

## IFTIKHAR DADI TIMEPASS

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*Many scholars have been examining contemporary issues of race in cyberspace. My reflections attempt to open up these questions for the generation of migrants who came to consciousness in the United States in a pre-digital era.*

Well before the pervasive spread of video and online games, Asians played board games of various kinds. For many Asian immigrants, familial relations and exposure to wider American society were perhaps mediated partly by such leisure activities. They were caught between relentless pressures to succeed at school and college and in professional life, and to conform to family life and community activities. Presumably, many young migrants shuttled between being industrious in their work and their studies, and spending leisure time in a somewhat socially confined and mentally detached zone of activity.

South Asian migrants would have been familiar with board games prevalent in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka; *Ludo* and *Snakes and Ladders* have deep historical lineages. A bewildering number of versions of *Snakes and Ladders* were played among various communities in South Asia; they laid out ludic scenarios rich with Tantric, Bhakti, and Sufi ideas about leading a life with redemptive and salvific potential. During the British colonial era that extended from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century, many traditional games were repackaged, shorn of their older associations, and redeployed as games of pure competition and chance.

As would be expected in some of the world's oldest civilizations, local cosmologies informed board games and leisure in many regions of Asia. Subsequent capitalist urbanization and modernization led to new articulations of leisure. Today, Asians worldwide bear the charge of both being industrious—to the degree of being viewed as robotic and inhuman—while simultaneously being mindlessly enthralled with the detritus of contemporary life and the mediatized frivolity of online games. The Asian American model minority stereotype fits this very well, while in Asia itself, we have K-pop, Manga, Bollywood, and the addictions of TikTok.

In modern South Asia, other games also became very common. I remember playing the British version of *Monopoly* while growing up in Karachi during the 1960s and 70s; in it, one could acquire public properties like Trafalgar Square (even if in reality these spaces existed in London). Local manifestations of *Monopoly* were also in circulation. For example, an Urdu version that I bought in Karachi in the early 90s called *Memon crorepati beopar* (Memon Million Business) was created by someone from the business-oriented Memon community. It offers prominent sites in Karachi for acquisition—rather than the faraway New York and London landmarks common to versions of *Monopoly* in the English language, with which one could scarcely relate.

Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, among other thinkers, saw boredom as a foundation of modern life. I can testify from personal experience that theory accords very well with reality. As a young boy, I remember my great uncle Siraj Mamoo saying to me rather incredulously and contemptuously in Urdu, “Why is it today that everyone is bored?” He used the English word “bore,” as this was the term we youngsters bandied about and one that has no good Urdu equivalent. For him, boredom was an affliction of those much younger than him, living in a debased society: entire generations had clearly lost their way.

We are guilty as charged, are condemned to this ennui, and suffer irrevocably from it. We also don’t care much about salvific or redemptive games of the past, or “educational” games of today that are trotted out regularly, even in the hyper-stimulated digital realm, as a way of developing correct political consciousness.

Among the towering contributions of South Asia to the grand theorization of boredom in the modern world is the magisterial concept of *timepass*. Anthropologist Craig Jeffrey managed to write a whole book with the title *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*, a study of non-elite youth facing thwarted opportunities in a midsized Indian city. And in her essay “Timepass: A (Queer) View from South Asia,” Anjali Arondekar characterizes timepass as “a relationship to temporality that is about loitering, stalling, and ultimately queering the process of making time ... from killing time, to engaging in casual (often sexual) activities that defy time’s value. To do or invite timepass is to unmoor oneself from the weight of time, to surrender (for better or worse) to the process; all that matters is that time passes and we along with it.”

If you search the Web for reviews of Bollywood films, people often comment that a particular film is “strictly for timepass.” There is even a list on IMDb for Hollywood movies titled “my best time pass movies.” (Writing and reading such frivolous commentary is itself a supreme timepass activity and thus positioned at a meta level of discourse.) These are films from which you learn nothing

of value, neither aesthetically nor ethically. Their only purpose is to fill the empty hours of the day, when one is too exhausted from the model minority rat race or when one simply sees no prospects worth struggling for.

Timepass is absolutely central to Asian American experience.

