community, because of the language barrier, information is limited from overseas. I didn't really face this issue until I came to Australia. I read this article then I felt really sad, and empathy. It is not exactly the same but when I performed in Sydney as part of a festival, at the end there was a circle discussion and someone told me "diverse people should not do contemporary dance. You should do your cultural dance." I felt terrible being told that what I can choose to do is so limited. At the end of the discussion someone came up to me and said "That was rubbish. Just do not worry about it." Luckily that person said 'do not worry' so I had the confidence to continue. When that sort of thing happens, it really stays. Like Miguel, I become defensive and have to protect myself from getting damaged by these horrible people. But not everybody is horrible. I slowly make distance and try to not look at them as part of a group, to look at the individual. I probably never would have understood what Miguel meant back when I was living in Japan. Now I totally felt empathy.

## **Faye Lim**

Hi. Thank you for sharing what you already have and also, Anna, for telling us about the feelings you had at that time. When I first read the article, the title was not something I paid attention to. Yes, definitely emotions came up. I shared some of it on Facebook with friends and it started a small conversation. One of my friends, I realised, read my emotions and read the article differently from how I did, and I want to start there.

They were concerned about abstraction with regard to ownership – that it is a concept that shows up in different cultures, and certainly doesn't "belong" to white people. That was, for them, the problematic provocation in the article. I was paying more attention instead to my feelings of internal prejudice and discrimination against parts of myself and the playing out of those feelings in how I made decisions dancing in the US more than 10 years ago.

Those feelings had to do with me aligning to ideas of neutrality, aligning my body to the whiteness in post-modern and contemporary dance that I think we are talking about here. I was in an improvisation-based troop, with a group of white dancers, and we were auditioning new dancers. I realised after, that in the audition, I was (perhaps we were) looking out for dancers who embodied "neutrality," like there was such a marker for the ability to take on different qualities and states in improvisation. I realised only after, that how I decided who and what was not "neutral" enough was racist. That thought process had much to do with framing the "neutral" dancing body as a person who danced from a place of abstract concepts, and with no cultural markers, no needs, no causes. It centred privilege and whiteness.

## Bernice Lee

I guess that's part of the problem, the idea that a body or a person can be neutral. I guess it's a problem that faces abstraction as an idea? As if to be abstract is to be neutral. But actually, it's just another point of view, another option. A third or fourth or fifth way to see something or talk about something. I think it's a mistake, to imagine a person can ever truly be neutral -- it's always ever an attempt, right. Like to mediate between points of view. I think part of what Faye might be referring to is growing up in a multiracial society as a person of privilege by being in the majority race. Where people look at you and maybe have some kind of confirmation bias because you look like them, and this makes your growing up years perhaps easier. Like I didn't take a bus and get looked at for being "other" because of my skin colour and could blend in more. And a huge part of the privilege is also economic.

Being able to blend in, but then going to live and study where you're the minority, like the States, living in a place where their power over our imaginations and thinking has been so strong -- like we all watched Hollywood movies, Disney movies -- and then more fully realising how troubled the racial politics are in the country, listening to people have passionate conversations about such issues, being inspired by the idea of people voting in a black President at the time I was there, and how all these conversations wasn't very obvious to us from the outside, that America's cultural output had these racist underpinnings. And it's maybe similar in dance. Why did I even want to study dance in the States? What did I know? How come all of us having this chat here, we can name some American names of artists and know quite a fair bit, but I'd be hard pressed to really be able to talk about the dance history of other countries. This maybe is less about race and more about geopolitical relationships, but race is so tied up in it. I think for me, working as a dance artist in Singapore can be very exciting and also frustrating, because we are always forced to confront identity, our relationship to traditions and cultures, and how our bodies look versus how our bodies move. Like nobody can be seen as neutral, although we can potentially all be seen as abstract bodies. This isn't always true all the time, but there's a feeling for me that it's a possibility. But when it comes to more practical issues of funding and frameworks and representation, then I'm less sure. Although there are also ways that artists strategise in terms of dealing with issues to do with these minority-majority, traditional-contemporary dichotomies, and there's a kind of privilege in being able to do that.

