

# Artist Talk with the artists of UNION

**Livestream event by the Richmond Art Gallery Association & Cinevolution Media Arts Society  
Saturday, May 15, 2021**

## **SPEAKERS:**

Nancy Lee 李南屏 and Kiran Bhumber ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ (artists)

Yun-Jou Chang (moderator)

**ASL INTERPRETERS:** Larissa Peters and Gillian Pettitt

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## **Yun-Jou Chang**

Hi everyone, welcome. So, I'm just going to get started. Welcome everyone Welcome everyone. My name is Yun-Jou Chang, Executive Director of Cinevolution Media Art Society, and I will be your moderator for today's Artist Talk with Nancy Lee, 李南屏, and Kiran Bhumber, ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ. So in terms of access offerings for today, we do have two ASL interpreters who's going to be available throughout the event. During the talk, the ASL interpreters and the active speakers are going to be spotlighted, along with any screen-sharing that is happening. We also have automated closed captions, which can be enabled by pressing the CC button in the top, in the bottom right hand corner of your screen.

So now let's actually get started. Cinevolution Media Arts Society and the Richmond Art Gallery are situated on the occupied, traditional, and ancestral territories of the Hən̓q̓əmi̓ñəm speaking peoples, including the Musqueam and other Coast Salish peoples. Because much of Digital Carnival is taking place online, we also wanted to consider the legacy of colonization embedded within the technologies, structures, and ways of thinking and doing that we're currently engaged in. This talk, and Digital Carnival as a whole, is using equipment and high speed internet technologies that are not available in many indigenous communities. These technologies leave significant carbon footprints contributing to changing climates that are disproportionately affecting indigenous peoples worldwide. We ask that you acknowledge that we are all sharing in this responsibility to reconsider our roles in reconciliation, decolonization and allyship in relation to indigenous communities, and what is now known as Canada, and also across the world.

So for today's talk, I'm really, really delighted to welcome Nancy Lee and Kiran Bhumber, to share a little bit about UNION, the featured artist exhibition for Digital Carnival Z, and also their solo gallery, their first solo gallery exhibition. This exhibition has been a true labor of love. I think we first started having conversations about this back in the fall of 2018. So more than almost two years ago at this point, and the world has changed so much in that time. But what I think hasn't changed is how prescient this exhibition, and the themes that it tackles, continues to feel.

### **Yun-Jou Chang**

So for those of you who don't know Nancy and Kiran, I'll just briefly introduce them and then I'll pass the stage to them to talk a little bit, to give us a virtual walkthrough of the exhibition, and then we'll enter the discussion.

So Nancy Lee is a Taiwanese, Canadian, interdisciplinary and media artist, curator, filmmaker, DJ and cultural producer. Their work stimulates and enlivens space, making a provocative statement about how inescapably interconnected we are with our surroundings. This notion of staging is a constant in Nancy's work, and underpins their projects from their early work as a filmmaker, through their conception of live events and into the realms of XR, new media performance, and installation, where their art practices continue to coalesce and evolve. Nancy is a co-founder and co-producer of CURRENT Symposium, an intersectional and multi-disciplinary initiative, featuring programming for and by women, non-binary artists, and artists of color.

Kiran Bhumber is an Indo-Canadian interdisciplinary media artist, composer, performer and educator. Her practice considers the mediation of memory through emerging technologies and how the body reinscribes memory into the present. Her work results in constructing interactive installations and performances that examine movement, touch and cultural memory. As a composer Kiran's practice centers around multi-channel and spatial arrangements, and how the choreography of sound can influence the listener's notion of space, time and narrative. Kiran is the co-director of INTER/MEDIATE, the media art educational festival focused on cultivating growth within Vancouver's media art communities, and empowering marginalized communities with access to workshops, artist talks, and collaborative opportunities. Welcome to you both. And thank you so much for doing this presentation today. So I'll hand over the stage now to Nancy and Kiran, to talk a little bit about UNION, and to share their exhibition with us.

### **Nancy Lee 李南屏**

Thank you so much for the introduction. Cool. So let's get our screen-share... Yeah, it's been such a wonderful experience, since 2018, working with Cinevolution to realize the project the way we see it today, because a lot has changed. And from the very beginning, where the idea and the story came, till the way it looks now, it was an immensely long process, but we're just very excited that we can continue nurturing this relationship with Cinevolution over the years, as the world has changed so much. Great, so what you see, well, right here, right now, this image is an image of the entrance of the gallery space. This is, when you first walk in the gallery space, you will, there'll be two projections that are facing each other. And it is the two-channel film that is in the space.

### **Kiran Bhumber ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ**

Yeah, and when you walk into this space, you'll see that all the walls are covered in the same material that you see in the film, which are these black plastic garbage bags. In the year 3000, the world is completely void of organic material, and so all that we have around us are like manmade materials, such as plastic. And the screens are in dialogue with one another. So, within the two screens, you see mine and Nancy's two characters, and our relationship within the dystopian world and this new order world called GAEA, which is this new friendly tech corporation that emerges, where they're inviting everyone who is living in this dystopic world to chip into the GAEA world where you can connect with one another, and experience pleasure and joy. And how you connect into GAEA is through a cyber-neurological implant called the GAEA seed. And in the film, you'll see this kind of

round little plastic figure that is attached to our back. And from there, you're able to access to cyber world. And before you access the cyber world, you have to agree to give GAEA all your privacy, and let GAEA harvest your memories. And so as GAEA harvests your memories, you're able to earn the currency to buy new memories,

**Nancy Lee 李南屏**

We can play the first video now. This video is just an excerpt from what you would experience with the two-channel film, with the two different narratives of Kiran and my story on the two different sides. In the gallery space, the film is enclosed in a quadrophonic sound system. So you have, you hear Kiran and I's voices coming from each different side of the screen.

