

# ON SPATIAL POETICS IX AND THE DELIGHT OF AWKWARD RITUAL-MAKING

>> NAOMI HORII IN CONVERSATION WITH NEO

*Event curator 2009*

Neo: Tell me about Spatial Poetics IX.

Naomi: For Spatial Poetics IX, artists came together and collaborated on performances that celebrated multidisciplinary, experimental, and innovative works. It was a one-night, one-time performance and exhibition event. Artists involved were Catrina Longmuir with Asa Mori, Ray Hsu with Tetsuro Shigematsu, Andrea Hoff and Sasha Popove, and Michael Mori with Iman Habibi and Mark McGregor.

Neo: But, tell me more. Why did you bring those artists together in one room?

Naomi: Well, I kind of thrive on awkward situations. Having a really diverse line-up of artists immediately posed an exciting challenge for me: how to bring a 'togetherness' between all these different people? How to tie a nice string around the evening?

Neo: The way you say "nice string" sounds slightly sarcastic. It feels like you want to say something here, like perhaps some pressure you felt; or maybe you disagree with 'nice string' altogether. Did you feel like it is inevitably impossible to thematicize Spatial Poetics? Or is it not that at all—is it more a question of 'iffy' group dynamics?

Naomi: Well it might be all or none of the above. I still felt awkward, and that feeling is at once lovely and terrifying. I wanted the artists and audience to be a bit outside of their comfort zone. I mean, that zone where everything is clear and every piece has a common thread, and the audience can 'get it' and everyone has a feeling of pleasure when they go home after an arts event. I wanted us all to go home feeling like there were some question marks and grey areas. At the same time I also wanted us all to go home feeling satisfied, worked, and maybe questioning our own, individual ways of consuming art.

I think it was a process of realization that I could not tie together this one-night performance. I decided that I could not force artists to do what I wanted, and could not massage an idea out of them that was something attached to my own interests. We all sat down and began with a theme, but I found that was completely meaningless in the end. In the end, to me, it was about asian canadian artists doing their thing. I simply think they are great artists, and whatever happens is for sure experimental art.

Neo: I see what you're saying about growing something that is completely out of your control. I suppose that is the thrill of curating. Curating can also be meticulous research and consideration of putting artists, concepts, bodies of work together. I don't want to offend you, but your approach seemed a bit laissez-faire, no? I mean, to be completely hands-off to the end product sounds downright dangerous.

Naomi: Absolutely. There are a lot of unknown factors to consider and I did a hell of a lot research into what my approach would be. I realized that providing a program of innovative, multidisciplinary work meant that I needed to involve the audience and the artists, as well as myself.

Neo: Tell me more about involving audience, artist, and curator. It sounds like a Hermeneutic that involves a matrix-like relationship-action movie.

Naomi: It really has nothing to do with The Matrix...

Neo: Ok, the movie has nothing to do with this conversation, but artwork—especially performance and experience-based artwork—occurs in a matrix of environment, perception, object, and experience. The system in which we find ourselves navigating when we are consuming art is feathered with relationships between moment, past, people there, people hidden, knowledge, experience... It is curious how much wonder art can bring into our living experience of it.

Naomi: Well that reminds me of Okosama Lunch by Catrina Longmuir and Asa Mori. Catrina and her collaborator presented a Japanese, old school Wunderkammer—those popular rooms or ‘cabinets of curiosities’ filled with random artifacts or weird objects of wonder and, during the renaissance, was a kind of precursor to modern museums. Longmuir’s Tansu (Japanese chest or cupboard) was inhabited by ghostly nostalgia and memory-objects; curious and interactive things. And you are right about using the word wonder: Okosama Lunch obviously would invite the viewer to explore, but for me even as curator, I was not privy to the contents until the installation. I was the audience, and it was the audience that brought the main elements of the piece together. Not until witnessing that did I understand that the Wunderkammer was a kind of framework for the evening.

