

**ART**

CONTRIBUTIONS  
FROM CHINA,  
GERMANY, HONG  
KONG, INDONESIA,  
JAPAN, MALAYSIA,  
MYANMAR, THE  
PHILIPPINES, SPAIN,  
SINGAPORE AND  
THAILAND

**LEARNING  
FROM  
THE FIELD**

**IN**

**CON**

**ON**

Published by  
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**Conversations  
with and between  
art and cultural  
practitioners**

**TE**

**XT**

**Edited by  
Herman Bashiron  
Mendolicchio  
and  
Susanne Bosch**

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# INTRO

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio

# DUCTION

and Susanne Bosch

The diversity of types of work that are driven by passion, vision and joy, could not be broader than works by artists, curators and other creative practitioners. This publication introduces 21 passionate artistic statements and contributions from practitioners in Myanmar, Japan, Germany, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Hong Kong and China. Different to gallery art, the value of these 21 works is not defined by unique aesthetics with solid artistic ownership. Nor do they claim a so-called "autonomy". Their value is embedded in a context, addressing site-specific or contemporary issues, and by a consciousness of collaboration and participation.

This type of art-making is known under various names: participatory art in public

space, socially engaged art, new genre public art, art activism, activism, community art, art education. All these various approaches express the ability to think outside the box and act beyond the existing parameters of specialized, professional troubleshooting. The practitioners represented here share a common approach of giving, receiving, and reciprocating, a theme that unifies their work and this publication.

Mirroring the essence of exchange within this practice, the structure of this publication is based on dialogue. All but two, of the persons in these dialogues, met in November 2015 for 12 days in Kuala Lumpur to take part in the master class *TransActions in the Field*.<sup>1</sup> The master class was an invitation to practitioners throughout Asia and Germany,

working in the interface between art and society, to meet for an experimental learning exchange in diverse settings such as the urbane environment of Petaling Street in Kuala Lumpur, and Kampung Banda Dalam, a small, mostly Muslim village outside the city.

The sometimes absurd situations within the master class led to two fundamental questions that we address in these conversations.

## WHAT DEFINES BELONGING?

More specifically: What is meant by community? Who is a community? and Are we practicing "community" art or community engagement? How do we deal with cultural diversity in this more and more fluctuant global situation in which multi-faceted migration happens everywhere, and in which nation states and citizenship turn out to be questionable indicators of belonging?

## WHAT IDENTIFIES US?

More specifically: How much do colonial and war relations between our countries of origin play out in our current relationships as peers? And to make it more complex, what about identities that come from bi-national backgrounds — the combinations of the occidental and oriental worlds, or experiences in multi-national realities through relationships or residencies? What about the mishmash of philosophical, religious, cultural and political approaches? How about inclusion and exclusion through language - in our case, English, as a common denominator? How are we united and/or separated through our identifiers?

The diversity and messiness of the fieldwork is part of the field, and we believe is best expressed through the original voices of the practitioners. The idea of peer-to-peer conversations, about each other's practices, was kindled during our initial encounters

in the field, the understanding we gained about each other's practices and the desire to eventually learn more from each other. It also was encouraged by Rolf Stehle, director of the Goethe-Institut Malaysia, who valued a deeper explanation and understanding of each person's practice. He invited us to create a publication which would extend insights about our practices to a larger audience and readership.

We, Susanne and Herman, took up the role of lead editors. We also responded to the interest of four participants of the *TransActions in the Field* master class to play an active role in the publication. To create these dialogues, Emma Ota, Elaine W. Ho, Alecia Neo, Zikri Rahman, Paik Yin Lim, Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio and Susanne Bosch, conversed with their colleagues, individually or in small groups. The exchanges happened in English, Chinese, Malaysian, and Japanese. Tokyo-based curator and researcher Emma Ota joined the publication team to dialogue with Misako Ichimura, Zulu Kageyama and Rika Aki.<sup>2</sup> Ko Aung joined from *New Zero Art Space* in Yangon and, together with Haymann Oo, had a conversation with Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio about their work.

The dialogues reflect the diversity of practices and languages within the group. They emerged quite organically, out of the formal and informal situations in which people had spent extended time together. The aim and objective of the publication is to function as a collection of practitioners' voices, as a kaleidoscope of approaches, methodologies, visions and perspectives. It does not claim to serve a meta discourse.

A publication in which the "makers" speak directly about their work with other "makers", promises to be an accessible path into examining often very complex and long-term engagements. The conversations here reveal the ideas behind the journeys — the approaches, the tools, the thinking and the attitudes, the questions and doubts —

that will be of interest to others in the field, be it students, colleagues, critics, academics, public art managers, policy makers or curators. It is also of interest to other actors in this interface between public practices. This kind of cross-sectorial learning helps us in our search to find new ways of living peacefully together, while facing multiple differences and global challenges. In footnotes and further links, we offer the reader an extended journey of theory and practice examples, into the web of existing knowledge behind the approaches and the ideas found in this publication.

*Conviviality* is the term introduced by Ivan Illich to express the “art of living together”. In a publication from 2014, entitled “Convivialist Manifesto. A declaration of interdependence”<sup>3</sup>, forty French-speaking individuals made the successful attempt to jointly write a manifesto for a constructive solution to today’s world’s ‘state of being’: “the prime concern, it says, is the quality of our social relationships and of our relationship to nature. The term it employs in this connection is ‘convivialism’ (from the Latin ‘con-vivere’, to live together). The term is meant to point out the fact that the main task we face is that of working out a new philosophy and developing practical forms of peaceful interaction.”<sup>4</sup> Similar to this joint attempt of sociologists, philosophers and academics, the authors of these dialogues present their examples of a more care-based artistic practice within society, with the intrinsic need to contrast their artistic approaches to the one-dimensional focus of the benefits of continuous economic growth.

Our interconnectedness and interdependency as practitioners in this field became increasingly obvious throughout the making of this publication, although we are based in eleven different countries in Asia and Europe. Our diversity of religious backgrounds, societal structures and cultural traditions is pleasantly broad. We live many thousand miles away from

each other, in different time- and climate zones, with different access to the internet and other resources, and with more or less limited freedom of expression or travel. However, we concurrently have similar experiences with ongoing global issues – the massive shift in living conditions, resource limitations, climate changes, demographic changes and power structures – that impact us all. Beyond neoliberal thinking, with its focus on separated individuals concerned solely to maximize their individual advantage, the common agreement of all the practitioners in this publication is the reproduction of societies via a cycle of giving, receiving, and reciprocating. It seems we all follow a global quest for a “mode of living together that values human relationships and cooperation and enables us to challenge one another without resorting to mutual slaughter and in a way that ensures consideration for others and for nature.”<sup>5</sup>

Every dialogue differs from the other as the form evolved out of the subjective social encounter and the questions that arose from the nature of the work. We are delighted to invite the readers to such colourful ways to speak to each other as well as to write about each other. The texts result from dialogical practices of skyping, e-mailing back and forth, meeting in person or sending an entire bulk of questions at once. All “dialogue partners” were free to choose a suitable approach. Suitability depended on time, on a common language and on comfortability. Each text focuses on one specific example or general principles of someone’s practice.

We started with a list of topics which could be explored in the dialogues, from individual perspectives. This common ground was a starting point and dialogue partners decided on the specific questions to ask. The initial fields we identified were: 1) location and the context-specificity of an artwork/art practice; 2) aesthetic and communication strategies and how the structural-organisational element becomes

the “work” of art; 3) communities and acting protagonists; 4) time; and 5) learning, success, evaluation, validation of the work, failure, change, and the meaning and function of social art practices. It is frequently said that art has the capacity to transform the lives, not just of individuals, but of whole communities. We, as lead editors, believe that this statement drives the work of each person represented in this publication. Yet, “the arts occupy a particularly fragile position in public policy, on account of the fact that the claims made for them, especially those relating to their transformative power, are extremely hard to substantiate”<sup>6</sup>. We cannot prove our transformative power nor do we want to prove it, as it would shift all we do into an instrumental sector. And “the idea of transformation is so complex that it is impossible to imagine how it might be reduced to a set of measurable attributes.”<sup>7</sup>

The impact of the arts, the aesthetic encounters, are located in the intrinsic world of each human being. Where are the relationships between arts, culture and the economic and social developments of our societies? Of what nature are these relationships? We see this publication as a tool for each reader to explore the individual approaches to these questions and the ideas introduced here.

We wish you new insights, joy and inspiration from these shared practices in the cycle of giving, receiving and reciprocating. Our warmest thanks go to all dialogue partners for their invaluable attitude towards sharing knowledge and experience, doubts and insight, and for diving together into the depths of these explorations. Our thanks goes to Cheryl Hoffmann for invaluable proofreading, copyediting and mindful comments on content and form. Finally our thanks also go to Rolf Stehle, Director of the Goethe-Institut Malaysia, who initiated and supported this publication.

- 1 transactionsinthe field.wordpress.com (accessed Aug 31, 2016)
- 2 Besides individual conversations, this group met on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2016 in Yokohama Paradise Hall to have a public conversation called “The Pitfalls of Art and Community – Dancing Together Whilst Stepping on Each Other’s Toes”. For more information see: facebook.com/events/614158988732131/ (accessed Aug 31, 2016)
- 3 *Convivialist Manifesto. A declaration of interdependence* (Global Dialogues 3), with an introduction by Frank Adloff, translated from the French by Margaret Clarke.
- 4 ibid p.6
- 5 ibid p.25
- 6 E. Belfiore and O. Bennett eds. *The Social Impact of the Arts: An Intellectual History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan) 2008, p.4
- 7 ibid p.6

# CITIZEN

Rolf Stehle

# PARTICIPATION IN

Director Goethe-Institut Malaysia

# PUBLIC SPACE

It was very exciting to be at the *Archive Exhibition* of participatory art of Asian and German artists in Kuala Lumpur (18th to 25th November 2015). The exhibition documented a broad spectrum of themes and forms in the context of citizen participation through artistic platforms in public space. It was a documentation of participatory projects through installations, photos, videos, posters, original artwork and even performances.

Presently, the most discussed topics across all the fields of the arts are participation, culture in urban space, and the design of the future from a cultural perspective. These themes are also frequently referred to in cultural theories and policies. In a conversation about this phenomenon just before the opening of the *Archive Exhibition*, one of the artists remarked to me that participation in art and participatory practices existed long before academics had invented the term “participatory art” (and one could add here: collaborative or cooperative art practices as well). Of course, she was right. Artists are like seismographs.

They observe their surrounding societies, question systems, take up and develop themes, and transform them into their art. Policy makers and cultural institutions often identify these vibrant developments and consequently support artists, within their policies. It is not the other way around.