And for me, I had the chance in Singapore to shift from my very postmodern dance training, which my professors never taught as neutral, but as somatic, with an understanding that there's a lot of cultural appropriation and resisting western classical ballet norms, resisting modernism, to doing a range of repertory from people coming from different dance and geopolitical backgrounds, then training in Bharathanatyam and some Javanese dance forms, and so on. And it's an eye-opener, always, trying to make sense of how dance, as a physical, artistic practice, lives separate from but is also entwined with cultural beliefs, lived experiences, and so on. I love that, as a dancer, I can try to embody different stuff, and try to figure out myself in relation to different (cultural) ideas, danced images, and so on. I see it as my privilege, that I can become an abstract body within all these cultural frameworks and produce something new from there.

But of course there's also the issue of, even if I were to try to create work where I think of myself as an abstraction formed of lines in space and materials and colours and temperatures, I'm still going to look like a 30+ year old Chinese woman to an audience. And people are likely going to read something into that, especially if there are other bodies in space who look very different from mine

### **Charemaine Seet**

What is really interesting to me is that we started with the emotional part of this but now the political part is really starting to come through, which I think is exciting. I guess this is what I found saddening about Miguel's article is that he talks about being colonised and it caused him to back away from abstraction. Reading that, made me feel suddenly paralysed artistically. I do understand this problem. But maybe the answer is to not give power to the gatekeepers and to keep on doing what you really want to do artistically.

### **Justine Shih Pearson**

You know, that's part of a specifically white, mixed-race politics, but then I also think that everybody here has had some experience of living in a white-dominated society in which we are encultured in ways that are part of a white society's way of looking, a Western sort of ideology. I am not sad by Miguel's article. I think it is anger: he is rightly angry, and I feel anger. To me, it is not a huge revelation to hear what he is saying because I think we have been having this discussion—I am also a scholar of contemporary performance and culture so this idea of power inequity and colonisation, and the racial politics that we have inherited from colonisation, is basically what I talk about every day. I am quite angry about it, but the strength in the article to me is really, as Faye pointed out, about this question that is specific to dance, contemporary dance, and it is specifically about this idea of contemporary dance and particularly postmodern dance being born out of abstraction and that's something that people of colour can't have access to.

Because I am thinking about Anna's story, which I think is just outrageous, but I am also thinking about a conversation I had with a white Australian choreographer who was saying 'Why do all of the artists of colour, why do they always make work about their culture?' and I was like, 'You don't think you're making work about your culture?'

So, the idea that whiteness is neutrality... the idea that either in a casting decision or in terms of cultural inheritance there is some sort of neutrality is, I think, the problem. I'm thinking of the Tongan artist Latai Taumoepeau—in some of her work she has made she looks at weaving patterns within Tongan art and she uses that pattern and rhythm to make movement from. You cannot get more abstract than that in terms of formal abstraction, which is so much a part of Western art's preoccupation. Not to mention that the whole Western modernist art movement is based on a whole bunch of appropriation of South Asian, Southeast Asian, and African cultural material.... But it is the privilege of whiteness within a white-dominated society that gets to pretend that their work is not from anywhere but the origin of the artist's vision.

## **Charemaine Seet**

I think it is really interesting that we have people in our discussion group who are coming a pure Asian background and still living in an Asian culture.

## **Lu Shirley Dai**

I have been thinking a lot about not seeing abstraction as power. We usually associate abstraction with theory because of its connection to Western philosophical structure that has been dominating much theoretical discourses and studies.

But for me as an artist and as a person of colour, I think a lot about abstraction as my means of working and as means of representation. I think partially that's what Juliana May was talking about. Because there is a distinction between me holding on to that power and me using it to address the symbolic representations, the references or even the political content that I want to talk about in a formal way in a structural way.

