

ESSAY

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Event curator, 2009



Documentation still from Mark Soo's *Drawing Line*,
Performer Bill Runge, Spatial Poetics 2009.
Photo credit: Greg Masuda.

In 2009, the Powell Street Festival left its home in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside for the first-time ever.¹ Bidding adieu to Oppenheimer Park as it underwent a year of renovation, we temporarily relocated to Woodland Park near Commercial Drive. We moved with the knowledge that our home would welcome us back. But given the logistical manoeuvring that we were forced to contemplate, we also began to think about the role of the migratory experience inextricably linked to the origins of the Powell Street Festival. As such in 2009, the Powell Street Festival embraced the theme of *Migration*. This gave rise to a number of projects, including two new works developed for *Spatial Poetics VIII* by artist collaborators Mark Soo & John Korsrud, and Shima Iuchi & Jean Routhier.

But as confident as we were that this relocation was temporary, the act of leaving the area for an entire year was tinged with angst. This neighbourhood is our home and to leave the area is symbolically and historically fraught. Once a bustling residential and business enclave for Japanese Canadians, this area was swiftly denuded of their presence when the Canadian Government forcibly relocated coastal Japanese Canadians to inland internment camps. As a direct implementation of the War Measures Act, this 1942 evacuation was initiated by anything but freedom of choice. And so this time round in 2009, there was a sense that we could not wholly abandon the neighbourhood. We owed it to the memories that haunt those who were part of the exodus, to those succeeding generations who embody the lingering traumas passed on, and to the often-stigmatized community that now resides in the area.

As such in the fall of 2009, we staged the 8th annual *Spatial Poetics* inside and surrounding the Vancouver Japanese Language School and Japanese

Hall.² Down the street from Oppenheimer Park, it is also a home of sorts, where we regularly stage some of our Festival activities. As curator for this year's event, I invited 2 visual artists interested in exploring the ideas of migration and meaning in association to place: Mark Soo and Shima Iuchi. For this collaborative project, Soo partnered with musician John Korsrud and Iuchi with sound artist Jean Routhier. The resulting new site-specific works brought to light the complexity of this particular Vancouver neighbourhood and the socio-political contexts that shape it, echoing the migrations of people both past and present, and the memories associated.

Vancouver-based artist Mark Soo had already contemplated the particularities of the Oppenheimer Park area and its social significance in the artwork, *Monochrome Sunset (English Bay—Oppenheimer Park)* (2006). This work made reference to Vancouver's contrasting identity: first as a bucolic coastal city ensconced in natural beauty and secondly to its reputation as home to Canada's 'poorest postal-code.' Using light and colour as its central axis, Soo created an installation where he projected an orange halo of light typical to Oppenheimer Park streetlights onto a translucent image of English Bay at sunset. In its matching of hues, the two constituent parts touched upon Vancouver's complex socio-cultural identity. While the sunset image captured Vancouver's picturesque postcard image, the lighting echoed the harsh reality of a city renowned for widespread illegal drug in the Downtown Eastside, including Oppenheimer Park. This commonly used light spectrum provides visibility but at the same time flattens colour recognition. These lights are used in public spaces to mitigate illegal activity, such as intravenous drug injection where differentiating colours at night is

1 One year in 2000 the Powell Street Festival relocated to the inside of the Vancouver Japanese Language School and Japanese Hall.

2 As the only seized Canadian property ever returned to the Japanese Canadians after the forced WWII coastal relocation of Japanese Canadians to the interior, it holds specific meaning and resonance within its walls.

crucial to finding a viable vein. Soo's work isolates Vancouver's dichotomy as a city of riches and a city of poverty, split at its core between the idyllic Westend and the more economically-challenged Downtown Eastside (DTES).