No doubt, challenging the role of citizen participation is getting more and more important in times of global change and growing crises. It is imperative to include citizens when it comes to stimulating and creating change in social, ecological and economic systems, based on justice and quality of life for all. Artists, who practice participatory art, are outside conventional art spaces like museums, galleries and theatres. Rather, they act in social contexts or within communities in the public space or sometimes they work with marginalized groups or culturally diverse communities, as some of the practices demonstrate, with panache, in this volume. These projects often bring awareness to social, political and environmental issues.

Democratic principles and cultural inclusion are the basis of participatory art forms; they promote the idea that each individual has the right to participate in culture and society, and to shape it. Art creates space for people to meet and invites citizens to take responsibility for change and to contribute to creative solutions for the future.

The *Archive Exhibition* was part of the Inter-Asian-German master class *TransActions in the Field: Challenging the Role of Citizen Participation through Participatory Public Art*, 14th to 26th November, 2015. The idea for this class was started a year before, when artist and art-based researcher, Susanne Bosch, was invited to an artist residency at Lostgens' Contemporary Art Space in Kuala Lumpur. *TransActions in the Field*, a 12-day master class, was organized by Lostgens' and the Goethe-Institut Malaysia. It was led by Susanne Bosch from Germany and Lostgens' artistic director Yeoh Lian Heng; Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio, a researcher and curator based in Spain, took the role as an observer during the class.

Twenty-two artists and activists, who work in the context of participatory art, from 11 countries, were invited to participate<sup>1</sup>. The class served as a platform for exchanging experiences and ideas, and for developing further knowledge in the field of participation and public art. Furthermore, the intensive program allowed the participants to network and to establish sustainable working relationships.

Creative interventions, performances and actions in the public, during the master class, revealed the broad spectrum of social engagement practices of the participating artists. The discussions centred around the questions: Which practices, initiatives and approaches work well? Is it possible to repeat certain elements, strategies and experience in another socio-political context? How can we engage ourselves? Who owns the city? How can we create

and design our own future? There was a vast concentration of local, regional and international knowledge gathered in Kuala Lumpur: new approaches, unusual expressions and aesthetics, current topics and states of research, and strong personalities. It soon became clear that we should collect these artistic practices and visions into a book.

Encouraging citizen participation also means supporting democratic processes, especially in countries of transformation. Artists and activists, in their participatory approach, take up social issues, some of which are delicate or very political. They approach the citizens, include them in their artwork, and sometimes even turning them into artists. Artists and activists give aesthetic or discursive input creating critical discourse, which is a precondition of change. They serve their communities and support the creation of stable civil societies. Sometimes their projects are risky, and therefore brave, especially in cases where public spaces are controlled and dominated by state authorities or economic bodies. The interviews and statements in this volume are highly reflective and personal. They are full of world- and self-assessment, which will hopefully provoke discussions and convey insights far beyond the usual political statements.

I would like to thank all the bodies and institutions, which supported our master class *TransActions in the Field* – the Krishen Jit ASTRO Fund, the Institute for Cultural Relations – ifa Stuttgart, the Japan Foundation, Madrasah Tarbiyah, PADU, Seniman Paksi Rakyat. A big thank you also to all our participants and contributors for their collaboration. I also wish to thank our editors of this publication, Susanne Bosch and Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio, for bringing these ideas together.

<sup>1</sup> They came from China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and Germany

# REIMAGINING

Lee Cheah Ni in conversation

# SPACE

with Alecia Neo



Lee Cheah Ni is an independent artist from Penang. She graduated from the National Taiwan University of Arts, Department of Fine Arts. While residing in Taiwan, she curated exhibitions and art projects, including her solo exhibition, *Live in Gabee*, which features a selection of photography and installation artworks, exhibited in Gabee Cafe, Taiwan. She was recently selected to participate in The Japan Foundation's *Run & Learn: New Curatorial Constellations* cultural exchange program. Since returning to Penang, Lee has sought to incorporate the practice of art in daily life and explores possibilities of generating dialogue through art. In 2014 she curated *Re:engage: The People's Court*, a community-based art residency project in George Town, Penang. In 2015 she invited Taiwan contemporary artist Wang Te-yu to have her first solo exhibition in Penang.<sup>1</sup>

Opening night – Yeo Lyle, Living Theatre Residents daily life in Living Theatre, People's Court, 2015

RE:ENGAGE: THE PEOPLE'S COURT, CURATED BY LEE CHEAH NI

The *Re:engage: The People's Court* site-specific art-residency project and exhibition began in 2014 with the very idea of bringing art into an ordinary living space, through diversity rather than a homogeneous and bottom-up approach. The project seeks to link the artist with the local residents, to create a community that learns and practises art together. It is hoped that the locals and the artists will inspire and complement each other. Through collaboration, both parties discover more possibilities, and explore creativity and meanings through dialogues and differences. It started in August 2014 and still continues. In its first phase from August 2014 to February 2015, it involved four artists within the local community.

The People's Court, located between Jalan Cintra and Jalan Pintal Tali, is a place full of history. It was a large grocery bazaar before World War II but it was ravaged by the war. Before the Second World War, this place was originally a bazaar for everyday items, but after enduring devastation of war, the merchants there erected wooden shanties on the premises. In the late 1950s, the first elected George Town local government led by The Socialist Front<sup>2</sup> cleared the area and built three blocks of flats under the People's Housing Programme. Most of the local residents speak in the Cantonese dialect, and many sunset businesses, such as traditional paper oblation, salted fish business and Cantonese traditional pastry shops in George Town are still operating here. Most of the residents moved from wooden shanties into blocks of flats during this period.<sup>3</sup>

**Alecia Neo:** Cheah Ni, you shared the following expectations with us during the master class *TransActions in the Field*.

*"I hope that in the master class TransActions in the Field I can learn from the experience of other practitioners and learn about more projects that can expand arts' reach or experimental works in non-conventional venues, from communities to public spaces and temporary sites, dispensing with institutional art spaces and gatekeepers. In recent years, I have met many who are preoccupied with the same question, and who have stood on the frontline of struggles or built infrastructures of resistance in neighbourhoods. These encounters have demonstrated, in exemplary ways, the forms that art can assume in relation to social movements. But I was always left with the feeling that there was no exchange between these various experiments, no way of putting something in circulation between them, so that experiences could be shared and examined collectively."*

It seems that you have a fascination with non-conventional spaces and non-hierarchical processes. Could you share more about your interest in this area and how you came to it? Who and what are some of your influences? Who were the artists, curators, theorists, art spaces, schools etc. who have informed your practice?

**Lee Cheah Ni:** As a fine arts graduate student, majoring in installation, I found myself asking a number of questions: How can we expand and deepen relationships between art and the public? How can exhibitions maximize community participation? What kinds of art can involve not only local community, but also create public projects that engage with an audience that is unfamiliar with art?

Since returning from studies abroad, besides being part of arts-related groups, I have had opportunities to be involved in local cultural research work, oral history documentation, and arts education. All these, I believe, play important roles in our society. These rich experiences have left a great impression on me, particularly about local residents; how their different experiences have shaped different perspectives of life. Through the collection of their stories, I have come to appreciate deeply not only the wealth of the local culture, but to understand that it is all about the heart and soul of daily life.

This set me actively seeking to incorporate the practice of art in daily life within Penang's local community, and to explore possibilities of generating dialogue through art. In the process of actually making the work, I reflected back on my observations in Taiwan and I realized that because I was just observing and not creating the work with community back then, I was only looking at an idealized situation. It was only back in Penang, when I began making my own projects, that I began to understand the limitations of some of the projects that I observed. A lot of projects are context-specific, and the case studies that I observed in Taiwan cannot really be applied completely to Penang.

I also took references from the writing of Taiwanese Professor Wu Mali's "Art as Environment: A Cultural Action at the Plum Tree Creek",<sup>4</sup> After attending the two-week curatorial workshop in Japan, I also started doing some research on Japanese artists' projects, such as Jun Kitazawa's *Living Room*<sup>5</sup>, which inspired me. The artists were immersed in the context, and dialogues would emerge from the discussions of daily objects.

Could you also share how the curator's programme by the Japan Foundation influenced your curating style? Would you have curated such a show if you did not attend the programme? What was your main interest in participating in it?

It was a two-week research trip. I met friends from neighbouring countries such as Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand. I realized we can share similar experiences and that we are facing similar issues because of our geographical status. I have an interest in Japanese art projects that work with local residents. Actually, I wouldn't really say that I have a curatorial style, and I do not want to define that at the moment, because I am still very new and fresh in my journey.

I wasn't really sure about the content of the programme in the beginning, but in a short time we were given an intense overview of the arts scene in Japan. However, we were mainly exposed to institutions and officially recognized art spaces.

Japan and Taiwan are very similar, and have a strong community spirit. In comparison, in Penang, there are differing attitudes in the community. So the methods used are not similar. I was interested in the strategies employed by the institutes and artists in engaging the community. However, I did observe that the programmes were well organized, and also well supported by the state and various institutions. This is very different from the situation here in Penang, where we are underfunded and have fewer resources.

I had the idea to do my project before embarking on the curatorial programme. However, the work in Penang was funded by Japan Foundation, and they gave me resources and the support which allowed me to speak with local authorities with much more ease.

I recall during your presentation in the master class that you personally have not reconciled with the term curator, although this has been a position that you have used in various artistic projects and contexts. Could you share more about your ambivalence?

I used to practice as an artist but not as a curator, and the role was quite confusing in the very beginning. A curator's job is multifaceted, compared to that of an artist. I had to learn more about management, how to put the right person in the correct role (most of the team being volunteers), and how to involve the residents in this art project in a way that the outcome would spring more from their decisions, as opposed to something orchestrated by us. Now I feel I am more like a mediator than curator...The art environment in Penang is still young. In recent years, quite a few people have begun using "curator" as a title in different projects. I think "curator" is still a very new term that we have not yet discussed in enough depth.

I think we need to have our own definition of art and curating in Southeast Asia as we have our own complexities, which are very different from other countries. Whether I am considered a curator or not, I hope that I can focus more on learning ways to channel different forms of social energy into making social change happen.

I was never trained as a curator, so sometimes the lines between artist and curator and other creative roles are very blurred. I end up taking up a lot of roles. And I prefer to work in these blurred lines, because that reflects real life where boundaries are not clear. In the process, I learned that one of the most important roles of a curator is the intensive and continuous dialogue between the curator and artists. In my project, this is the area that I wished I had more time to delve into.

Winter Solstice Celebration  
& 35th Anniversary of People's  
Court Association, 2014



You've titled your project *Re:engage: The People's Court*, which suggest your intentions of reconnecting with the local community and site, as well as to reframe its histories. Could you share more about how you began the project, and to what extent your motivations changed over the course of curating this project?