A lot of the works I saw in New York were falling into this topic of identity politics. There is so much emotion already being expressed, not personal emotion, but trying to emphasise the aspect of emotion and almost making it as therapeutic. As an audience member, I find it really hard to relate. However, there is a really amazing Brazilian artist Lygia Pape whose works I saw in Mexico. In a film, she had three cubes on the ground—yellow, blue and white. Soon there were three black men coming out of the cubes, stepping, beating the drums and playing with the rhythm.

For me that moment in the video was so powerful because I think she was exploring both how she could criticise or asking questions about abstraction through a different culture. I think that to me was more interesting than trying to eliminate abstraction in my work. Also, what exactly does cultural dance mean?

## **Charemaine Seet**

I really love what Justine said. What dance is not cultural? 'cultural dance' is a loose meaningless term. I think we all know that abstraction is pretty much an international thing. Everyone uses it. My attitude is f\*\*\*K it. Do your work, whether people accept it or not. When I was in the UK, people could not comprehend that I was involved in postmodern dance. It was really bad then but now that I am older things have improved. I can engage with postmodern dance on my own terms and I know it's not going to be a problem.

## **Faye Lim**

It feels to me that there are different ways to read the article – ways to meet our own needs. And it might bring up anger or sadness or self-reckoning. I'll go back to something Ting said earlier and respond to Charmaine as well - about artists who are working and living in Asia.

So, Ting said that moving back to Taiwan, things changed for her and I felt the same. Since moving back to Singapore, my community of friends and peers I work with more intimately, are Chinese. But the broader network of artists I've worked with here is quite multi-ethnic, given the construct of Singapore. Not all the artists are directly referencing classical or traditional art forms. Some of them are and some are deconstructing, exploring and experimenting with different lenses, looking at how to approach the culture of what they've inherited, or they have studied for a long time. Coming back to Singapore and being in this community of artists opened my eyes.

I spent two years at the World Arts and College Department in UCLA and dance courses were described from the perspective of the lineage of the art form. So, ballet was not just called ballet and that was what the department was trying to do. But I felt for me, it actually strengthened the place of post-modernism and Eurocentric conceptual theory at the top it, using that as the frame for how we view other cultural forms.

Back to Charmaine's question - I was really bothered and annoyed like 'Why do I have to explain what I'm doing? What is contact improvisation? Why post-modern dance? What is this work about?' and it was terribly annoying for me at that time. But over the past eight to 10 years, I started really valuing these questions and the opportunity to grow and to understand my place of privilege within this community. And even though I've not put in as much "full-time" time working in the field of dance in Singapore (as some of my peers and colleagues), there's something about my certificates, my MFA, BA from the U.S. that help some institutions here acknowledge me as a legitimate dance artist. I have peers and colleagues who have been dedicated and working hard and I believe they have been disadvantaged by the system because they do not have the formal academic degrees.

### **Charemaine Seet**

Oh my God, your education is wonderful. I have to say coming from another generation of dancers I am just so impressed by the articulate, wonderful ideas that are coming from you guys. It's really inspiring. It makes me feel really privileged just to be listening to you. I felt the same way actually at a workshop I attended in New York led by Tere O'Connor. I was listening to how the young artists spoke, their analysis and their confidence ... that is the result of education.

### **Faye Lim**

I think the emotions and the tears do not mean that I'm paralysing myself. I think that was what my friend (from the online conversation) thought too, that my expressions point to a self-paralysing guilt. To me, it's really a process of understanding and accepting and as you said - where can we go from here? There's a lot of richness and there's a lot of power that my peers, my friends have that I don't have either depending on the circumstances. But on the topic of saying you are a dance artist - not everyone here in Singapore who says they are a dance artist will be acknowledged that way and there are implications, such as in funding, in where you can teach, etc.