Considering Soo's intimate knowledge with Vancouver's politics of space, for *Spatial Poetics VIII* I asked Soo to create a site-specific work. Soo proposed *Drawing Line*, a work that defined place through a metaphoric line drawing, and partnered with musician, composer and musical director John Korsrud to enact the project. In their collaborative effort with 6 saxophonists (Evan Arntzen, Saul Berson, Michael Braverman, Bruce Freedman, Graham Ord and Bill Runge), Soo and Korsrud orchestrated a conceptual sonic line that brought people, place and space together by drawing out a musical phrase between strategically placed musicians along several city blocks. These musicians drew an invisible line back and forth, up and down the streets surrounding the Japanese Language School in the Downtown Eastside. Each static musician passed along a musical phrase. Every time the phrase moved from one to the other, the subsequent saxophonist expanded, improvised upon, and shifted his phrasing from memory—sometimes accurately or more often than not, inaccurately. People strolling and riding their bikes within the acoustic boundaries became embedded into a sense of defined yet liminal space. Audience members (and inadvertent passer-byes) became part of a temporal collection/communion.

At the same time, *Drawing Line* framed the separation and disjointedness of the area, and accounted for the multiple shifts and histories that colour this historical site. The codified song that brought together the neighbourhood, gave way to the dislocation between the gentrified area of Railway Street and the more impoverished streets of Alexander and Princess. The tenuous borders that held the area as one were only as tight as the

metaphorical line lingering in the soundscape. Gasps, gaps and voids in the musical phrasing reiterated the chilly discord between the visible signs of class differentiation. The clean, bright modern lines of the buildings on Railway clashed with the more unkempt buildings and sidewalks down the other streets. Geographically linked together as part of the Downtown Eastside, the area is circumscribed by a physical dissonance that highlights class divisions and the encroaching gentrification process. History repeats itself, pushing people out.³

Drawing Line also inevitably points the role of the artist/musician as a signifier of encroachment. In this work, the saxophonists stood in for the gentrifying process, as excavators who initiate the first forays into areas of ill-repute. Musicians and artists are often the first signs of gentrification. Finding cheap studio spaces, they carve out space and normalize the area for others to move in, subsequently abetting the pushing out of others. They act as bridges between classes but at the same time redefine the line between classes.⁴ Although this act of playing a line across physical landscape was a temporal and ephemeral invasion that lasted less than an hour, it was nonetheless a real invasion of space. For some it was an unwelcome intrusion.⁵

3 For non-Japanese Canadians there was potential economic gain from Japanese Canadian internment. Property and assets were seized and redistributed at below-market value. Currently as land speculation develops in Vancouver, many low income residents feel the push of gentrification as developers purchase low-income single room occupancy (SRO) units for conversion to other uses.

4 Nonetheless artists unto themselves also cut a large swath within class divisions. From my memory not all of the musicians in *Drawing Line* were entirely comfortable with their new temporary performance venues.

5 Unsurprisingly, not everybody welcomed this event. During our dress rehearsal one resident at a nearby SRO became particularly aggravated, and demanded to know what film we were filming. Given Vancouver's notoriety as Hollywood North, it was clear that he had encountered film productions previously in his neighbourhood. Ironically once we let him know that we not filming and that we were from the Powell Street Festival, his anger quickly

The ephemeral line cut across a swath of land that marked the socio-cultural and class divisions in space and time, and displayed the ways that these dividing lines are pushed, often not in the most equitable means. *Drawing Line* conjures up memories of those left behind and those who are still caught in the struggle fighting for space to be heard.⁶

In the *Spatial Poetics* project *Coastal Calls*, Kamloops-based artist Shima Iuchi took a personal approach to the creation of space, and integrated ideas of migration as they pertain to community. For this work Iuchi collaborated with sound designer Jean Routhier to create a site-specific work exploring the process of migration from one culture to another. Located on the fifth floor of the Vancouver Japanese Language School, the installation included two video works and an audio soundscape set in a room overlooking the orange cranes of Vancouver's port, framed by North Vancouver's mountains. Iuchi created a pair of animations based upon her diary entries. One set encapsulated entries from her Japanese journal and the other culled images and writings from her Canadian journal. Projected on opposing walls, these videos were accompanied by an audio score developed by Routhier that mixed English and Japanese speech patterns with whale vocalizations recorded by Iuchi. Familiar sounds were intermittently juxtaposed against different languages and incomprehensible whale echolocations and calls. Viewers were invited to lie down on tatami mats strewn between the two projections and watch the simultaneous videos. In

addition to the mats, Iuchi reinforced the Japanese aesthetic by installing lanterns encased in mirror outdoors on the two adjacent decks. Like *Drawing Line*, *Coastal Calls* created a sense of commune at the same time a sense of disjointedness.