I initially felt that local voices were often unheard, and I wanted to look for the gaps between authority and local resources, and the need of the people. We usually think that the people are weak and not able to voice out their needs. But in the process of my work, I learned that people do know the game of politics well. I realized that the people actually do know the tools and strategies to engage with authorities to get what they want. However, this is also unique to Penang, as Georgetown has a strong culture of self-governance and a sophisticated social structure. I only realized this after embarking on the project.

*Re:engage* is actually engagement in two ways. Through artists reframing works in Penang, residents have the opportunity to relook at their histories and ways of life. Simultaneously, artists working on the project also have the space to reassess their role as artists in society, through exchange with communities.

A resident shared with us that she used to be embarrassed by the fact she lived in a low-cost flat. And it was not until she experienced Johor-based artist Yeo Lyle's work, *Living Theater*, that she realized that where she lived was actually beautiful and full of life. We spent most of the time having meals together with the residents, and got to know more and more new neighbours through these daily conversations. We introduced the artists as new neighbours who would be



Lunch as Fieldwork in People's Court, 2014

moving in to start their residency that October. Each artist posted caricatures of themselves around every block to introduce themselves. I hope that both residents and local authorities can go deeper in the underlying problems of residents' daily lives, including the way we think about development in our homeland. I believe social change must start with alternative social imagination that includes all parties of society.

Through the art project, I realized art is a great way to bring people together and start dialogues. Art may help in creating and re-creating new relationships among people.

Whenever an issue emerges, I always go back to the community. There are endless dialogues about various matters. I tend to act as the mediator between different bodies of people, and help to mediate consensus and conflict between different groups. Interestingly enough, usually I do not have to physically "do" anything after the dialogue, as a natural course of action, to resolve various issues, tends to take place between the people and the local authorities.

How did you select your participating artists and families? How did they perceive the project in the beginning and how did that change over time? How do these projects actually function to transform an individual consciousness or a public space? What effects and affects do they produce?

I selected four artists from Malaysia, two of whom live in Penang. The artists were theatre practitioner Yeo Lyle, visual Artist Tan Lay Heong, media artist Okui Lala and visual artist Chang Yoong Chia. I selected them because they specialize in different mediums, and their ages span across three generations. Hence, they could help to represent and investigate the different perspectives of the people living in People's Court. Additionally, they all have experience in working with communities.

I collaborated with the Oral History Team from George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) in documenting the stories from Georgetown. I was already involved in GTWHI's three-year long oral history project in Penang. They are one of the main oral history project groups here. With their expertise, and the new information gathered from the project's process, we selected six families who have lived in People's Court for over fifty years, as the featured stories in our project brochure. But we did not "select" the residents who collaborated and worked together with us. They got involved after they knew more about us.

We don't always get to choose our neighbours where we live, so similarly in this project, I wanted to create organic opportunities for people to explore new ways of forming communities and new approaches to living together.

Currently, the project has created a sort of disruption and movement in the community. The residents are becoming conscious of the possibility of, and the room for, change within their community, and they are beginning to actively reimagine how they could create changes for themselves. Local authorities have also stepped up by contributing to physical changes in the community, such as the upgrading of the fire system in the neighbourhood, repairing corridors and fences, organising New Year celebrations etc. However, we do acknowledge that these actions from the local authorities remain passive and they tend to be approached from a top-down manner.

What were some of the challenges or areas of conflicts you faced?

One of the main challenges is to create or be a link between the authorities and the people. I have to discern between different opinions, especially opinions from stronger authoritative voices, who have the power and ability to effect change. For instance, sometimes when I'm organizing a project, there will be demands placed on me to ask artists to do something that we do not find critical and urgent. In this case, much negotiation and discernment is needed to thread the lines between being agreeable and difficult.

From your experience, do you think it is possible to have a truly reciprocal partnership with a community? Who's getting what from whom? In your project for instance, were there any instances where the families involved felt used or overexposed?

As human beings, we are constantly influencing each other. Nothing is ever one sided. The partnership may not be equal, but we can definitely influence each other in terms of viewpoint.

In my project, the community contributes what they wish to contribute, without any determined demands placed on them. We seek to build trust with the community, and this has aided in the process. Actually, some of the families wanted to be "exposed" and to be featured. Perhaps this was linked to possible business opportunities, hence this exposure was viewed in good light. However, as the curator, I do take a lot of care in making sure that the project prioritizes the local needs over publicity.

The artists, in return, gain experience from this interaction. In the beginning of the project, we enter the community as a learner, like a new neighbour moving into this shared space, and we consciously avoid having expectations of evoking a predetermined change in the beginning of the process.

In Singapore, we celebrated our city-state's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday throughout the entire year in 2015. Proudly named the "SG50" celebrations, the entire island was thick with nostalgia. This resulted in a lot of older communities and neighbourhoods suffering from overexposure and nostalgia-fatigue as students and artists parachuted into these neighbourhoods and began endlessly mining for stories. Are stories enough?

In my current project, we exhibited stories that are from the community, and the individuals involved get to decide how their stories will be told and presented. We are in the process of working out the next steps for People's Court. Our first project focused on the collaboration of artistic work created by artist and residents, so fewer conflicts arose. However, presently, there are discussions about creating changes in public space. So this might actually create an additional layer of tension.

At the moment, we have strong relationships with the community, and they trust us to make ethical decisions and to share their stories. For instance, we do have powerful stories from individuals about overcoming social stigma in the area. We think that these stories are important and could be inspiring for young people. However, we also need to consider whether or not this would negatively affect the individual who shared this story. I do believe that oral histories and personal stories are important, not because of the scale of a story, but how a personal story reveals the complexities and context of a generation. It's not the story itself, but how we use the story as a platform for deeper issues.



Resident (photographer) shares his photos and his memories with resident artist, Okui Lala, 2014



Exhibition Venue 1: People's Court Association office. The project process in diary and video documentation, 2015

Exhibition Venue 1: People's Court Association office. Residents' stories in audio-visual documentaries, miniature models and old photos, 2015





Exhibition Venue 2:  
Artist Residency Unit –  
Art Work, People’s  
Court, 2015

The official stories from governments and officials tend to sugar-coat reality. This is why individual stories are still important in shedding “truth”.

It is rather common for artists or art groups to measure the “success” of the project by its sustainability. The common belief is that if a project is able to continue for an extended time, it must be popular and well-received by the community, and hence viewed as positive. Could you share your thoughts on going further in art, and what does sustainability mean in the creation of such projects? Is sustainability a trapping? The nature of long term projects is that it is difficult to replicate, as different conditions are necessary for different elements to happen.

I think that it is important not to take a successful project, and just implement it in another context without considering each context’s complexity. I will be continuing the project with People’s Court, but in the process, I am constantly furthering the engagement with the community to understand what our next steps will be. Each context is different, and needs long-term engagement.

We are constantly asked about sustainability. I always return to a very simple thought, which is that life and death is an on-going cycle. Hence, I am not overtly concerned with sustainability. If the essence of a project is not really achieved, and only sustained by mindless action, then there is no purpose in this artwork. Sustainability is often viewed on the large scale, and we often feel the need to see things happening and continuing. However, we can also view sustainability as a seed that grows within a person, and that the inspiration and thought continues within a person, who continues to create other forms of work inspired by a prior experience.

What are your thoughts on developing a curatorial framework for collaborative art projects? Is this a process that is discussed with your art community in Penang or your artists in your project? Could you give us some examples of the process? Was it effective? If so or not, how so?

I didn’t have much experience in the beginning, so my strategy was to take on challenges one step at a time. Personally, I find that a rigid framework is limiting and at times dehumanizing. In fact, I do feel that it is an artist’s role to disrupt

existing frameworks and to challenge them. These are my feelings at the moment, however I might change my view later on as I continue working in this area. Perhaps my method is collating all available resources from a specific context, creating opportunities to process and interact with these resources, and later seeking out different ways of channelling them back into the public.

I would say that I am still in the midst of experimenting in using art as a medium to engage spaces and residents to create a community that learns and shares. I desire to grow and improve my capacity in curating art infused with culture of diverse themes and genres.

What’s next on your plate? Will you be extending your project?

I hope to have more opportunities to understand and learn from case studies and methodologies from projects in different countries. I will also be spending more time with the residents of People’s Court to further our discussions in collectively reimagining our future projects together.



Discussion and design of the announcement with Uncle Chan (carpenter), People’s Court, 2014

1 Re-engage: The People’s Court, [runand-learn.net/my/reen-engage-the-peoples-court/](http://runand-learn.net/my/reen-engage-the-peoples-court/) and their Facebook page, [facebook.com/RTPC2014/](https://www.facebook.com/RTPC2014/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

2 [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malayan\\_Peoples%27\\_Socialist\\_Front](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malayan_Peoples%27_Socialist_Front) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

3 Re-engage: The People’s Court, [runand-learn.net/my/reen-engage-the-peoples-court/](http://runand-learn.net/my/reen-engage-the-peoples-court/) and their Facebook page, [facebook.com/RTPC2014/](https://www.facebook.com/RTPC2014/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

4 Curating Cities: a database of eco public art, [eco-publicart.org/art-as-environment-a-cultural-action-at-the-plum-tree-](http://eco-publicart.org/art-as-environment-a-cultural-action-at-the-plum-tree-)

[creek/](http://creek/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

5 Living Room, living-room, [junkitazawa.com/about\\_2.html](http://junkitazawa.com/about_2.html) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

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# MIGRATING

Okui Lala in conversation

# REALITIES

with Alecia Neo

Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe, the Myanmar couple that is involved in Baan Noorg's 365 Days: LIFE MUSE residency program, 2016

**Chew Win Chen aka Okui Lala** (b. 1991) is an artist based in Penang, Malaysia. Her practice spans photography, video, performance and community engagement. As a Media Art graduate, she has explored various approaches to her art practice, from creating experimental videos, designing visuals for performances, facilitating and conducting workshops, to being an artist herself.

Okui embarked upon "Flow" (3.13 min), a single-channel video shot at Kampung Sungai Batu, Kedah which was shown from 2011-2015 in experimental film and video art festivals around the world. She has exhibited in group shows such as "Sewing

and Sew Eng" (9.09 min), a video installation at The Good Malaysian Woman Group Exhibition (May 2014, MapKL), in which she becomes both the subject and artist-performer with her mother.

Okui is currently working on her *As if\_\_\_\_\_* series, a project ongoing since 2013, exploring the notion of home, migration and identity. In *Let's Drink and Eat Tea!* (August, 2015), she looks into the traces of history of the early Burmese settlement in Penang and the recent migration culture in the city through road names and Burmese food - Lahpet Thoke (Burmese tea salad).<sup>1</sup>



As world populations continue to rise and countries face unprecedented political and environmental challenges, the "migration crisis" can no longer be simply regarded as a temporary situation in someone else's backyard. Artists such as Okui Lala have found themselves compelled to understand the world through the eyes of invisible and silent communities, and to reimagine social hierarchy and ownership.

