

# Rungb

A South Asian Quarterly of Culture, Comment and Criticism

\$5

Volume 1, Number 4

## **The Body Issue**

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A conversation with Neil  
Bissoondath

### **AIDS, Art & Architecture**

Alistair Raphael's *Invasive Procedures*

### **Unwanted Body Hair**

Interrogating the Male Gaze

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# Rungh

Volume 1, Number 4

RUNGH is an interdisciplinary magazine committed to the exploration of traditional and contemporary South-Asian cultural production. It is a project of the Rungh Cultural Society—an incorporated, non-profit society.

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Subscription rates to RUNGH are \$20 per year for individuals, and \$27 per year for institutions (GST incl). For US and international, please add \$5 for

postage and handling. Canadian Publications Mail Sales Product Agreement Number 83712.

RUNGH welcomes inquiries about feature articles, reviews, art projects and other submissions.

RUNGH accepts no responsibility for unsolicited material and such material shall be returned only if accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope.

## Funding assistance from

Canada Council, Explorations Program  
Secretary of State, Multiculturalism & Creative Programs  
City of Vancouver Cross-Cultural Program

ISSN 1188-9950 Printed in Canada ©1993

# Letter to the Editor

I'd like to make a few comments on the article **Leather, Sex and Masala** (Vol. 1 No. 1 & 2), Vinita Srivastava's interview with Srinivas Krishna about his film, **Masala**.

I find myself in the awkward position of being the 'man at the Desh Pradesh screening [of **Masala**] in Toronto' who Krishna says 'mortified' him. I was the one who stood up during the question period and raised some concerns about the Sikh characters in the movie.

But I never said I was—and I never felt—'offended.' Indeed, I fully share Krishna's evaluation of those whose response is to 'take offense' at things that challenge their static view of the world. They are living in a state of 'closure' as he puts it; I would add 'complacency' for good measure.

What I did say (after pointing out that I liked the film, and could identify with it, having spent my entire childhood in Toronto) was that there is a chauvinism and a lack of trust between the different religious groups that make up the South Asian community in Toronto—not to speak of the situation in South Asia itself—and that it struck me as somewhat irresponsible to have Sikhs cast solely as political agitators (I did not say 'terrorists') who, moreover, pushed their cause through the medium of toilet paper.

By and large, I stick to these concerns. When I made the comments I was a bit shaken—I find the movie quite moving in parts—and there may have been a problem of emphasis and tone of voice here and there. I certainly felt bad for Krishna when I saw the veritable look of gloom and doom that overtook his usual and admirable air of self-confidence while he listened to my remarks and then awkwardly made his reply.

I'm not so childish as to have wanted to 'show him up' in front of the audience. And even if I was, I certainly didn't succeed—the remaining comments from the audience were highly praiseful, verging on fawning.

The really unfortunate part of the exchange came after the public questions and comments session, during a smaller discussion in the theatre. There, I had a chance to explain my concerns more fully to Krishna, once again insisting that they did not override my general appreciation of the film.

Indeed, I pointed out that one of the major strengths of the film was that it brought the Indian community in Canada to life; showing representatives from all spectrums, showing Indians watching TV, working at the post office, masturbating, having sex, getting attacked, going to school, running a business, currying favour with government ministers and so on.

In short, it gave the Indian community in Canada a real, rounded personality, and in an irreverent, unconventional way at that. We are real, working, playing Canadians after all.

But I also said that this 'Indian' community wasn't quite complete, that it was actually only the Hindu-Indian community. That is fine, Krishna is from a Hindu background, that is what he 'knows.' But does it logically follow, then that Sikhs have to be portrayed—insofar as the 'Hindu' filmmaker in question feels compelled to portray them at all—as obsessive political agitators and (apart from the taxi driver "ringleader") as quaint, speechless, head-bobbing ninnyes with no other role in Canada but smuggling rolls of toilet paper emblazoned with Sikh history in India?

Is it far-fetched to suggest that this may not be the best way to build communal harmony, whatever Krishna's intentions may have been? This is particularly relevant given that the subtext of the entire film is the bombing of the Air India jet—a bombing which, though unsolved, has been used by every anti-Sikh communalist fanatic to stoke hatred both here and in India.

In any event, I expressed these concerns, and Krishna's response was, "What kind of racial politics game are you trying to play? Are white filmmakers held to the same standards?" and, "Why don't you make your own movie?" He also grouped me in with the conservative elements of the Hindu community who denounced his film for 'blaspheming Lord Krishna' and other predictable fundamentalist nonsense.

Criticism is criticism, I suppose, even though mine comes from a totally different angle and is aimed at nurturing public debate, not at censoring or barring the film. Sadly, fear of the 'politically correct' bugaboo is increasingly preventing people from approaching works of art and scholarship in a critical-minded spirit.

I'll leave it to your readers to decide if my concerns are really as 'mortifying' and 'idiotic' as all that. It is really unfortunate that a filmmaker who has earned his place in the cutting edge of Canadian cinema has chosen to respond in such a hostile and dismissive fashion.

And there is something terribly distasteful about the fact that he has elected to do so in the name of combatting 'closure.'

**Raghu Krishnan**  
Paris, France

*Rungh welcomes letters to the Editor. Please send us your comments, ideas and responses. All letters should include the sender's name, address and phone number. We reserve the right to edit all submissions.*

Andrea Imada and Sarita

“unwanted



problem?”

Struggling  
to Re-present  
Our Bodies

Mummy gives me a spoon  
Daddy gives me some lovely soft foamy shaving cream

Proudly Proudly I remove the hair from my hairless face  
Just like Daddy

I lock the bathroom door  
My shopper’s drug mart plastic bag is with me

Secretly  
Silently  
I read the instructions

The sickening chemicals give me away  
and scar my skin.

“...naming, like a cast of the die, is just one step  
toward unnamng, a tool to render visible what he  
has carefully kept invisible...”  
Trinh T. Minh-ha <sup>1</sup>

Gasping and laughing, we women are  
empathetically, defiantly and jokingly offering  
a friend responses to the men that yelled,  
“Shave your legs!” at her. Standing around after  
work, we are mocking and talking about how  
others see our (‘hairy’) bodies, and how we  
see ourselves.

It’s not something we are supposed to do,  
loudly share these stories in the hallway.

## Self Portrait

When we Western(ized) women remove the hair from our bodies, it is a secret ritual, so that we can pretend we never had any. If we don't shave, then it is supposed to be a trivial or political matter, one we are comfortable with.<sup>2</sup> We're not supposed to admit feeling (or being made to feel) inadequate about measuring up to the images that we are **opposing**. Certainly, we are not supposed to talk publicly about such vulgarities, or offend, or threaten others with our vulgar, hairy bodies in the first place.

The powerful norm of hairless (white, blonde, skinny, tall...) female body is not as universal, in the West, or in the world, as the images we see lead us to believe. Yet, I (we) do believe the images. And in believing them, I internalize notions of beauty that mean I see my hairy body as ugly, unwomanly, 'anti-womanly': the antithesis of what is defined as 'woman,' or threatening rejection of it.

The relationship between body hair and sexuality is explicit in representations of both women and men. Explicit, yet complex, contradictory, and unclear. Ads push endless products claiming to enhance the sex appeal of our eyelashes, or the hair on our head. Other ads sell us products to make ourselves smooth and sexy by removing the hair everywhere else on our face and bodies. John Berger comments on a 17th century European painting which traditionally does not depict a

woman's body hair—even her genital hair:

*"This picture is made to appeal to his sexuality. It has nothing to do with her sexuality. Here and in the European tradition generally, the convention of not painting the hair on a woman's body helps towards the same end. Hair is associated with sexual power, with passion..."*

Stuart Hood, in his discussion of war and sexuality, also mentions the 'notable lack of pubic hair' in a pornographic cartoon during WWII.

A woman I interview also begins to talk to me about the link between body hair and (male) sexuality:

*"It is interesting, how much it has to do with sexuality—men call you a dyke, or ugly—as if that was the worst insult, that they find you sexually unattractive. It makes you think that it really is about patriarchy."*

Although hair is associated with sexual power, a woman with body hair is portrayed as (hetero)sexually undesirable. In order for women to be seen as desirable to men, we have been stripped of our own sexuality. And that European image has become so naturalized that it represents not only female sexuality and beauty, but what is (Western) 'woman.'

In discussions and interviews with women, we begin to realize, or have recognized, that the desire to have a woman hairless is a desire to keep her looking like a girl. Body hair is a

'secondary sex characteristic'; it indicates sexual maturity, it is one of the things that defines us as women, rather than as girls.

I am also realizing that there is an unexplored link between animality and body hair. An acquaintance who shaves her legs asks to see mine. I raise my pant leg and show her a hairy limb. She shakes her head and says, "You're wild, Sarita." Her judgement throws me off, and only later can I reflect on her choice of words: 'wild: savage, undomesticated, passionate, unruly.'

In trying to redefine, reclaim my body, my sexuality, I am trying to oppose those images, those norms. Examining, deconstructing them, learning about their origin, is a beginning. Learning they are not universal helps. A woman of African descent tells me about her visiting grandmother who sees her clean-shaven legs, and exclaims with alarm, "She doesn't have any hair on her legs!" Reassured, she says with disbelief, "You **shave your legs??!!**" And my mother tells me that in India, the practice only began in the 60s when all the 'modern, Westernized' girls began wearing sleeveless tops as a rebellion against tradition. Yet now my friend's aunt in India tells her it is only 'backward and uneducated' women that don't shave.

I am concerned with the images of these norms and relations, and their visual and symbolic representation. Photographs are not significant because they necessarily **create** these norms and relations. Photographers, however, are significant because they do symbolise, 'idealise' (Holland et al 1986),<sup>3</sup> powerfully reinforce, and help to naturalize norms and relations. These images also become powerful because they are both used to sell us an image of ourselves and the products that we need to create that image. For example, an article and accompanying photos in a women's magazine advertise bathing suits, and then tell us exactly which before, during and after products we need to shave that 'sensitive' genital area. So, creating alter-

native photographic images of myself and other women, and talking to these women about their experiences, has become part of my project of opposition.

Yet I have apprehensions, questions about what I am doing. How can any alternative photography avoid reproducing the images it opposes? When I photograph a woman's leg, my leg, I feel I am using my power as photographer to objectify and fragment her body, my body. And in pretending to counter images, am I consciously/unconsciously reproducing the codes and conventions of those images? I cannot deny that I am still defining myself in opposition to, and therefore in relation to, a dominant image, rather than escaping it. Trinh T. Minh-ha points to the way in which we cannot avoid reproducing the colonialism of the colonizer's language:

"I have wondered time and time again about my reading myself as I feel he reads me..."<sup>4</sup>

But we also need to look beyond an analysis of the 'inherent' qualities of the technology, of its conventions, and look as well at the political and social context of both dominant and oppositional images. That means we must ask who creates and controls the image? What is it used for? Who is it made for? Who is photographed?

For months I have been excited about this photo project, discussing it with other women. And yet, when I first get behind a camera and turn it on **my own body**, I begin to have serious doubts:

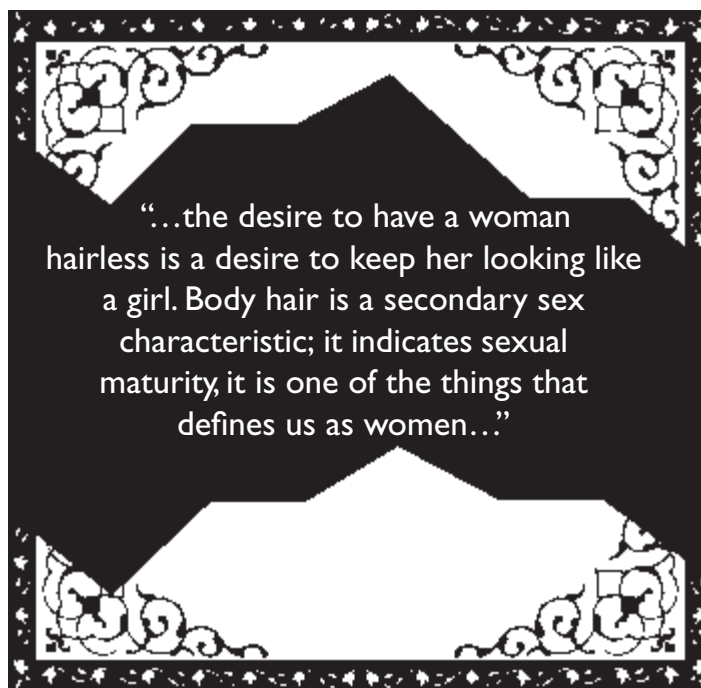
"I am starting to feel uncomfortable with the idea of photographing women, and especially parts of their bodies. Am I just reproducing their objectification by others in the images all around us? There is something about photography, about the technology itself that seems to be perhaps inherently **objectifying**. And **silencing**. It can be used out of context, and most often, **out of control** of the photographed, but in the **control of the photographer**."<sup>5</sup>

Holland et al (1986) focus on this issue of power, saying that, "photography constructs and positions sexuality in the likeness of the beliefs and interests of the institutions which support it."

So I would like to think the photographs I take (my photographs) are different than dominant images in an important way. I can

make the argument this way: Unlike the professional image-maker, keeper and seller, I am a non-white, female, amateur, novice photographer taking pictures of my own community, myself, and my supportive friends. Unlike some 'political' photographers, I am not trying to interpret the social conditions of another community through my eyes. I pay to print these photos out of my limited income, and do not sell them. My intentions are to oppose an oppressive norm by making a political statement about our personal lives, not to make a profit.

But I do profit from these images, personally, academically, maybe profession-



ally. I also keep them, manipulate them, and control if and where they get shown or published. To some extent it feels like a reproduction of the power relations of dominant image-making. Perhaps I can resolve this by taking only self-portraits. Or by conceiving of a truly collective project, as Su Braden advocates in **Committing Photography**.<sup>6</sup>

An oppositional, alternative photography needs to address these issues if it is to truly challenge or subvert the dominant; the **power** of (hetero)sexist, classist, racist images. But I have also found that even an attempted alternative photography can have several roles in countering dominant images. We must focus not only on product, but on process. As we

produce alternative images, the open discussion about our issues of self-representation, as well as our internalized feelings about 'beauty' and 'ugliness', can be as important as the 'finished' work.

Barthes says "...the *Photograph's* essence is to ratify what it represents... No writing can give me this certainty."<sup>7</sup> I realize that is why I photograph women myself, to affirm our/my reality, to say, "We are real, we exist, our reality is silenced. No one can disprove our presence in these photographs." (I think). It goes further: I am refusing to hide what is supposed to be hidden; I am flaunting it.

In the end, I photograph not to replace the dominant images, nor to influence those who make them. I want **my** images to be seen by women whose reality is not represented by the dominant images. I want my photographs to be seen by women who have chosen differently, to be seen by me.