## **Charemaine Seet**

Well this is in a way true everywhere. But I feel like through my life I've been asking too many times permission to be accepted as a dancer or an artist or a human being. It's over now. I'm saying what I am and that's it. But I get what you're saying, if you want funding and want people to take you seriously, you have to play the game.

## **Lu Shirley Dai**

There's a question I want to propose to the whole group about the relevancy of Miguel's article to all of us. That's probably one of the reasons Charemaine arranged this group, as we all had experience studying, working in America mainly and we are all Asian faces. I want to ask about the relevancy of identity politics for Asian people, with our ethnicity culture? I have this idea of "am I being brainwashed by American identity politics?" and "what is my position and my directions in my creative process, since especially now I am not in the States."

I have been reading this article from a Chinese professor talking about what is Asian-ness, about the concept of universality as particularity and she was actually proposing forming an Asian theory which is generated from the Asian history, but is based on empirical reasonings and definitely very different from Western concepts about universality. So, I'll stop here, and I am curious to hear about everybody's thoughts.

## **Bernice Lee**

I think when I read the article, I was emotionally connected to what he felt about race and his identity. But I was reading it in an abstract way and applying it to myself in a sense of for me it's about how we relate to power and what other different contexts that creates his reality. For example, in Singapore, like if you come from a Malay dance community, there is a different type of power there and people play with it in different ways to create a relevance for themselves in the kind of cultural landscape.

So, I was just reading his article in the lens of how am I working with my reality and there's privilege in my world in the sense of. Yes, I'm Chinese, I come from a certain educational background but also there's other reality which is that like the expectations on me as an individual were quite indifferent growing up and that's very specific and it's not purely about race and it's not purely about identity. It's about like let's say the family or just the smaller social circle. So, it was relevant in that way not necessarily in the history of Blackness and Latin-ness in you know in America. I think the emotion is different here in Singapore, which is multicultural, is cosmopolitan. It has all these things about Asian-ness and Western-ness, it's been in my head since birth basically and I think there is something in it that captures the sort of complexity of the experience.

## **Justine Shih Pearson**

Faye's tears... that's to me the point of this article—and it is the same as when I say that everybody's doing cultural work. Because the point is that in fact we don't live in a vacuum. We all live in particular inherited power structures, and power structures that we participate in making and holding up, or not, or we're trying to undermine or whatever.

I totally agree with Bernice, it is about who has got power when and so for Faye to say, in fact, 'I have to think about the kind of power that I bring to my situation, particularly in Singapore,' I think that's the point right there. What Miguel is noting is that certain dancers, choreographers, critics and audience members within the American political context don't have to do that kind of reflexivity.

I would say we're not just Asian faces all together, but we're all people who are crossing into different cultural contexts all the time. And so, what that gives you is a kind of very immediate and visceral experience of the changing hierarchies and power dynamics going on. That stops you from taking it for granted and going, 'Oh, that's just the way it is.' So, Charmaine you want to do postmodern dance, go ahead do postmodern dance. But because you're in a political context in which you are not stealing anybody's thing that you're not entitled to by doing Western contemporary dance.

In the Australian context, I feel it's quite hard to have this conversation without talking about Indigenous politics, Indigenous/coloniser binaries, and also in our region in terms of Asia but also the Pacific because that's the political landscape here and it's always relative. So, what we have entitlement to do or not do is always contingent on who we are in the context that we are in.

### **Charmaine Seet**

Well this is in a way true everywhere. But I feel like through my life I've been asking too many times permission to be accepted as a dancer or an artist or a human being. It's over now. I'm saying what I am and that's it. But I get what you're saying, if you want funding and want people to take you seriously, you have to play the game.

### **Justine Shih Pearson**

No, I don't mean that Charmaine. I just mean that postmodern dance has been made on a lot of power, globally on a lot of power. But you know different rules apply to doing someone's Indigenous dance from Arnhem Land because the history of dispossession and cultural appropriation in Arnhem Land by the West is different.