Through this extended conversation with artist Okui Lala, Alecia Neo seeks to understand her motivations, artistic strategies and process of developing relationships and art work with transitory communities. The shifting roles and responsibility of the artist are pondered, through their conversation about the complexities of translation, migration, acts of generosity, navigating the public sphere and the potentialities of intimate encounters.

**Alecia Neo:** Okui, how would you describe your practice, and what would you say your art is for? When embarking on a project, where do you begin, and how do you define the parameters of your work?

**Okui Lala:** I like to use this symbol as a way to describe my art practice: Relationship = self >< others. This can be read as a two-way relationship,

a journey that travels back and forth. Often, I initiate our conversations by sharing my background and thoughts while listening to theirs, to see where we both are coming from. I'm not really into advocacy, but I'm on a quest to search for alternative narratives on identities and belongingness and, in extension, the larger social, cultural and political milieu.

Identities >< Migration. My exploration of my own identity began with an artwork I did with my mom ("*Sewing & Sew Eng*", 2014). As I was exploring the tensions and compromises between us while making an artwork together, my identity as a Malaysian (as well as the fourth generation of Chinese descendants in Penang, Malaysia) was slowly unveiled; from the languages I spoke, the culture norm I'm brought up in, to the notion of home that differs among generations.

I then worked on "*Re:engage : The People's Court*" project, 2014, which was curated by Lee Cheah Ni.<sup>2</sup> The project was set in my hometown and within a Chinese community. As compared to the project I did with the Myanmar community in Penang<sup>3</sup>,





We sew together on a piece of cloth, with the dimension of 23 x 63 cm signifying our age; as the sewing gets closer, so does the tension surface, 2014

I assumed that I didn't need a translator, but little did I know, despite sharing the same ethnicity and nationality, that there were also values, local wisdom and ideology differences... We could be worlds apart! How do such notions influence our voices as individuals, a community or a nation? Working with people allows me to translate these notions.

Could you share what drew you to working in this way with people? Could you perhaps share your influences? Perhaps where you were educated, how your work was exposed, the workshops, artists, exhibitions, art spaces, and mentors who have become part of your journey?

I did my Bachelor in Media Arts at Multimedia University where technology is used as a medium to interact and communicate. We learned programming and interactive works while being exposed to old and new media. The University is located at Cyberjaya, which is a centre for Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project.<sup>4</sup> I was also involved in Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film, Video & Music Festival (KLEX),<sup>5</sup> as one of the festival directors was my lecturer. From there I began to develop my visual language as well as live performance and improvisation sensibilities.

In contrary, my hometown is George Town, Penang, which is known as a UNESCO Heritage site. I was exposed to Arts-Ed,<sup>6</sup> a non-profit organisation in Penang which provides place-based education for young people. Through Arts-Ed, I was trained as their facilitator to conduct workshops and cultural mapping activities which taught me a lot about working within a community and with young people. For instance, in the *Sungai Pinang Kita* project, they introduced me to the community at a low cost public housing flat, which I hadn't had the chance to work with before. I was in charge of the video and photography workshop to raise awareness on trash management with the young residents there. The teenagers involved there were very street smart, so in the beginning, I was kind of bullied by them because I was inexperienced! And it became a process of learning how to push and pull my subjects, and that I had to also stand my ground.

Arts-Ed uses art as a tool to engage community and connect to the subject. The organisation is very clear with their objectives, and hence they can go far in their education and advocacy work. Through the process of working with them, I began to understand that people could be a medium too. These realizations

helped me gain artistic agency; artists could act as mediators to interact and communicate with people too.

In your artistic process, do you think that the artist becomes a researcher and ethnographer, as compared to a maker of products? How do these different ways of working change the way we interpret the project? In such cases, do exhibitions even matter?

I look for softness and balance in my approach. This makes me think that I have human skills and that I am a "people person." I have begun to position myself as a medium too. Perhaps the nature of my artwork requires a lot of research. I ask a lot questions, almost like an ethnographer; my questions also lead to the artwork, and there is an exchange of experience. In a way, my participants and I have a flow of exchange of dialogues. The process of our exchange is about seeking balance.

The Chinese character, 人 (Ren) represents a person; 从 (Chong) (Two 人 side by side in the Chinese character) is to follow, which from my interpretation is about compromising; while 众 (Zhong) (Three 人 stacked together in the character) means the public. The word 众 for me represents another view and how the public views the artist and our collaborators. It's interesting to look at the three human characters stacked on each other. This is how I view my work.

When we position ourselves to the public, I think it is important to have exhibitions or some kind of public viewing. It is important to the participants, and sometimes they will ask us why so few people come. Clearly they care about what they have to say and an audience is important to them.

In my project on migratory culture, I get questioned a lot about whether I'm Burmese, why I care, and if I want the Myanmar or Bangladeshi workers to become a core nationality in Malaysia. In a 众 mentality, people start to care about things and issues bigger than themselves. For instance, in Malaysia, we finally got comfortable being the third generation living here as Malaysian, and now the new migration wave has begun, and new problems and compromises are emerging for some.

Could you share with us how your project began and how your interest with the Myanmar community in Penang started?



Exhibition still, *Translating*, August 2015, Penang State Art Museum, Penang.

From late 2012 to early 2013 I started off by documenting the "non-locals" (migrants) in the city. It was a work (*As If, Hope*, 2013) for an exhibition in my university, responding to the exhibition's theme on urbanization. I was recording the faces of migrant workers, seeing it as being very beautiful portraits of the city when captured in slow motion. However, others saw different things in my work. I was surprised that my

classmates asked if they were refugees and illegal! During that time in 2013, it was a sensitive period politically as the opposition parties were very close to toppling the current ruling party. It was reported that some political party gave out a lot of IDs to the Bangladesh workers so that they could actually vote for them. This has built up even more xenophobia in the country and migrant workers often become the victims in these cases. Later, I continued some NGO work, where I was involved in documentation to support their cause. In the process I felt that art could not necessarily solve problems, but it could offer a softer way and provide alternative narratives to a situation.

As I made my frequent trips to a small Myanmar community in the city centre, I met more people and started to talk to them. Most of them are only able to converse in simple Malay, thus deeper conversation was hard for me until I met Bo Mya, who became my “middle-person” and translator. He helps to run a travel agency and conducted free language classes for the Myanmar kids there. In January 2013, I did a portrait session at his place whereby I photographed over sixty persons from their community in a day. It was popular because selfies were not so common then, so having a print-out of a portrait meant something.

In April 2014, I visited Bo Mya again. I was so surprised when he told me that more than half the people that I’d photographed had left Penang for other places. I then decided to make a project with them again, to talk about the ebb and flow of migration happening in the city. Unfortunately, Bo Mya himself decided to go back to his country to settle down in 2015. Before he left, he introduced me to his best friend, Steven Nyi Nyi, who also, like him, has worked and stayed in Penang for the past twenty years. Steven speaks good Hokkien, Malay and English.

When I first talked to Steven about doing an “art project” together, he suggested to look into the road names in Pulau Tikus, Penang, whereby eight roads were named after places in Burma (Myanmar) during British colonization in Penang. Penang, being a vibrant port back then, attracted people from around the world. There was a large Burmese settlement at Pulau Tikus in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup>

For Steven, the road names, Burmese temple and the traces of history in Penang are some of the reasons he felt attached there. The working process with him was interesting because all the information of the road names found online was available in English only. Steven translated the text into Burmese and got another friend, Zay to type his hand-written notes into Burmese (*Translating, 2015*).<sup>8</sup> He then shared the information on social media with his friends.

Another work that we did together was the video work about Burmese Tea Salad – Laphet Thorke. Historically, Laphet Thorke was served as a peace offering dish after a dispute between kingdoms; nowadays it serves as a snack and welcoming dish to guests. In *Let’s Drink and Eat Tea!*, 2015, we engaged Steven’s young and friendly friend Florence Lay, who has worked and stayed in Penang for the past four years. Most of my conversations with Florence were in simple Malay, which she learned while working in the factory here. Steven, on the other hand, speaks fluent Hokkien, a local dialect commonly used among locals in Penang, along with speaking basic Malay and English. Steven has many local friends because of his

language ability, thus, he adapted well in Penang. Here, I found that language tells much about one’s migratory history and the demography of a society too. For instance, how did I end up knowing five languages? When and why do I use one language? Therefore, in one of the videos, I performed alongside with Steven and Florence to make a Burmese Tea Salad tutorial.

It is interesting that you met Bo Mya and then Steven in public areas, where the interaction is not controlled. Was this decision a conscious one? How would you describe your negotiations and interactions with him and the community?

No, it was not meant to be controlled and the process evolved over time. It was my first project on migration. When I started the project I was asked frequently by others if my portraits would affect this community negatively, as it would be exposing them. It was a very diverse community, with different ethnicity, and I had no idea whether they were legal or not. The feedback I was getting from others made me very self-conscious as well, and I even stopped the project for a year.

But later I asked some of the participants of the portrait shooting section what they thought of my concerns. They were not worried because the photos’ background did not show where exactly they were and it didn’t portray them doing business. According to them, when I first started to make my frequent trips to their community, news spread among them that there was a girl with a camera interested in them, and I noticed that I was being observed as well. As I gradually gained their trust, I also learned that they had a strong support system as well. They would gather for festive occasions and try to contribute back to their community. For example, they organized donations during the Myanmar flood of 2015.

In 2014, a lecturer of mine, who has been following my work and progress, encouraged me to return to this work and keep the conversation going with them, now that I have more experience working in projects involving people and context. When I returned, I was shocked to find most of the Myanmar shops were closed and so many of them were not there anymore. It made it even more important to continue to work on it. Was it really due to political or economic reasons that they were leaving?

In 2015, Malaysia-Thailand-Indonesia-Myanmar were caught-up in the Rohingya<sup>9</sup> refugee conflict and crisis. The governments from all countries reacted slowly and were pointing fingers at each other. The public started to show concern about



Roads in Penang that are named after places in Burma, 2015

the issue when a refugee boat was very near to the Malaysian shoreline. At the same time, there was also the European refugee crisis. For a while, news and headlines were constantly reporting on both the crises in SEA and Europe. Eventually, the public interest faded as the news feeds shifted focus.