**Sarita Srivastava** is a Toronto activist. She has been involved with the environmental and popular education movements. She is currently a doctoral student at OISE.

<sup>1</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, **Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism**, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1989:48

<sup>2</sup> Wendy Chapkis describes not being able to talk about feeling 'ugly': "As a feminist, I felt I had 'no business' feeling stung by not measuring up. Of course I **knew** that all my sisters felt comfortable in their skins—whatever shape, colour, texture, or size they happened to be." (Chapkis 1986:2)

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Holland, Jo Spence and Simon Whatney (eds) **Photography/Politics: Two** Comedia Publishing Group, London, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, **Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism**, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1989

<sup>5</sup> Personal notes, October 16, 1992

<sup>6</sup> Su Braden, **Committing Photography**, Pluto Press, London, 1983.

<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes, **Camera Lucida**, The Noonday Press, New York, 1981.

# the cultural imperative

*Neil Bissoondath was interviewed by Ali Lakhani on Saturday, October 24, 1992 at the Vancouver International Writers' Festival. Photos by Ann Marcoux.*

## an interview with Neil Bissoondath

**Ali** Societies often identify individuals in terms of their ethnicity, in terms of characteristics such as race, religion, and culture. Are you troubled by this in any way?

**Neil** I am troubled by it when these divisions are used to highlight and therefore to isolate people. I think it is the grand flaw in multiculturalism as we have practised it in this country. I think that the policy, as enunciated, is a generous one. It is an interesting approach to creating a new kind of society, but it may be inevitable that because of the various forces that do try to manipulate society in its constituent parts, people will start finding themselves put into their little ghettos, into lots of pigeon holes created by those who have an interest in creating pigeon holes. Nothing is more convenient for a politician than to be able to identify an ethnic group for an election and turn up with a cheque in his hand. I believe that this is divisive and it is a policy, a way of approaching society, that is bad for society. It is bad for the country because it means that we develop a patchwork of people who do not know each other and fail to engage with each other in society. It is bad for the individual because it turns the individual into a kind of representative, into a kind of exotic exhibit, and that is immediately a narrowing of the human possibility.

**Ali** You once referred to the Canadian policy of multiculturalism as "a gentle form of apartheid." Do you see the proposed treatment of aboriginals and French Canadians under the Charlottetown Accord also as a gentle form of apartheid?

**Neil** I differentiate between the two. The Québec situation; having lived in Montréal for three years now, I am approaching the entire debate as a 'Quebecker' and this is a new discovery for me. I understand the situation and the needs of the Province of Québec. I speak French. I have lots of friends who are separatists, nationalists, federalists, both Anglophone and Francophone. I have come to realize that Québec really is, to use the phrase, a 'distinct society' within Canada. The Province of Québec is different, it approaches life differently, its attitudes towards life are different. Its reactions are different from the mass of English Canadians. It has special requirements for the protection of its language and its culture, and its culture is a way of life. That is what we are talking about. The way of life is different.

There are similarities between 'Quebeckers' and the rest of Canadians. There is a certain larger outlook towards life and an attitude towards politics that are similar. We have a shared history that we cannot deny and that has shaped us in certain ways. Yet these are not all of the differences.



Because Québec is different, because it has special needs, I think it needs special powers to deal with them. I think of it in terms of the family. I am driven to distraction sometimes by this simplistic interpretation that we hear from individuals, from ordinary people, from politicians, as to the meaning of equality. A lot of people seem to assume—and I think this is simplistic philosophy—that equality means sameness. Equality is never sameness. Every parent will treat his or her children equally, but differently, because every child has specific needs. We recognize the individuality of those children and we treat them equally but not in the same way. This is only normal.

**Ali** What about the argument that other provinces should be treated as distinct?

**Neil** We already do. We already do. The principal of distinct treatment has long been practised in this country, otherwise you wouldn't have things such as transfer payments from the richer provinces to the poorer provinces. We don't treat people the same way in this country. No province is treated the same way. We have to be careful when we start saying this. If we were to be consistent with the idea that every province is to be treated the same, then we must withdraw the transfer payments to the poorer provinces, and we must let every province deal with its economic realities in its own way. That is sameness. We don't believe in sameness for this country; we believe in equality, and we believe in treating people according to their needs, such as they are in their particular circumstances and in their regions and provinces. I fail to see why people—I think it is a kind of ignorance about just how different Québec is—fail to accept that Québec needs special powers. We use such loaded language here. Different powers.

**Ali** At the root of all of this is a fear, is there not, a sense that by defining a society as distinct we are really driving wedges between communities in Canada?

**Neil** There is possibly that fear. I don't think it is a fair fear. I don't think it is informed. But no fear is ever informed. I think that if people were to know Québec more, it would make a difference...Too much of what I hear seems to be informed by ignorance.

**Ali** While you are not a fan of multiculturalism policies, you don't subscribe to the American melting pot theory either.

**Neil** No. Each one is false.

**Ali** What is your view of the treatment that governments should accord to ethnically diverse societies?

**Neil** Get the hell out of it.

**Ali** Is there any role at all?

**Neil** The role of the government is in combatting the things that divide us. Take racism for example. I would like to see more money put into the education system, encouraging people to see what unites us, not what divides us. Let's not highlight the differences. The differences are obvious to everyone. Those are interesting differences and sometimes they are divisive differences. What we have to highlight is the humanity that does unite us. And that has not been done. That is the only role for government. Beyond that, we are already too subject to government manipulation. We have to be very careful. I think government has used multiculturalism to manipulate the ethnic communities. Let's face it, multiculturalism is prompted, in part—in great part—by an intent to co-opt the ethnic communities for the Liberal Party. It is a way of buying their loyalty, and it worked for many years. So, recognizing that, let's make the necessary changes.

**Ali** Do you have a sense of personal identity that is linked to notions of ethnicity?

**Neil** Not particularly. I know who I am. I know where I have come from. I know as much as is possible to know. It is true of my family that a lot has been lost over the years. I am secure of who I am and I suppose from that point of view I do have a certain...identity, and I am comfortable with it, I know what it is. But it isn't particularly linked. It is as much linked to ethnicity as it is to being born where I was, into the family which I was born, and to what I do. The ethnicity itself plays no major role. It's simply part of who I am.

**Ali** You shy away from linkages to particular groups.

**Neil** Yes.

**Ali** And yet to some extent when one talks about identity, one has to think in terms of reference points.

**Neil** I always think in and talk in terms actu-

ally, of my family, rather than of civilization. This is honestly how I think about it; on a fairly, I suppose, individual level. The only collective I'm comfortable with is the collective of the family. Beyond that, I am uneasy with any kind of larger collective, whether it be religious, ethnic, political. I have never—cannot even—join a political party. I haven't even been able to bring myself to join the Writers' Union. This is simply part of a personal distrust of any kind of collective identity.

**Ali** And linked with that, I suppose, is a danger in stereotyping that can occur when one thinks in terms of larger groups.

**Neil** Exactly. The stereotyping by others, but also a kind of theatre in your own personal life. They begin acting their ethnic role. And I have seen this too often. It becomes very sad.

**Ali** Are you conscious of this as a writer, and do you try to avoid or even expose stereotypes in your writing?

**Neil** Oh absolutely. Absolutely. I am an enemy of ideology of any kind, political, racial, religious. All ideology depends on stereotypes, and human life is not so simple.

**Ali** In what sense would you say that your

“Multiculturalism constantly throws your ethnicity at you, thereby putting you at arm's length from society at large.”

own Indian-ness or West Indian-ness has shaped your writing? Has it been a defining factor in your writing?

**Neil** It is very hard for me to say. And I suppose it is because I have not really thought about my writing in those terms. I am too close to the writing. I tell my stories and I learn from others what is in my stories. I am often asked how much influence, for example, did my uncle have or does my uncle (VS Naipaul) have in my writing, and I cannot answer that question. These are questions for an academic to answer; someone with a greater distance, who can look back and compare things and come to conclusions. As far as my writing is concerned, I am fairly instinctive. There are a lot of questions that I can really not honestly answer.

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**Ali** I would imagine that you would resist labels such as an 'Indo-Canadian style of writing' or 'Indo-Canadian novel.'

**Neil** I wouldn't reject it, but I wouldn't be sure what it means. I have no idea what that means.

**Ali** People speak of 'Canadian literature' and 'Canadian novels.' Do you think there is such a thing?

**Neil** Oh, absolutely. Absolutely, and in fact, it is the only label that I am happy with—'Canadian Writer.' I will tell you why; because it means everything and it means nothing, because it includes Rohinton Mistry, Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Timothy Findley, Neil Bissoondath and MG Vassanji. It is such an open concept: 'Canadian Writer.' Canadian literature now accommodates such a variety that it is very comfortable to be called that. There is no label, there is no stereotype to be attached to it any more. There was a time when to be called a 'Canadian Writer' was to have elicited groans and, "Yes, tell me once more about your growing up on the damn prairies." That is no longer so. And that makes that label comfortable.

**Ali** I suppose at some point the group becomes so large that it affords you anonymity.

**Neil** Exactly. Because I distrust stereotypes so much. Labels will often create a stereotype in the mind of the potential reader. They will come to your work thinking that you are, let's say, an Indo-Canadian writer. People will pick up a book expecting a kind of eastern mysticism or exoticism. They won't necessarily find that in my work. They will judge my work based on its failure to provide them with the expectations that the label had created, and my work goes well beyond them, and so I want to avoid that.

**Ali** Criticism from a prejudice.

**Neil** Exactly. You get enough of that from academia.

**Ali** In your novel, *A Casual Brutality*, the dilemma of Raj on one level is that he cannot embrace the ways of the past—what you've also termed the 'cultural imperative'—and yet he cannot flee these ways either. He vacillates between different choices of identity. He speaks of 'the theorem of race that informs every attitude of this society' in Casequemada. He instinctively rejects the racial definition of identity that characters

like Surein and Madera have embraced, and yet he finds no comfort when he leaves Casequemada to come to Toronto. In Toronto he encounters a racism, and at the same time shrinks away from what you have termed the 'stares of racial inclusion' of his fellow West Indians. Do you believe that for an individual it is possible to escape from the culture imperative?

**Neil** I like to think that it is possible. I like to think that one can take control of one's own life and of this fear. Certainly of one's internal life, and this is what the cultural imperative is in the end.

**Ali** But it is not something purely subjective, there is an objective outlook to it as well. You need to be in an environment where you are accepted otherwise you are constantly reminded of differences. It is natural that you will have a sense of being apart.

**Neil** Which is why I am an opponent of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism constantly throws your ethnicity or exoticism at you, thereby putting you at arm's length from society at large. I believe that an individual can—and I know lots of people who are like this—can be informed of who they are, of their background and the cultural imperative can be part of them but it doesn't necessarily control them. It's a wonderful freedom. You are not manipulated by the past, and this frees you to create your future as much as any society can allow an individual to create a future. But you haven't got that baggage or, at least, the baggage is a comfortable one.

**Ali** There is an issue here of entrapment and the need to be detached. To what extent do you feel that we build the prisons that we live in? There is a tendency for people in life to hold onto things, to try and control things, rather than to let them evolve. Could you comment on how you explore this theme in your writing?

**Neil** I basically come to it, whether it be questions of the Third World, to use that phrase, or of immigrants to this country—it seems to me that all change has to start inside. On the level of Third World problems, for example, a corrupt society—and there are many of them—will not stop being corrupt until the people of that country decide that they will in their personal lives stop practising corruption. It is not enough to be horrified at the politicians' corruption if you live a corrupt life yourself. And so the change has to be internal. And I think the same is true for immigrants.

You have to come with the attitude of 'you are coming to something, you are going to make something of your life,' and not allow yourself to be entrapped by your prejudices, by your fears, by your assumptions. I have seen too many people lead very sad lives, having arrived in this country and having wrapped themselves in their cultural baggage, creating their little worlds in their apartments, never engaging in society. Yet they believe that they know the society, judging it on misconception and usually judging it negatively, and therefore leading lives that go nowhere, leading lives in which they eventually entrap themselves. They weave a little net for themselves, and the only ones who end up losing, in the end, are themselves. I think that all change has to come from inside, that's basically it. I think the individual responsibility is where everything starts.

**Ali** And yet it is very difficult to escape that. I think for example of the ending to the story *The Cage*. The way the Japanese girl feels at the end that she has to go back to her society and the hold that her family seems to have over her. In a sense, the same sort of tension is one that you find in the character Raj in *A Casual Brutality*.

**Neil** It is never easy. I never claimed that it was easy. In fact, it is the most difficult thing. The easiest thing of all is the surrender. To surrender to those fears, to surrender to those assumptions, to those stereotypes that present themselves so easily, is comforting. It requires very little effort. What requires much more effort, intellectual and emotional, is to take that step beyond, because it means having to take a clear-eyed look at yourself. It means being honest with yourself about not only what you feel, but also about the origins of what you feel. It means questioning, sometimes, your very basic assumptions about yourself. So it is not easy, by any means, and it is easy to be dragged along, but I don't think it is impossible.

**Ali** When I think of 'traditional societies,' by which I mean the societies with extended families, societies in India and perhaps the West Indies that you knew, I think of a greater emphasis on responsibility rather than on freedom and I think of the opposite when I think of what we call 'modern' (western) societies.

**Neil** More freedom and less responsibility?

**Ali** That's right. I get the impression that you would lean more towards freedom rather than towards responsibility.

**Neil** Absolutely. The reason being that traditional societies impose their concept of responsibility on the individual. I believe the only responsibility that is worthwhile is the responsibility the individual is prepared to accept. In order to do that, you have to have the freedom to question everything and then to decide for yourself what is important. There are rules, there are certain limits of course, but I would rather take the chance on excessive freedom than excessive shaping.

**Ali** And what aspects of oneself does one call upon to give the right balance, to achieve the right balance between the two?

**Neil** Everything that makes you human, but most particularly, your critical sense. Having the courage and the strength to question everything, even your most basic senses of yourself, who you are, what you acquired and what you think you know. I think it is true to say that we almost always know a great deal less than we think we know. That's what you've got to keep in mind.

**Ali** The two quotations at the beginning of *A Casual Brutality* suggests to me two different extremes. The quotation from Brel suggests helplessness, an inability to shape one's destiny. The other quotation from the interrogator of Timerman suggests an inflated sense of one's power to shape one's destiny. Between these two extremes lies hope, which in the first line of your novel you refer to as, 'but a synonym for illusion'. In a sense, I think the book is about a struggle against 'the illusion of control'. The threat of the casual brutality emanates from the pervasive presence of fear and greed in the various characters and communities that you have described in the book. When you consider human nature and the forces that underlie society, are you an optimist?