### **Charmaine Seet**

I guess the point I was trying to make, quite clumsily, is that what I got from Miguel's article was his frustration, his anger, but also it was a reiteration of problems that have been going on forever. That frustrated me. I didn't want to get involved in feeling terribly torn by the problems. I wanted to just try and be honest to what I wanted to make (obviously within the realms of not being horribly offensive) without feeling "paralysed" by guilt or resentment. Not to feel that I'm letting down the side or I'm not understanding how I am complicit in this situation. That's colonisation as much as anything. The real hurdle for me is that I have been identified as "other" in many spaces.

### **Justine Shih Pearson**

Could that be liberating?

## Charemaine Seet

I think the article is positive in that it makes people think who haven't considered this yet. For myself, seeing Miguel suffer his frustrations made me feel more despairing of change. It may help me reassess whether or not I can just take a slip out of this or not? Not sure if that is liberating though. Perhaps someone else has something to say about this. Anybody else?

## Ting-Ting Cheng

So, for me, in reaction to what Charemaine was asking, I found it really related to me. I can completely relate to Miguel's position. Of course, it has a lot to do with I used to live in UK and my research. I've been discussing related issues in my works. I asked myself, did I or do I feel limited to what I'm doing, like have I ever been told if I should go this way or not. Probably it didn't happen to me directly, but I can feel or see this happening around me. I was very angry when I heard Anna's story. This is so ridiculous. I can't believe it's still happening at this day of age.

And Shirley, you were saying that you wonder if you're brainwashed by the American's identity politics. Sometimes I was told the same thing here, like, "oh you're Western because you were in UK, this cannot be applied here." But I would like to go back to what Justine was saying, "we don't live in a vacuum." It's not only about how we see ourselves. It's about our relationship to the world. Even though we don't buy into this identity politics, identity politics does exist, and people do see us in a certain way. I don't think we are "brainwashed". And to go back to what Faye was saying, about moving back, I think I might still be in the phase of "feeling annoyed". I miss this type of conversation. I have been discussing race and culture in contexts like this for a long time. And I find it difficult to have the type of conversations here, since people here are not buying into this identity politics. I am constantly told that I'm too sensitive, too PC...etc. I think it's interesting how the issues are considered in different contexts.

Another thing I'm thinking about lately was that, I remember Juliana was saying, one of the problematic things about Miguel's article is the binary of "people of colour talking about politics" and "white people talking about abstraction". I don't know if this is too much of a derail. There is a man in Taiwan, whose name is Chi Chia-wei. He is the first gay man coming out of the closet in a press conference in Taiwan in the 80s. He is an activist in gay rights movement. Lately, people found out that he is supporting a politician whose party is the one boycotting same-sex marriage. People got really angry. Then, I read an article. It says, if you really believe in liberating LGBTQ+ people, seeing them as everyone else, then they have the right to vote for whoever they want. They don't need to vote for the party that's supporting gay marriage, just like everyone else. I think that's the thing. Sometimes I fall into this trap of "people of colour need to be in solidarity, and we can't be like the white people", but I guess the real equality is that we can do whatever we want. We are allowed to get away with things, allowed to not to explain ourselves. What I'm trying to say is that we should hold the same standard towards people of colour and white people.

Another thing I find frustrating is that, I have been asked by other Taiwanese artists about “how to be successful in Europe”, “what Europeans like to see in Asian art”. Sometimes it’s not really about what Europeans expect Asian artists to do, it’s how some Asian artists believe what Europeans would expect Asian artists to do. They look into how to get famous in the “Western world” by following trends. I think that’s very frustrating. And then back to the case of Anna, I feel there is a limitation, sometimes you are expected to do “cultural”, “political” things, other times you are criticised that, “why people of colour always talk about politics, it is so tiring.” Whatever we do is not good enough.

