

PLATFORM

CENTRE FOR
PHOTOGRAPHIC
+ DIGITAL ARTS

Gastro -po etics

12 JAN-
24 FEB, 2024

“We are all a bit Chinese, a little bit Mexican, a little bit Italian and French..., most of us do not eat a single cuisine all the time... one day sushi, another Thai, a third Italian, and the fourth day maybe Mexican, or how about Moroccan?”

— Padma Lakshmi,
Tangy, Tart, Hot and Sweet

Lebanese-Australian scholar Ghassan Hage criticizes such culinary-adventuring and links the practices of dining out in ethnic restaurants as a form of “multiculturalism without migrants,” through which the distance between the migrant and diner accumulates and power hierarchies remain unchallenged. Shifting focus from the practices of eating ethnic food to the essentialization of its cooking, *Gastropoetics* focuses on the public, and largely accessible, medium of ethnic cookbooks to raise equally urgent questions about the continuation of exotification and differentiation within ethnic food writing and the reductions of culture to its shareable recipes.

Gastropoetics as a research project and a group exhibition emerges from a growing discontent among diasporic subjects around the false fronts and false utopias promised by ethnic food cultural producers, like the renowned talk-show host and cookbook writer Padma Lakshmi, who elsewhere, has gone on to argue that the “best thing about immigrant culture is the choice and variety of tastes and ingredients it offers.” This project is envisioned as a response to such easy multicultural interactions and culinary exoticisms, which end up serving rather than challenging the all-consuming Western appetite. This project brings together four researcher-artists who delve into diverse cuisines, ingredients, and recipes to engage history, displacement, and the sinister culinary practices of multiculturalism.

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Appetizers:

Two Notes on Curatorial Strategy

1. Alongside a critical unpacking of the medium and messages of ethnic cookbooks, I am also interested in adding another layer of experimentation to *Gastropoetics*, playing with American scholar Julietta Singh's notion of "unthinking mastery" to push my own understanding of exhibition-making and working with artists. In her book, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglement*, Singh writes that there is "an intimate link between the mastery enacted through colonization and other forms of mastery that we often believe today to be totally harmless, worthwhile, even virtuous." While she shies away from defining what mastery is, her text thoughtfully sheds light on the range of mastery from the seemingly benign mastery of a craft, such as photographic and digital arts in the case of *Gastropoetics*, to the more harmful colonial varieties, which according to her "render some beings more human than others." Following Singh, I insisted on inviting four non-practicing artists to produce artist projects visualizing their research for the exhibition. The result is an exhibitionary aesthetic that is uneven, research-based, and critical of our broader expectations for mastery in our world.

2. The second organizing strategy is informed by my interest in pursuing a relational approach to curating and using curatorial opportunities to develop new modes of being around and in relation to other individuals navigating the shaky terrain of diasporic culture. The invitational model for *Gastropoetics* was informed by my existing personal and professional relationships, akin to how we invite those who are close and intimate to us to our home and our table. Over the last few years, I came into contact with Alireza Bayat, Areum Kim, and Svati Shah in Winnipeg, Calgary, and New York, respectively, through work opportunities and other forms of personal networking. Somewhat predictably our conversations always turned to foods we loved, and I saw this exhibition as an opportunity to understand their diverse approaches to eating and food cultures.

Mains:

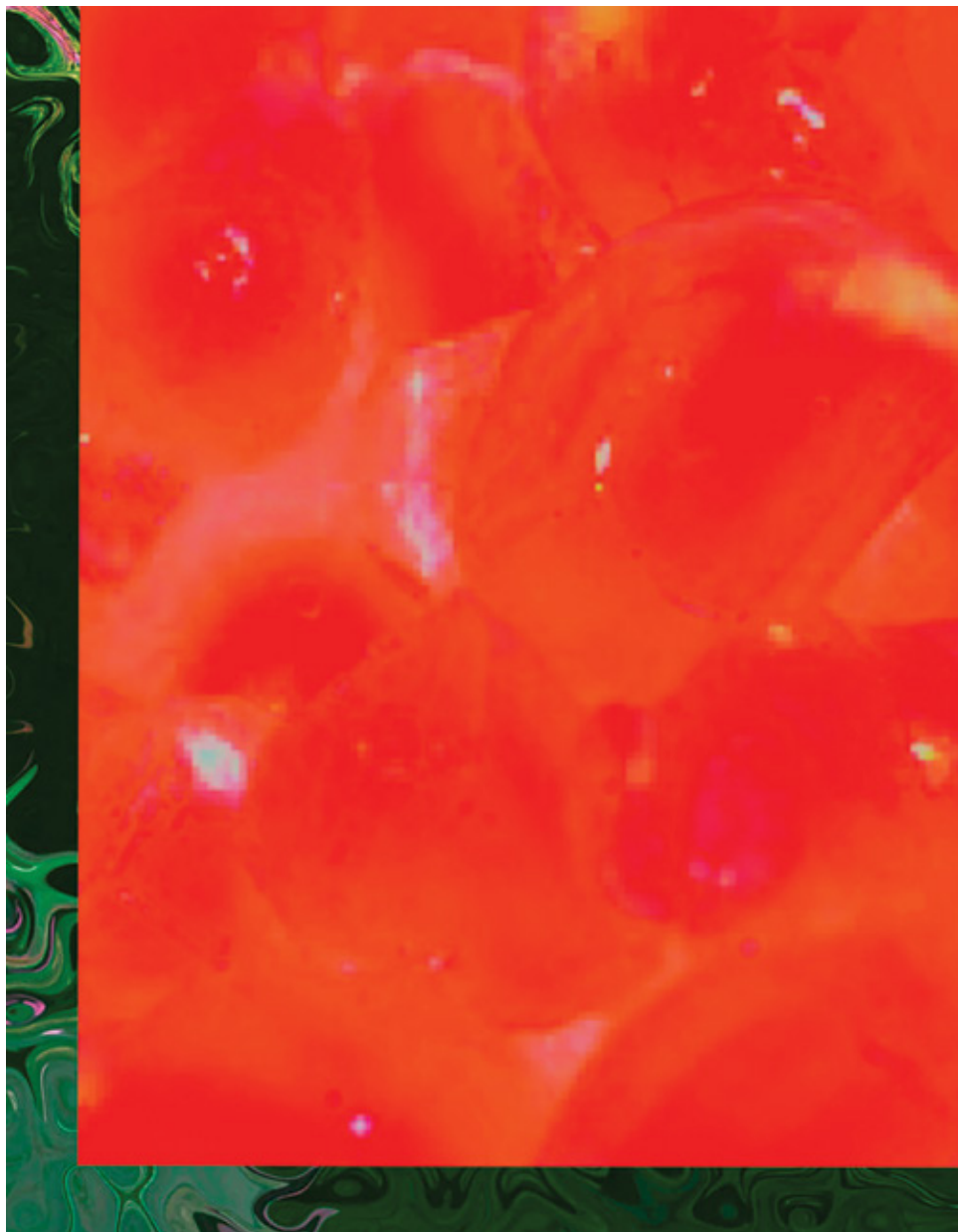
Research as Art

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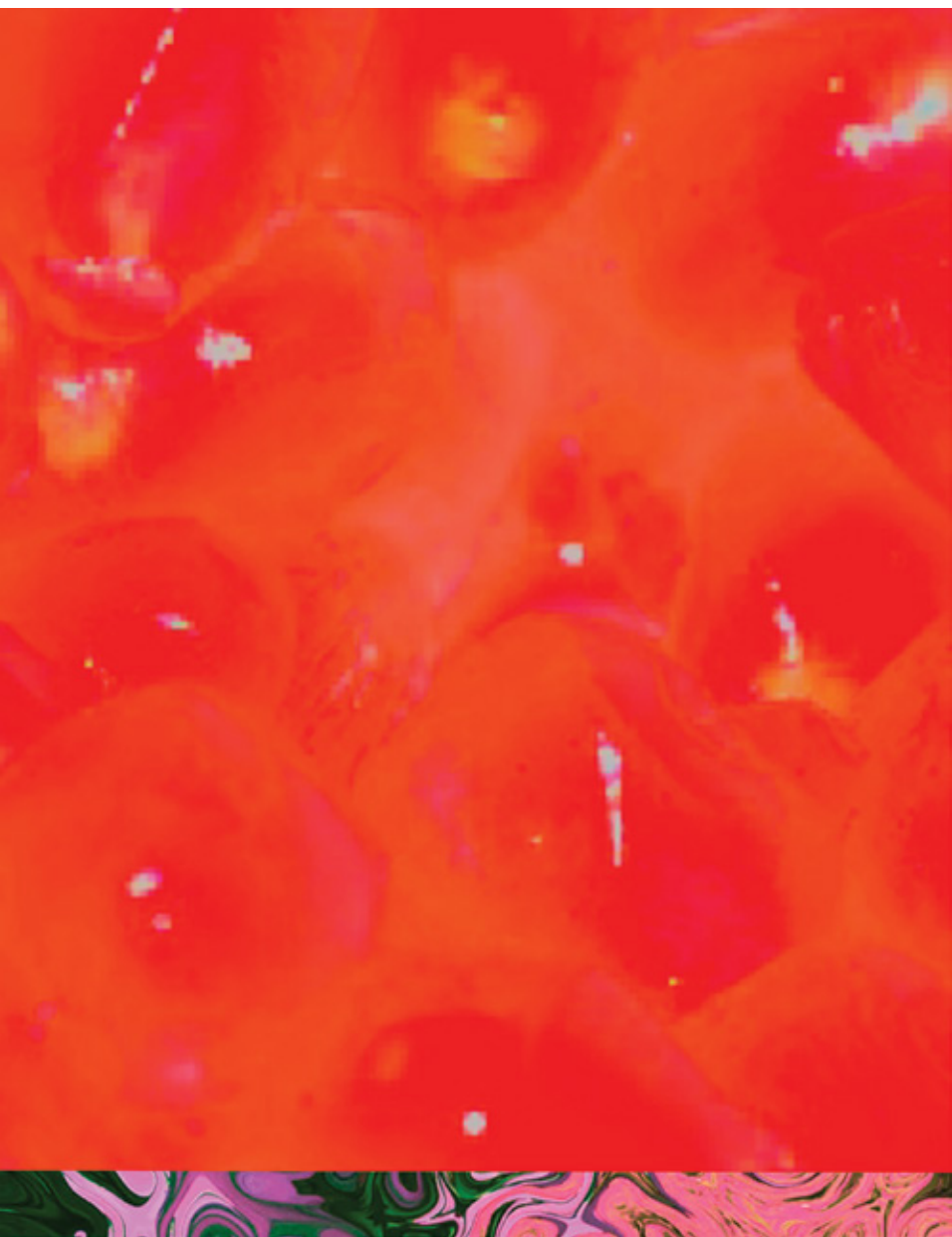
The research contributions and artworks commissioned for this project are largely rooted in the culture of ethnic cookbooks and processes of fermenting cross-cultural relation. As part of their research curators Areum Kim and Alireza Bayat, focused on select ethnic cookbooks to study and deconstruct key tropes, such as availability of ingredients, essentialization of identity, and the palatability of difference. On the other hand, scholar Svati Shah's installation serves as a window into domestic spaces of food making, while highlighting alternative ways of sharing knowledge within diaspora. Finally, the inclusion of Yafa Café as the fourth and final researcher-artist signals the urgent need for integrating political advocacy within food culture.

When I first approached Areum Kim to work on this project, I was interested in exploring our shared love of spicy food and her belief that she (and I paraphrase) "did not feel full unless she had eaten something red and spicy." After our initial conversations, however, Kim ended up venturing into a more personal journey, stretching from Jeju Island to Sri Owen's London to her current home in Calgary. Kim referenced her family's roots in Jeju Island, South Korea to her growing interest in rice as an available commodity. For centuries prior to capitalist food production and circulation, residents of Jeju Island considered rice to be a rare commodity, owing to the difficulty of growing rice in the volcanic terrain. In the end, Kim did a close reading of Indonesian-British food writer, Sri Owen's canonical *The Rice Book* to, in many ways, catch up with other cultures' celebration and sophisticated use of rice. For *Gastropoetics*, she has re-produced a recipe for Lontong, an Indonesian dish made of compressed rice. The video placed over the recipe depicts the artist working between Lontong and the Korean sweet rice dish Yaksik, making links between two cultures while obscuring the borders where one begins and the other ends.