**Kiran Bhumber ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ**

In this world, the only memories that GAEA cannot access are your ancestral memories, and these memories are rooted in your body and encoded in your genes. And the way these memories are manifested, or awakened, is through ritual performance. So throughout this exhibition, Nancy and I are rediscovering our ancestral history through touch and through ritualistic performance, which is realized through our post apocalyptic wedding ceremony.

**Nancy Lee 李南屏**

So we just included some like BTS footage of us shooting the film and also recording the sound for the piece, just to show how the material that we use in the film is actually wrapped around all over the gallery space. We essentially brought the entire set into the gallery space, so people could feel immersed in this world that we've created.

**Kiran Bhumber ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ**

And here are some excerpts from the recording session with the music that was created for this exhibition. So the screens are in dialogue with one another. And what you'll see situated in the middle, is a sculpture of Nancy and I embracing. And this is to represent the longing for touch and intimacy that one experiences in this year 3000. And it also symbolizes the resistance that Nancy and I become a part of in this world, because touch is forbidden, for us to embrace is us going against the GAEA state.

**Nancy Lee 李南屏**

The sculpture is made in collaboration with sculptor Ian Nakamoto, and the sculpture has hand imprints and skin, we really wanted to convey the sensation of touch through this piece. Because with everything that has been happening with COVID, the scarcity of touch and the scarcity of presence, and not being able to really take up space in the gallery as performers, as we had initially intended on, we wanted to perform in the gallery space. But because of COVID, now, we have to think of other ways to create, to put our presence in the space, and that's why we created a sculpture that is almost a life-size of our physical being.

**Kiran Bhumber** ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ

So these are three different lightboxes that you'll see in the gallery, and they're throughout the space. And these are to represent the propaganda, different propagandas, that the GAEA state is perpetuating in the world and inviting you into the cyber world.

**Nancy Lee** 李南屏

It was important to us to convey these posters in the lightbox medium, because this is the medium that we're all used to seeing adverts in. And throughout these lightboxes, we're able to kind of dive deeper into the conceptual elements through worldbuilding and through branding. So the first, the lightbox on the most left, the yellow one, it says "play" and it has a symbol in it that's like a circular symbol, that stands for the symbol of the Arc. So ARC is the currency that is being used in the cyber world. When you log-on to GAEA, you give away your privacy and you have your memories extracted in order for you to earn ARCs. And then you can use those ARCs to buy more memory and pleasurable experiences. As you see in the back it says "play the memory game". "Playing the memory game", these are slogans. We did a bunch of research like reading casinos and gambling websites and platforms, and kind of figuring out what kind of slogan we want for ARC, the monetary system in the cyber world.

**Kiran Bhumber** ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ

And then the second lightbox, you'll see in this nice bubbly, inviting, fun writing. It says "A deeper way to connect, you are never alone". And in the background, there's some pretty watercolors, almost like a waterfall kind of a wave flowing down. And you can imagine that this propaganda poster came about when GAEA first started and they wanted folks to sign up and subscribe to it. And at the bottom, it gives you more information about why you should subscribe to the world, and that you will be immersed forever and be connected through the GAEA seed, which is the chip that goes onto your back.

**Nancy Lee** 李南屏

And the third lightbox, which is a mostly blue lightbox with some yellow numbers, you will see there's number one: serotonin, number two: dopamine, number three: endorphins, and number four: oxytocin. So this lightbox showcases the four pillars of GAEA. And these are the four pillars that you can, it's kind of, we took a lot of language from multi-level marketing organizations, and we took a lot of language from self development organizations, where they want you to join so you can discover your full potential and pay a lot of money for it. So a lot of the, there's a lot of small texts that are also in this lightbox site. If you are in the gallery space and you can look really closely into it, and read some of the texts of the market, of the GAEA world. The four different levels essentially is the four different happy hormones that we experience as humans. And these are the four hormones that essentially, it makes up your happy experiences that you purchase in the GAEA world with your ARCs. So as you gain more ARCs, you get to access the better and better hormones. As you know, the last hormone oxytocin, that's the love hormone. So that's like the most intimate and pleasurable hormone that you can experience. So as you level up in the GAEA world, the more you'll be able to access this love hormone and feel a sense of intimacy and connection.