Although Iuchi's interest in whales stems from her childhood, it was only recently rekindled during an orca encounter on a kayak trip in Canada. At that moment she was suddenly flooded with childhood memories of her first whale sightings in Taiji, Japan.⁷ Iuchi's vivid experience of reliving a recessed memory triggered her desire to learn more about these animals,⁸ and to explore the notion of memory. As complex animals that are increasingly recognized for their intelligence, transient orcas stand in for the metaphoric search for home that eludes Iuchi.

Having grown up in Japan, Iuchi has lived in the eastern United States, Banff and Kamloops. As such she understands the discord and shifts that occur in relocation, particularly in the movement from one distinct culture to another. In the attempt to find home, there is the manifestation of a desire to search for that which cultivates nostalgia, and for the new. Following well-worn paths, the orcas represent Iuchi's search for the familiar and the foreign. Far from her place of birth, she integrates Japanese traditional signifiers into her work, such as paper-making, tatami mats and lantern building, securing a sense of nostalgia for that place that once was home. Although Iuchi seemingly proposes the idealization of nomadic life—full of discovery and exploration—her desire to linguistically confound

dissipated. Familiar with the Festival at Oppenheimer Park, he seemed more concerned about corporate interests invading the area than about the actual acoustic disturbance.

6 In addition to Japanese Canadians who used to live here, this area is located on unceded Coast Salish territory—a historical meeting ground for Tseil-Waututh, Squamish and Musqueam people, and is currently home to a large number of urban Aboriginals, as well as many others.

7 Taiji is a historic whaling village. It gained particular notoriety with the release of the 2009 film *The Cove*, where the village's annual dolphin hunt was captured on film. Ironically it was about the same time that Iuchi produced this work that *The Cove* was released.

8 Iuchi has spent time studying transient orcas' patterns of migration and communication at the orca research facility on Hanson Island led by renowned researcher Dr. Paul Spong.

viewers points to a sense of disconnect. As much as she cultivates community and attempts to bring people together through her work, there is a sense of isolation and loss—incapable of bridging a culture in its entirety. In its foreignness, the whale speaks to the duality of dislocation and communion that embodies cultural migration.

Coastal Calls finds an analogy in the migratory experience of the contemporary Japanese Canadian search for nostalgia or *natsukashii* in returning to Oppenheimer Park for the Powell Street Festival. Be it the neighbourhood or friends that they yearn for from their youth, for the festive atmosphere, or for a taste for traditional Japanese festivals, many Japanese Canadians return in the search for a place to call home and for a community that they can call their own, at least for two days of the year. *Drawing Line* on the opposite spectrum demarcates the current politics of inclusion/exclusion. The work engenders the thoughtful process of self-definition, ownership and the politics of agency in a site of contestation. At the same time, *Drawing Line* and *Coastal Calls* expose how divisions can be absorbed by the metaphorical embrace of a moment—a shared moment. Like the Powell Street Festival itself, there are moments when people can find and develop a new space to commune, despite differences or perhaps because of them.

In both works the artists question what makes a community and how to shape that sense of commune when a tangible physical presence is excised from space. Their works invariably put forth the idea that ownership to place and sense of community is something that is continually contested. Imagined communities shift and are based upon collective notions. Like Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined community, affiliation is not based upon daily contact, but a concept of unity.⁹

9 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities; Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, NY: Verso, 1983).

Yet heterogeneity disrupts the notion of unified community. Individual wills and desires challenge boundaries of space and identity disrupting the notion of a unified homogeneous nation-state, let alone a community bound by tenuous geographic delineations and fragile social linkages.

The Festival underwent three migratory experiences between 2009 and 2010, including the shift to Woodland Park, *Spatial Poetics VIII*, and the Festival return to Oppenheimer Park. What became most evident to me at these moments was the sense of community that has been cultivated over the years despite the lack of a permanent and widespread Japanese Canadian physical presence in the Oppenheimer Park neighbourhood and how this is represented at our Festival.¹⁰ These shifts made me think about what this Festival may potentially mean to those beyond the Japanese Canadian community, who are part of the local neighbourhood community.