**Neil** That is a very good question. I consider myself to be an optimist. But not on the level of society. On the level of society, I am a pessimist. I think society will inevitably always corrupt. But it is up to the individuals. I think that is where I am an optimist. I think individuals can go a long way in creating options for themselves. It seems to me that the thing we must try to create always in life is options. To have no options is to have no hope. And to surrender to that is to surrender to life.

**Ali** And, at times, too many options can paralyse.

**Neil** Too many options can paralyse, but that is only if there is a lack of courage. But to have some options and to be able to decide which of those options you will try—because there is no guarantee of success—is part of the essence in life. And just to get back to the quotes at the beginning for a moment, I think that the novel is an exploration of the perilous path between those two extremes; of the dangers of trying to control, of seeking that control, but also at the same time the necessity of having it, because either extreme is perilous in some way or another.

**Ali** I just interviewed Rohinton Mistry and suggested to him that one of the themes that I saw in his novel *Such a Long Journey* is the theme of detachment. Yet I found that in his book, what was suggested by the resolution of Gustad Noble's dilemmas was very much a sense of compassionate detachment. On the one hand, a kind of detachment drove one to escape from the world, and on the other hand, compassion anchored one down in the world. There

“I am an enemy of ideology of any kind, political, racial, religious. All ideology depends on stereotypes, and human life is not so simple.”

seemed to be a balancing involved between the two. Do you explore the same sort of themes in your writing?

**Neil** I suppose I do but in a very different way of course. I mean these are all the basic questions of human life. That is one of the reasons I like Rohinton Mistry's writing. I think he does explore those themes, and in very gentle terms. Also, I like Gustad Noble. I remember him very well from experience of the novel. The way he leads his life is interesting. The way things resolve themselves is I think very realistic. I'm not sure there are any answers there but of course no one looks to a novel—and one should not look to a novel—for answers. Just to get back to your previous question, would you consider *Such a Long Journey* an optimistic novel or a pessimistic novel?

**Ali** Very much an optimistic novel for me, because in the end, it was an affirmation of the choices that one can make in life. The journey is, for me, similar to the idea of a river. It is something that is there and yet, at the same time, constantly moving. There is a passage in *Such a Long Journey* where the pavement artist identifies the source of

sorrow as the yearning for permanence, and at that point in the novel, he speaks of the importance of the journey—'unplanned, uncharted'—and I think this is the realization that Gustad Noble comes to in the end. It is a sense of having to detach himself from all the conflicts that have plagued him and to rise above it.

**Neil** Yes. And to continue living his life. I agree with you. It is an optimistic novel but it is not an easy optimism, is it? I am often accused of being a pessimistic writer; but I believe there is a kind of optimism in my writing to a certain extent. I think maybe some of the situations I have written about are harder, in a way, because people living in smaller societies get caught up more easily and that is part of the difference, I think. It is a much larger society that Rohinton has written about. In small places, it is very hard sometimes to escape and to live a kind of detached life. Everything has an impact on you, a very direct impact. It is not easy to step out of the way of a roaring train. I think that is one difference, but I consider myself to be an optimistic writer.

**Ali** A few moments ago, you talked about Third World countries and that brought to mind the way you deal with the issue of colonization of Third World countries in *A Casual Brutality*. The character Grappler in this novel describes Casequemada as 'a failed experiment in nationhood'. Has the 'politics of greed' created a new type of colonization for Third World countries, moving from colonization by the outsider to a colonization from within?

**Neil** Precisely. Because the essence of colonialism was rape—rape of these lands that the colonial powers took over. What seems to have continued beyond independence in so many of these countries is the attitude of rape, the attitude of enriching oneself. No idea of contributing to a country, but taking from it. This often always has been the case for many of the politicians who led these countries to independence, who pretended to be sacrificing their lives and their ideals for a much higher ideal—the ideal of freedom. And yet, when you come right down to it, you go through the countries of the Third World, so many of them have simply become the treasure house of their so-called leaders. And that attitude has transmitted itself down to the people of these countries, too. I mean, corruption is not exclusive to the political masses. Corruption in a corrupt society goes down to the lowest, meanest levels. That is part of my despair for these places.

**Ali** But in a sense the old colonial powers in the West are also to blame.

**Neil** Of course. I have never said that they are not to blame, although there are those who have claimed that I have said this. Not in the least. Of course they are to blame. They agreed to the situation in the first place.

**Ali** And they create a sense of dependency rather than self-reliance.

**Neil** That is it. People have grown accustomed to this, it seems to me, so many generations after independence in so many countries. This is where the internal revolution is necessary, what I started talking about in the beginning—the change that is necessary inside for people to say “we have had enough of this” instead of continuing, as so many people do, to simply blame Britain, blame France, blame the colonial powers. That is not good enough any more. That is simply not good enough any more. You must start taking a look inside yourself, at yourself, and until people are prepared to do that nothing will change.

Somalia is a wonderful example of the kind of thing that makes you despair. Where you have got children starving in the streets, you have got aid agencies flying in tons of food, and you have got other Somalis with guns stealing that food for themselves. You have got other Somalis with guns taking blankets from dying children, pulling them off. These people are doing it to their own people. You cannot blame anybody else; only the internal situation in that country. These Somalis with the guns have to start thinking of their attitude. Until those attitudes change and raping their own country or stealing from their own people stops, nothing will change.

**Ali** Could you speak about your new book, *The Innocence of Age*? What are the themes that you deal with in that book?

**Neil** The primary theme is the relationship between a father and his son. The relationships between parents and children is one that has interested me for the last little while and this novel grew out of that, grew out of my father’s death and my own becoming a father. Lots of questions; it was a strange time. A lot of questions came out of that. And a fair amount of work has also come out of those two events. One of them is the novel. It is a story of a father and a son, people very different from myself, who have appropriated white, WASP faces. It is a difficult relationship, as so often. It is a

search for what unites them in all their differences, I suppose. Which, in the end, seems to me to be often the struggle between parents and children.

**Ali** Does your having recently become a parent enable you to appreciate your own parents a lot more?

**Neil** Yes, it helps me see my parents more clearly. It also raises more questions about myself, about my parents, about the kind of life that we lived. Questions that cannot be answered any more because my parents are dead.

**Ali** What sort of questions?

**Neil** Questions about, I don’t remember what life was like when I was five. I don’t know what my parents were particularly doing. I want to know where some of my insecurities come from, what might have created them. I tried sitting down with my father and discussing these things, and he couldn’t answer my questions. He wasn’t the kind of man to communicate on that level. My mother would have been, but she died at the age of fifty. And it would be wonderful to sit down with her over a glass of wine and simply talk about what life was like for her when I was born, when I was growing up. The years of struggle that they went through—because they did go through years of struggle financially—and simply what it was like. I know almost no stories of my childhood. Things that many young people don’t think about. I suppose part of it is I am seeing my own insecurities and trying to deal with them and hoping I don’t pass them on or procreate them in my daughter. I suppose in wanting to be as good a parent as possible to my daughter, I need to find out what was the background that created me as a son, as a boy, as a young man. But there are no answers now because my parents are dead.

**Ali** The theme of the relationship between my parents and children is also one that you explored, as I recall, in one of your short stories called *The Power of Reason* in the collection *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows*. There is a kind of love there that is submissive and open to abuse. And another that is more directed, more demanding. Could you speak about this?

**Neil** It is difficult for me to speak about it because it is all part of my learning process, I suppose, exploring this complex relationship that takes so many forms. I am still

learning. I am looking at myself and my reaction, I am looking at my daughter and the changes that come to her by the day.

**Ali** This again calls to mind the passage in Rohinton Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey*, where there is a tension between Gustad Noble and his son, Sohrab. Gustad obviously has certain aspirations for his son, and his son resists these. I suppose in the years ahead you will probably feel the same sort of tensions as Gustad.

**Neil** Probably. I am already anticipating them... My father was a businessman and in his family they are business people, doctors, lawyers, that kind of professional life. My paternal grandmother wanted me to become a doctor—“It would be wonderful to have a title”—and none of this appealed to me. I am not sure if my father understood my desire to be a writer. My mother did, coming from a literary family she understood that drive, and she, while never actively encouraging me, quietly encouraged me by, I suppose, in a way helping resist the demands of my father’s family... There is a kind of link between us, an unspoken link that we both knew was there, that we never spoke about because I was too young, and because we were living in different countries. But that was there, and I would like to be able to ask her how she recognized that.

**Ali** What about future projects. I understood that you were planning to write a book on Spain.

**Neil** I started writing a book on Spain, but other things keep intervening. I had planned, in fact, to write a book on Spain when we got back from a trip to Spain a few years ago but instead what happened was this novel. *The Innocence of Age* started writing itself so I had no choice but to follow. I have, since then, started writing a book on Spain but I found that in the last couple of months or so, a new novel has begun to take new shape in my head. I have taken notes and there is no time right now to start writing on the road, so I will probably write that while continuing to work on the book on Spain. That is an ongoing thing. I have no particular deadline for it.



**Ali Lakhani** is a lawyer and a writer living in Vancouver.

On October 26, 1992, a national referendum was held in Canada. The referendum question asked the electorate to vote yes or no to a document called the Charlottetown Accord. The Accord challenged the notion of the two 'founding cultures' of Canada—the English and the French, and outlined a new framework within which the Canadian federation of provinces would operate.

The following letters offer a personal perspective on the referendum from two English-speaking South Asian women living in Francophone Canada.

Dear Sarah,

When I walked in, I thought I'd be directed to the voting booth—just like everyone else. Instead, I waited. And waited. Men and women, ahead and behind me, all of whom were white, stood patiently. I don't even know if they were all francophones. People **behind me** were being directed where to vote. I think that the 'usher' (for want of a better word) had decided that a voting booth for South Asians had yet to be constructed because I was directed nowhere. I guess he figured I didn't have a vote or that I shouldn't—I don't know which is worse. I was shocked. I shouldn't be shocked any more by the latest bullshit these fuckers come up with, but I was shocked. After about ten minutes of just standing there, like a cheeky mis-read brown street sign, fixed as if in cement, I managed to open my mouth just as he was about to direct yet another person standing behind me. "So where do I vote?" I asked him loudly, in English. I felt like asking him in Punjabi and throwing in a few *haram zhad*as to spice it up a bit.

When I walked into the polling station, I had no idea as to how I was going to vote. This usher-type sure helped me make up my mind fast. For once, there was something I could do about being treated as if I don't even exist. I could vote YES. And I did. For a few minutes, that felt like some kind of victory, an empty one at that since I figured *la belle province* would reject the (Charlottetown) Accord. After that it felt pathetic. Was this the best I could do?

Nothing was as clear as in 1980, and yet the dreaded stakes still loomed in the same shadowy spaces. This time around, however, the stakes seemed bigger and weightier, having grown in the intervening decade. This was the result ten years later. No matter what else had shifted and been irrevocably altered, the 'usher' and his attitudes had not. I for one didn't need to vote in a referendum to find that out.

A friend of mine once told me that the sweetest revenge is to ensure that the abuse never happens again. Within whose reach is that revenge waiting—mine or the 'usher's'? And what form will it take?

**Molly A.K. Shinhat**  
Montréal, PQ

Dear Sona,

The referendum is over, and we can go back to our normal everyday lives. I am going to miss the intense discussions we used to have across dining tables and in classrooms. For once, we felt intensely about federal and provincial politics: there was a fear over what could happen.

Since most of the the people in the country voted NO, the Charlottetown Accord didn't go through. It's good that it has happened this way. Even though the reasons for voting NO were never the same from province to province, from group to group, or even from person to person, one thing came out loud and clear: the majority of the people didn't like the Accord. At least there was this common ground to stand on.

I wonder what would have happened had Québec voted NO against the rest of the country. That would have left us indisputably divided. It's ironic nevertheless that the radical differences that divide us finally resulted in one resounding voice—the voice of NO! *Alors on commence encore!*

Where do I stand in all this? I don't know. I have yet to build my history here. How do I feel? Numb and displaced. Also I feel tired, tired of the debate. Jobs are scarce. I see frustration written over so many faces. Those of us who have jobs feel, in a way, guilty of being lucky ones. When I think of the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on commissions, ad campaigns, publicity, and all that it took to get this referendum going, it makes me very tired. How will we stand accountable to the future generations? People ask for bread, they are being given alternatives for a constitution! No wonder many decided not to vote at all or to spoil their ballots in protest.

One is satisfied that at least for now there is welfare and Medicare for survival. But if this recession continues, tax payers may not be able to afford the basic social benefits we take for granted today. The day after the referendum, when ad campaigns were suggesting that a NO vote would change the entire face of the country, we woke up to a mere nothing. The referendum is over! The Accord is dead! Let's go on with it! Let's find the jobs! The referendum is over! Who cares anyway?

Of course the leaders are aware of what people want. For everyone today, the word is **economy**. But we are waiting. Thousands of jobs are going to be lost at CN and Pratt and Whitney. We are scared. "Am I going to be next?" is the question most of us ask ourselves. The referendum is over. Welcome to the real world!

**Nilambri Ghai**  
Montréal, PQ

## Rungh Cultural Society presents

**Saturday, January 16 8pm**

Octopus Books East

1146 Commercial Drive 253.0913

Admission by contribution

**Rienzi Cruz** was born in Sri Lanka and came to Canada in 1965, and is presently the Reference and Collections Librarian at the University of Waterloo. Mr. Cruz has published extensively in magazines and journals in Canada and in the U.S. His poetry collections include **Elephant and Ice** (*Porcupine's Quill*), **Singing against the Wind** (*Porcupine's Quill*) and **Still Close to the Raven** (*TSAR*). He will be reading from his latest work **The Rain Doesn't Know Me Any More** (*TSAR*).

**Steve Lundin** was born in Toronto. An archaeologist by training, he has travelled extensively in Central America, and holds an MFA from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. He lives in Ganges, BC, with his wife and son. Mr. Lundin will be reading from his story cycle **A Ruin of Feathers** (*TSAR*).

**Yvonne Vera** is a doctoral student of English Literature at York University. She was born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe and currently lives in Toronto. She will read selections from her first novel **Why Don't You Carve Other Animals** (*TSAR*). She has recently completed her next novel, yet to be published.

**Sunday, January 17 8pm**

Vancouver East Cultural Centre

1895 Venables 254.9578

Admission \$10 \$7 un/deremployed

**Himani Bannerji** was born in Bangladesh, and presently teaches at York University in Toronto. A scholar, social activist and feminist, Ms. Bannerji has been published in numerous journals and is well known for her poetry and critical writing. Ms. Bannerji will be reading poetry from **The Geography of Voice: Canadian Literature of the South Asian Diaspora** (*TSAR*).

**Sadhu Binning** has published two collections of poetry, and has been anthologized in **East of Main** (*Pulp Press*) and **Paperwork** (*Harbour*). He has completed his MA in Sociology at SFU, and is currently the co-editor of **Watan**, a Punjabi literary magazine. Mr. Binning is a founder of Vancouver Sath Literary and Cultural Society, which produces activist theatre, and publishes **Ankur (A New Beginning)**, a magazine of Indo-Canadian contemporary writings.