In his approach to ethnic cookbooks, Alireza Bayat has chosen a more deconstructive method to uncover and think through key Orientalist tropes and cross-cultural failures found in Iranian cookbooks. Working between Najmieh Batmanglij's *Food of Life: Ancient Persian and Modern Iranian Cooking and Ceremonies* and Sabrina Ghayour's *Persiana: Recipes from the Middle East & Beyond*, Bayat has crafted two photo mosaic works. The first includes the amalgamation and eventual deconstruction of photos taken by the artist cooking the Iranian dish, Fesenjoon, in three different ways: Ghayour's,



ABOVE↑
UNTITLED
Noor Bhangu, 2024,
Graphic for Gastropoetics (2024).



Batmanglij's, and, finally, his own. The second work is a broken up between three Plexiglas prints, each depicting a lens through which the West might approach Iranian cuisine, featuring Google-sourced images of Fesenjoon, of Iran, and visual Orientalist images. Together, the two works not only reveal the alteration of Iranian cuisine based on the needs of Western audiences but also the ways in which diasporic authors rely on orientalist tropes to appeal to their audiences.

Alongside the relational and critical readings of ethnic cookbooks offered by Kim and Bayat, *Gastropoetics* also includes the work of queer feminist scholar Svati Shah. Initially, I was interested in including a digital publication of recipes Shah had produced in 2016 and generously forwarded me after a queer food gathering in New York City this past summer. The publication is rooted in a Queer South Asian genealogy and hopes to share cherished and new recipes with the diasporic community, many of whom have severed relationships with their family and/or limited cultural knowledge about ingredients. In the exhibition is a photographic recreation of Shah's collection of fermentations, images taken over the course of a few weeks and depicting the multiple stages of food preservation the artist engages in. Also included is a video work documenting Shah's conversation with a friend about the process of making nimbu achar, a lemon pickle common in South Asian cuisine. As an installation, the fermentation scenes work with the video and publication, gesturing to food as a laboratory for understanding difference and producing relation. On October 7, 2023, during the time I was labouring to invite the fourth and final researcher-artist to this project, Hamas launched an attack on Israel and, a day later, Israel formally declared war on Hamas. While the explicit aim of the war declaration was to eradicate Hamas from Gaza, I, like millions around the world, understood the writing on the wall: genocide in the name of self-preservation. This conclusion is not far-fetched considering the statements put out by national and local political leaders in Israel, including David Azoulay, who publicly called for the Gaza Strip to be "flattened completely, just like Auschwitz today." Yafa Café was brought to my attention through a conversation about Palestinian food and Israeli occupation with long-time friend and collaborator, Christina Hajjar. The restaurant's work includes two existing images of their menu and a relational process to unfold over the course of the exhibition. To this end, the owner of the restaurant,

Rana Abdulla, will lead a talk during the opening reception of Gastropoetics, catered by Yafa Café. The aim of this collaboration is to consider the over-representation of Israeli food writers, Otto Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi, in the SWANA region (Southwest Asia and North Africa). Anny Gaul and Graham Auman Pitts have argued, “the appropriation of Levantine foods like hummus by European Jews has corresponded... with the further entrenchment of Israeli colonialism.” In working with Yafa Café and its owner Rana Abdulla it is my hope to reach a space for political solidarity beyond sharing a meal.

“The unequivocal goal of BDS is to force Israel to abide by international law.”

— Naomi Klein

The BDS movement is building an economic boycott of Israel and developing effective campaigns against companies that participate in Israel's oppression of Palestinians. International companies aid and abet Israel's violations of international law, including by operating in illegal Israeli settlements and acting as contractors for the Israeli military and government. Campaigning has led to major companies such as Veolia and Orange selling up and leaving Israel altogether and a range of investors divesting from Israeli and international companies. The UN, the World Bank and other experts say that BDS is having an important economic impact on Israel and that this could well grow as the movement develops.

Learn more: www.bdsmovement.net

PLATFORM is an artist-run centre dedicated to considering the expanded role of photography in contemporary art. We are a multidisciplinary centre that supports and showcases local, national and international artists and are committed to supporting marginalized and BIPOC voices. Through exhibitions, lectures, workshops, production facilities and publications we aim to foster and sustain a critically engaged community of artists.