It made me think about how we treat our migrants in our daily lives? If there is xenophobia in our everyday society, how would we even be able to deal with a refugee crisis? In Penang, where we take pride in our multicultural city and history, it is shocking that sometimes our leaders behave in racist ways. For instance, it was in the news that our leaders said publicly that migrant workers should not be allowed to cook in Penang eatery outlets, as it would affect our quality of food and heritage.<sup>10</sup>

I was then invited to do an artwork responding to the ebb and flow of the city for *Digital Arts and Cultural Festival*,<sup>11</sup> as part of the *George Town Festival 2015* program.<sup>12</sup> The venue of the festival was at the Penang State Art Museum. I approached Steven and his friends again for the project. They were quite excited because of the venue and were very willing to participate. It became a win-win situation, for both Steven and I had a clear idea of what we would like to get from the project: I wanted to explore the different narratives of migratory culture, while Steven wanted to talk about the richness of Burmese culture in Penang. That was how we got into using food as a medium. He said, "Do you know why Burmese food is not as famous as Thai food?" and then he related it back to history when Myanmar was closed off and not used to foreign style. The food was not adapted to a more "universal taste". Burmese food is often regarded as too salty or too oily. He believes that it could be as famous as Thai food with some adaptation. My project was a way for him to reach out to the public in Penang, and I was also interested in the public responses.

I met artist-curator Jay Koh in the middle of this project. Jay shared with me that it is good and bad to have a middle person in my project. It could pose limitations to my understanding of the project. However, I feel that I work better one-on-one, instead of in larger groups, so it was a conscious decision for me.

Would you describe Bo Mya and Steven as your collaborators and your project as a collaboration? What were some of the challenges in the process of creating the work? Were there moments where you felt that you were the main person directing the project? If so, was that something that was desired artistically by you?

It's a tricky question, as they still see me as an artist and refer to this as my project. Although I consider them as my collaborators, they do not necessarily feel so. For the *As If, Hope*, the portrait project, it was my first project with the community; so I didn't quite know how to position the project, and there was nothing that they could really contribute, so they felt less connected. However, for my video on Burmese Tea Salad, *Let's Drink and Eat Tea!*, Florence got involved as Steven shared that she liked to talk and was good in cooking. So this actually allowed them to feel that they were really part of the project, and also contribute in their own way. I try to create situations where people can be in their element.

I also created a game so that it would be fun for everyone to participate. Every time one sentence was spoken, we would try to translate it. The Burmese Tea Salad was quite easy to prepare but as we used four languages in the tutorial, the whole process became longer and more engaging.

Perhaps collaboration didn't really matter or is not really understood by them. They probably view it as an interesting project. But I was really happy they started calling it "our project" and this was a marked difference from where I started in *As If, Hope* where it was clearly "my" project. Steven likes art, and checks out events in Penang regularly. Sometimes, he was almost a co-director, commenting on my work and telling me when to cut out parts of the video when it was boring.

Collaboration is a tricky word. I think artists have different perspectives on what collaboration is, and that might be more so for non-artists, because we have different expectations of the project and of each other.

What does translation mean to you in your artistic practice? / What is the role of translation in your practice? Are there dominant cultures or languages in Malaysia or Penang that have affected the expression or cultures of minority groups, and how "invisible" cultures are revealing themselves with and without artistic intervention?

To me, translation is not only in language, it travels through various forms and mediums. One could also be translated from familiar surroundings to another foreign land. Just like the movie *Lost in Translation*, things really do get lost in the process. Even within the same language, the interpretation may also vary among individuals.

Would you say that in your practice, that taking responsibility and to express solidarity is to learn other person's mother tongue?

Yes, and no... Language helps in understanding someone's thoughts or philosophy more deeply, especially in communities where some of the dialects are not written or recorded. Some local wisdom is passed down through oral histories. As an artist working in multiple cities, I can't possibly learn so many languages, but I do pick up parts of the language whenever I can. It's more about understanding the context and the cultural norms and behaviour of a city and its people.

The process of your dialogue or work with the community seems rather seamless and that the collaboration went smoothly. Were there any particular turning points in the process? What were some of the challenges?

Every project comes with its challenges. One reoccurring challenge is how to balance my artistic side and my research side. On one hand I have a very nerdy side to my art practice where I like to do research and accumulate knowledge. And I also struggle with how much I should present the knowledge accumulated. At every point there are compromises. For instance, I am also concerned with what kind of information I should put out in the public and whether it would affect my participants.

Family and friends of Steven and Florence after the performance of "Let's Drink and Eat Tea!", 2015



"As If, Hope", 2013,  
Penang



Behind the scene of "As  
If, Hope", Bo Mya was  
helping a newly wed  
to pose for the portrait  
shooting section



"Let's Drink and Eat  
Tea!", from left-  
Florence Lay, Steven  
Nyi Nyi and Okui  
Lala, 2015, Penang



I also want to push my own artistic boundaries. Sometimes, people say that if it's too smooth, there are actually underlying problems that have not been confronted. So I am aware of that in the "smoothness" of my project. There are some misinterpretations of the project as just a cultural exposure and outreach programme. If an audience zooms into the project without considering the overall curation of the exhibition, they might just miss the point.

Cooking and making tea can be seen as a simple gesture. Would you say minimal forms of participation are better than no participation at all? Can minimal participation still have profound impact on the participant or the work?

I don't really see it as a simple gesture. The reason why I choose daily life as a subject is because it is a gesture that my participants do every day and that they can relate to. Although it seems simple, as an artist I can learn from them, and I learn about their lives from these very simple actions. Tea and food became our topic. In the same way, they always make fun of me. They laugh and say, "Why does this artist not know how to do anything? Why doesn't she know how to cut the garlic properly!"

I'm not a good cook, so I don't set this up intentionally. However, my participants are good at it. So there is a role reversal that happens. The artist is usually the expert, but in this case the participants become the ones imparting the skills.

In the case of *Let's Drink and Eat Tea!* what were you hoping to achieve specifically? If there was not a specific goal, please share your intention and how your process and presentation made your intentions visible.

When the outcome of the work was first exhibited and performed, I was often asked by the audience if I'm a Myanmar descendent or that if Myanmar culture is part of our city culture. I find this position interesting as George Town is known for being a UNESCO Heritage Site and Food Paradise but at the same time it also has certain criteria and values that close it off. George Town received the UNESCO Heritage listing along with Melaka, as these two cities reflect the multicultural heritage forged from the exchange of Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures along with European colonial influences for almost five hundred years. We took pride in our migratory history and multicultural background but at the same time we hesitate to accept and adapt to the presence of new cultures in the present.

The term "migration" has always been regarded as something serious or issue related. Perhaps this is because the line between local-migrants-immigrants-refugee is still pretty much grey especially in SEA where all eleven countries apart from Thailand were colonized. SEA has a different developing process from ancient to modern times as compared to other regions in the world, and we use different approaches to the various issues. How do we locate our regional issues of migration and conflict in the midst of global developments? From Identities >> Migration, I wish to disperse and reconstruct these complicated notions through an alternative or new narrative.

After all this work on migration and identity, where do you see yourself headed? And what are you working on right now?

Perhaps the exploration on the notion of "identities" will be a never ending quest as we are constantly "translating".

I'm currently in residence at *Baan Noorg's 365 Days: LIFE MUSE*,<sup>13</sup> model study for the Nongpo community's foreign labourers. The community-based art project is organised by *Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture*, a non-profit artist initiative based in Nongpo District, Ratchaburi Province, Thailand. Throughout this one-year program, fifteen international artists are invited for a three-week residency, while a Myanmar couple that is working at a factory nearby has been engaged to be part of the residency programme. The couple, Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe got involved in the project through an open call advertisement written in Burmese. The ad was almost tacky, saying that "we don't have a yard nor a swimming pool but we could provide a small house and artist companions" ... And they called.

The question of quantitative impact was also raised about this project - How can this be a model case if it's just one couple? However, the program works qualitatively: this couple has been engaging with many different practices of the artists who visit, hence it could possibly offer a different perspective. One artist asked them to trace their memory from their hometown while another initiated a collaborative soap making project with Chaw Su, Kyaw Moe and their friends using fresh milk from the dairy farm nearby. Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe stay across the street from the residency. I'm the ninth resident.

"How do you guys deal with artists constantly?" I asked. Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe admitted that it was tiring to work during the day and still meet artists during their rest time. But these encounters were interesting for them as well, as usually their life revolves around just the factory and work. I shared my previous project with them, and they were passionate about it as they were surprised that in Penang there were Myanmar migrant workers like them too.

For this project I'm looking back at translation. Chaw Su has stayed here for thirteen years, and she speaks really fluent Thai, so fluent that you can't tell that she's not local, while I'm reliant on my translator as I don't speak either Burmese or Thai. I'm keen to find out what could be translated out from this project!

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|--|--|---|--|
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| 4 Official MSC Malaysia website, mscmalaysia.my (accessed Aug 31,2016)   | 8 Aya Fabros. <i>The (Non) Citizen of Komtar: Reflections on Migrant Worker Spaces and Expressions of Community and Agency</i> , Centre of Southeast |   | Image Copyrights: Okui Lala  |

# ARTS-ED AND

Chen Yoke Pin

# THEIR PARTICIPA-

in conversation with

# TORY PRACTICES

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio

# IN MALAYSIA

**Arts-ED** is a Penang-based non-profit arts education organization founded in 2000, which explores and provides innovative non-formal arts, culture and heritage education for young people in rural and urban settings. Its aim is to be a positive agent of change for local cultural sustainability, diversity and vibrancy using creative and participatory approaches.

Arts-ED's range of programmes includes training, programming, community consultation, cultural mapping, participatory research and creative arts projects.

The project outcomes generally crystallize in the form of cultural events and/or publications such as culture related educational materials. Arts-ED works in collaboration with local institutions, arts educators, artists, cultural activists and community groups. Individuals and organizations in Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia have emulated their innovative approaches.

**Chen Yoke Pin** currently serves as the Senior Manager of Arts-ED. For the past 10 years, she has been actively involved in producing, coordinating

and facilitating community-based arts and culture education programs for children and youth in Penang.

Chen works with multiple stakeholders of various ages and cultural backgrounds. She has also been involved in the production and publicity of other Penang arts initiatives, such as George Town World Heritage Celebrations, George Town Festival and Ombak-Ombak ARTStudio.

Through Arts-ED projects, Chen Yoke Pin focuses on developing awareness of and promoting the cultural

assets of urban and rural communities using creative approaches. To do this the organization has had to play multiple roles as connector, facilitator and negotiator with the many stakeholders involved: young residents, adult communities, schools, experts, artists. Here, Yoke Pin talks about how the multiple roles are managed and how this prepares the way for the working team to enter and sustain relationships in the community!



Performance outreach in the community, Butterworth, Penang, 2007

**Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio:** As a general starting point, I would be interested in exploring the spirit, approach and focus of Arts-ED. The organization – which has been active for over 15 years and is today considered a model in South East Asia – finds its interests and competences in the connections and intersections between art practices, education, local heritage and community engagement. Could you please tell me more about its history and mission?

**Yoke Pin:** Arts-ED started as an informal group in 1999. Janet Pillai, who was the founder of Arts-ED, had already started multiple arts performance groups through Young Theatre Penang and Universiti Sains Malaysia. Janet has a sociology and children's theatre background, and so connected the issues of children in the community with performance skills such as music, drama and visual arts.