**Yasmin Ladha** spent her childhood in Tanzania, and emigrated to Canada in 1978. She is currently completing her master's degree in English at the University of Calgary. She has one previously published book, **Bridle Hands on the Maple** (*disOrientation*), and has been featured in numerous periodicals and anthologies, including **Alberta ReBound**. She will be reading from her latest short story collection, **Lion's Granddaughter and Other Stories** (*NeWest*).

# SCAFOLDING of the BONE HOUSE

## An interview by Sonali Fernando

Alistair Raphael's photographic installation, *Invasive Procedures*, maps biology onto buildings to revise age-old metaphysics—ideas of the infinite reproduction of the human body in macrocosm and microcosm, of skin and institutions as bulwarks of means of access—but with a new history and a different consciousness. Excavating the vocabulary and imagery surrounding AIDS as a source material for work that considers surveillance, freedom, invasion and privacy, he asks us to take full stock of an old puzzle, “Where does my skin end and yours begin?”

**Sonali** In *Invasive Procedures*, you hang massively inflated photographs of blood cells in the ground-floor windows of a building; inside, rows upon rows of microscope slides printed with words like ‘Innocent,’ ‘General Population,’ ‘Risk Group’ stick out from the walls; why did you make these images and objects part of the building, rather than just exhibiting them conventionally, as in a gallery?

**Alistair** I wanted to do it in a double kind of way: to use the format of photography to create a window display and at the same time allude to the whole building having some kind of fungus—or virus; physically representing the institution as diseased. The word ‘diseased’ interested me, and who names whom as ‘diseased’. I was very much thinking about who commissions images and the repercussions of this—you can flip through *Cosmopolitan* or *Elle* and come across pictures of the virus but on further investigation you’ll find that the magazine doesn’t engage with any other aspects—just dissects an element and prints it. It’s about the way institutions condition information.

**Sonali** The blood ‘window display’ refers to an institutional trafficking in AIDS that disowns responsibility and disacknowledges the subjectivity of its values in the act of defining. In a similar way, the slides inside, pre-prepared with words instead of blood, seem to refer to an ‘objective,’ scopic process of ‘scientific’ investigation. The scientist who has given us these loaded concepts remains absent and anonymous. What happens to the shopper who is enticed in by the window display?

**Alistair** I wanted people to be conscious of entering in a penetrative way, on a conceptual level. I printed words on the slides to implicate viewers more fully in the physicality of the process of using language. I wanted to sensitize them, make it a ‘risky’ practice, in a sense, to be involved in the use of words and images. Once they have entered that building, they’ve entered an institution, and they have to form some relation to it—they could be alien in somebody else’s space or they could join in. I wanted people to be aware of the glass slides themselves in relation to their bodies—there is the constant risk of grazing yourself on these sharp glass lines. You become aware of the vulnerability of the skin, the edges of your own body, and where those remain edges, as opposed to breaking and flooding.

**Sonali** Boundary and invasion, barrier and flooding: your imagery bears traces of other metaphors of deluge, of Asians flooding the country (the UK), ‘rivers of blood’ and invasion by a ‘gay plague’—and yet you’ve reversed the positions, pivoted these images on themselves. Now it’s the body being invaded by the institution. And it’s the ‘outsider’s body’—because the virus is now indelibly codified in the

## of the BONE HOUSE

West as ‘gay’ and ‘male’, despite lame after-the-event protestations that the ‘virus has no prejudice’—being invaded by the ‘insiders’.

**Alistair** And there’s this whole idea of ‘carriers’, as in the context of drug-trafficking stereotypes and the idea of an ‘alien’, the virus as alien: it’s been transported and infiltrated the system. All the same metaphors are there when you talk about race.

**Sonali** Did you intend to produce fear in people? The idea of entering a bloodstream could be terrifying.

**Alistair** No, not necessarily fear. I wanted to convey an obsession I had with ‘edges’, which would seep into every aspect of my life. The edges of my body, my thoughts, my identity—be that as a gay man or as a (South) Asian person—and also with my sex life and sexuality: where do you allow the edges still to remain drawn? I wanted to examine where that obsession had come from, and how I had aligned myself to these ideas. Through photography and through works one constructs oneself, yet the vocabulary that had been selected for me as a gay man had become specific. Let us look at the question of invisibility because of being ‘other’: once there’s a reason for the power structures to make you visible, you’re made visible within a very particular context, and over the last ten to fifteen years, there’s been almost a



repeat performance of what happened at the turn of the century. Gay men's bodies have been returned to the medical gaze, but this time they're being examined for signs of physical deformity, malfunctions if you like, innate signs of something that marks them as 'other,' on a microscopic level. Whereas before they were looked at for signs of mental illness and so on that would mark them as 'different.' What has been identical both times has been this absolute right over the gay male body, for the sake of the 'general population,' 'humanity' or whatever. In that process a modern idea of the homosexual has been constructed. And because it has been constructed by a disease and by a medicine, not only has it taken on that medical vocabulary, it has also taken on a kind of austerity, and the fear that hospitals generate. You become the patient on a conceptual level as well as potentially on a physical level. It's as if that's the price of visibility, which begs the question of who has the power to 'make visible'?

**Sonali** It's as though your cells are turned inside out by the scientific/media gaze, as if your cellular privacy has been invaded in a particular way, for particular ends. But do you feel, on the other hand, that in some way this introduction of a public discourse related to gay men has given you a conceptual language in which to speak about the body?

**Alistair** Yes, in a way. I don't think there's been a school of thought that's geared to men having knowledge about their bodies, either on a physical level, or in terms of how their bodies have become not-their-bodies and been overruled. It's made me really aware of how those edges of the body have been penetrated: it has, in a sense, given me a metaphor of invasion that I can use in other scenarios.

**Sonali** What I find interesting in the whole network of visual metaphors about 'penetration', for instance, is a photographic image of a drill with fire and sparks coming from it which burns into another space. The notion of penetration is associated with danger and violation. Do you feel this rendering of institutional violence in a physical, bodily way overlaps with women's experience in feminist art?

**Alistair** I think there's a danger in finding too many similarities between women's experiences and gay men's. But a lot of the

“..it is only by acknowledging the levels at which you are invaded that you know where privacy starts.”

awareness of this politic around the body has come from feminist critique over the past fifteen years, the same fifteen years that I'm talking about. I have had criticism because of the nature of the work that I make.

**Sonali** From women?

**Alistair** There have been many allusions to an 'appropriation' of women's language in the visual arts. I find it problematic, though I acknowledge where it comes from: I'm not willing to give it up. People can get too precious about it being *their* language. I like Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger's work which looks at vocabulary and text as *actuality*. And Helen Chadwick. But languages don't exist in sealed containers for pre-ordained user-groups. They feed into each other and we inhabit many different ones.

**Sonali** How does your notion of 'penetration' contest or reinforce all the edicts around now for gay men about not penetrating, about maintaining an invisible zone or barrier around the body, about celibacy?

**Alistair** It's tricky when you have the state telling gay men not to penetrate each other. I think when I'm using the word, even in terms of 'a penetrative gaze' or in the imagery, I'm referring to the idea of the state, the designer, the power structure. Yet at the same time we all have the potential to penetrate and be penetrated. The work comes round full circle: a lot of the imagery is based on blueprints and architect's plans, suggesting that *everything* has been thought of. It's in the way that our whole society is constructed: different buildings are designed for different reasons. You couldn't live a domestic life in an office. We are *designed*,

the way we socialise is designed, with 'reasons' for those designs. I'm using that as quite a crude starting point, but going further: not only do we design the buildings for our bodies to enter, we actually design our bodies. If you take the human body as the nought line on a graph and extend outwards, you go through plumbing systems, sewage systems, electrical systems, ventilation systems, rooms, buildings, big architecture, there's the body reproduced in macro, and then going down from nought into the body, you find this exact mirror. When you start to look at it in terms of disease, when you do things that weren't 'designed' to be done (according to this normalising opinion), use buildings in the ways they weren't meant to be used, buildings fall down. The same is being inferred in terms of what happens within the body as well, in terms of 'unnatural practices.' My main interest is this idea of looking inside the body at the same time as being the body inside another body...like Russian dolls.

**Sonali** How do you refer to this construction of 'unnatural practices' without censoring them yourself?

**Alistair** With the **No Entry** image, it's a complete play on works and images, a man-hole cover; man-hole, the underground network of fluid-transporting pipes, the No Entry sign made with a superimposed image of HIV. Medical examination has involved all these *sorties* actually into the body, all this equipment that can actually photograph you inside.

**Sonali** How do you personally participate in or resist that as a photographer with your own scopical project?

**Alistair** The work has to be photographic, but I find taking photographs problematic: a lot of my images are actually other people's—borrowed from hospitals, manuals, textbooks, anatomy books, data and so on—familiar images. It's almost as if they have a function before they become my function. It's as though these images were the fall-out, already part of a familiar vocabulary.

**Sonali** Mainstream imagery 'about' gay men seems to be sharply polarised between, on the one hand, enlarged 'scientific' photos of the virus and, on the other, eugenic body-photographs. How do you site yourself between those?

**Alistair** I ask why these two? Why such a small selection of images, so polarised in their content? I think it's very important to look at that: it doesn't take much imagination to see the connection between the two, because there's a conception of 'other' sexual beings as Bodies. By isolating, photographing and publishing this viral image you have a very dangerous situation where you have something that people think they can recognise: then you start to ask questions like, "What is the purpose of having images everywhere of this virus that you can only see through a microscope if it's enlarged at a certain point in its life-cycle by several billion times?" It relates to an obsession with 'identifiable' visual signifiers—the KS scars, weight loss, the hair loss—almost like the *Handbook to Depravity*. The moment it is photographed it is no longer a microscopic virus: it becomes ideas, it becomes technology, fodder to be used in a very particular way. In the installation *Strike gently away from the body*, a huge 25' x 12" photopositive is laid over the slanting glass roof of a studio. The image is of lungs taken from an anatomy book, with key numbers on it labelling different parts, but without giving the viewer the key to access the information it is obviously collecting; these numbers appear again at ground level, burnt into the floorboards.

**Sonali** Why lungs?

**Alistair** It was a little bit of romanticism—breathing, primal things—and it connects with the ventilation system in the building, which I noticed afterwards and quite liked!

**Sonali** What reactions did you get to the work?

**Alistair** To see that image you had to penetrate the building. The act became charged. The room not only had images grafted on, there was also an excavation of the floor: I'd scraped off twenty years of paint and routed a grid structure across the floor into which I'd lain tubing. People had to enter the whole work, and were 'scooped up' by these grids. I wanted them to be aware of the building as something that was carrying fluids around, sewage, electricity, that had internal membranes, and structure, brickwork and glass clad on top of each other. And by juxtaposing that with a human image that had gone through a process of exfoliation to the point where its internal muscles were

### No Entry

visible, like being shown on an x-ray box, connections were made. Many people wanted to find a corner of the room from which they weren't viewed but could look...interesting in terms of scopophilia.

**Sonali** Is your work pessimistic in asserting that there is no privacy, no place in which we can be free of being looked at and encoded?

**Alistair** I see it more in the sense of exposing something, in the photographic sense as well, of acknowledging something that does go on, and it is only by acknowledging the levels at which you are invaded that you know where privacy starts. Where you can start constructing relationships which aren't subject to that same kind of gaze.

**Sonali** What's interesting is that it's not emotionalized in any way. The power of it lies in the way you make conceptual and structural oppression *physical*. The numbers on the glass, anatomical key to the lungs, brand the skin with shadow, just as you have charred their shapes into the floorboards.

**Alistair** One of the most important things for me when I make work is that there should never be any signs of making, that there should be no sign of my humanity in the work. It comes not from this cold pessimism but from wanting to use the materials that I perceive being used in certain ways socially, against themselves, wanting to steal the signifiers and re-juxtapose them, changing very little in fact. We face these impressive, huge photos everyday on billboards, yet are visually complacent when we see them in advertising or social publicity.

**Sonali** Could you tell me what thoughts of containment and invasion brought about

the other part of the *Invasive Procedures* installation, where a transparent rubber strip-curtain containing an image of a building site divides a room?

**Alistair** It's to do with isolation in medical terms: in hospitals that are different areas where things happen differently, as if in different spaces there were different atmospheric pressures and different temperatures. The rubber doors are used in factory warehouses that forklifts can drive through, but you also see them in hospitals. I was struck by how much they were like skin, but an industrialised skin, the building's skin, and they're also this demarcation of space which is penetrable by specific personnel only. They acknowledge their accessibility but at the same time they're quite clear about it being a boundary. It was interesting, in the case of hospitals, in terms of contamination, quarantine, isolation. I wanted to return to the idea that a building is designed, and to make people really aware that they were inside this building, by creating another structure inside the first, a skeletal building in the process of construction, which involved scaffolding, and raw materials. There are quite positive things about penetration, the building is made to be entered after all—but I want to talk about taking responsibility for the act of going inside a space. And how that changes in different contexts: if you walk through those rubber doors in the hospital you're aware of what you're doing. You think, "Should I have a mask on? Should I be in here? Am I in danger?"

**Sonali** You say that acknowledging the possibility of invasion is also recognising that one needn't invade or be invaded: so in the very same moment of challenging enforced quarantine, the piece maps a radical claim to privacy.

**Alistair** And in this piece you can choose not to enter it. The space was divided cleanly in half and a lot of people didn't choose to go through this gap that was accessible. What I like is the idea that you *do* have the choice.



**Sonali Fernando** received her English degree in 1989 from Oxford University. She is a writer and filmmaker currently residing in London, England. *Scaffolding of the Bone House* also appeared in *Bazaar*, Issue 22.

Picture this: a village called lamayuru situated somewhere between srinigar and leh: in this village a stone two-storey with the words "Medical Clinic" painted in red on the side: in this stone two-storey a man, a doctor, a brahmin, squatting in a cluttered kitchen area, smoking a bidi to pass the time: in this image of a smoking doctor of a stoney clinic of a midway village: is this is there a body that we know about? Does tobacco smoke stray off the page and infiltrate viewing lungs? Does hard cement in the summer warmth cool viewing ankles? Whose hands are these entextualized and quadruple focussed upon? Does his gaze graze on these hands or do these hands graze grate grind over his body's image? A story a story a story a store he the subject and me the viewer, the photographer cannot hear the photograph.





“Customers have moved from being faceless elements of market share to a powerful force that can pick and choose as they please. Let me give you an example of the first wave of the trend.”