As a migrant, one’s community inevitably extends beyond kinship. School, college, friendships, jobs, neighbors, and media all expose young Asian Americans to the wider American society to which they also seek to belong. When migration from Asia reopened in the United States around 1965, it was also a time of great ferment in American society; with the civil rights movement and the intellectual and cultural movements of the 60s and 70s, new ways of thinking about the self and society were being forged.

American board games from the 60s and 70s embody the anxieties and the possibilities of the era (for example, the 1971 game *Perception*, with its psychedelic graphics, reflects the pop gestalt psychology of the period), but also the widespread blindness to an increasingly multiracial United States. The 1970 game called *Blacks & Whites* issued by *Psychology Today* magazine is a kind of a critical but perverse *Monopoly*, with its mapping of social exclusions premised primarily on the Black-White duality. What might have a young Asian American have perceived, if invited to play such a game? Education and timepass, mixed together in a strangely inviting yet alienating cocktail?

And what have our young subject have made of *The Middle Class Game* from 1979, if invited to play along with neighbors? The graphics of the game extend American popular culture’s Whiteness from the 1950s to an era that ought to have known better. What kind of affect would it have evoked, which aspirations would it have resonated with, and how would it have felt—uncanny, *unheimlich*?



received public art commissions from the *Art Newspaper* (2019) and Rose Kennedy Greenway (2020), as well as the Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation Fellowship (2017) and an Emergency Grant from Foundation for Contemporary Arts (2020).

**HERA CHAN** is a curator and writer based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, by way of Kowloon, Hong Kong. Currently, she is a participant in the De Appel Curatorial Programme. Formerly, she was Associate Curator of Public Programmes at Tai Kwun Contemporary in Hong Kong, Director and Curator at Videotage in Hong Kong, researcher for SEACHINA in Hong Kong, and Cofounder and Director of Atelier Céladon in Montreal. Hera has staged exhibitions and public programs at articule, Montreal, Canada; Para Site, Hong Kong; SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin, Germany; Studio XX, Montreal, Canada; SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, Montreal, Canada; and the UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing. With artist Xiaoshi Vivian Qin, she began investigating the 2017 purported sonic attacks on American embassies in Guangzhou and Havana as part of the Times Museum All The Way South exchange program with Artista x Artista. She was a fellow of the RAW Académie Session 7 and is cofounder of Miss Ruthless International, a contemporary art network that mimics the infrastructure of diasporic beauty pageants. Her writing has appeared in *ArtAsiaPacific*, *Artforum*, *ArtReview Asia*, *Di'van: A Journal of Accounts*, *Frieze*, *LEAP*, *MICE Magazine*, *Mousse Magazine*, *Real Review*, *Spike Art Quarterly*, *Take on Art*, and *Ocula*. She was editor in chief of *Theoretically in the Gutter: A Manga Essay Collection* and editor for *Ruthless Lantern*.

Since 2011, **HERB TAM** has been the Curator and Director of Exhibitions at the Museum of Chinese in America in New York, NY, where he recently cocurated "The Moon Represents My Heart: Music, Memory and Belonging." Tam has previously served as the Associate Curator at Exit Art and the Acting Associate Curator at the

Queens Museum of Art. Tam was born in Hong Kong and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. He studied at San José State University and earned his MFA from SVA.

**HOLLY SHEN** is an Asian American writer, curator, and arts administrator based in the San Francisco Bay Area. She most recently served as Deputy Director of the San José Museum of Art and in 2018, was awarded a Women in Power Fellowship at 92Y Belfer Center for Innovation & Social Impact. From 2013 to 2018, Shen was Director and Curator of Visual Arts at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. She has previously held various curatorial and collections management roles at Artsy, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, and SF MOMA. Shen holds a BA in art history from Georgetown University and an MA in art history from the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University.