Arts-ED was developed in response to the local school art syllabus which focuses only on visual arts. In the schools the art classes often get replaced by subjects considered 'more important' such as mathematics and sciences. When Janet created Arts.ED, she also started a lot of arts classes with many artists from different genres to introduce a variety of arts skill, covering traditional arts to modern art forms. This program went on for about 1.5 years until Arts-ED recognized a disconnection of the skill with the environment and people.

In response, we started a 'place-based' approach. Community-based arts and culture education uses social practices of everyday life as the subject matter and young people use the arts to research, document and later to express their findings. We approach the community/site as a cultural lab where we bridge artists, educators, local residents and young people to create understanding

The 4 Pillars of Arts-ED are:

- Culture and Community is the Context
- Awareness and Transformation is the Goal
- Creative Education is the Means
- Artists, Educators and Young People are the Target Groups

VISION:

- To develop the critical & creative potential and aesthetic value of individuals for the better of humanity
- Support cultural sustainability and promote place-making

MISSION:

- Use arts for community development and social transformation
- Capacity building of cultural workers
- Create platforms for intergenerational, cultural interaction and transmission

through the process of creating art: Interact, Observe, Research, Present & Reflect.

Some of the communities we have worked with in Penang include the historical city of George Town, the agricultural prefecture of Balik Pulau, an urban public housing area in Sungai Pinang and suburban Butterworth.

The main ideas of all the projects are to facilitate and provide a platform for the young to explore and discover their cultural identities through all the processes. We developed a methodology through these years and we are using it to practice in more Penang communities, as well as sharing it with other community-engaged arts individuals and groups.

Arts-ED is based in Penang and develops most of its activities and projects in the local context. Your practice seems very attentive to context-specificity and every

single project is carefully tailored for a specific location. How do you choose the context/place you work in? What is your understanding and interpretation of 'public space' in Penang?

Choosing a site is based on many reasons. Need is important – the social context is needed. For example, in 2000, George Town had a drastic drop of population because of the repeal of the 'rent control act'. We were worried about the loss of culture when the people moved away. So, we chose George Town as a site before its potential disappearance. Later that year, groups/NGOs, who had already started to work in a particular site, invited us to plan a place-based programme with the young people. For us to start a programme, there must be a need from the stakeholders. There are groups (schools and young people) who are interested and would like to come in as a partner. We will not embark on any programme if the groups are not supportive.

Talking about public spaces – there are fewer now. A lot of the community sites we worked with used to have very tight communal living – many shared 'spaces' for hanging out and relaxing, for leisure & entertainment activities, for religion and social practices, within the same cultural group. Although there are a lot of interactions among different cultural groups, there has not been much in-depth understanding of other cultures in daily practice.

There are spaces, other than the tangible ones we can see physically, that are used by the community/public. We are also keen on the intangible spaces such as any opportunity of dialogue, and common platforms for sharing different views and possibly to create consensus.

A specific focus that I would like to discuss with you is methodologies. I see that most of your projects require a deep engagement and interaction with people, students, specific groups and communities. Triggering participation and collaboration is not an easy task and it always requires a detailed set of methods and a clear approach. What are the methodologies that you research and apply in your projects at Arts-ED?



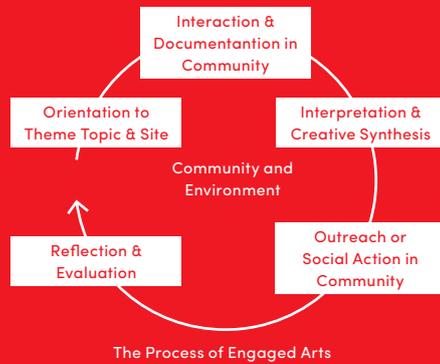
Practicing their photography skills, Butterworth, Penang, 2016



Engaged arts is a form of learning which uses the arts as a tool to facilitate engagement, comprehension, application and communication of knowledge and skills. Engaged arts may use a single arts discipline or a multi-modal approach, that is, the creative arts in combination with other creative processes such as games, improvisations, simulations, innovation etc. as pedagogical tools. The artist-facilitator in Arts-ED projects usually needs to be apt at the design and selection of creative arts tools, and the techniques and mediums for participants to utilize as investigative, expressive or reflective instruments.

Engaged arts applied in a community setting is a creative approach to help students comprehend the relationship between themselves and their social, cultural and physical environment. Cognitive, affective and sensual learning is activated when participants interact with, inquire, and analyse how and why things come to be in their environment and community.

The engaged arts model used by Arts-ED follows a clear process as illustrated by the figure below. Students become engaged in an art-making process, which involves exploring their environment experientially, recording data, then analysing and interpreting the data, using creative modes. Participants then synthesize their findings by creating art works inspired from their interactions with the community/environment and present their creative outputs in the public realm for the purpose of communication and reflection.



The photo sequence below illustrates one of Arts-ED's projects entitled *Kisah Pulau Pinang* (Stories of Penang, 2006-2007), in which participants began their project by conducting interviews about immigration and settlement experiences from the older generation residing in Georgetown. Participants then composed lyrics from the oral stories and synthesised the stories of various ethnic groups into a musical drama. In the process of devising and creating the performance, participants unravelled their past. The performance allowed the multi ethnic communities who shared their stories to reflect on their collective histories objectively. The photo essay below shows the sequential steps in the Engaged Arts Process:



Step 1. Orientation to the theme, site and community through a guided walk



Step 2. Interaction with community and documentation of migration stories



Step 3. Interpretation of collected stories using music and lyrics



Step 4. Synthesis into a musical drama for community audiences



Step 5. Participants' reflective journals

In relation to the previous question I would like you to expand on a specific methodology that I consider particularly interesting in this case – as it involves community-engagement and several issues linked to participation -, I'm referring to cultural mapping. The practice of mapping, especially in the cultural field, is paving the way to several interesting outputs, which include notions of sustainability, sharing and the public. We could probably say that cultural mapping is a methodology, a statement, a technique that changes the perspective from unilateral to multilateral, including different voices in its own development. How do you use the methodology of cultural mapping in your projects? What does cultural mapping represent at Arts-ED?

Cultural mapping and interpretation is the process used in AAK ["Anak-anak Kota" (Children of the City)]<sup>2</sup> to help young participants identify cultural assets in a local area and study how the people, activities and built/natural environment are connected through time, space, social and economic interaction.

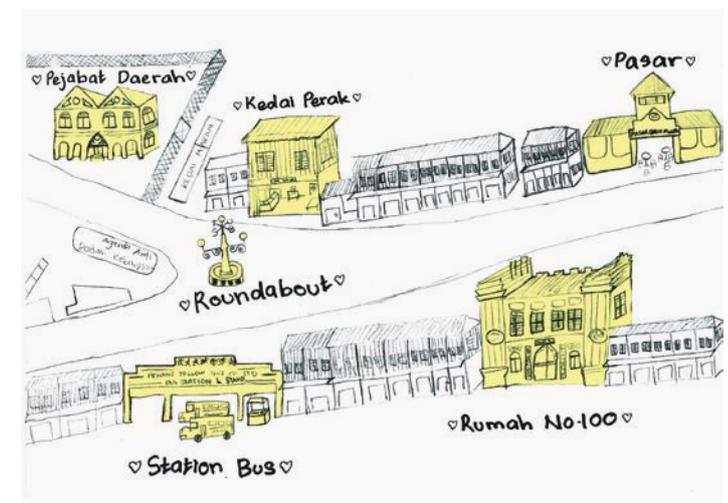
Initially participants are provided with an overview of local culture, history, geography (and economics if necessary) of the locality and taught research and documentation skills. This is woven into the projects through interactive activities, talks/demonstrations, audio-visual resources and guided tours.

Participants then embark on projects to study and inquire into rituals, festivals, craft, architecture or design and to connect what is imbibed in the tradition to the cultural, religious, historical and social context.

This data is later codified and used to develop a creative output that can communicate their impressions or social reflections on the historic, economic, environmental and social significance of the site, community or environment through artistic works. Artistic interpretation can be in the form of performing arts or visual arts products.

In a nutshell, the creative initiatives are a shortcut to children engaging with their culture and participating in some form of cultural enterprise. Through their research projects combined with creative end products such as performance, artwork, craft, brochure, video, websites etc. they promote the community's assets.

Several of the AAK projects involved on or off-site interpretations. These interpretations may be in the form of exhibitions, performances or publications intended to educate the public or as advocacy for the conservation effort. One example is the interpretation using photography, web and video of three Penang artists' works and their relationship to history, local tradition and the environment. These were displayed in public exhibitions at two galleries. Another example are the brochures produced for tourist walking tours,



An illustrated map by a young participant, Balik Pulau, Penang, 2006



Young participants and a traditional trader exchange their knowledge about a traditional food but in different styles, George Town, 2007.

Young participants interview and collect data from a local resident, Butterworth, Penang, 2016.

What makes a good photograph? Young participants set their own criteria, Butterworth, Penang, 2016.



documenting the history, process and products of 20 endangered trades in the inner city.

Some other ideas that come to my mind while checking your projects -and I will ask you about a specific one right after this question - revolves around the notions of re-appropriation of the public space; the elaboration of the sense of the common; the role of artists in the social sphere; or the presence of the inter-elements (intercultural/ intergenerational /interdisciplinary). I see most of these questions as essential components of your projects. I would really like to know your thoughts about these elements, and see how you integrate them in your working process.

Arts-ED projects call for intergenerational and intercultural interaction with all sectors of the community who are the repository of history and culture. The team of young people working on a cultural heritage project is expected to handle language, age and cultural challenges. Each project team attempts to have a mixture of participants from different cultural, income, ethnic, age and gender groups. This profile foreshadows the kind of social, intellectual and creative sharing that will take place on-site within the community itself.

Participants are also expected to bring their specialized area of discipline/ knowledge when forming a team. The program attempts to ensure, as far as possible, that team members include participants with different skills, language and knowledge base. On recruitment, participants are assessed and assigned specialized tasks which accommodate their talent, knowledge, interest and personality e.g. as an interviewer, as documenter, performer etc.

The role distribution promotes sharing and collaboration, and provides an opportunity for participants to excel in their area of their capability. Inevitably through group negotiation, some of the differentials in culture, personality, age, ability and experience are dealt with, and stereotypes and prejudices are somewhat reduced.

Working on the principle that knowledge is intrinsically integrated; participants are introduced to the site using a multi-media and multi-disciplinary approach. An overview of local culture, history, geography and economics of the site is presented through talks, demonstrations, audio-visual presentations, guided tours by experts and interactive hands-on activities. This introduction contextualizes the site and its cultural heritage within a larger, more holistic framework. It also allows participants to acquaint themselves to different facets of the site through cognitive and affective means.