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Biographies

In the 21st century, food has emerged as a site through which to recuperate lost solidarities and shared histories. Owing to the catastrophic ruptures dealt by post-9/11 racisms and ongoing genocides, the practices of sharing food across cultural borders has become a palliative salve to sweeten and digest ethnic difference. Gastropoetics, as an exhibition and public program, focuses on the popular medium of ethnic cookbooks to question the proposed fallacy that cultural differences, racial inequities, and psychoaffective harms of displacement can be treated by learning about the culinary cultures of the Other. The exhibition will feature four researcher-artists, including Alireza Bayat, Areum Kim, Svati Shah, and Yafa Cafe, to share their reflections on the culinary tropes expounded in ethnic cookbooks and other printed matter.

Biographies

Noor Bhangu (MB/NO)



Noor Bhangu (MB/NO) is a curator and scholar, whose practice is rooted in relational curatorial aesthetics and practices. Through curatorial intervention, she hopes to involve politics of history, memory and materiality to problematize dominant histories of representation. She completed her BA in the History of Art and her MA in Cultural Studies: Curatorial Practices at the University of Winnipeg. In 2018, she began her PhD in Communication and Culture at Toronto Metropolitan University and York University in Tkaronto, Toronto. Her past projects include *Not the Camera, But the Filing Cabinet* (2018) at Gallery 1C03, *even the birds are walking* (2020) at Latitude 53, *the excess is ritual* (2023) at Dunlop Gallery, and *Homorientalism* (2023) at Smack Mellon. She is currently working on a group exhibition and public program, *Queer Islamic Art*, at Nasjonalmuseet for Spring 2025. ON). They have previously worked as the Interim Artistic Director of PAVED Arts (Saskatoon, SK) and in public arts spaces such as Art Museum at the University of Toronto and McMaster Museum of Art.

Alireza Bayat (MB)



Alireza Bayat (MB) is an independent curator and cultural worker currently based in Winnipeg-Manitoba. He is a graduate of M.A. Cultural Studies/ Curatorial Practices stream from the University of Winnipeg. He also has a Master degree from Azad University-Tehran in Art Studies, where he completed a thesis on the notions of gender and sexuality in 19th century Iranian written and

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visual texts (2018). Alireza Published a book (from the cycle of silence-2018) on non-conformist forms of publication and distribution of literature in the USSR. He was selected for a curatorial exchange program between Iran and Norway which led to co-curation of a joint exhibition, “Shadows of Garden” (2016-2017). He has also worked as an art advisor in multiple artistic and commercial institutions. Alireza will curate a forthcoming exhibition for the 3.14 Art Gallery-Bergen, Norway- that centers around Post-Taliban situation of women and ethnic minorities of Afghanistan (January 2024).

Svati Shah (IMD)



Svati Shah (IMD) is an anthropologist who works on queer and feminist theory, space, and political economy in India. They are an Associate Professor of Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, with affiliations at the University of Bergen in Norway and the University of Pretoria in South Africa. Their cooking and fermentation practice is part of a larger critique of what is often lost for queer and non-cisgender people of color when we break the normative rules of social reproduction. This is particularly for immigrant queer and transgender people living in the Euro-American North. Sva makes and invents food and ferments to give them away as a gesture of love, and in rebellion against this norm.

Biographies

Areum Kim (AB)



Areum Kim (AB) (she/her) is a writer, book-maker and arts organizer based in Mohkinstsis/Calgary, AB. Her research is often concerned with diaspora and translation. With her collaborator, she runs Yolkless Press, an initiative to make artists' publications.

Yafa Café (MB)



Yafa Café (MB) is a world of Arabic cooking and an exciting new addition to Winnipeg. Located between Polo Park and the Assiniboine Park/Zoo, they offer an Arabic fusion, providing a distinct Arabic twist to many Canadian favorites, while introducing a distinct cultural flavor to the community, contributing to the transformation of their corner into a 'New Arabia.'

The cafe is the brainchild of a passionate owner who longs for the vibrant atmosphere of Downtown Jerusalem, Beirut, Baghdad and Algiers here in Winnipeg. The name is their daughter's name, named by her grandfather, inspired by Yafa, a Palestinian coastal city that was the site of major trading activity since the second millennium. It was a cultural center, where most Palestinian newspapers and magazines were published and known for its numerous cafés and modernity hence comes the name of Yafa Café.