### **Charemaine Seet**

I think I get that a lot Ting, I get what you’re saying. I find it annoying too that we are so concerned with taking care of everything. We’re like making sure the politics are okay, and we’re doing this and looking and analysing and no one else is doing that. I feel like I don’t mean to throw it out but I think there is some liberation available or there’s some sense of empowerment that we can get from stepping away a little and going, I could explore Hip Hop, I could explore, as long as I’m not insensitive and appropriating in a disrespectful way or like the person that you mentioned Justine, who is using the Tongan designs to create something. I just suddenly felt ... when I read Miguel’s article ... just kind of shut down and it was the same feeling I felt when I would walk in to a space in the UK or another “white” space in the past ... shut down. It was particularly hurtful when it’s an artistic space and you want to feel free to let your defences down to make your art. Anyway, thank you. Anna did you want to say something?

### **Anna Kuroda**

When I read his article, it was almost like I read his diary of seven bad days, days I have also had. The situations make you traumatised. I don’t have to change people by presenting my (abstract) work. I just let the audience be open in how they think about my work. I don’t have to say this movement is coming from this and this. I don’t have to educate the audience. I continuously, never stop, making my work, because otherwise the dominant people win. I have to continue my practice by not losing to those hurting memories. It hurts but I remind myself that individuals, not a group, are the cause. Generalising is dangerous. People try to put me in a box. I try to move away but not stop making work.

### **Charemaine Seet**

Just a little anecdote if anyone’s interested; in the 90s, I was part of a company in London, called Union Dance and it was comprised dancers of colour, in particular black dancers. We were funded by the City of Westminster to produce “multicultural” dance. Near the end of my time there I advocated that we commission a piece by an English choreographer who was very much influenced by Steve Paxton. So, it included improvisation, contact and other postmodern dance elements. Very Abstract! It also included a lot Capoeira, which was very “in” in the 90s. Union Dancers still retained their personal movement styles offering a new context for their dancing. It felt liberating to me to be able to dance like that. It was a lovely piece, we all enjoyed it. AND we got that weird look from the dance community, which said ‘Why are you doing that? That’s not your thing. It doesn’t suit you’.

So, you know Anna it's been going on forever. It's just like Ting says ... it is really horrifying to hear that it's going on STILL. Lu, you have a sense of this? Sometimes do you feel a little push to do something that is Chinese-ish because everyone gets really excited when you mention it ... like, "yeah, Chinese stuff!"? Of course, we are all struggling to get recognition and support for our dancing and sometimes one might think "yeah, I do love this too maybe I'll emphasise it more because people seem interested". Does one want to feel guilty about that?

### **Lu Shirley Dai**

Well, totally and to be honest I was asked a lot whether in college or in my MFA grad school to perform Chinese dance, but I have very limited knowledge or memory of Chinese traditional dance vocabulary. It's also funny because when I try to do a modern dance or a postmodern dance people always say, oh we can see the Chinese style. Also, abstraction really helps me reconsider about my Chinese identity and cultivate my cultural consciousness because that's really what I've been experiencing while when I was in the States.

In a way, I relate to the "paralysed feeling" that Faye was saying. I feel being forced to do a lot of things and after a period of time I then start to understand and articulate why I made those decisions. For example, for the first four years of my artistic exploration I was doing purely abstraction. I was a big fan of Trisha Brown. I talked only about geometry, lines and space. then I realise oh, no, I forgot that I'm Chinese and then I start to add Chinese elements in my work almost to prove that I am Chinese, even though I am Chinese. I tried to use Chinese symbols, such as festive paperwork that you see in Chinese New Year's and suddenly, I realised my understandings of China are not much different from how Americans understand China, how they see Chinatown. So that's how I get to explore more about representations, about how abstraction in a way can be effective and constructive in terms of understanding the coexistence of different cultures. Otherwise, I would simply just make a piece just to say that I am Chinese or just to fall in the category of identity politics.