Born in Victoria to a Japanese immigrant mother and an Anglo-Saxon Toronto-born father, I cannot claim deep Japanese Canadian roots, nor can I lay claim to the DTES. I do not carry the trauma of the Japanese Canadian internment experience, nor did I grow up with the Festival. I am an insider by slim virtue of my mother's origins, but beyond that I am a guest. There are those who have been with the Festival infinitely longer than I have and who find community within, yet have no cultural or ethnic affiliation with Japan. Yet I see that they have a larger claim to stake in the community that I do. I would argue that the Festival, having successfully articulated cultural difference for over 35 years, is now considered part of the norm, part of a collective sense of identity in Vancouver. It is much more than an occasion for Japanese Canadians to be heard, identified, celebrated and included as part of the Vancouver identity. In its drive to be

10 There are only two remaining Japanese Canadian organizations left in the area: the Vancouver Japanese Language School and Japanese Hall and the Vancouver Buddhist Temple.

inclusive, the Festival has become an interstitial site of enunciation. It is a site of engagement indelible to Vancouver's identity where non-Japanese Canadians willingly insert themselves.

Part of the key to this engagement lies within the Festival's location in the DTES. When the Festival moved to Woodland Park, a large percentage of the Festival's regular drop-in volunteers from the DTES community never showed up. Their absence was sorely missed; we depend upon them. They are part of our community, and when we returned in 2010 they welcomed us back into their fold.¹¹ Beyond history and memory, community is a large factor in the Festival's commitment to the neighbourhood. For three days a year,¹² the community opens up and we are invited back home. Like any visit home it is fraught with familial tensions; it's not always easy, but there is a level of kinship and cooperation.¹³ In many ways the Powell Street Festival engenders a liminal Third Space.¹⁴ It is a shared space where dialogue, communion and discourse are enabled, and culture is exchanged at various levels of interpretation. For those unfamiliar with the DTES it provides a point of access; for those within the

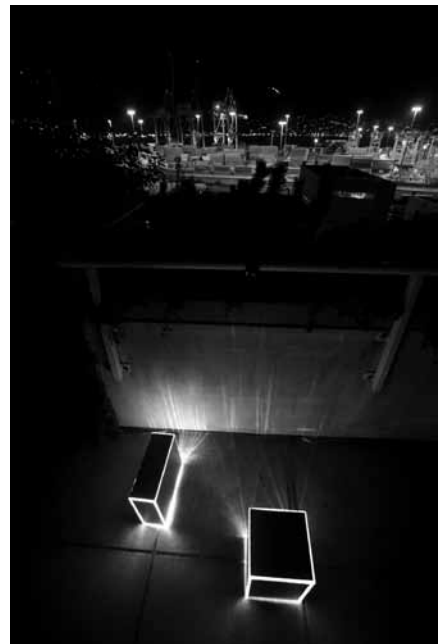
DTES it provides a moment to engage as hosts; and for the Japanese Canadians it provides a moment to celebrate. All participants are provided with an opportunity to engage with a broad spectrum of community on a dynamic level. As an event that constantly evolves and reaches out to other communities, the Powell Street Festival provides a space of redefinition and allows for a malleable notion of community. Hierarchy gives way to a hybridity of cultural and class inclusion, overlapping at various levels, and while not always smooth and entirely successful, it is always interesting and engaging. The Festival's migratory path is open to change. Luckily, this means that the doors home have always been left open to us and for others to visit.

11 Unfortunately there is a large gender discrepancy within the number of DTES volunteers, receiving far fewer female volunteers. This is arguably based upon the real gender inequalities that exist within the DTES community, where gender stratification becomes most apparent.

12 I'm including the Friday when we set up the Festival for the weekend.

13 Like any large free outdoor public event, we experience a certain level of crime and disturbance. Nevertheless, thanks to a dedicated number of volunteers and supporters from the Portland Hotel Society's Lifeskills program who are familiar with the area's unique, socio-cultural makeup, the Festival encounters few violent confrontations by successfully encouraging non-confrontational interactions.

14 "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have not primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew." Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), p.37.



Documentation still from Shima Iuchi's *Coastal Calls*, Spatial Poetics 2009.

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