—George Harvey, President of Unitel Communications

**1** Sometimes waking up at night I hear the ripping of flesh. But its only the sound of me grating and grinding my teeth. Is that what wakes me, or is it the dream? I want to remember what I’m dreaming, what I don’t say when I clench my teeth at night. Does it stop me from screaming, from talking out the names that I’m afraid to speak. I am so tired of lying, so tired. Afraid that they will know. My body fills up with unspoken words.

I find myself crying at night, sobbing, when its been a beautiful day. Happy. Laughed all day so why do I cry at night? Even the laughter cannot fill those empty spaces. Alone at night, untouched, alone. Muffle the tears, stuff blankets into my face, crying alone.

You aren’t here. I miss...inine conversations. One of the few times I feel normal, when we’re having those ridiculous conversations. Inanity prevents insanity. The left hand of sanity. My clenched sore teeth.

**2** Sometimes she wakes up at night smelling fried eggs. In a few seconds the smell disappears into the humming of the clock. Into that insistent green glow telling her its five in the morning. What wakes her up at five? Click, she imagines that the sun has just risen when she awakes. Towards the window there is only darkness, not touched by sun. Fried eggs. She remembers not to stretch. Awaking too much fragments the memory of the dream.

What smells? The oil, the butter, not the eggs. A smell that gets into the skin, into the hair, into a leather jacket not hers, a car not hers. Sitting in the passenger seat, smelling. Long black hair. Not her. A hand resting on a gear shift, long fingers, white touched with black hair. Driving where? Her eyes do not see the road, all she sees is fingers touched with black hair. So small this car, so closed. If she leaned over to touch the radio, her nipple would caress the arm. Stretching her tongue, she could touch the ear. The lobe at the tip of her tongue, flicking the earring, moving inwards, making clicking flesh-flesh sounds. But she doesn’t. Silence and the smell of fried eggs.

Slowly her hand reaches out into silence, touching on the white hand. Pleasure at seeing skin against skin so different. Brown over white. She grasps and turns over the hand, brings it to her mouth, gently tracing curves. Long fingers, soft palm. Tongue pressing circles in the centre, pressing.

The dream disintegrates. Desperately she searches for the essence, but it goes no further. The strain of trying to push it further gives her a headache. Defeat, at five in the morning. She cannot sleep.

Breathe in. She sees the roundness of the belly even when she lies flat. No matter how hard she tries, that little *kudoo* of a stomach will not flatten out. She smooths her hand over it, pulling at the belly hair converging into a line near her belly button. It moves up and disappears into that space between her breasts.

Closing her eyes tighter, she tries to push the dream into existence again. The strain of trying to fall back into the dreamworld makes her gnate her teeth, and her right temple starts to throb. She is awake.

**3** It is night. Alone in her room she listens to *ghazals* whose words she does not understand. Voices and music that provide the same comfort that her doll did when she was young. Lying in her bed she would place it by her side in the *langa* and *kurta* her mother had made for it, and it’s eyelids would drop closed.

face  
elem

# less ents

She imagined that the doll was her child. Even after she cropped the long blonde hair close to the plastic head, she still loved and was comforted by it. Her doll and her music. In the music she heard her voice singing to a love she never had, and another voice responding. But now she knows it is a *kucha* comfort, uncooked/ungrown, untouched, only imagined. It made the *ghazals* more poignant, more precise.

Tired, she starts another letter.

*I miss you. When are you coming back. We need to talk soon, letters just don't do it. Not enough...*

She stops. The banality of forced letter writing is the most unpalatable thing in the world to read and write. What is there to tell anyways? Her life of waking and sleeping simply becomes boring after awhile. Waking, sleeping, dreaming...nothing happens. Nothing ever happens.

4 There was this photo of a banal man in the paper today. He killed 52 people. Often he tasted them too. *LURID TRIAL TOLD OF MUTILATIONS, FREQUENT EATING OF TONGUES AND SEXUAL ORGANS.* What, is the tongue not a sexual organ? Or the skin? It should've read *FREQUENT EATING OF TONGUE AND GENITALS* or just *FREQUENT EATING OF POTENTIAL SEXUAL ORGANS.* They could never find him for the past twelve years because he had an absolutely banal public character: You know, like your neighbour, or your high school geography teacher, or your son. This man was someone's husband too, someone's father. So close to each other yet they never suspected.

The image of the banal man from Russia, the mass murderer (maybe it had something to do with Communism—found only after the collapse of the Empire?). Reminds me of Rick Gibson. Remember? Mr. *I-eat-human-testicles-as-a-performance-artist* and the *Almost-Snuffer-of-Sniffy-the-Rat* fame? Difference being that Rick Gibson gets a few bucks for what he does (on a small scale really) and the banal man gets shot in the back of the head. Executed, Russian style. Banal Man needs someone to recontextualize his work, put a new spin on things: *THE FLESH CARVER—Creating Asexual Beings And Other Investigations in Gender.* “Sick! sick!” you say, “Institutionalize her.”

Institutionalize me? Too late, it's already been done. I work in an office. I go to a university. Even my home feels like an institution. My room is my cell-block. Visitors require permission from my mother-warden and by special permission of my father-governor. Is any of this true? How can it be?

**TRUE OR FALSE** The Banal Man from Russia ate his victims' sexual organs because his desires were never touched, never tasted by anyone. Ingesting sex would make it so much more pure.

**TRUE OR FALSE** The Banal Man was bisexual because he killed and ate substantial amounts of both men (20) and women (35).

**MULTIPLE CHOICE** Your dreams and fantasies taken to their fruition would: A) involve killing and mutilations; B) involve pain; C) be considered pornographic; D) would simply be erotic; E) all of the above and more.

**WRITE AN ESSAY** The Banal Man had sexual dreams and simply felt the need to act them out. What are the implications on the justice system of such a statement?

**WRITE A BOOK** The Banal Man is not unusual but a normal outcome of this technological society. He is a normal abnormality. I stopped believing my dreams could become true the day a Banal Man entered my life. No one is unreachably.



**R. Niche** is a young writer in angst. Her inspirations have been *The Globe and Mail* and Kafka, who she's never read, of course.





# Beyond the *Body* Project

## Art and the Interaction of Communities

*The Body Project* originated in discussions we had about the level of interest shown both by the arts and academic communities in issues concerning the representation of the human body. We decided to try to bring together performance artists, visual artists, and academics sharing these interests in order that they might share their insights with each other. We are now at the end of the project, and as a result of the issues raised, are beginning a process of re-examination of our initial conceptualizations. At this point, we want to present a preliminary overview of how our understanding of the issues has changed.

One of our initial organizing ideas was simply to present a variety of viewpoints on how people come to be embodied in the way they do; by 'embodied' we mean the struggles, pains, and pleasures provided for and by their bodies. It was obvious to us right from the beginning that people are not only embodied in particular ways, but that they organize themselves in 'communities of embodiment,' groupings based upon how this embodiment is perceived.

We thought the main questions that would arise from such an examination would be: How much 'choice' do people have in the communities of which they are a part? Do they choose to join communities? If so how and why?

On a simple level it appears communities can be divided into voluntary and involuntary

associations. One voluntarily chooses, more or less, to be tattooed, or to join a weight loss program. One doesn't choose race or body type.

But the question of apparent choice is actually more complex than that. Some examples of this complexity may be reflected in questions such as: how much choice does a woman have about getting a breast implant? There is usually no overt force used to make a woman surgically change her body. But there is an undeniable and powerful pressure on women to conform to certain ideal body types. How much choice does a woman really have if she has been convinced she will have a better life with bigger breasts?

Conversely, why are racial characteristics such as skin colour such a powerful organizing element? On one level, the answer is obvious: because such an organization is a convenient conduit for the dispersment of power in our society, benefitting some, and disadvantaging many. But why do these powerful interests operate through race? Why not hair colour or height? How does race get established as a major means of distributing inequality?

With these questions of race and identity in mind, we invited two South Asian artists, Sherazad Jamal and Chris Creighton-Kelly, to participate in *The Body Project*. In both cases we tried to pair the artists with academics working on what we felt were related issues. For example, Creighton-Kelly's performance

of <<P.C.>> dealt with how racial issues are addressed in our society, and we tried to pair him with Phil Vitone, who researches the communicative aspects of social interaction. In the same vein, Sherazad Jamal created an installation on the constituent elements of her identity as a South Asian woman, and we placed her work alongside a presentation by Norbert Ruebsaat exploring how males are represented in contemporary advertising. As we expected, all these participants showed different aspects of how people come to be socially constructed, and explored how much real choice people have in that construction.

But the pairings didn't quite work out as well as we had hoped, in part because of our inexperience as producers. We failed to get Vitone and Creighton-Kelly connected at all, and the connection between Jamal and Ruebsaat came off clumsily at best.

But notwithstanding problems in production, we believe a more fundamental reason underlay why these connections weren't entirely successful. It's all very well and good to say we wanted to bring together people from different communities with their varying perspectives on the body, but the fact is that, for the most part, people from one community aren't necessarily interested in the viewpoints of another. To a great extent, the mostly white, academic, straight audience that came to see Ruebsaat's presentation paid only polite attention to Jamal's work, and people from the South Asian and women's communities who came to see Jamal's installation seemed to sit through the presentation only in order to have more opportunity to look at her art. To describe what occurred between the two groups as a meaningful exchange would be a misrepresentation. In fact, dialogue between various communities consistently arose as an issue throughout *The Body Project*. So, the question now arising for us is, specifically how and why should members of different communities be brought together?

We believe the answer to this question lies in the way individuals operate within and between communities. Every individual nego-

“On a simple level it appears communities can be divided into voluntary and involuntary associations. One voluntarily chooses... to be tattooed... One doesn’t choose race or body type.”

tiates their relative position to more than one community. For example, Sherazad Jamal’s installation was structured around four poles of identity: her race, her class, her sexuality, and her gender. Each pole has a corresponding ‘community’—the South Asian community, the middle class, heterosexuals, women—and furthermore, through her artwork she places herself within the ‘arts community.’ Like Jamal, everyone operates within a constellation of communities. A gay male South Asian multi-millionaire would probably share some of Jamal’s interests, but not others.

As members ourselves of a particular constellation of communities (white/male/academic/artistic), our programming for *The Body Project* was informed by the values of that constellation. By starting from the attempt to bring together the arts and academic communities, the

*Project* necessarily was informed by the concerns of those communities. One of the fundamental concerns that arose during the series was the question of normative or transcendent values. We’d like to now briefly describe our understanding of how this question is debated within the art and academic communities and then critically assess this debate in light of our experience producing *The Body Project*.

Both the arts scene and academe tend to valorize communities that make claims transcending their own perceived self-interest and address the interests of other communities as well. So, overall, academe, as a ‘community’, tends to support

principles of freedom of speech, or rational argumentation. Whether or not this support actually benefits other communities in fact, or merely provides a hegemonistic or leitimizng mechanism for perpetuating the values of a small group (usually white, straight, male), is a matter of considerable debate among academics. But for all their

Chris Chreighton-Kelly in <<P.C.>> publicity image

attempts to deconstruct or decode in various ways how values are in fact interests, few academics or artists question the need for transcendental values. Instead, various competing groups within academe or the arts debate whether or not their values are truly the most genuinely transcendent ones.

For the most part, players in the academic and artistic systems who question the need for transcendental values are relegated to marginal positions. For example, some feminists in the Eighties began to conclude that men are socialized so thoroughly in ways antithetical to women that as a gender they are incapable of accommodating the authentic interests of women. In other words, these women deny the possibility of both men and women finding common values that authentically serve both their interests. As a result, some ‘essentialist’ work seeks to exclude men as completely as possible, both practically and theoretically. By and large, their work is not taken seriously because of a concern that, in deciding to eliminate the considerations of a significant group, radical feminism creates a ‘closed loop’, with a weakened ability to affect its social environment. Unable to respond to new input, critics feel it cannot develop new strategies reflecting changing circumstances. Whatever its merits at present, eventually such a ‘closed’ loop is in danger of becoming academically irrelevant.

The same scenario plays itself out in the arts. Ultimately, the reason big-eyed girls painted on black velvet are so abhorrent to the arts community is that they signify an apparent lack of any mechanism to respond to the needs of anyone other than the relatively small group who find big-eyed girls significant. Lacking that input, big-eyed girls get painted the same way, over and over again. Being so programmatic in concept, they fail to carry any expressive content.

After our experiences in *The Body Project*, we’re not sure this reasoning about ‘closed’ groups is in fact correct. For example, Sandra Lockwood, who is a white performance artist, did a presentation on her appropriation of Japanese culture. On the second night, some of the people of colour in the audience vigorously denounced this show as perpetuating racist stereotypes. After some heated debate, they declared their refusal to educate whites, and left. In subsequent discussions the classic argument about closed loops was raised: the refusal to continue to engage in debate meant neither side learned

*Race Re-presented*, a portion of Sherazad Jamal’s installation

nities is a matter of life and death for us.

Therefore, the first task we face as producers of future projects is to seek artists and academics who share similar research interests. The most disappointing moments for us in *The Body Project* were when presenters offered simplistic, black and white analyses. They were disappointing precisely because they threatened to alienate people from outside the academic and artistic communities, who don't share the presenters' parochial language and concerns.

The best parts were works such as Jamal's, which presented with subtlety and wit some of the ambivalences of identity. For example, her use of a 'Barbie' doll showed how this cultural icon represents women in a highly specific and usually unattainable manner (thin, white, blonde, etc.). But it is also a loved toy. Or, while Jamal's image of a marriage ritual reminded us how women are institutionalized as property, it also showed us how marriage unites clans, and emphasizes the spirituality of human interchange.

The second challenge we face is to organize projects such as this one with a more specific focus. We now feel our failure to bring together an interchange of different work and audiences was in large part a failure to clearly articulate goals for the project. Ideally, we would have worked with the presenters earlier in the series to determine mutually agreed upon, substantive goals. Subsequent claims for attention by presenters could then have been evaluated in terms of whether or not they contributed to that end. For example, if we had more clearly identified the problems of cultural stereotyping as a key concern in advance, then we could have perhaps presented Sandra Lockwood's performance next to Sherazad Jamal's installation, followed by a performance by Heavenly Alarming Female, a group of lesbian women of colour. A follow-up panel on cultural stereotypes could then have been organized. A clearly articulated project goal would also allow for a more focused audience orientation, so that people would arrive with at least similar expectations. *The Body Project* brought together people (both audience and presenters) with such varied agendas that many were inevitably disappointed.

The third point we have come to recognize is that 'communities' are not monoliths; they are fractured by a number of competing forces. The 'art community' exists in many ways in name only. People who use that phrase often do not include Toni Onley or Amir Alibhai or Henry Tsang. The same appears to us to be true of the South Asian artistic 'community,' which fractures along lines such as traditional Indian artists, artists doing traditional Western forms such as landscape painting, or those

such as Jamal and Creighton-Kelly in *The Body Project* who do hybrid innovative work incorporating Indian and Western ideas. Again, a clearer idea of the goals of the project would help us have a better sense of upon which levels the various communities might interact.