### **Charemaine Seet**

When we studied Trisha Brown's choreography in NY recently, and I was looking at it from the point of view of the 80s, the era in which she made the movement. I recognise some of her movement as influenced by African-American dance, it's fascinating. The ripples or waves through the body are reminiscent of the early Hip Hop work, and there is so much traditional Jazz movement ... in her shoulders and weight transfers, footwork too. We all absorb what is around us. It's all there. How do we see? Who owns everything? My research at the moment is about how we see and experience body language in dance as "Chinese" or other.

So, suggesting a thing exists in a cultural vacuum of course is ridiculous. But I think when you're in a predominantly white space, the pressure to fit into a kind of identity that makes you "more acceptable" is painful. That's why Miguel's article just brought those feelings back, I guess for me and all of us perhaps.

## Lu Shirley Dai

Actually, can I ask a quick question to Ting? Because your primary practice is in visual arts and so much of what we've been talking about really relates to the body and which is very apparent in the discipline of dance. But abstraction mainly comes from the visual art theories and cultures. I wonder in the discipline of visual art, have you found how your peers and colleagues use such identity politics influenced ways of thinking to apply to their works or are the ideas of abstraction still quite prevalent in both representation or integrated process?

## Ting-Ting Cheng

I think it's interesting that even though visual art and contemporary dance sound different, but I feel every discussion here applies to me. Even though they didn't directly happen to me, at least I don't consciously feel that way, I have seen cases like that happened to people I know. I have a Taiwanese friend who was studying art in the U.S. Recently, I started seeing a lot of elements in her works that are very "Chinese", as a concept. And I feel a bit weird, because I know that's not a daily language in Taiwan. It feels very "Chinatown". And interestingly, when I talked to her, I asked, "do you feel pressured to go a certain way?" She answered, "no, I'm just interested in finding my 'root'." I'm not saying that she really was pushed into a certain way. I believed that sometimes people are subconsciously pushed into things without realising, including myself.

Another example came to my mind. I don't know how related it is. Perhaps it's a reverse case. A friend of mine is Spanish. When we studied together in London, one of our tutors, who is an amazing artist from Iran, she kept pushing my friend into talking about her identity, her Spanish heritage, but she wasn't interested in. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I don't feel visual art is much different compared to contemporary dance in terms of the issues we are talking about.

And Shirley, you were saying that people still see "Chinese-ness" in your works, even though you were doing other things. I feel the same way sometimes. I got people came up to me and said, "I see Asian-ness in you works", "this is so Asian". I got annoyed. I feel like, "really, you really do?" But then I think, perhaps it is true? I mean, I am Asian? Yeah, I completely feel related to this discussion.

## Charemaine Seet

Well, that's what I think too Ting. I get very annoyed when people come up to me and ask, - 'Where are you from?' I say 'Sydney'. They say 'No, really where are you from?' 'No, I am from Sydney'. Then the person takes offence and walks away. I am penalised. I am penalised for claiming my right to define my identity ... and for pointing out the person's racism.

I've been watching a lot of video myself dancing and I've been trying to analyse what I see... to trace a kind of quality that's going on in my body. I think there is something there that holds my history and ethnicity. It's just maybe the ankle or the wrist or an angle. I'm finding that my movement style is connected to voice and verbal language acquisition as well. So, I'm really interested in looking at how that's working in my body just as a personal thing, from a dance point of view. It's interesting to me.

Of course, it becomes political. So, this is the thing ... we feel guilty about saying yes there is Chinese-ness and I'm interested in it? Or we feel guilty about saying 'no there is no Chinese-ness' to try and deflect the racism. We are kind of stuck in this place and we are responsible for everything. As Justine said, some people don't have to be responsible and that's what's so frustrating.

### **Justine Shih Pearson**

But my feeling, having said that, would be they are responsible, and they should feel that they are. That, to me, is the political work to be done.