**HÔNG-ÂN TRƯƠNG** is an artist who uses photography, video, and sound to explore immigrant, refugee, and decolonial narratives and subjectivities. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in Fine Art in 2019 and was the 2020 Capp Street Project artist-in-residence at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco, CA, where she developed her web-based project *We Listen Nearby*. Hông-Ân lives in Durham, NC, where she is an activist and a teacher. She is Associate Professor of Art at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

**HOWIE CHEN** is a curator and writer based in New York, NY. He is currently a principal at Chen & Lampert, an art consultancy, and is a founding director of Chen's, a townhouse gallery in Brooklyn. He has held curatorial roles at the Whitney Museum of American Art and MOMA PS1, and is a founder of Dispatch. With artist Milka Tajima, he formed New Humans. Chen graduated with a BS in economics from the Wharton School and was a Curatorial Fellow at the Whitney Independent Study Program. He has been published by Primary Information and Badlands Unlimited, as well as in journals

including *Artforum*, *Frieze*, and *Art in America*. He is on the faculty of the Steinhardt School at New York University and has been a lecturer at MIT, Parsons School of Design, and Rhode Island School of Design.

Inspired by South Korean online LGBTQ+ communities in the 2000s, **HYPERLINK PRESS** is an online publication and curatorial collective creating intersectional platforms to showcase work by artists navigating the in-between spaces. Hyperlink Press's mission is to empower the under-represented history, experience, and identity in the tech field and art gallery system. Founded in 2018 by Taehee Whang, Jeong Yoon Lee, and Minsoo Thigpen, Hyperlink Press aims to share the utopic excitement for an equal world that we felt back in our shared childhood in the 2000s, breaking free from traditional forms of community building.

**IFTIKHAR DADI** works collaboratively as an artist with Elizabeth Dadi. Their practice investigates memory, borders, and identity in contemporary globalization, the productive capacities of urban informalities in the Global South, and the mass culture of postindustrial societies. They have exhibited widely internationally. Dadi is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of History of Art, and Director of the South Asia Program at Cornell University. He researches modern and contemporary art from a global and transnational perspective, with emphasis on questions of methodology and intellectual history. His writings have focused on modernism and contemporary practice of Asia, the Middle East, and their diasporas. Another research interest examines the film, media, and popular cultures of South Asia, seeking to understand how emergent publics forge new avenues for participation. His publications include *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), the edited monograph *Anwar Jalal Shemza* (London: Ridinghouse, 2015), the coedited catalogue *Lines of Control* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), and the coedited reader *Unpacking Europe*

(Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2001). Dadi serves on the editorial and advisory boards of *Archives of Asian Art* and *Bio-Scope: South Asian Screen Studies*, and was a member of the editorial board of *Art Journal* (2007–11). He is an advisor to Asia Art Archive.

**J FAN 范加** was born in 1990 in Ontario, Canada and raised in Hong Kong. Speculating on the intersection of biology and identity, his transdisciplinary practice emerges from a sustained inquiry into the concept of Otherness as it relates to the materiality of the gendered and racialized body. Working primarily in expanded sculpture, Fan often incorporates organic materials such as soybeans, melanin, and estrogen into larger assemblages fashioned of welded steel, poured resin, and handblown glass. Fan's recent research has explored the complex and porous systems formed between biological agents and the surrounding environment, seeking to queer the binaries of the artificial and the natural. Fan is the recipient of various fellowships such as the NYFA Artist Fellowship, Joan Mitchell Painters & Sculptors Grant, Jerome Hill Artist Fellowship, Van Lier Fellowship at the Museum of Arts and Design, and John A. Chironna Memorial Scholarship at the Rhode Island School of Design. Fan's work has been featured and reviewed in *Artforum*, *Hyperallergic*, *Art21*, *AsiaArtPacific*, *BOMB Magazine*, *Frieze*, and others. In 2021, Fan will be participating in the Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool, UK; Shanghai Biennale, Shanghai, China; and Kathmandu Triennale, Kathmandu, Nepal. Fan is currently based in Brooklyn, New York.

**JP MOT** (Jean-Pierre Abdelrohman Minh Mot Chen Hadji Yakop) is a Khmer Canadian conceptual artist who was born in Montreal and divides his time between Brooklyn, Montreal, and Beijing. He completed a BFA in visual and new media art (2009) at the University of Quebec and received an MFA in visual art at Columbia University (2015). His work has been shown both locally and internationally in galleries, museums, and festivals.

Inspired by a nomadic and in situ practice exploring found objects, intimate architectures, and banal gestures, the eclectic works in his current series fall under a common umbrella captured in the title, "Hermit & Tent," in remembrance of the year in which, unable to secure suitable housing, he slept in a tent within his art studio to shelter from mosquitoes during the hot summer, taking showers in nearby gyms. Exploring notions of alienation and the syncretic body as political currency, his work presents an exegesis of the figure of the sacrificial scapegoat as the hero's foil. It draws on the study of canned humor and subversive semantics involving words found on items of consumption to disrupt established iconographies, expectations, and systemic stereotypes.