We hope we have been sufficiently clear in our comments that we are not presenting our views here as some kind of final or complete analysis, but rather are attempting to negotiate the difficult terrain of opening artistic and academic work to broader audiences. Obviously, critical response is essential to this negotiating process, and we welcome feedback on whether undertakings such as *The Body Project* offer the possibility of exploring the dynamics of community expression.

*Norbert Rubesaat and the representation of men in advertising*

anything. On the contrary, we feel there was considerable evidence that in fact this group of people of colour, as well as their opponents in the debate, were not acting in a 'closed' way. For example, both sides politely respected our efforts to moderate the discussion, even though we are white and the debate centered on how whites dominate other races. Obviously, there was a willingness to engage in dialogue, although not for as long or as thoroughly as we would have liked.

We are coming to believe that the open/closed model of community interaction needs modification. All communities are a relative mixture of being open and closed. We believe there is a need for research into how 'open' and 'closed' get defined, and by whom. This is a notoriously difficult subject to tackle without on the one hand seeking confirmation of a predetermined normative condition (either oppositionally or by embracing it) or, on the other hand, maintaining a pretense of 'objectivity'. But we believe the academic and artistic communities are among those best equipped to handle such a difficult problem. What other communities largely define themselves through the breadth of cultural expressions that they explore?

We also recognize that this belief springs in large part from our personal interests as members of the arts and academic communities which are presently facing a crisis because of their 'closed' nature. This is particularly true of the arts community, which faces a funding crisis from, on the one hand, failing to develop very wide audiences willing to pay to see cultural work, and on the other, failing to generate the political support necessary to maintaining government subsidy of the arts in tough economic times. So, the whole question of being 'open' to the needs of other commu-

*Noh Face – Sandra Lockwood becoming San-di-lan*



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**Basic Inquiry Centre for Figurative Arts** is devoted to art exploring representations of the human body. It runs life drawing sessions, courses, a gallery, and performance art events. #5 – 901 Main Street, Vancouver, BC V6A 2V8

A celebration of the Indian documentary  
film festival held at Pacific Cinematheque,  
September 1992, Vancouver BC

The background is grey. Not the grey that ambiguities are made of. Not dark by light. Like the first light of dawn chasing the night. A small opening, small but piercing, that challenges the rule of darkness. Not harsh but determined. Growing slowly, like a revelation, a new world view.

*The light fills the frame. She stands alone. In traditional black and white. Adorned and framed. Frozen and speechless. The pointing finger louder than any word. The eyes focused on a different truth. Not arrogant. Not dramatic. Simple. And shattering.*

It has taken a long time for this hand to rise: for this finger to point; for this gaze to arrest... The message is clear: *Don't frame my narrative. Just listen. For a change. And then her voice takes over.*

### Opening Frame 1

**Eyes of Stone** Director: Nilita Vachani.

"There are many women available. It only takes a few thousand rupees to get another one. And I am a man. I can have another woman whenever I want."

*A man's words. A woman's life.*

Vachani takes us into this oppressive, patriarchal landscape by framing the life of Shanta (a name that means *the peaceful and quiet*—the irony!) by constructing her narrative with the voice of those around her—the helpless mother, the unconcerned husband...and the voice of Bhankya Mata, the goddess with the eyes of stone.

*The rage beneath the frame scorches. The aridity of the Rajasthan desert and the desolation of Shanta's life merge to create a documentary of great loss and survival. Shanta's opportune possession by the spirit of Bhankya Mata provides an angry counter-text to systemic op-*

pression. Her indictment of patriarchy through the words of the goddess, a language that is bold, cutting and liberating, is an unleashing of individual power.

There is no exoticizing in this exploration of ritualized healing. There is the agony of suppressed anger in every nuance. Vachani frames Shanta's narrative only to make it a part of a larger, feminist outrage, an identification from different womanly subjectivities. Vachani's may be a privileged gaze, a scripted, edited and re-recorded re-telling. And Shanta could be silenced again.

*But this song is a chorus. Shanta is Vachani's Bhankya Mata.*

*Yes, frames within frames. Growing in number, gathering force, strong enough to exorcise and explode the Master-frame.*

### Opening Frame 2

**Something Like a War** Director: Deepa Dhanraj

A group of women sit around a white, larger-than-life paper canvas.

*These are my hands, says one.*

*These are my legs, says the other.*

*These are my breasts, says one.*

*This is my womb, says the other.*

*This is my body, they say together.*

*This is creation.*

Deepa Dhanraj's **Something Like a War** is a hard-hitting exposé of India's failed Family Planning Programme. With startling restraint, Dhanraj critiques the involvement of multinational institutions like USAID (United States Agency for International Development) in the testing of debilitating contraceptives such as Norplant, on the bodies of Third-world women.

*The testimonies are haunting.* "Birth control and population control are not the same thing" is the text that underscores every frame. The former is a woman's right and the latter, institutional might. The only commonality between poverty and population is that they happen to be words that begin with the same consonant. Third-world women are paying with their bodies to prove Malthus right. And Malthus was, after all, a man.

*The testimonies are assaulting.* This critique is a form of tokenization. An allowance by the institution. This is how all oppressive power structures redeem themselves. Dhanraj is aware of her co-option here. She is also aware that it will be some time before she is permitted to point her finger once again. Her narrative is funded by BBC's Channel 4. She is not uncomfortable in this irony. **Yugantar**, the name of her film collective alludes to that transitory moment between eras. Dhanraj knows that transition is an on-going process.

The reportage is ruthless. Every aspect of India's patriarchal family planning programme is unmasked. The bureaucrats, the doctors, the middlemen and women, the clients... Layer after layer. Victim after victim. Frame after frame...

From the sophistication of Levi-Strauss' insight into the victimization of the weaker of

the species by the strong, which opens the documentary, to the simple, straight forward and brilliant conclusion when Gyarsi Bai's question:

*"But why are they so interested in me?"* is raised in opposition to the words of the chairman of the Ford Foundation. **Something Like a War** is something of a turning point. As a call to women to take control of their bodies it is a narrative of empowerment... 24 forceful frames per second.

### Opening Frame 3

**Kamlabai** Director: Reena Mohan

What happens when an actress of silent films speaks?

*Contra-diction. Accepted absolutes are challenged. Conventional history is fractured. Truth ceases to be singular. Re-vision*

*Reena Mohan's Kamlabai is a meta-documentary. A cinematically self-conscious re-construction of turn of the century Marathi stage and silent film actress Kamla Gokhale's life, which deconstructs official historiography and delights in the possibility of alternate truths and realities.*

Here memories and facts merge. Here old sanctities are demolished. Here conflicting texts co-exist. Kamlabai's life is the story of one women's struggle against the social currents of her time. A story about voice. About silence. And voice again.

*Still, life.* Kamlabai's family stands around her. Children. Grandchildren. Great-grandchildren. L to R. Front sitting back row standing. This is a photograph. You can almost hear the person behind the camera say, "Smile, please!"

Instead you hear the man sitting to the far right say something. Somebody from the top left recalls another incident. **Kamlabai** breaks many such frames.

*The camera is a character here.* Subversion has a face here. One woman's life constructed by another. Yes, this is a kind of privileging. This is also historic denial. How many Kamlabais has history denied?

*But what are you going to get from re-making my life?* Kamlabai asks Mohan. One more version. One more chapter. One more volume.

*To un-make history. To make herstory.*

Yet this is a man's view of woman's work. But not a re-view. Not convention. Not co-option.

*Celebration, yes.*

Resisting Closure Opening Frames

*I am grateful to Marilyn Iwama, Yasmin Jiwani and Scott McFarlane for sharing their views on these documentaries with me.*



**Ameen Merchant** is pursuing studies in Postcolonial Literature at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

# to visit the tiger in review

**to visit the tiger** held at the Community Arts Council in Vancouver in October, 1992, was the first exhibition in British Columbia of contemporary visual art by artists of South Asian origin. As a representation of a community that has had little exposure within the 'mainstream,' white arts communities, this was an important project and a historic act of affirmation and self-definition. Here was the first 'public' presentation of artists who identified themselves as South Asian, although for some, the ethno-specific framework was not a comfortable one. Nevertheless, this was a repositioning of their work in order to facilitate a dialogue concerning issues of cultural identity, displacement and racism.

Curators Shani Mootoo and Chris Creighton-Kelly chose twelve artists who work in painting, printmaking, and installation. The forms presented were limited (media-based works such as photography and video were absent), and all of the pieces showed strong connections to western historical art practices, whether they be straightforward representational painting or politicized avant-gardist installations. The artists selected reflected to some degree the diasporic histories of South Asians, with differing birthplaces (such as Zaire, Uganda, Kenya, England, India, and Pakistan), historical arrival periods in Canada's immigration history, and religious backgrounds. The wide age spread of these cultural producers is evident in the work presented. They offer varied, sometimes antithetical, relationships with their heritage; for some, especially the older artists, cultural identity is not an issue in their art practice.

Badru Jamal's small, subdued watercolours of a landscape, a cabin interior, and a desk with various significant personal objects, are painted in a restrained manner. There are subtle references to importance of his faith in his personalized view. Ranjan Sen's four-panel painting **The Animals, The Flower, The Fish, The Land** is vivid, looser, and technically more proficient. Sen's broad strokes and bold use of colour depict fauna and flora in separate spaces, juxtaposed but not intersecting. A tenuous allegorical relationship exists, alluding to the fragility and delicacy of the balance in nature as we see and attempt to control it.

For some others, especially younger politically-sensitized cultural producers like Sherazad Jamal, Amir Ali Alibhai, and Sur Mehat, the investigation of personal, cultural, and national identities becomes a focus, along with the problem of defining one's cultural hybridity. Their works show the influence of postmodern, postcolonial discourse in their approach to subject matter as well as form.

Jamal's sculptural installation consists of a chest of drawers in front of a rich golden sari fabric backdrop. The drawers are lavishly painted and layered with lasercopied images of herself in poses of entrapment and frustration. On top of the chest sits typical bedroom paraphernalia; the tools for making one presentable in 'public,' including a hairbrush, handmirror, a jar of vanishing cream, and a small framed memo to the colonizer. The private domestic sphere becomes a site of resistance from the erasure of racial otherness, rejecting assimilative pressures to cosmetically whiten oneself up and down. She affirms her heritage as

## Artists' statements excerpted from the catalogue

### Amir Ali Alibhai

As an artist I have been concerned with the search for self and home by reclaiming themes, media, images, techniques and the history of my South Asian/Ismaili roots. I present and re-present these through my experience as a western-educated and 'assimilated' Canadian. And like my ancestors, I also have a taste for storytelling, decorating, adorning and exaggerating...The basis of my aesthetic is that 'there is no empty space.'

### Ameen Gill

For the past five years my predominant mode of artistic expression has been stone lithography...I'm attracted to the older parts of town where the buildings show signs of decomposition, of being weathered-of-time. We often say that these neighbourhoods have character and that is a human quality. That these buildings show signs of decomposition makes them feel, to me, full of energy, full of life. In my prints I try to convey these feelings.

### Badru Jamal

...Painting becomes a form of meditation, of contentment. There is an excitement, a satisfaction he feels in being able to work solitaire, absorbed by his subject, his colours and by the very act of putting paintbrush to paper...(He) chooses subjects that speak of contrast: old and new; decaying and growing; detailed and obscured. He is interested in colour, light and shade, capturing the details in layering...

### Sherazad Jamal

I am keenly aware of being culturally schizophrenic...The only time I feel 'at home' is when I am creating. It means that I define the boundaries—boundaries don't define me...The fissure that exists in Western theory between art and everyday life concerns me...I think that art comes from life, from experience, from context...My work is to be touched, felt, utilized...And when it leaves the sacred setting of the gallery, it integrates back into my everyday life.

Photo by Tom Stratton

she identifies the oppressive society she lives in. As the most direct anti-racist piece in the exhibition, this work is positioned firmly within the current discourse on art as social activism.

Jamal's work was placed opposite to Alibhai's in the exhibition space, and an ambiguous relationship resulted. Certain formal elements in both works, such as the sari fabric and the use of the swastika suggested a visual link. Beyond that, however, on a conceptual level, the two pieces had very little in common and did not merit such inadvertent conflation.

Amir Ali Alibhai's painting-installation also employs sari material, but not as a cultural backdrop; they are front and centre, functioning as translucent scrims in front of his paintings. Draped from ceiling to floor, the three delicately patterned fabrics form an ethereal wall, filtering and mixing in with the patterns of the three paintings behind. On the floor are dyed green rice grains forming lotus petals (life and rebirth) and swastikas. The richly textured paintings are mystical and mystifying, with an idealized woman's face surrounded by fractured space, populated by intensely activated images of flowers. Perhaps these are allusions to the feminine as 'other,' as some manifestation of Alibhai's relationship to his own self as male and as South Asian. The shrine-like presentation emphasizes the other-wordliness of his

iconography. It pushes towards an exoticization of that which he cannot yet know, yet is an integral part of him nevertheless. The title, **Avatar** (incarnation/visible manifestation) implies approaching a mystical 'other.' In this case, he has used the form of a woman, a problematic proposition. The hanging fabric is not the only barrier in accessing this highly personalized, somewhat esoteric, and complex work.

Sur Mehat's sprawling installation is concerned with the racist construction of Canada through language. There are file folders with images and text, framed history and geography textbooks, plywood boxes with peepholes and journals inside, all scattered along the second-floor balcony. Mehat's installation also includes plastic refrigerator-magnet-letter mobiles hanging like a chandelier over the foyer. Mehat re-presents images of official, institutionalized Canada with irony and sarcasm. Those left out of the equation are either exoticized or marginalized. What her piece lacked in technical finish and, at times focus, was almost made up for by her ambitious undertaking of attempting to inhabit parts of the Community Arts Council Gallery space seldom utilized for presenting artwork.

Waheeda Tejani-Byron's etchings were evocative and subtle, imparting through the painfully stark yet textured renderings of enigmatic figures, a stillness and solitude.

The large lithographs of streetscapes by Ameen Gill were technically impressive particularly due to their scale. She documents Vancouver's old-time architecture through exaggerated perspectival licence, as if with wide-angled lens distortions.

Shamina Senaratne's quilt **Lands, Seas & Resources** contains elements and fabric materials from Canada, Sri Lanka, Kenya, India, Pakistan, and England. It is a combination of influences from the displacement she and her family have experienced thus far in their journey to find a home.

Parminder Mann's triptych incorporates photos and texts into the painted surface. Images of a female figure wrapped completely in muslin are surrounded by quotes from **The Book of Dead**, giving off an eerie sense of otherworldliness, as if she is attempting to find the middle ground between this reality and elsewhere.