I would like to ask you now to explain a recent project – partially realized and partially on-going – that you are working on at Arts-ED: *myBUTTERWORTH*.<sup>3</sup> What is the project about and how is it structured?

This project aims to create an alternative learning platform for young people (aged 9-12 for primary school and 14-16 for secondary school) to map, discover and document the cultural assets in the old town of Butterworth (Bagan) through a place-based learning program combining mapping and photography tools. Through experiencing place, knowing history and culture through interaction with local community, participants will gain knowledge of a particular heritage theme and they will be trained to use photography to interpret and express their findings.



# PRODDING CIVIC

Alex Lee

# IMAGINATION

in conversation with

# THROUGH PLAY

Alecia Neo



Sepetang Community Art Project, The kids sharing their favorite spot with us, 2014

**Alex Lee** (born 1990 in Ipoh; lives and works in Penang) is trained as an architect. Alex has initiated several independent projects in his hometown. *The Ipoh Bus Project*<sup>1</sup> sought to revive interest in small town bus systems, LOCAL (an architectural

commentary zine), and *Tiny Art Space*<sup>2</sup> in the old town heritage trail zone, to promote interest in locality and design. He was at Lostgens' independent art space in Kuala Lumpur<sup>3</sup> where he helped work on place-making and community mapping of the

Jalan Sultan area. He was a participant of *TransActions in the Field* in 2015, a master class and art project on challenging the role of citizen participation through participatory public art.<sup>4</sup>

Ever-resistant to labels and pretentiousness, Alex Lee consciously produces projects in urban spaces that emphasize a desire to connect people and the importance of inclusion and accessibility through both playful gestures and “useful” initiatives. In this dialogue with Alecia Neo, he shares his obsession with occupying public spaces, power structures and the challenges of evaluating participatory art. Through exploration of Alex’s wide-ranging projects of varied methods, the dialogue also discusses modes of audience engagement, authorship and the importance of openness in any artistic endeavour.

**Alecia Neo:** During the workshop in Kuala Lumpur last year, you shared this as your motivation for participation, “I am interested in exploring the power play in public spaces, like how defensive designs deny undesired users access to certain area (it goes both ways, shopping malls or slums).” Could you share more about your interest in power, and how this informs your practice and your projects?

**Alex Lee:** I think I was always interested in power and the systems that create power, not like power crazy, but more like crazy about power. I remember a question I asked my mother when I was very young, maybe around five years old — who was the most powerful person in the world? I discovered later that power was a construct and it depended on the systems you live with, and with the advent of the internet and social networking, I began toying with different ‘projects’ each experimenting with the creation of different systems, like the ‘swing project’<sup>5</sup> which was really about public ownership of both the physical (swing) and memory spaces. I am not sure if many of my friends who helped me were aware of this. (Ha-ha)

Did it concern you that perhaps a majority of your friends who worked with you on the project were not aware of your intentions? Would you say you would be interested to take this further in your next projects?

I think it is important to explain the intention of a project. However, it can be difficult especially with public participation, as the time in engagement with the public can be really short. I still believe everyone helping with the project should at least know my intentions.

You’ve also shared that you have an interest in new media art works, and more specifically, art that puts the audience into an immersive experience when experiencing the artwork. You’ve refused to use the words, ‘to view’ artwork. Why are you so adamant about this?

I don’t think you can really view artwork. All artwork has to be experienced. In a world where knowledge is no longer scarce, I think people no longer take anyone’s opinion for fact. One can, and must, experience it him/herself.

When we google articles, we don’t just get text; we also get video, audio, live tweets etc. Almost all of our senses are engaged. We are experiencing the article as if we were there and sometimes better than being there. The content for Wikipedia is contributed by the public. Knowledge is currently abundant and so is experience. Today, everything is fluid. Opinions are contested and the new power structures are created. Businesses such as Uber<sup>6</sup> and Airbnb<sup>7</sup> are leveraging this. Experience is our current situation and I think artists need to understand this.



Ah Soh's place-GTF, 2013

You've maintained that you're not a trained artist, but as an architect. How does your training influence you? How did you come to art and why have you decided that this is the best way to express your ideas?

First of all, I was trained as an architect. I cannot call myself an architect because I do not have a professional license, but this is normally what people refer to me as, on the streets (some power play going on). I was trained as an architect.

I bring the element of space to the conversation of art. Space is really powerful. It plays a big role in the human concept of our dimension and is inherently related to experience.

I once did a project in my second year of architecture school where we were told to discover the 'genius loci'; loosely translated as the spirit of place, or its essence, and translate it into a physical building. I was stumped. Where does the spirit of place reside? You can see it, you can feel it; but where is it exactly? How could one translate a feeling, an experience into something physical that others are able to share too?

I realized one night, that we experienced things through our senses, collective memory and our individual past. This was a very important discovery for me and when I left architecture, I joined Lostgens as an intern, which was, at that time, part of the *Petaling Street Community Art Project*<sup>6</sup>, protesting the loss of the Chinatown area to state development.

They were really the first artists I worked with besides my uncle. My uncle does contemporary art, which is centred around the themes of childhood. I must have been influenced by him on some level because he used to live and paint in my childhood home. I still talk to him about my projects and stuff to get some advice. Lostgens, an artspace in Kuala Lumpur, interested me at that time, because they were addressing the issues I was interested in, power play and place-making.

I was with the Occupy Dataran Movement<sup>9</sup> before Lostgens, which exposed me to "artivism" but I was only exposed to the ins and outs of activism and artivism through Lostgens. This left a huge impact on my worldview, which I feel is still evident in my artwork.

Given your influences and your interests in artivism and the mechanics of power, who is your audience? When you create a project, do you have an audience in mind? How do you wish to engage with them?

The audience is always the public. Public depends on certain things like where the artwork is based. For example, in the artwork *Cinemana*<sup>10</sup>, I sought to bring the conversations between the people I met in Kelantan<sup>11</sup> to the people in Kuala Lumpur based on a simple topic of a cinema. For *Cinemana*, I was sent to Kelantan

as an artist for two weeks. I quickly realized I wanted to avoid addressing the common political narratives of a conservative Islamist state. Not directly at least. There was a myth that cinemas in Kelantan had their lights on and that they separated male and female audiences. It led many, including myself, from outside and within Kelantan to believe that a cinema existed. It was this myth that led me to search for the non-existent cinema through the conversations I had with people I met all over Kelantan. The topic of Kelantan isn't very comical to many, so I felt the need to translate the collected material into comical drawings. The people I met and the conversations we had were light. And I wanted to reflect that.

In my smaller projects like the "Rock Paper Scissors" the engagement is lighter and shorter. Actually I think all of my works are rather light. Rock Paper Scissors was a game I created with two other artists during one of German artist Susanne Bosch's earlier participatory workshops at Lostgens<sup>12</sup>. I carried it on in the same manner, choosing the hottest days and dragging out a cooler filled with cold drinks and teasing the public to beat a rock paper scissors 'Master' for a cold drink. No other strings attached.

These types of participatory performance are quite rare here in Malaysia, where the mantra is that there is no such thing as "free" on the streets. Many view it curiously, and some engage in it cautiously, but usually it ends up in a burst of laughter and a picture taken together.

In the making of works which you consider light and informal, what are the ways in which your art connects and relates with untrained or uninformed art audiences? Does art have to be useful for the people who approach it or who are approached?

In my opinion, my art connects with uninformed audiences better than with informed audiences. A friend once said something like, if you think too hard when 'viewing' an artwork, then you are probably thinking too much.

No, art does not have to be useful but I feel the artist has a responsibility to understand the context and have a purpose, because art is actually a way of communication. I don't think anyone communicates for no purpose.

My previous question is also closely related to this one. Are "trivial" forms of participation better than no participation at all? Can minimal participation still have a profound impact on the participant or the work? When you look at your past projects,

do you find some more effective than others? How so?



Ah Soh's place-GTF, 2013  
Little cards explaining plant use, Penang, 2013

I trust we have been at one point or another, a participant in such artworks. Whenever you allow the public to participate in the artwork, trivial or immersive, you allow your artwork to become vulnerable and at some points the possibility of switching roles between artist and participant is real. I feel

these kinds of artworks are similar to a deep conversation, otherwise impossibly attained without prior rapport.

In the ‘paper boat folding’ intervention, I began demonstrating to a few participants how to fold a paper boat. Soon after, some from the first batch of participants were teaching other participants how to fold paper boats. A group of boys started teaching me their version of a paper boat. A participant went on to write a love ‘*pantun*’ (poem) on the paper boat and read it out to the audience. Here, I was no longer the artist. The intervention continued to exist without me. Perhaps the artwork could have reached a point where no one knows who started it, if there was adequate paper.

The mutual exchange is such a critical aspect of such artistic processes. Do you then view the processes of socially engaged art as more important than the reception of the work by audiences and its effects? For instance, if there was opposition from the community for an art project to take place, do you think it’s appropriate to continue? I’m reminded of Misako’s intervention during *TransActions in the Field*, where she invited some of the participating artists to “escape” the program as a protest against hierarchical approaches and control, and we all ended up participating somehow, in varying degrees of compliances and disagreements.

I’m a process person. Even if an art project breaks down, you have already engaged the community. Art is communication, and like conversations, there are risks, but the pay offs are worth it.

Openness is a very important part in socially engaged art. Understanding your own bias and ego is also important in the navigation of any public related artwork. Sometimes a little naivety helps when dealing with the public.

During Misako’s intervention at *TransActions in the Field*, at first it seemed like it was a party. Then it was really uncomfortable, for me, when the schedule was thrown out, literally. And it got really unsettling for me when none of the group explained what was going on when prompted. Withholding information when

openness was such an important part of *TransActions in the Field* really made me uncomfortable and I felt I had to say something.

Later I came to know that some in the group did not know about the action too. Some were lost in translation and some were not at the critical parts of the discussion. At the end, I felt I reacted a bit too harshly, but it would have come one way or another. It was an important part of the programme to have a crisis like that. In the building industry, we stress test everything before it becomes a building. I felt this was the same with *TransActions in the Field*.

I also am quite curious about the process behind how you determine the presentation of your work. There is definitely an emphasis on a tangible experience that could be easily understood, and on playfulness. What is your strategy here? How do you decide how the process of your work is being presented?

I don’t really think about how to present my artwork. It’s not my strong point. Whatever happens, happens. Working in the public realm is also problematic and often relies on some ad hoc changes. But yes, fun is a really important part of my work. I am serious about fun. Besides that, I like to keep my actions in public to a barebones simplicity.



An exchange over boat making, Kuala Lumpur, 2014

Could you share more about a project that you feel really proud about? How did the project start and develop? Are you still working on it?