He has been supported by the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, Canada Council for the Arts, NARS Foundation, Asia Art Archive in America, New York Foundation for the Arts, and Trust for Governors Island of New York.

Born in 1971 in Seoul, South Korea and raised in the United States, **JEAN SHIN** lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. She attended the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture in 1999 and received a BFA and a MS from Pratt Institute. She is a tenured Adjunct Professor of Fine Art at Pratt and a recipient of Pratt's 2017 Alumni Achievement Award. She serves on the boards of the Joan Mitchell Foundation and National YoungArts Foundation.

Shin is nationally recognized for her monumental installations that transform everyday objects into elegant expressions of identity and community. She has had numerous solo exhibitions at institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA; and Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, CA. Her work has been featured in more than 150 exhibitions at major cultural institutions such as the New Museum, New York, NY; Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY; Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, MA; Museum of Fine Arts

Houston, Houston, TX; Asia Society, New York, NY; Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA; and Museum of Art and Design, New York, NY. As an accomplished artist practicing in the public realm, Shin has received commissions for large-scale, permanent installations from public federal and city agencies. She recently completed a landmark commission for the MTA's Second Avenue Subway at the 63rd Street station in Manhattan. Shin has received a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, Asian Cultural Council Fellowship, and NYFA Fellowship, among others. She has been featured in *Art in America*, *Sculpture*, and the *New York Times*.

**JEN LIU** is a visual artist based in New York and Vermont, working in video/animation, genetically engineered biomaterial, choreography, and painting to explore national identities, gendered economies, neoliberal industrial labor, and the retooling of archival artifacts. She is a 2019 recipient of the Creative Capital Award, 2018 LACMA Art + Technology Lab grant, and 2017 Guggenheim Fellowship in Film/Video. She has presented work at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; the New Museum, New York, NY; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; the Royal Academy of Art, London, UK; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK; Kunsthalle Zürich, Zürich, Switzerland; Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria; the Aspen Museum of Art, Aspen, CO; Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, León, Spain; the UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China; A07 @ 798 Art Zone, Beijing, China; Guangdong Times Museum, Guangzhou, China, the 2014 Shanghai Biennale in Shanghai, China, and the 2019 Singapore Biennale in Singapore.

**JESSE CHUN** is an artist working and living in New York, NY. Chun's work has been presented internationally at SculptureCenter, New York, NY; the Queens Museum, New York, NY; the Drawing Center, New York, NY; the Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York,

This collection of seventy-three letters written in 2020 captures an unprecedented moment in politics and society through the experiences of Asian American artists, curators, educators, art historians, editors, writers, and designers. The form of the letter offers readers intimate insights into the complexities of Asian American experiences, moving beyond the model minority myth. Chronicling everyday lives, dreams, rage, family histories, and cultural politics, these letters ignite new ways of being, and modes of creating, at a moment of racial reckoning.

"This refreshingly original anthology offers a remarkable window into the everyday spaces where art, biography, and cultural marginality provoke and enrich one another."

—Arjun Appadurai, Max Weber Global Professor, Bard Graduate Center

"There is something metamorphic about the letter form, and this capacious book shows how the epistolary address can mutate into seemingly any genre. What is marvelous about this rangy collection—whose selections include discursive essays, Instagram screenshots, filial love letters addressed toward the future and the past, poems, crossword puzzles, and more—is how it is so emphatically a heterogeneity, just like the impossible polyglot of Asian America itself."

—Ken Chen, former Executive Director of the Asian American Writers' Workshop

"Greatly complicating and enriching the category 'Asian American,' these missives contribute enormously to urgent ongoing discussions around race in the US.

I saw myself reflected as never before in these letters."

—Eugenie Tsai, John and Barbara Vogelstein Senior Curator, Contemporary Art, Brooklyn Museum

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# Best! Letters from Asian Americans in the arts

EDITED BY CHRISTOPHER K. HO  
AND DAISY NAM

WITH PAPER MONUMENT

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