**Kiran Bhumber** ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ

Yeah, and the next space is, we have the wedding dresses displayed, that you'll also see in the film. And the wedding dresses are really important to us, because they were the impetus of the whole project. Back in 2018, when Nancy and I were first talking about a new project and conceptualizing what UNION was, it really came about when we had this desire to wear a really intricate, beautiful, traditional wedding gown. I wanted to be draped in a traditional Sikh Punjabi wedding gown, and Nancy wanted to be draped in a traditional Han Chinese wedding gown. And then we started interrogating why we had that desire. And we realized that we were feeding into this wedding industrial complex, where we just wanted to wear a wedding gown just for the sake of wearing something expensive and to take photos in, only to store it away afterwards. Much like what happens today in weddings, where it's not really about the spiritual union between two people, it's really about doing it for other reasons, like your family, or like displaying your wealth and also for social media. And we, when we were first conceptualizing this project, we talked about, like, how we wanted to create something intercultural that is truly respectful of both of our cultures. And, we consulted with elders, and we consulted with artists, older artists, in our communities. And one thing that really stuck with us is, you know, we had an elder that said to us, "Why? Why respect the culture when, as women, the culture doesn't respect you?", or can lead to non-respect. In a sense, where, when we talk about being women, and the policing of women's bodies, and being sold off or traded through marriage, because it is really, you know, it has become, it has evolved from becoming a transaction between two families. And that kind of alleviated a lot of tension that we had towards wanting to be as respectful as we could to our cultures. And so we collaborated with a friend of ours, Adam-Lin Bunnag, who goes by NOT DEAD YET, to imagine what these wedding gowns would look like in year 3000. So we took aspects of our ancestral heritage. So you'll see in Nancy's wedding gown, the paneling and the sleeves reference Han Chinese traditional wedding wear, and then my wedding gown references Indian traditional wear, where you have two pieces, a top and a bottom representing a Lehenga. And the whole, the reason why we wanted to do this project, is to have an understanding and to show that culture is not a static set of rules. It is informed by the past, but it doesn't make it culture unless it's performed in the present. So unless you are performing a wedding in the present, it doesn't constitute as something traditional, and therefore by you performing it, you're also re-inscribing, what that performance is and therefore, changing the cultural memory and the cultural performance of that ritual.

**Nancy Lee** 李南屏

These two dresses are made out of, it's a very shiny material, most of the dress is metallic red. And this material is, it's latex on vinyl. And that was a really important process for Adam, NOT DEAD YET, to conceptualize what kind of materials we'll be able to access in year 3000, based on this apocalyptic setting that we've set in place. So plastic was one of the main materials that we had access to. And the dress that I wear is more bottom heavy. So it's an off-shoulder dress, and it's got big long sleeves that drapes to the ground, and a red paneling that's in the front that kind of references some of the more traditional Han dresses. And with Kiran's dress is more top heavy, because Adam wanted to kind of create a piece that was in dialogue with each other, that would complement each other in the space. So her top part has two long sleeves, her shoulders are designed in a very sharp and pointy way that almost creates like an armour for her to wear. And her bottom part of her dress has three red thinner paneling that kind of comes down throughout.

**Kiran Bhumber** ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ

So the last section of the exhibition is situated in gallery three, which is this octagonal room. And what you will see in this room is a 16-channel, so you will have 16 speakers all around you and a floor projection that's 18' by 18' wide. And the idea behind this installation, so you can walk inside this projection onto the floor and have the sound diffused all around you, in order for you to get an idea and be inhabited into the world of UNION. And we're also using motion tracking to track where users are, or audience members are, in space. And then from there we're able to change projection, have projection change all around, and have sound follow you in the space.

**Nancy Lee** 李南屏

The idea of having this space as like the last gallery space, and having it as a participatory experience, is that we wanted to bring the audience into the Richmond Art Gallery and we want folks to be able to experience Kiran's and my narrative first, within the two-channel film and kind of get to know the world a little bit better through the film, through our individual stories in dialogue with each other, and through the different lightbox panels and our sculpture presence. And then after that, after we've primed them with all of this information of the world, then we bring them into this much more immersive experience. So the audience members can now participate and be a member in the dystopian and in the cyber world GAEA, and also be a witness of our UNION ritual.

**Kiran Bhumber** ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ

Yeah, so you'll see the same, some of the same imagery and symbolism being projected as well.

**Nancy Lee** 李南屏

Yeah, so I think this is kind of our general brief walkthrough of the exhibition, but we, I know Yun-Jou has prepared some more questions so we can kind of go more in depth into some of the elements of this project.

**Yun-Jou Chang**

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Thank you for that walkthrough of the exhibition. I feel like every time I see it, and every time I hear you speak about it, you know, the project gains, there's always more to learn, right? There's always more detail. There's so much that has gone into the world building, but also the care with which each work has been crafted in collaboration with different collaborators. So, I think one of the things that has, like I said at the beginning, one of the things that continues to strike me about UNION and one of the first things that people will point out when we start to tell them about the exhibition, is just how incredibly timely it is. And in many ways, the exhibition seems to have predicted our current moment, even as it is anticipating the distant future. And you spoke a little bit already about the impetus behind the show and your relationship to the wedding dresses, but I'm wondering about, just what do you think are the experiences that you've had, individually as artists, but also as people that sort of gave rise to a project like this? Even before the moment when you were talking about wedding dresses, what are some of your lived experiences, or what are some of the, in terms of the trajectory of your artistic practice, that maybe made UNION "the project" of the moment?

**Nancy Lee 李南屏**

A big part of my practice is, we are performers. Like we wanted this slick, nice wedding dress to wear, to perform in. But I think, beyond that, it's just also wanting to create something that has, create a piece that has a lot of different detailed elements that kind of bring everything together. Because Kiran and I, our practice is like, I do, I'm more in a visual realm and Kiran kind of works more in the audio realm. And being able to work in these two complimentary terms allows us to world-build in a lot of different ways. And I think this project, kind of helped us or gave us an opportunity to be able to experiment with new mediums, with new emerging technologies that we've never used before, and it allowed us to collaborate with a lot of amazing collaborators on this project that we've always wanted to work with, but did not have the time or did not have the resources to do like a more deep dive into this, like deeper relationship building within with our collaborators. And another part is just like, I think, being a queer Taiwanese person, I wanted to create something that made it so other people feel like this, despite the dystopian future, despite all this dystopia that we currently live in, I want people to feel like they are able to be the protagonists of their own narrative. That as a queer Taiwanese femme, or queer Asian femme, you get to conceptualize your own traditional wedding, because that's something that is not very accessible to any of us.

