

Identity and change

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...After much thought, I've decided to speak - not because I wanted to represent the Vietnamese community in Australia, nor the artists in this exhibition. I have no rights to do either, even though this may seem to be the case. But I'm up here because I wanted to have my chance to speak about Identity and Change, about my identity and change, as I understand it; and how this has affected me. My talk is more for myself than anything, but if it somehow manages to make some connection with people, then I've exceeded much further than I would have hoped.

...Born in Vietnam, I was in Australia by the age of seven, and have been ever since. I have heard somewhere that a large portion of the world is occupied by 'displaced' people. I don't exactly remember the percentage, but it seemed like every third person had either left their place of birth or in some way feels displaced. I don't know if I feel Australian or Vietnamese, or whether there are such feelings. How does it feel to feel Australian or Vietnamese? Do I feel

Australian because I occasionally like eating 'fish 'n' chips'? But while thinking about the things I did like and feel, I thought more of the things I didn't like or felt an affiliation with: that is, I hated being out in the sun; I hated Vegemite; I hated beer - does this make me more Vietnamese and less Australian? The one big thing which prevents me from feeling comfortable with being termed 'Vietnamese' is that my language skills in Vietnamese are very poor. I recall artist Imants Tiller saying, in an article, that his ability to - I quote:

...speak or understand Latvian could be a sign of alienation, displacement or loss. A reminder, perhaps, of the loss of language, of heritage, or homeland (is) like the loss of oneself.

End of quote. I certainly feel that I have lost something - perhaps my language skills have not had the chance to develop; but I often struggle with the simplest of words which come without effort or even thought when spoken in English. Like other children of Vietnamese origin, my loss of the Vietnamese language has meant I could not speak to others in Vietnamese. But, most importantly, it has meant I could not speak to my family about the things and people in my life, and how these have made me feel and think. It has rendered me speechless, more or less, within my own home and amongst my own people.

However, ironically with my loss, my origin has opened the doors to my involvement with community arts. Over the past few years, I've been active in the community arts field. During this period, I've been involved in very worthy projects, all dealing with communities of non-English speaking background - 'NESB' for the acronym. I've often felt uncomfortable, and even embarrassed, when dealing with older participants from a Vietnamese background. This is because I could not communicate with

them to the extent I wanted to, and because I could not answer their reasonable questions of enquiry. For those reasons and more, I could see their disappointment - their disappointment in me - in someone who should have been able to help them, but could not. I have yet to resolve my thoughts and feelings about my involvement with community arts and whether to continue in this field. Out of paranoia and my own insecurities, I have often questioned why I have been selected for a particular job, or exhibition. I often think whether these selections were based on my merit, or my origin - or both, as most would claim - and if both, which did they consider most - my abilities to do the work, or my token place of birth? I do not want to be accepted as a token of 'Vietnameseness' because as much as I would like this to be, I am far from what many may understand how a Vietnamese person should be - whatever that is. But because I was the closest person whom they could find from a Vietnamese or 'ethnic' group, it seemed pointless to look further for possibly 'better', or more qualified applicants.

As an artist, my involvement with community arts has boxed me into a non-English speaking background group of artists, which bluntly translates as artists dealing with folk art, traditional media; and to the world of excellence in the arts, community art is - I quote - 'potentially excellent but not yet excellent' and 'a kind that can never be truly excellent'. (This quote is by Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope, from Culture, Difference and the Arts.) This is a recurring issue for the NESB artist, and is just one of several that I have yet to explore further. The perception that community art is 'ethnic', and therefore must be for ethnic communities, is very narrow-minded; but it nevertheless holds truth for some individuals. Its content is intricately linked to concepts of multiculturalism. The 'multicultural label', as Kalantzis and Cope points out, is - I quote:

a category of marginalisation, something other than mainstream art that excuses the mainstream from dealing with 'migrant' or 'ethnic' issues.

With all projects I have worked on,

multiculturalism has played a large part in its entirety: that is, from the conception; the grand proposal; and to the making of the project. It is a consuming issue to Australia's identity, yet, as one of the elements which won Sydney its Year 2000 Olympics, it's become one of those words which has been taken for granted. It is not surprising, then, for the concept of multiculturalism to have also followed this casualness.

There is, undeniably, no one interpretation of multiculturalism but several. However, unless it is taken seriously as an issue which exists in Australia, and not as a term that is used for the purpose of name dropping, then multiculturalism will remain as that - a word we use to describe something we do not really understand.

Multiculturalism has been linked to the colourful festivals of food and dance which many of us would have experienced; and hopefully will continue to, as these are vital factors towards an understanding of other cultures. However, multiculturalism is much more complex than it suggests. It extends further - I quote:

than the ritualised presentation of origins such as "Carnivals" tends to typify.

(This is a quote by Bernice Murphy.) Unlike its stereotypical images, which are limiting and misleading, multiculturalism is a diverse issue drawing on a circle of associated topics. It is an issue of its time - the present time. And, as with cultural identity:

is not a fixed essence, lying unchanged outside of history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark.

(Quote from Stuart Hall). It is unknown to me how multiculturalism came about but it seems to exist in Australia because Australia needed it, and Australia needs it because we, the people, do. But this course of direction cannot continue

if there is no ongoing discussion to bring life to it. And, with recent derogatory remarks from MPs, the issues are obviously - the understanding of these issues is obviously lacking.

I have mentioned the issues of multiculturalism in this talk because, as much as I think it is important to think about your own identity, it will, as a result, reflect upon your environment and where you are. Therefore, Australia's identity has very close association with my own identity.

Born in Vietnam and living in Australia has given me a 'strange', yet very 'normal' life - as I know of no other way. I may never know how it feels to be a 'white Australian', nor will I ever know what it would be like to be a Vietnamese living in Vietnam.

I am often asked where I come from, and in reply to that, I answer, 'I was born in Vietnam'. This is the easiest response for me, as it merely states the place of my birth - it is something which is concrete and factual. Should my answer be interpreted as something more, then it is not within my ability to control this. But to simply reply in the usual sense, that is, 'I am Vietnamese' - then it is to imply not only was I born there, but I am also 'a Vietnamese', with associated knowings and knowledge. This leads back to my first point to how I feel about being known for my Vietnamese origin. I am uncertain about my answers, and can only respond to the questions with other questions. By doing so, I am not avoiding it, but rather, I feel, it is opening to other possible outcomes and not having to centre on definite solutions - which I think are perhaps none, but many.

Upon ending my talk, I would like to refer back to my reasons for speaking here.

I am here for several reasons, some of which I have already stated. However, as a young woman from an Asian background, I have not, through my years in Australia, seen many individuals of similar origins speak out on matters. For all the negative sensations the Asian

communities have had, there are few willing to support it. We have become easy targets to the loud and aggressive, as we have too often stood back and played passive. But now is the time to speak out. Now is the time to speak out on your identity, and your change.

Thank you.