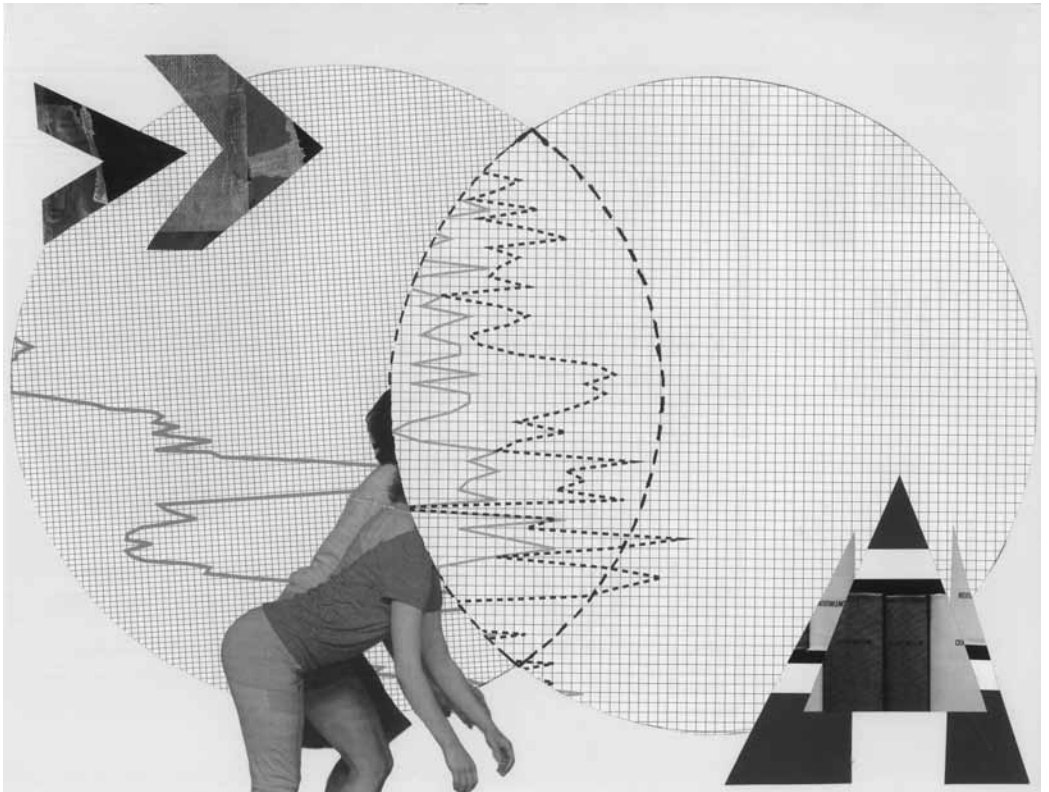
Curiosity and wonder rang true for Michael Mori and his collaborators in *Nothing is Free* as well as in Ray Hsu and collaborators in *The Way of Ray*, <-->Inviting Van. The element of surprise in *Nothing is free* was startling for me as curator. I didn’t know the darkness of Michael’s piece before he performed it. Plus, his take on a traditional theatrical form felt like engaging with an ancient artefact placed in a room that miraculously updated its own existence. The surprise I felt really added to my understanding of the evening as a whole.

Neo: What do you mean by that? Is it kind of like this conversation—in that it’s really not two people talking, its really just one person thinking out loud?

Naomi: Well the fact that I’m writing as interviewer under a nickname and interviewee under my own name is similar: in Mori’s piece he had to be 2 people, plus narrator, all at once. We as audience obviously knew that, but he really played with the question, “who is telling this story?”

What was interesting about Ray Hsu’s piece, *The Way of Ray*<-->Inviting Van, was that he had decided to curate his own performance slot by bringing in collaborators outside his original and sole partner, Tetsuro Shigematsu. Instead of performing himself, Hsu chose to curate his own *Spatial Poetics* within *Spatial Poetics*. He was almost completely invisible in the piece—instead he was a silent actor and foil to Andrea Hoff’s performance.

My pure delight was at the end of the night when I thought, “Who curated this thing anyway? I didn’t!” I was a spectator. And all those who came and participated created the evening. All those artists who performed were watching it all go down. I had many questions in my head after that night, like: “What was the artwork?” or “Who were the artists?” or “What was the medium used to create new, experimental,



multidisciplinary work?”

Neo: Yes, I remember during *The Way of Ray* - ->Inviting Van, thinking, “Why the hell am I listening to this woman’s story?” But as I reflect, perhaps the intention was to create something ‘true’ to the moment—to perhaps focus on our roles as art consumers/producers/instruments/what have you, and to create a ritual between strangers. Our friend, Wikipedia, defines ritual as “a set of actions performed mainly for their symbolic value. It may be prescribed by a religion or by the traditions of a community.”

If we are community by being there, being in that space, community of VIVO, Powell Street Festival Society or simply of Spatial Poetics we act our roles but, wonderfully, never neatly.

Naomi: I enjoy awkward ritual-making. In the now decade-long trajectory of Spatial Poetics, I feel lucky to have come into the community that has been playing with those roles of curator, artist, and audience for a long time already. I felt like the space, especially at VIVO (a long time friend and community partner of Powell Street Festival Society) gave everyone present the room to practice our Spatial Poetics rituals.