**Kiran Bhumber ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ**

Yeah, I think expanding on our practices, Nancy and I have spent some time working in immersive environments, whether that be through like XR and performance. And in a way, the pandemic really assisted in making us more isolated and forcing us to focus on one project, which was this one. And we were able to deeper dive into world building, that we haven't done before. I mean, the types of exercises that we were doing and the type of mentorship that we had, was incredible and it really deepened all the subjectivity within the world.

**Yun-Jou Chang**

Can you say a bit more about that, just that deeper dive into the world building process because I know that is such a big part of this work? Probably, I don't know, like maybe 80%, I think, of that work was front-loaded right? In conceptualizing every little detail, from what the acronyms are going to be, to what the symbols are going to look like, the color choices, everything is so deliberate. Can you tell us a bit more about that process?

**Kiran Bhumber ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ**

Yeah, we watched a lot of films. Yeah, we watched a lot of films and we listened a lot. And from there, I think, we took a lot of inspiration from the media that we were consuming, and then took ideas that we liked and then had brainstorming sessions where we literally took pieces of paper, and then wrote in bubbles like okay, "dystopia", what's in the dystopian world? And then "cyber world", and then "union", and then we're finding connections between the two. So we actually have a lot of rough draft paper, with all of our concepts on there. And then from there, that's when we kind of had more of a grasp of what the worlds were and what their relationships were with one another. That's when we brought in collaborators as well, to further develop the graphics of GAEA and whatnot, and the interaction design, and so forth, and the film as well.

### **Nancy Lee 李南屏**

Yeah, I was also taking an online screenwriting course during the development of the project. And you know, I've never gone to film school or art school at all, so that really informed me as well, to just understanding how to create dramatic tension, and how to position and create characters that were, or objects, or things in a story that had antagonistic kind of forces. So that really kind of informed us in terms of the creating how many, like how many worlds that exist within this entire UNION world, and how the different worlds overlapped. And then we brainstormed that through Venn diagrams, thinking about sensorial experiences of each world, the smell, the touch, the colour, the taste, and the emotional kind of sensation and using that to map out. So we had a very clear distinction between each of the worlds. Essentially each of the worlds has a very specific kind of aesthetic, like framework for it, and then just sticking to that, and then using that framework for us to work with a friend of ours, Venom-s Studios, they did a lot of the graphic design work for us. So the graphic design work, we spent like 11 weeks working on different iterations of it. So picking the direction of what we wanted to do for the graphics, and using that as an opportunity to help us further our visual world building. And then taking the visual world building and implementing it into the film and using the world building to also, visual world building, informing some of the elements of the sonic world and vice versa. Because all the parts were kind of in development together. So Kiran would send us some of the tracks for the world that she's made, and then we will listen to it. And then we use that to kind of develop like, oh, what kind of textures that we will want for the world. And then they will kind of go back and forth, as we kind of both like, as we kind of both develop visually and sonically.

### **Yun-Jou Chang**

Wow. Sounds like yeah, it's just, it's incredible, right? Like, there's so much work that has gone into every stage of the process. And my mind is just going in all these different directions, has tons of questions, and I'm sure the audience does, too. Sammy just pointed us to a video excerpt of the interactive video installation. And I know Victoria has a question as well, about the technology that's being used for the motion tracking. So maybe, is this a good time to share? Maybe that gallery three video clip of what the inside looks like? Okay.

### **Kiran Bhumber ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ**

Yeah. So unfortunately, you won't be able to hear the sound very well. So this, the interaction and projection design was in collaboration with Sammy Chien, from Chimerik. And we're using blob-tracking technology. So essentially, we have the projection coming from above, and a RealSense camera that is detecting depth in the space. And so what we're able to do with that is, know where your coordinates are in space, and use that information to change the projection and also to alter the sound world. So right now, this section is the dystopian world. So people that are on the projection, they get a sense of being surveilled. So your coordinates are being shown in the space, and then you see this pulsing circle around you and lines appearing showing your relationship with one another in the space. Because in this dystopian world, it's forbidden to touch, it was important for us to represent what surveillance would look like. And as mentioned before, the audio system, we built a custom audio system in collaboration with Aleksander Zecevic, that allows us to position sound in a 3D space, and using an audio format called Ambisonics. And Ambisonics allows you to hear sounds the way you would hear it in real life. So it uses psychoacoustic properties to change sound depending on where you are in the space. So this is the second movement, so this is when you get invited into the world of GAEA. So you'll hear

the voice of GAEA, inviting you with the, introducing the four different pillars, and how you earn ARCs. And the voice of Gaia is actually programmed to come from above. So we created this virtual speaker in space. So when you stand in the middle, you get the sensation that she's coming from above, kind of like a voice of God. And here the interactors are playing the memory game. So this is when GAEA is asking you these questions and extracting your memory. And you're gaining points after she asks the question. And this last movement is the spiritual union. So this is where Nancy and I, you become a witness to Nancy and I's characters UNION for each other. And when I was conceptualizing the sound world, I consulted with an ethnomusicologist Connor Singh VanderBeek about Chinese, traditional Chinese and Indian music. We started talking about the traditional instrument guqin, which is a string instrument, Chinese string instrument, and there's three different ways of playing the guqin or three different idioms. And they're called people, earth, and the heavens. So 'people' is when you pluck the strings. 'Earth' is when you slide on the strings. And then 'heavens' is when you play harmonics on the strings. And they use that framework, those three descriptors, as mapping on to the three different worlds of UNION. So the dystopian world represents the earth, so we hear more sliding sounds. And the cyberworld is more, it represents the people, so you'll hear more pluck sounds. And then in this UNION world, this represents the heavens, so you'll hear more harmonics in this world.