Surjit Mehat's acrylic on wood paintings are abstracted formal depictions of women in traditional garb. His smaller two pieces almost

“This type of proclamation is not so much a reflection of a community of artists who merely want recognition, but rather the inequity of the present system in which they live.”

leave representation behind, and in so doing, with a clearer palette, move toward a bolder graphic quality.

Kausar Nigita's woodcuts, drypoint, and etchings refer most directly to classical Indian art history and mythology. Her dream-like illustrations place women in various poses in fantastical landscapes, infused with a feminine essence.

Paul Pahal's loud paintings, with shiny stones and cloth imbedded into the bright paint, point almost to a decorative tradition of whimsy, if not for the references in his abstractions to the American Formalist tradition. It is a fusion of cultural influences.

On opening night, the speechmakings, poetry readings, and supportive audience created a sense of community. And there was the feeling of completion. “I wish this had been done long ago”, sighed an exhausted Shani Mootoo in conversation that evening; such a statement requires contextualizing.

As the **first** of its type, as a community-building project, there is inevitably the burden of responsibility to present positive imagery. The pressure to propose a single, unproblematic view of what is usually fractured and polyperspectival is the result of two very different strategies for survival. One is to present a front of solidarity to the outside, resisting divide-and-conquer manoeuvres from institutions and the status quo. The other is to maintain the sufferance and traditions of silence that non-white, non-anglo peoples have utilized to endure the

racism they have faced in Canada. Hence the need exists to present a general overview of South Asian art, to present an image of a **community** to the outside, where the construction of that larger ‘public’ is still generally perceived (regressively, I believe) to be ‘white.’

Chris Creighton-Kelly, in the catalogue introduction, writes that the exhibition ‘does not represent itself as exhaustive.’

Such **first** shows from the ‘marginalized’ are invariably surveys, and are seldom coherent or consistent. They are held together by the sheer will to work together in order to refute their marginality. They constitute a coming-of-age, demanding mainstream exposure because it is their right and should be their privilege as well.

Meanwhile, the diversity and accessibility of traditions, religions, and ethnicities are concomitantly displaying to the **communities** within. This reference, again, to the **inside** and **outside** is not to set up a dichotomy, but to argue that they occupy separate states. Rather, these spaces overlap, and more so, they **contain each other**. The view of the outside is just as fabricated as the image of the inside, and both are constructions of the other. And so the artists in **to visit the tiger** occupy these spaces simultaneously. They have experiences so unique that no comparison can be made. Together in this exhibition, their participation speaks of a commonality, a commonality of differences.

“Simultaneous with celebration...is the

### **Parminder Mann**

My works are mainly collages, using a variety of methods such as photographs, pen and ink drawings, cheese-cloth, paint, plaster and occasionally, text...(I) need to express my diverse and conflicting cultural roots, and my inability to fully integrate into India, English or Canadian Society. Modern life has created this new generation of displaced individuals searching for their own identity. My art is the process of finding that identity.

### **Sur Mehat**

...From the beginning of my green-walled, desks-in-straight-rows education, I was expected to rely on and revere the assumed authority of overbearing and seemingly omnipresent patriarchal value judgements—Western European/English Canadian/White American—as the truth, as the way things are...The only moment of lucidity came when *fact* became prefixed suddenly (and irreversibly) with *white male subjectivity, Eurocentric, phallogocentric*, etc. It is with this strategy that I re-view my Archive. It is from this position that I explore questionable historicity as the basis of a shifting identity.

### **Surjit Mehat**

...Growing up in Canada and being surrounded by so few, if any, images on oneself creates a sort of multiple, split personality...In terms of art and art practice...(s)uddenly you are transformed into a *South Asian* artist. I think living beyond a stereotype is one of the hardest things to do. Yet as an artist of colour you become surrounded by what people want you to be. These *wants* include such categories as the exotic, passive, sensual, mystical vessel that is forever *other*. This *other* is always on the fringes of dialogue. It is the subject of discourse, never the enunciator of it.

### **Kausar Nigita**

Printmaking appeals to me because of its long tradition and its ritualistic nature...I do not like my subjects to be anchored in time and space. I prefer them to be light with a timeless quality about them...I seek to create a dream-like atmosphere in my images, similar to the state of dream-like, mystic contemplation evoked by Sufi poets. My Indo-Persian roots are apparent in my style which is sometimes ornate, sometimes calligraphic, sometimes both.

### Paul Pahal

...My work over the past few years has concentrated on the colours and patterns of our culture. More recent work incorporates silk sarees and other fabrics...The main influence in the manner of painting is *abstract expression* with definite focus on Hoffmann, Pollock and Kline...Utilizing my heritage and upbringing, my pieces should convey two points of view:...my South Asian background, (and) my Western influences.

### Ranjan Sen

Attraction to nature is obvious to my recent works. I want my paintings to be subtle, subliminal reminders to the viewer of how fragile and precarious the balance in nature is. These works are a witness and a reminder so that we don't spoil it all but at the same time I want the viewer to enjoy and revel in the magic of movement, colour and aroma and wonder how and where one wants to fit in the scheme of things.

### Shamina Senaratne

This piece grew out of the realization that I am only able to direct my life with ease and grace when I recognize who I am and where I come from. What cultures do I come from? What countries have I come from? What religions have influenced me the most? What perspectives flow from this collage and patchwork that makes up my background? What perspectives flow from my *lands, seas and resources*?...The patches, motifs and fabrics that make up this work come from Canada, Sri Lanka, Kenya, India, Pakistan and England. Inspiration for the designs came from Canadian heritage quilts, the work in Lahore Fort and Sri Lankan temple border patterns.

### Waheeda Tejani-Byron

During one particular art education course we were asked to draw a house we once lived in. This assignment triggered a series of drawings, paintings and prints based on my memories of Africa. I was able to recall...happy childhood memories without reference to the political conditions. My Indian cultural heritage was still absent in my work. Then after my trip to India in 1985, this aspect of my identity started to manifest itself in my art, either through memories of my visit or imaginative interpretations of its folklore.

“...as gender-specific shows in the Sixties and Seventies with women's art indicated feminism's rising influence, so too does (**to visit the tiger**) harken to a stage of development in which issues of representation, access and aesthetic sensibility dominate.”

Photo by Tom Stratton

recognition that much ground remains unbroken, and issues, such as systemic elitism, are left on the table,” states co-curator Shani Mootoo in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue.

Clearly, this show is a celebration. It is a self-conscious statement of presence. South Asian artists are alive and well and occupy an important role in the production of contemporary culture here in Vancouver.

This type of proclamation is not so much a reflection of a community of artists who merely want recognition, but rather of the inequity of the present system in which they live. Whether as South Asians with different art historical traditions or as South Asians with different theoretical and philosophical frameworks, or as South Asians with different coloured-skin and languages, the equating of **South Asian** with **different** must be noted. This assertion of a communal identity works in opposition to a belief that there is a dominating culture where **white** is **normal** and therefore **non-different**. The problem with this assertion is that it inherently acknowledges that there is a dominating structure. This exhibition works toward a time when there no longer exists the political

urgency for ethno-specific projects.

And certainly, the function that **to visit the tiger** has is specific to this socio-historical period; as gender-specific shows in the Sixties and Seventies with 'women's art' indicated feminism's rising influence, so too does this project harken to a stage of development in which issues of 'representation,' 'access' and 'aesthetic sensibility' dominate. In keeping with other community-based presentations dealing with self-definition within a broader context, this first venture is a survey of work from various diverse practitioners, unified by an oversimplistic theme, in this case, race.

Rungb

**Henry Tsang** is a Vancouver artist. He co-curated **Self Not Whole: Cultural Identity and Chinese Canadian Artists in Vancouver** at the Chinese Cultural Center in 1991.



## The Writers' Union of Canada and cultural appropriation

*Althea Trotman and Ajmer Rode, members of the  
Racial Minority Writers Committee.  
Illustration by Heather Spears.*

I'm sitting at my desk reading from Ajmer Rode's 1990 collection ***Poems At My Doorstep*** (Caitlin Press). I find myself struck by the second stanza from his poem ***Light That Fell***. The poem is about lovers who lose their sense of their intertwining destinies by forgetting that, in their loneliness, they might still communicate with one another. Rode writes:

*Words she wrote in her shadow  
words I spoke to my shadow  
did not share did not last  
in the shadow dance we got lost*

The poem is not only an accurate characterization of the situation of many lovers; it also accurately describes the problems of person-to-person and group-to-group communication. These problems have plagued the issue of cultural appropriation which has generated much controversy in the Canadian arts scene.

Many outspoken visible minority writers and artists, including Marlene Nourbese Philip, have argued convincingly that white writers and artists are more readily able to publish and display their works. This comment is important but obvious. The shocker? Not only is it easier for white writers to publish and display their representations of white characters, but it is also easier for them to publish and display their work about visible minority characters, First Nations peoples, Asians, Africans—you name them.

This year the soft-spoken Rode, a poet and playwright, who has published poetry collections in both English and Punjabi, is on the National Council of the Writers' Union and is a member of the Steering Committee of the Racial Minority Writers Network. The purpose of his work is to bridge the communication gap that exists between visible minority writers and those of the white majority in the Writers' Union, who share a common

destiny that has become obscured by the often rancorous debate over the significance and the meaning of cultural appropriation.

The Writers' Union of Canada, the largest and most powerful body of Canadian writers, represents writers' concerns to the government and the public, publishes newsletters and has an annual general meeting, where policy is made, discussed, and debated. In May of 1990, when the topic of cultural appropriation (now called in the union's latest resolution 'cultural misappropriation') became a headline issue and enough visible minority writers in the union became vocal about it, the Racial Minority Writers Committee was set up by the Writers' Union.

Until it was disbanded and replaced by a ten-member steering committee, it was comprised of three union members and three members outsiders the union. The coordinator of the committee was Yvonne Bobb Smith. The committee's members were Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (Chair), Alooook Ipelli, Rick Shiomi, Althea Trotman, Fred Wah, and Ajmer Rode. Its purpose was, in Rode's words, "to define a place for racial minority writers in the Canadian writing and publishing environment." Why? "Most writers," Rode continues, "feel there is not equality in the publishing industry and they do not have equal access to resources."

I wondered why the committee was called the **Racial** Minority Writers Committee. Rode: "It was a problem to decide how to pick. In this case, we were quite clear that we wanted to limit the committee to First Nations writers, writers of Chinese and Japanese origin, African-Canadians, and Indo-Canadians. I [myself], like many others, don't like the word 'minority': it connotes smallness in number **and** importance. But we don't have an alternative term as yet."

The committee circulated a questionnaire to more than 200 visible minority writers. From the responses, the committee made a list of **issues** and **needs**. The issues were appropriation of voice, access to publishing, censorship, ghettoization, publishing (non-acceptance of native writings; publishing of native legends by non-native authors), rejection (racism in children's literature, sensitivity of

*Whereas we resolutely affirm the freedom of imagination and the freedom of expression of all writers everywhere;*

*But whereas cultural misappropriation exists as a form of oppression;*

*And whereas cultural misappropriation is understood to be taking—from a culture that is not one's own—intellectual property, cultural expressions and artifacts, history and ways of knowledge, and profiting at the expense of people of that culture;*

*And whereas cultural misappropriation is among the factors which have contributed to the exploitation and misrepresentation of cultures and the silencing of their peoples;*

*But whereas there has always existed among peoples an interchange and sharing of ideas and cultural forms, usually referred to as "influence" and "teaching";*

*And whereas human rights work depends, globally, on people giving accounts, fictional or journalistic, from countries not their own, and none of the above shall be construed as an interference with that process;*

*And whereas censorship is a growing world-wide problem for writers, and none of the above shall be construed as an endorsement of censorship, or as an attempt to imprison writers in cultural ghettos, nor to encourage racial or ethnic segregation;*

*Be it therefore resolved that The Writers' Union of Canada recognizes and affirms the responsibility and accountability that attend the freedom of imagination and freedom of expression.*

*June 6, 1992 at the Writers' Union AGM,  
Toronto, Ontario*

issue, ethnicity in content based on language), reviewing standards, and sexism. Important needs to be addressed were communication, education, funding, marketing and distribution, publishing sources, reception, support groups, and technology.

Between the 21st and 24th of this May, 1992 in Orillia, Ontario, the committee held what it called the Planning Session, which was based on a First Nations' consensual problem-solving model. About sixty-five writers, editors, and some small publishers attended. White writers were not included in order to allow concerned visible minority writers to speak frankly and openly about their pent-up frustration with the white mainstream publishing industry. "This was most successful," Rode says. "People felt comfortable expressing themselves."

Highlights of the Planning Session included recommendations that small presses be supported (since these presses publish the vast majority of visible minority writers); that the Racial Minority Writers Committee be disbanded to be replaced by a steering committee comprised of ten members; that the process be continued; that a newsletter be started (Ashok Mathur and Fred Wah volunteered to produce this for one year); that

equality in funding be fostered by having more visible minority writers on jury panels; and, finally, that a motion be put forward to the Writers' Union on cultural appropriation. The latter was done June 6, 1992 at the Writers' Union AGM in Toronto and was passed—a historic, emotional event, according to Rode.

The wording of the resolution put forward at the Writers' Union AGM was altered under considerable duress. "Lenore and I were fine tuning the wording of the resolution at the breakfast table." States Rode, "When Union members Margaret Atwood, Michael Gilbert and Candice Savage came along. We started collectively working on the resolution, discussing it word by word, making sure the modified version would not go against the spirit of the original resolution passed by the minority writers at Geneva Park. It was past noon before we had a resolution which we thought would be acceptable to both minority and white writers."

The most notable addition was on human rights work. This particular issue is close to Rode's heart: Rode, whose writer friends in the Punjab have been murdered because of what they wrote or said, was persuaded by Atwood's argument. "I myself," Rode says, "could become a target if I condemn human

rights abuse in Punjab. It became clear to me that if something happened to me or a friend of mine and a white colleague went to India to write about it, I would not consider this an act of appropriation." When the final resolution was presented, many white writers who had prepared speeches in argument against the resolution, withdrew their objections.

In short, says Rode, "We cannot limit a writer's imagination. However, writers must use their imaginations responsibly."

How will the motion and work of the Steering Committee change things for visible minority writers? "The motion and the recommendations of the Steering Committee [of the Racial Minority Writers Network," he says, "will change attitudes and effect the current mainstream stereotypes. Visible minority writers are becoming more aware and confident and I believe this will reduce ghettoization and entrench the emerging confidence. Canadian writing will become more colourful—not coloured."