In a way we're kind of crossing between, on the one hand, my strategies to making my work, and then, the reception of the work and how it gets read. The second is not always within our control—obviously they are related—but it's not always in our control. Bernice's point that, 'I'm doing Trisha Brown's choreography' but somehow, it's done 'Chinese'—obviously that's context. If she does it in Beijing the audience may be like, 'this is the best Trisha Brown we've ever seen,' right?

It is not completely within our control, so of course through our art making we are trying to make some kind of intervention into the evolution of social thinking but that's a slow movement. So, there's what we can be ethically and artistically responsible for in our practice, and then this other question of 'how does that get read?' and that's much more about the kind of current discourse on identity politics and so forth. But you can only pull from what you know, only make what you know or what you can make. But knowing, I suppose, where you are getting that from or thinking deeply about what the impetus to make a choice is—is to me the only way we can maybe ethically do that.

### **Charemaine Seet**

That's so insightful Justine. I am also really interested in what you were saying Faye in terms of your way of seeing people and the thing you mentioned before which was very emotional for you, your judgment of other people's movement being so influenced by the learning you had in the U.S. Is that something that you think is purely from the U.S. or something that's in Singapore as well? That hierarchy of style and way of judging dancers? I don't know. I mean, it's everywhere. Let's face it. But do you think it was particularly coming from like, the prestige of postmodern dance being a so-called white form?

### **Faye Lim**

I can't say beyond myself at this point. For me, growing up in my family and my community, there was an uncritical aspiration towards ideals "from the West," from "white America," and I see that as effects of colonisation in Singapore (Singapore was British colony). When I was in the U.S. as an impressionable young person, I was learning and talking about "good art/bad art" in the academic setting in college, and thinking about what experimentation is, what is "traditional." What is valued on stage and what gets presented?

What I saw happening in college was that academic and conceptual studies of “traditional” or “classical” art forms, had the effect of de-legitimising these art forms, as if we would not appreciate them in the academic setting unless there was some treatment done, eg. deconstruction, etc. I hope and I believe I am not minimising the work that was done in that department by sharing this. It did have the effect of giving me a lens to look at what gets valued in the artistic world in the field.

### **Charmaine Seet**

Do you think that dance academia drives people to try to find those kinds of justifications for studying something? Is it the academic thing or practice? I’m not sure.

### **Faye Lim**

I was in a panel in Singapore and someone brought up something about how many artists claim they are doing experimental work, like in classical or cultural art forms, but there is little difference between what they are doing and what came before them. And it really bothered me. I was asking ‘How are we seeing what is experimental? How are we seeing progress and artistic inquiry? What lens are we using to be looking at these?’

### **Bernice Lee**

I just want to add that like when we talked about abstraction actually, classical Indian dance is incredibly abstract, the most complex in terms of abstraction that I interacted with myself. Like we’re not equipped with the language or we’re not giving ourselves permission to see in that way because everywhere including especially in Singapore things like that get seen as traditional arts, that it’s about culture and ethnicity and diasporic roots. Like it’s the political framing that comes from elsewhere and it’s really problematic.

### **Charmaine Seet**

Well, that’s what I thought about Miguel’s article. There was this framing that I found quite undermining in a similar way.

### **Faye Lim**

What Bernice also said Charmaine to your question of ‘Have you felt compelled to make your work, label your work in certain way to be produced, to be presented, to get money?’ The thing in Singapore is that a lot of artists get put in this traditional art bucket and it’s been happening. But in recent times there was specifically a pot of money and venue and space in traditional arts and a whole bunch of our friends are in there because you access the resources.

### **Charmaine Seet**

I think it’s ok to access the resources if you can. I really believe in artists defining and redefining their work and surviving as well as they can. I don’t think it compromises too much. Maybe I’m wrong.

Thank you again everybody. It’s been really wonderful. I love listening to all you. You are all brilliant.