### **Nancy Lee 李南屏**

And with the lyrics of, that we wrote for this sacred ritual of pure mind, we use the process of dance writing, which is informed by our choreography teacher and consultant, Emmalenna Fredricksson. So, you know, Kiran had some ideas for the music, from just like, rough sketches. So we would listen to that, and we would do some improvisational dance to it for like maybe five or six minutes, and then we would use that time when our bodies have become activated, to do some, like another five more minutes of free writing. So then we would take our text from free writing, for example, like two words like "trembling harmony" from Kiran and I, and we use that, put that into a phrase, and then we would then dance again to that. And then we would do that many times as we created more text and more movement. And then we took all the texts, and we kind of place them together to make a lyrical content for this song, and then we translate it into our respective languages of Punjabi and Mandarin Chinese. And then that's how we formulated the lyrics for this portion. It was important for us to you know, activate our bodies because this whole entire project is about, you know, cultural memory that's stored in the body. So throughout this process, we wanted to, it was important that we, that the words that were coming out of us was authentic to our true lived experiences.

### **Kiran Bhumber ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ**

We also studied, you know, Nancy sent me some Buddhist folk chants that were really important to her. And I also studied traditional Punjabi folk music as well, to frame the melodies of our two verses, and the moment where we also sing together at the end. But yeah, that whole experience, definitely, if you can come out to the gallery, it's super immersive. So hope you all can make it out.

### **Yun-Jou Chang**

Yeah, we're being very safe with COVID measures. I know the Richmond Art Gallery, and the staff there have been really diligent about making sure that we're following all the public health advisories. So you know, you will be safe when you come. And, yeah, we have a really extensive comment, so I'm just going to try to read it. I'm

guessing this is probably a question from Tyler, who says: "Thank you for this brilliant and carefully descriptive talk. I was privileged to work with the artists in the final stages of installation, the deliberateness of each aesthetic decision, and the detailed attention paid to the sensorial experience was really impressive. But what was perhaps most impressive was the capacity to engage so many collaborators. It seemed to mimic the organizational architecture of filmmaking, a deviation from standard visual art practice. I know this question is a little nerdy, but could you speak to your vision of the position of such collaborative art practice in our society, and questions of authorship, funding, audience engagement, and archive? Thanks for such amazing work."

### **Nancy Lee 李南屏**

Well, the biggest, I think the most important part of this collaborative kind of project, you know, if you like, if you look at our credit list on our website, or even if you come to the gallery space, the didactic video in the front, where there's the text for the story and everything, it was super important for us to make sure that our collaborators are shown in the gallery space. Because it's just, like, we do not want to be the kind of gallery artists that you know, kind of takes credit for the work that we're not actually physically making, or that is not entirely our work. And with a project like this, it takes, you know, like 20 plus people to make it possible. So, you know, that's like, that's something I think even with our within our own kind of like, decolonial journey, it's important for us to make sure that people are credited properly, and that we want people to be able to feel a sense of ownership, you know, over the work as well. Because I know traditionally in gallery spaces, you have art fabricators, you have artists that don't actually touch or even fabricate any of their own works. And that's, that's kind of like something that's acceptable and normal, and that's something that we want to challenge because we don't think that is acceptable. We think anyone, even coming from a labour standpoint, you know, anyone that puts in any hours of work making the pieces should be credited, it should be on the didactics, should be in the film, should be on the websites. And that's just like a future that we hope that all artistic institutions and gallery spaces will adopt moving forward.

### **Kiran Bhumber ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ**

Yeah, and for the two of us, when we work on these projects, for Nancy and I, it's, you know, the end product, it's wonderful to have an end product and land somewhere where you feel like you've gained so much and have completed something that you've been wanting to do. But for us, it's about the process. It's about the relationships that we build with our collaborators, and it's about our learning from one another. And learning new skill sets, especially working with immersive and interactive technologies.

### **Yun-Jou Chang**

Absolutely, yeah. I think, well, Victoria Gibson says, "Thank you for your attitude about crediting the technicians". And I think so many of us who work in the field, have the experience of, you know, working on a project and then the project goes live and everybody celebrates, and, you know, your labour is kind of forgotten, right. And so, it really is, it's really refreshing and I think really inspiring, you know, to see a different standard being set. And also this kind of relational approach, even as you were speaking, during the walkthrough of the different pieces in the gallery, you were introducing some of your different creative collaborators. I'm hoping you can talk maybe a little bit about, a bit more, maybe about sort of the collaborative process behind the

project. And Pia also has a question here that might be relevant, which is also about the activism embedded in your art. So I'll leave it to you which of those questions you want to address.

### **Nancy Lee 李南屏**

Okay, process first, right? So when Kiran and I, we work, like we've done other projects that kind of had a big team as well. And I think, we do have our respective fields that we work in. So it's like, I'm kind of, I direct the visual realm, and then, listen it's not totally split, but like, Kiran does a lot of direction with the audio team. So we do kind of set up a way that we operate in terms of like, who delegating our, like supervision or like responsibilities, and who we're kind of keeping, you know, like, to hold each other accountable for the work that we do. And then like, for example, depending on the collaborator, like working on the wedding dress with Adam, or like working on the sculpture with Ian, and doing the audio system design with Aleks, our process is like, I think at the end of the day is like, we want this to be a fun process for everybody too. This is, this entire project is a learning process for all of us, because none of us have ever done anything like this. So I think the most important thing is that every one of our collaborators is able to get something and gain something through this experience. And, you know, at the end of the day, it's like, it's great that we have a dope show right now. And like, that's all, that's all great. But at the end of the day, what's most important to us is that now we've had this opportunity to really deepen our artistic relationships with our collaborators. And that is the most valuable thing for us moving forward.