**Sanjay Khanna** is a Vancouver-based writer who just completed his MFA degree in Creative Writing.

# in inglish:

## writing with an accent

how to decentre the imperial "I"  
— possibly with a "P" for politics...

by Kirsten Emiko McAllister

English with a capital "E" is an imperial language, an infrastructure of invasion and domination. As Roy Miki says, it is the language of government, power, law, fear and intimidation. Those of us who are not narrated by the imperial "I", not centred in the white, male(volent), homophobic, bourgeois assumptions of the Anglosaxon world, live ambivalently in some sort of Eng-lush. I wouldn't say we're swooning luses, blissfully intoxicated, but rather incoherently drunk, slurring sharp cornered words, tripping over packed up participles—all that verbage, with so many tenses. A tense tongue is needed: at-tention. Elsewise, as Fred Wah says, words like the 'soup' slip to 'sloup', and we fall from our momentary flight in the language of the Law and Nation into humiliating silliness. But do we really want to tense our tongues, attempt to situate ourselves in what Betsy Warland calls, "the land of angles": *Angleterre*, the land-uage of terror?

Perhaps the strategy should not be to tense the tongue but to build the ambivalences, slippages, to inhabit english with transgressive activities, to 'fake it' a la Fred Wah, to 'perform' from a position of 'interlanguage' as Jam Ismail demonstrated at ***Inglish: Writing with an Accent***. *Inglish* was a series of readings and talk sessions that took place at the Western Front in Vancouver, November 20 – 21, 1992 organized by Roy

Miki. It was to be a meeting ground for "immigrant and Canadian-born writers from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds"<sup>1</sup> to speak about issues that concerned them as "...writers who have experienced denial, discrimination, and marginalization within Canadian society...and [who] have grown up with a troubled and problematic relationship to the English language..."<sup>2</sup>

Many of the writers directly addressed this relationship. Aruna Srivastava and Betsy Warland presented the inability of English as an academic discourse/discipline and as god's word/truth to address what Julia Watson calls the "unspeakables"<sup>3</sup>: the assumed whiteness and heterosexuality in our language with its implicit racism and child abuse. In particular, Aruna Srivastava presented how the English as a discipline narrates her on the one hand, as a professor in a position of neutrality and decorum within the academic institution; and on the other, how it painfully silences and isolates her as a South Asian woman and as someone with unbearable past experiences. Ayanna Black and Marie Annharte Baker spoke from culturally and historically grounded communities struggling against political violence. Pointedly, as well as with wit, they explained how this positioned them against what Baker calls Canada's "settler lit"; alias "apartheid lit/a part/a part hate literature". But both writers also made it clear that they were not just stuck in a position of defence. As members of their particular communities, they also participate in the continual development of their people's languages and literary forms. Likewise, Ashok Mathur and Jam Ismail discussed their innovative approaches to writing and publishing in terms of generating new forms that slide over the frames locking english as logic, as located in the book.

This seemed like a promising day, but somehow it dissipated into a strange silence. While it was apparent that many discussions were many, despite the fact that they spoke with weight and complexity. Was this because we didn't know how to address the "unspeakables" they presented? Perhaps it was the difficulty of speaking out when the gathering's configuration of power was not explicit—or perhaps too explicit. Was it because the poetic word was too mesmerizing?

“Our difficulty in realizing the complexities, problems, and...‘elegances’ presented by the writers was due to our inability as a group to accept the brute fact of power differentials: the mean retching side of reality.”

Or had the stranglehold of academia, the one that Aruna Srivastava named, somehow managed to creep into the Western Front?

Informal discussions during and after the conference seemed, indeed, to point to the underlying layer/lair of academia as the problem. Robert Kroetsch, Aritha van Herk and Smaro Kamboureli, each of them established academics, seemed oblivious to the particular way in which English narrated them within the dominating discourses. For example, Kroetsch constructed his autobiography around a literary investigation/pursuit of a woman, apparently a “brilliant” writer, who, he explains to us, mysteriously disappears... after which he enters her home and continues to search through/pillage her private writings. Was he aware of the latent misogyny/voyeurism in operation? Aritha van Herk and Smaro Kamboureli dominated the open discussion, struggling to come to terms with the fact that some of us refused to accept the underlying implications of their statements: that the oppression of ethnics is parallel to the systematic violence imposed by racism, homophobia, genocide and sexual abuse in Canada. It was an unpleasant affirmation of Aruna Srivastava’s struggle within and against the capital “E” of English.

*English* offered a much needed forum to discuss the various anti-hegemonic writing strategies being developed by innovative writers along our cultural *front*. Our difficulty in realizing the complexities, problems, and to borrow Jam Ismail’s terminology, the “elegances” presented by the writers, was due to our inability as a group to accept the brute fact of power differentials: the mean, retching side of reality. Unless we recognize that this work is more than an aesthetic movement, that it is a political project, our discussions will continue to dissipate into silence. No doubt it is clear that the “E” of English is quite firmly enthroned — but if we try to, as Roy Miki said, keep “ing-ing” maybe we can make it totter, then tip then, do you think—fall? The “I” of *English* for me is about a critical self-reflective politics of Empowerment with a capital “E”. It is about reducing and decentralizing the “I” of institution to small mobile and multiple *i*’s located in histories, economies, self-determinations... about finding ways to break up and build across.

*Acknowledging myself as a guest writer, I want to thank Rungh for asking me to contribute to this edition.*

*Thanks to Shafraz Jetha and for critical feedback.*

*Appreciation and acknowledgement of discussions with Shafraz Jetha, Scott McFarlane, Charmaine Perkins, Ameen Merchant, Wendy Plain, Roy Miki and Jerry Zaslove.*



**Kirsten Emiko McAllister** is a Vancouver writer.

1 Ad for *English: Writing with an Accent* in *Front*, Nov/Dec 1992, 12.

2 *ibid*

3 Julia Watson, *Unspeakable Differences: The Politics of Gender in Lesbian and Heterosexual Women’s Autobiography, De/Colonizing the Subject*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

## Video in review

### ***A Sari Tale***

Directed by Premika Ratnam  
Written by Premika Ratnam  
TVOntario Productions, 1991

### ***Hair Scare***

Directed by Premika Ratnam  
Written by Ali Kazimi  
TVOntario Productions, 1991

With ‘voice’ and ‘cultural appropriation’ the most controversial topics in the arts scene these days, filmmakers Premika Ratnam and Ali Kazimi have made two brief, dramatic videos for TVOntario’s timely ***Many Voices*** series. Both videos beat the educational-drama trap of neat endings, goofy plots, and what I call the *sermon effect*, in which the targeted audience solemnly remembers the film’s politically-correct message one moment—and casually forgets it the next.

The ‘voices’ in ***Many Voices*** are the voices of visible minority youth living and being schooled in today’s ‘multi-cultural’ urban Canada, and the films, each approximately 14 minutes long, tell two different stories from two contrasting and very important perspectives.

***A Sari Tale*** is the story of a twelve-year-old Hindu girl whose white elementary school teacher wants her to wear a sari to a costume party because women in the girl’s culture “dress that way, don’t they?” ***Hair Scare*** is about a Sikh boy who endures racism in the schools and at a local swimming pool.

Gita, the protagonist of ***A Sari Tale***, doesn’t like it when her friends call her ‘Indian’ or when people stare at her sari-clad mother in shopping malls. She’s embarrassed about some aspects of her background and resents her teacher’s assumption that her Indian roots necessarily make her feel comfortable wearing a sari to school. The solution? Her parents ingeniously drop hints that she might learn

about festivals of light—including *diwali*—that occur all over the world when “it begins to become dark earlier.” Gita persuades her teacher to allow her to make a presentation to class about these festivals. While this temporarily solves Gita’s problem, the film’s closing scene, in which Gita celebrates *diwali* with her parents, is fraught with inner conflict. Will the students make fun of her presentation? Will they understand that she’s a Canadian *and* a Hindu?

***Hair Scare***’s protagonist, Amar Bhalla, switches schools. As in his former school, he’s taunted about his *patka* (the partial turban wore by Sikh boys), has to deal with bullies, and try to make friends. The central dramatic injustice occurs when he’s excluded from a swimming pool by an ignorant swimming instructor, who believes Amar’s *patka* is a health risk. Through his own sense of justice and his father’s help, he regains admittance to the pool and swims with a bathing cap over his *patka*. He also receives an official apology from the pool’s director (*and* an unofficial one from the aforementioned instructor). Problem: winter’s coming soon, Amar’s *patka*’s getting soaked from swimming, and he’s embarrassed about revealing to everyone the scary stuff we know is underneath the *patka*. What will he do as it gets colder? Will he endure a winter of head colds? Will he dry his head after each swim and be able to cope with the bullying and the shame?

There are fascinating sequences in both films. In ***A Sari Tale***, we see a mother empathizing with her daughter’s embarrassment with Indian culture—and, yet, feeling palpable, profound sadness about it when her daughter is out of view. In ***Hair Scare***, the nagging question “What’s underneath the turban, eh?” is answered. We see Amar, after he’s had a shower, combing his long *hair*, gathering it and tying it with string; we see his father help him with the cloth that is tied around the bunched *hair*; we see the father and son discuss their common experience with turbans and being teased. Both videos have aired repeatedly on TVOntario and on the Knowledge Network in British Columbia. Deservedly so: they tackle the wide ranging issues of racism sensitively, facing head-on the stereotypes that all Sikhs are terrorists and that all Indian parents are insensitive to their Canadian children’s needs. What is more, they portray youth issues in a way that the widest possible audience of children and parents can relate to. And, best of all, the avoidance of neat endings: the filmmakers acknowledge that, by definition, dilemmas never afford an easy way out.



**Sanjay Khanna** is a Vancouver-based writer who just completed his MFA in creative writing.

# Samachar

*Rungh accepts submissions to Samachar. Please send us your calls for submissions, announcements, upcoming events, etc. and, space permitting, we will publish them.*

## Calls for Submissions

### Invisible Colours Video Project

We are looking for young women of mixed parentage, ages 14 to 19, grades 9 to 12 to participate in a video making project entitled **Seeing Ourselves and Being Seen by Others**. Please submit written proposals no later than January 31, 1993 to

Invisible Colours  
115 – 119 West Pender Street  
Vancouver, BC V6E 4L2  
604 682.1116

### Racy Sexy

We are seeking submissions for a performance/exhibition/screening/writing series dealing with inter-cultural conditions for the construction of sexuality in contemporary Canadian society. These commissioned or curated pieces will deal with issues of sexuality, sexual orientation and sexual practices in the context of race, culture and socialization. We are also inviting artists, organizations and individuals to be a part of a new data base of cultural workers and producers. We are the newly formed **Chinese Canadian Contemporary Projects Committee**. If you are interested, send information to

2814 Trinity Street  
Vancouver, BC V5K 1E9  
or contact Cynthia at 604 254.9487  
or fax 604 687.6260

### Cinema ICA, London, UK

The Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, England is hosting a South Asian Film and Video season in March 1993. The six week programme will feature work by South Asian artists working in the west and will be curated by Ian Iqbal Rashid. A series of panel discussions and lectures will complement the series. For further information please write to

Cinema ICA  
The Mall  
London, UK SW1Y SAH

### Centre for Developing-Area Studies, McGill University

Special issue of *LABOUR, Capital & Society/ TRAVAIL, Capital & Societé*, Fall 1993 "Contemporary Perspectives of Women and Work in South Asia." We are looking for Research articles • Research reports • Interviews • Review essays • Book/film/video reviews • Book notes • Select biography •

Deadline: February 15, 1993

Contact for guidelines Dolores Chew  
Centre for Developing-Area Studies  
McGill University, 3715 Peel Street  
Montréal, PQ H3A 1X1

### Call for Photographers

EN FOCO, INC. encourages culturally diverse photographers to submit slides to our Slide Registry. We are interested in photographers who have a high quality body of work to present. Our registry is an ongoing library open to critics, curators, collectors and all who are involved in exhibitions and publications. We have been supporting such artists for over 18 years and wish to continue our efforts to include more Native, Asian, Latin and African-Americans. We would like to extend this invitation to culturally diverse photographers. Please call or write for more information.

Miriam Romais, Program Associate  
EN FOCO INC.  
A Community Visual Arts Agency  
32 East Kingsbridge Road  
Bronx, NY 10468  
212 584.7718

## Upcoming Events

### New Directions in Indian Dance— Assimilation of Tradition, Innovation and Cultural Transplantation

February 10 – 13, 1993 at the Harbourfront and Premier Dance Theatre, Toronto

February 14 – 15, 1993 at the Betty Oliphant Theatre, Toronto

Presented by Kalanidhi Fine Arts of Canada, this international dance festival and conference provides and opportunity not to be missed! For the first time in Canada, Indian dance is being represented in all its range at an international level in the form of Public Performances, Workshops, Lecture/Demonstrations, Scholarly Presentations, Panel Discussions, Exhibition and Videos. This is the

environment in which the dancers, choreographers, teachers, dance scholars, critics and presenters of South Asian dance traditions as well as other traditions such as Ballet, Modern Dance, Spanish, Chinese, African etc. will come together to share common perceptions, issues, concerns and insights born out of working in new and possible converging directions. For more information please contact

Nimmi Nagothu, Administrator  
321 Sheppard Avenue East  
Toronto ON M2N 3B3  
416 229.0369/ fax 416 250.1871

## News

**SAWAN** is raising funds for the creation of a South Asian Women's centre in Vancouver and welcomes new members. Please call Sunera at 604 872.9420 or Yasmin at 604 669.6241 for more information.

## Erratum

Vol 1, No 3; p31 Premika Ratnam was the President of the Independent Film & Video Alliance at the time of **About Face About Frame**.

p32 Photo credit in **About Face About Frame** belongs to Shirley Claydon.



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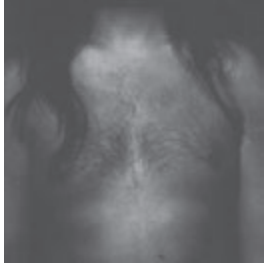
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No such thing as a photographic self-portrait, no such thing as a photograph which is not a self-portrait, no such thing, perhaps, as a definitive line between the front and back of a lens. Especially when the south



asian subject clashes with the south asian viewer, emulsion turning brown. This is the head space. The head looks up, turns up, toward, takes in the image already

taken. This is the disconnection, the disarticulation, the place where the head is taken off. A barren (not barrel) chest, cut off from parts extreme. In here is a south asian story of south asian experience in (and



not in) a south asian world. A south asian body tail. The viewer is clothed in darkness, hands in warped content, and in the text inscribes itself around the body,

the south asian body, clothing the body in words unauthored. The movement comes from the groin, clothed itself in jeans, not pyjamas, and hands clasp unclasp silently between gazes. Still a still glance from



below unaffected by rising bidi smoke or by errant window light or side-by-side residing hands still. He looks up on he, he looks upon he, and up to legs flexed in

mid-rise, legs floating between words. The south asian body is diasporized, say they, the body of southasianness dispersed. But here is the immediacy of the body, south asian, conflicted between the rise



and fall of a shutter, captured and transposed into silver-based brown.



Cover Art *Amaltas*, 1992  
Woodcut by *Kauser Nigita*