### **Kiran Bhumber ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ**

Yeah, and especially during a time right now, where, when we were working with our collaborators, most of us didn't have any other projects going on, too. So we were able to create a space where our friends and collaborators could use their craft for this exhibition.

### **Yun-Jou Chang**

Absolutely. And I just wanted to start to invite people to put their questions in the chat. You know, so if there's anything you want to ask about, I've been asking lots of questions, and reading out some of the comments, but if there's anything you want to hear Nancy and Kiran talk about, please don't be shy. And then meanwhile, I want to kind of loop back to Pia's question about the activism embedded in your art. And yeah, do you want to talk about that?

### **Nancy Lee 李南屏**

Yeah, for sure. Pia is actually, Pia Massie is one of our artistic and film mentors, that has helped us a lot with this project, kind of just like guiding us conceptually. And, you know, I think as, just as, like, diaspora, diasporic Asian artists working in a contemporary art realm is, like, every move you make is a form of activism. You know, just to take up space in these institutions is a form of activism, you know, because it's not something, it's, like unfortunately it's just not, we're not, our society is not at a place where people of colour are fully embraced by these institutions in a non-tokenistic way. So, I think, for us, like being in here, like doing the work that we do, it's not easy, there's a lot of institutional resistance that kind of come with it. And there's a lot of uncomfortable feelings that kind of come about, you know, doing the work that we do. And I think it's just being able to survive it, and to be able to persevere through it, to have something to show. It kind of offers this opportunity that we

now paved the way, where, and set us, setting a bar for what is possible for the new generation to come, because then they could be like, well, if Nancy and Kiran can do this in a gallery space, like why can't we do it?

**Yun-Jou Chang**

Yeah, and I think like the, you know, something that kind of, it kept coming up for me as well, in so far as, you know, being a role model in some ways or like, modeling what's possible. You know, I also heard that in how you were speaking about the project as a learning process for you and your collaborators, but also for you, yourself to develop, you know, sort of new skills in working with new technologies, like new ways of working. And of course, that's related, I think, as well to your individual work with CURRENT and with INTER/MEDIATE, yeah, which is just really, really inspiring. So thank you for the work that you do. Yeah, so Victoria says, "It's not just people of colour, but also that you're women, which is really inspiring". I'll keep asking questions as we wait for the audience to chime in. But one of the things that's really fascinating for me is kind of, I think your, as artists, you each work so much in live performance, and live performance experiences, and kind of creating these immersive environments. What was that difference? So the difference in is Nancy, for example, I know, you do a lot of DJing, and Kiran you do a lot of live work as well. So what is the difference for you between sort of more like one-off events where you are constantly there, right, kind of masterminding the entire environment, to creating a gallery experience, where the audience sort of comes in and has to make their own experience? Do you see that as being different?

**Nancy Lee 李南屏**

It's quite different, I think. One is, like, the longest durational performance you'll ever do. And one is like, oh, the performance or like, it's a one night, you know, and you do one thing, and it's like, it's like, it's fleeting, right? Like this, this process, definitely, maybe in 10 years this process will feel fleeting, but you know, we're still in the thick of it right now, and it just feels, I think, the type of, you know, communication and kind of the way the project is produced. Exhibitions, like, this is our first exhibition, we've never done something like this before. And I think previously, we were like, when we do our own live performances, or even our, with our own projects, with like INTER/MEDIATE, with CURRENT and stuff like that, it's like, I think it's like, you know, we're kind of like renegade artists that, like, we're used to, we're used to being self-producers.

**Yun-Jou Chang**

Yeah.

**Nancy Lee 李南屏**

You know we're used to getting our own funding, used to being self-producers, used to getting our own space, negotiating our own contracts, doing things that way.

**Kiran Bhumber ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ**

And having our own agency.

**Nancy Lee 李南屏**

So working within an institution is like a really, really new experience for us. You know, we had worked in like, we've done Fuse and stuff at the Vancouver Art Gallery, but again, that's like a one night event. You know, maybe within preparation, that's like, the duration of your relationship is like, one month. So I think working within an institutional kind of framework where the bureaucratic process of getting things done, and the order of things, and the communication practices, that is, like an extremely new experience for us. And, you know, it's definitely challenging at times. And, you know, we hope that institutions can recognize that the way they are, institutions can kind of, I hope institutions can recognize that the way that they are structured is oftentimes, like, it's not the best way that it can be, and that there are actually a lot more robust kind of ways that you can kind of implement or kind of showcase something that does not have to go through this process. And I think like, as artists that want change in the future, we hope, and this is not just artistic institutions, we're talking about, like every kind of government institution, just institutions period. Like, you know, we hope that there'll be an opportunity where like, we can kind of just deconstruct these kinds of institutions, and hopefully we can build a new world where structures can actually be in place that isn't just meant for its own self-preservation, but it's actually in place that, where every one part of it, every part of the process, whether you are on contract or not, or whether you're just in the space, can feel a sense of ownership in building that organization up.

**Kiran Bhumber ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ**

Yeah, so we hope that different organizations and institutions can be open for change. Yeah, like a lot of these have long histories and yeah, are about self-preservation. And just going back to being a performance, even if we're not producing our own performances, you know, if we get hired to do a performance, it's like you're getting hired to do as your act, right? Like you're Kiran Bhumber performing, or Nancy Lee performing. And with the, with a gallery exhibition, and because it hadn't been realized previously, it felt like, things had to be in a constant negotiation with the gallery space on like, what the exhibition would actually look like. Which was a challenge for us.

**Nancy Lee 李南屏**

Yeah. And we just hope that like, we hope that the, what curators or what the curatorial means, generally. I mean, I know that has been evolving a lot over the years. And I hope that just evolves quicker, you know, in a way that like, curators, at least the kind of curators that we would like to be, we want to be people that support the artists, that kind of allows complete artistic freedom. And I know that's traditionally not really what curators do, you know. Curators do have a lot more control over how works are presented, and we just hope that by us doing this project and doing UNION, we get to challenge, kind of like, what the status quo has been within arts institutions.

**Yun-Jou Chang**

Yeah, and, you know, I think UNION challenges the status quo in more ways than one, right? I think in terms of, yeah, I think in terms of the form of the artwork itself, in terms of, I think the content, and as you're speaking to now, like, also, like the process of art making, you know, what, you know, what that can look like? Yeah, so I have a question here from Ying Wang, who says, "You know, continuing on the foundation that UNION has built, what is your vision and your plan for future projects?"

**Kiran Bhumber** ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ

But still see, it still feels like we're in the thick of UNION. But we do want to tour this project, especially in our respective countries. I mean, once COVID permitting, we do want to go to India, and we do want to go to Taiwan. Because we do feel, you know, Nancy and I have shown work in Asia before, and we do find that the audience is, is so different. And the reception there is so different for media, for media art exhibitions. And so we'd love to see what the reception is, and have conversations with people over there, on how relevant this project is to them too as folks living in our home countries receiving the work.

**Nancy Lee** 李南屏

And, like, I think, for us, like future was too like, not just for UNION, but it's to further engage in like, making new works. Where we're decentering the white gaze in like, contemporary art context, right? Like, we don't want to be the token Asian artists, like in a white institution, you know. We want to make art and make work for people that are, that look like us, that have lived experiences like us, and that can relate to us on like, a very, like, personal and spiritual level. And I think that's there's a lot of work that needs to be done just generally, just not by us, but like, as society as a whole. And you know, that's something that we want to continue participating in and championing.

**Kiran Bhumber** ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ

And we also want to continue working with Cinevolution. Yeah.

**Yun-Jou Chang**

Well, we'd love to continue working with you, I know. We were talking about how it, well, you know, since I'm here in Taiwan right now, like, it's a really great opportunity to connect with some of the local organizations about hosting opportunities. Although, of course, right now we're, COVID is ramping up here, so we're actually in semi-lockdown, so we shall see. But I think it's, it's that, it's holding on to that hopefulness, right? About what is possible and what can happen. Because I think, like the last year, or two, has been such a roller coaster ride in so many ways. It feels like we're kind of in this moment of reckoning between, you know, just amidst, like, Black Lives Matter, and the murder of George Floyd, to the most recent, the killings in Atlanta, you know, which really, yeah, I don't know, I just, I feel like, heartbreaking doesn't begin to describe it, right? And I'm wondering too, like for you, sort of from when you were conceptualizing the project, in 2018, and kind of like working through all of these world events since then, not just COVID, but also the political and social upheavals that have happened. How has your thinking, or your approach to the project, or to your own art practice, evolved, over time, over that period of time?

**Nancy Lee** 李南屏

I mean, I feel like it's, I've always, for both of us we've always kind of, been in the, kind of like, we've always wanted to make work for people that can relate to us and connect to us. But I feel like, with everything that has happened in the last year and stuff, and things that are happening right now, still, I mean, the thing is, with all the stuff that we see in the news, it's like, as someone living in a racialized body, it's actually not that surprising to see all that stuff happening in the news. Because it's always been happening. You know, these racist experiences have always been happening, we've just always experienced it, but now it's just being played on the

news, and getting more media attention. So like, it hasn't changed anything about what we've always wanted to do, but it just made it, it gave us more courage to be able to be more outspoken and to ask for what we really deserve. And I think, if anything, like anything that happened in the last, you know, year or so, it just made it so, it made it that we just don't want to take as much shit anymore.

**Kiran Bhumber** ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ

Yeah, and also to, yeah, there's also like this pressure of like, you know with all of these world events that are racialized events have been happening is to, like create trauma art, as well, which we've been seeing in galleries too. And that's not something that Nancy and I want to do, because it's not, you know, that type of art is, again, for the white gaze to consume the pain of racialized bodies. And so, it pushed us even more to create space and to carve space for us to be in this exhibition, or create this exhibition.

**Nancy Lee** 李南屏

Yeah, we want to be able to create a future where people like us can like happily, like thrive in, and to get married, and to perform rituals, you know. Like, contemporary art, that celebrates our culture, yeah, that celebrates us instead of like, you know, reflecting on the painful past that we all have lived and it's all stored in our body already. Like, you know, I don't, I don't want to look back on that. I want to look at the future that we could possibly all live in.

**Yun-Jou Chang**

Yeah. So I've got a question here from Ying, and I want to respond to that, but there's just a lot, so I'm going to take a moment in asking this question. So Ying says, "Part of the process for you is also to explore the root of your own cultures. How have your perspectives of your own traditions been evolved after the process?"

**Nancy Lee** 李南屏

I think we kind of talked about it, like we talked about a wedding dress. Like we wanted to, at first we wanted to do something traditional, you know, like, what does that even mean? What does tradition even mean? Right? Like, is tradition something that you can like buy at a store that is supposed to be from 300 years ago? Or is tradition, you know, what you do every day, and what you perform in the present in reaction to what the present moment is giving you, right? So I think our understanding of our own desires for tradition, you know, as a diaspora of community members is like, oh, like we wanted, we wanted something, we wanted to get this like fancy wedding, this fancy fat Asian wedding that we wanted to do. And then we realized, how much we are being influenced by the wedding industrial complex, by capitalism, and how much of our desires we don't even own our own desires. Our desires are being shaped by the media, by capitalism, by all these other things, and this project kind of allowed us to take ownership of, and really interrogate where our desires actually come from. And then that gave us space to kind of imagine, like, what we would actually want now that we have some awareness of how our desires are shaped. And I think with being like, being Asian, being a migrant here is like you kind of have a longing for your culture in a way that, and I think a lot of Asian folks here too, it's like, you want to overperform your culture in some ways, because you feel so far away from it. But you know, consuming and overperforming your culture doesn't necessarily make it more of your culture. You don't actually have to do that, you can actually create your own rituals and create your kind of cultural traditions as diaspora. Like, I speak

Mandarin with a funny accent, I know that. And you know, that's chill, but it doesn't make me any less Taiwanese. Yeah.

**Kiran Bhumber** ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ

Yeah, I think that's the biggest thing, is like, yeah, throughout my artistic journey the past few years is realizing, like, it doesn't matter. You know I'm not fluent in Punjabi. I can't read Punjabi, but it is my ancestral tradition, it's all lived experiences in my body. And that gives me the right to reify and to perform in a way that makes me feel grounded in my culture. And I think UNION has given the space for that.

**Yun-Jou Chang**

Yeah, absolutely. And I think that, I think for me what is most powerful about this exhibition is that sense of hopefulness, and that sense of agency, and empowerment of the individual to really stake out or to carve out a space for themselves within their culture, where every gesture, every iteration can be a full participation in the culture and can have the, and that it's not only that they are able to take ownership of the culture itself, but that they can influence what the culture becomes. And I think that is just such an important message. I think so many of us who are young diasporic subjects really struggle with that. And I know too, in terms of intergenerational or familial dynamics, that's often very, very challenging, especially for younger generations, right? Where I think there is this longing to reconcile with your family and your culture, but whenever there is a disconnect, it's kind of like, "that's the Western influence in use".

**Kiran Bhumber** ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ

And I was gonna say, but every generation has had other influences, too, right? Like, every generation has had different socio-economic factors, other political influences, you know what I mean? That it's like, it's never like, there's never been a time where something's been like, the purest, and it's been like, 'this is tradition'. It's been evolving with every generation. So I think it's also like having elders realize that it's, it is malleable.

**Yun-Jou Chang**

Mm hmm. Absolutely, yeah. And I think just, you know, even that, it comes down to I think in some ways to this attitude of openness, right? And to things that are, quote unquote, "other", right? And sort of being open to other interpretations or readings or performances of identity, right? And it's not just culture, but also, and Nancy we've had lots of conversations about queerness as well, and how queer identity is understood. So yeah, I feel like this work just operates on so many different levels to, you know, to...what's the word that I'm looking for? It's still 6:00 AM so my brain is not totally firing, but to unravel, and I think to kind of reimagine the possibilities that are open to us, to us all, not just as people of colour, not just as women, but I think as humans living on this astral plane, or whatever. So I'm just going to check to see if anybody has any questions, because we're starting to go over our allotted time. So I want to see if anybody in the audience wants to raise any questions and add to the discussion. Pia has actually been popping lots of little gems in the chat. So I'll make sure that I, we pass that along to Nancy and Kiran, they're a little far away to be able to read everything that's being said. Yeah, so if they're not responding right away, that's why. Yeah, Sammy says that, "Nancy that your Taichung sound, your Taichung accent is actually really badass and trendy!"

**Nancy Lee 李南屏**

Nice!

**Yun-Jou Chang**

Yes, so if there aren't any questions, maybe we will start winding down. Do the two of you have any final words, anything that I haven't asked about that you really want to just get out there, while we're all here?

**Nancy Lee 李南屏**

You know, at the end of the day, we just want people to feel like they have agency to change the current, we want people to have agency to feel like they can change the current conditions that we live in, and that they can participate and be an active cultural producer and producing a culture that we all want to live in, in the future. And, you know, with Kiran, me and Kiran's collaboration over the years, it's also important for us to set an example so people know that, within our diasporic and migrant communities, it's kind of siloed in some ways, too, right? We want to show that we can have lots of intercultural solidarity with each other, because that's just so important, at the end of the day to kind of like, see past our cultural differences as well, too. And that we are stronger together.

**Yun-Jou Chang**

Yeah, hear hear. Thank you. Thank you so much, Nancy and Kiran, for the lovely, lovely talk and conversation. Thank you everybody in the audience for being so engaged, all of your wonderful comments and thoughts, I'm looking forward to revisiting them after this. Like I said, this conversation is being recorded, and so it will be made available from June 5 onwards, so you can watch it again. And also, I want to thank the Richmond Art Gallery, of course, for hosting this talk and for hosting the exhibition and for being a partner with us during this, during the year long journey. So thank you as well to the interpreters, Larissa and Gillian, who have been working really hard to keep up with the conversation. I think Victoria commented earlier that the ASL is just so much better than the auto captions. So no out-of-the-can solutions for us, I think. Thank you, everyone. Take care, and we'll see you soon.

**Kiran Bhumber ਕਿਰਨਜੀਪ ਕੌਰ ਭੰਬਰ**

Thank you. Bye.

**Yun-Jou Chang**

Bye, everyone.