I love and hate all my babies just as much, so it’s really hard to choose. But as mentioned in a chat, I really enjoyed working with Yeoh’s project in the village of Sepetang<sup>13</sup>. However, it wasn’t my project. I’m also really proud of a garden I built with my mother called *Ah Soh’s Place*<sup>14</sup>, in the city of George Town, Penang. It was for Georgetown Festival (2013). Given that it was a very difficult

project site to work with — a crumbling termite infested shell of a home with no roof, no traceable owner, and on a busy street with a hidden area of residences behind — I’m proud that we made it happen. At that time, I was into pocket spaces, or interstitial spaces, back lanes, and neglected or underused spaces. At the same time, I believed (and still do), in the idea of guerrilla gardening.

I realized I would need the help of the community and neighbours. Getting them involved would mean sharing ownership of the project and this was in line with my principles. More essentially, I had no power or water supply. I had to approach the community very carefully and I decided to start with the motorcycle shop next door. The neighbour had already spruced up the front part of the shop, adding seats and a table for his customers while they wait for their repairs to be done. I promised that I would keep to his spirit and kept the improvements he made.

For the purpose of the garden, I created a garden very similar to the potted gardens found in front of the traditional shop-houses of the city. These potted

#BetterCities community seed bomb workshop, 2013





Sepetang Community Art Project, participants creating a song for the performance, Sepetang, 2014

gardens are mainly utilitarian and are generally plants used in the local cuisine & medicinal herbs. My mother (we were a double trouble artist team) helped make little signs for the plants, explaining their use, and planted most of the plants. I spruced up the crumbling building and did the hardware improvements. When we were done, the neighbour chipped in an aviary of birds and a turtle. I was really shocked by the aviary but uncle<sup>15</sup> insisted on having it there and it turned out to be an important part of the garden. The chirping birds completed the garden and it was a physical manifestation of the shared ownership of the project.

However, the council's permission to use the property ended after three months, and almost immediately after, someone claimed the property and hoarded up the garden. Soon the neighbour also closed his motorcycle repair shop. I was really upset at this and I didn't talk about the project for a while. I started to have questions on the role of the artist in gentrification.

I recall during *TransActions in the Field* that you were equally as fascinated and troubled by evaluation as I was. What does evaluation mean for you now? I recall that you shared how evaluation is often measured against economics. Do you sense that increasing terms like experience and community are being co-opted by industries and co-operations? How do you evaluate your past projects? Do you have a framework that you use? If you have references or examples from other artists or art groups that would be great to hear as well.

I think I'm in the same situation as I was about 'genius loci' on this. Clueless, fascinated and worried. For example, I'm a bit troubled by the idea that artworks are often evaluated on an economic scale which means some art is valued

higher than others. In a world where we are told that "You get what you pay for", this leads to a misconception that expensive artworks are exclusively better.

However, I said something about the abundance of knowledge earlier. It's my opinion that more and more people are evaluating things through different means, for example, by experience, instead of just economically. I discovered this after taking an Uber ride — \*Please rate your experience\*.

I think most often my works are valued because of the concept rather than the outcome. This is, of course, after I put the concept into a practical action.

I am not sure of how to measure or quantify the degree of engagement. One of the ways I like to work is to allow an independent third party to evaluate my project. For me, this usually results in articles in the news. A mention is good, a paragraph is nice, a write-up even. One other way to evaluate more complex projects, like the *Sepetang* project I participated in, would be to have a public exhibition and invite stakeholders to experience the artwork or interventions etc., and judge for themselves the "success" of the project. *Sepetang* had a performance night and exhibition. It created a tangible outcome for an otherwise intangible process. I believe that when you set out the project, the outcomes should already be on the plan. So preparation for it is part of the process.

Time is somewhat a decent quantifier of the quality of engagement. I am taught to do questionnaires but some of my works are so simple, even the simplest questionnaires may just take over my work.



Sepetang Community Art Project, Class time, Sepetang, 2014

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|--|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|---|--|---|--|---|---|
| 1 Alex Lee, "Bus Stop", <a href="http://bumpitybump.blogspot.com/2013/03/bus-stop.html">bumpitybump.blogspot.com/2013/03/bus-stop.html</a> (accessed Aug 31, 2016) | 2 <a href="https://www.facebook.com/tinyartspace">facebook.com/tinyartspace</a> (accessed Aug 31, 2016) | 3 <a href="http://lostgenerationspace.blogspot.sg">lostgenerationspace.blogspot.sg</a> (accessed Aug 31, 2016) | 4 <a href="http://bumpitybump.blogspot.sg/">bumpitybump.blogspot.sg/</a> (accessed Aug 31, 2016) | 5 <a href="http://bumpitybump.blogspot.sg/2011/04/">bumpitybump.blogspot.sg/2011/04/</a> | 6 <a href="http://uber.com/">uber.com/</a> (accessed Aug 31, 2016) | 7 <a href="http://airbnb.com">airbnb.com</a> (accessed Aug 31, 2016) | 8 <a href="http://lostgenerationspace.blogspot.sg/2011/09/jalan-petaling-cap.html">lostgenerationspace.blogspot.sg/2011/09/jalan-petaling-cap.html</a> (accessed Aug 31, 2016) | 9 <a href="http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_Dataran">en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_Dataran</a> (accessed Aug 31, 2016) | 10 <a href="http://projekdialog.com/featured/khabar-dan-an-gin-exkursus-on-faith-in-kelantan/">projekdialog.com/featured/khabar-dan-an-gin-exkursus-on-faith-in-kelantan/</a> (accessed Aug 31, 2016) | 11 Kelantan is a state of Malaysia and is located in the north-eastern corner of the peninsula. Kelantan is an agrarian state with lush paddy fields, rustic fishing villages and casuarina-lined beaches. | 12 <a href="http://susannebosch.de/132.0.html">susannebosch.de/132.0.html</a> (accessed Aug 31, 2016) | 13 Kuala Sepetang Community Project, <i>Look Port Weld</i> , lookportweld.wordpress.com/ (accessed Aug 31, 2016) | 14 <a href="http://bumpitybump.blogspot.sg/2013/09/ah-sohs-place-georgetown-festival.html">bumpitybump.blogspot.sg/2013/09/ah-sohs-place-georgetown-festival.html</a> (accessed Aug 31, 2016) | 15 Asian way to name people... "uncle, aunt" Image Copyrights: Alex Lee |
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# BUKU JALANAN'S

Zikri Rahman

# POLITICS

in conversation with

# OF THE STREET

Elaine W. Ho



A bi-monthly book discussion in Taman Tasik Shah Alam, 2012

Zikri Rahman consistently embarks on diverse interdisciplinary socio-cultural-political activism projects with the focus on public space subversion as a form of knowledge transaction. *Buku Jalanan*, a project he co-founded as a cultural workers' collective and an

autonomous community-based cultural and literacy initiative, has now spread to almost 80 different locations worldwide.

He is also the festival director for the inaugural *Idearaya*; a festival of ideas to celebrate progressive and dynamic

discourses within vibrant and diverse grassroots communities, intelligentsia, civil society and community organizers in Southeast Asia. Apart from that, Zikri is also a writer, independent researcher, translator and podcaster for various online portals such as *Projek Dialog*,

*Jalan Telawi* and *Roket Kini*. Currently, he is doing a cultural and literary mapping project in understanding the development of the city Kuala Lumpur through literature lenses with *LiteraCity*.<sup>1</sup>

Without having known all that Zikri Rahman is involved with, spending two weeks with him during the master class *TransActions in the Field* made it obvious that this young man is extremely active and connected. Wherever we went—to a café, on the street or in the metro, he ran into people he knew. So...either Zikri is the friendliest mafioso in Kuala Lumpur, or he is a jack of all trades. Working in the realms of cultural studies and social justice, Zikri's activities as a writer, researcher, translator, festival director and even podcaster put him in touch with all manners of people and bring him all over the city. The following dialogue focuses on one of these activities, not coincidentally also involving many social groups and multiple locations. *Buku Jalanan* is the open-air reading group that Zikri, with two fellow students, began in 2011, in the university district of Shah Alam. With the simple manifest to “bring books down from exclusive shelves and out to public spaces for all”, the pages of *Buku Jalanan*, (literally translated as ‘street books’) has come to include around 80 chapters all over Malaysia and the globe. Here, Zikri and I read together through the work of *Buku Jalanan*, reflecting upon the potentialities of reading as a form of organization, organization as an on-going dialogue, and dialogue as a means to emancipation.

**Zikri Rahman:** We started *Buku Jalanan* in the year 2011 with the awareness that there is a lack of public spaces being used for public activity. Public space here is always either sponsored by the state or corporations, both with agendas which actually side-line the idea of public space itself. The global phenomenon of privatizing public spaces also reflects our consciousness as a collective to reclaim it.

In addition, studying in the local university under the repressive University and University College Act and the Educational Institutions (Discipline) Act (Act 174) means that students are not allowed to engage in politics. We would like to raise awareness and create alternatives for discourse. Books and the act of reading can be seen as neutral, but to see a group of students converge and take part in different activities and sharing sessions within the realms of books, arts, culture and activism helps us to fill the void within university discourse and reimagine what we can do together.

**Elaine W. Ho:** The idea of utilizing public space in conjunction with the act of reading is wonderful and very challenging, because that is the point when reading goes beyond an individual activity towards a collective and shared one.

The accessibility of information in our modern age now is full of potential, and yet general society remains banal, merely consisting of passive readers. Thus it is no longer a question of how much we read, but how much we gauge the potential of reading as an act of liberation. Reading alone is not sufficient, and so the reason why *Buku Jalanan* emphasizes the idea of utilizing public space is to advocate cultural change collectively through the simple act of reading. But it is not only the act of reading. It is the idea and praxis that reading brings from theory and from the words we consume. We do believe in the notion “to read the word, is to read the world”.

And with so many chapters all over the world, it seems like *Buku Jalanan* is slowly doing that! But the culture and politics of public space in different countries is so diverse, how does the confluence of reading and space work in these different contexts, and is context-specificity important to you all?

Yes, there are 80 autonomous chapters of Buku Jalanan worldwide, run by hundreds of budding cultural activist-cum-librarians, meaning we interact with totally different contexts altogether. The most popular initiatives work via NGOs or advocacy groups centred in urban areas. But Buku Jalanan, as an idea, transgresses the boundaries of the urban-rural divide, opening it up to multiple adaptations of the idea.

For me, the practice must be context specific because the interaction happens within different groups of people and communities. For example, Buku Jalanan in Shah Alam interacts with the student-based community, but our counterparts in Buku Jalanan Chow Kit focus upon marginalized groups in the city. This does influence our priorities in terms of the types of literature and texts, the discourse and even the language that we speak in meetings. Nevertheless, transversality and the idea of solidarity within different multiplicities have always been the focus, and for us, advocacy must happen in public space as a form of 'dynamic' and ongoing protest.

This reminds me of the 'space of appearance' discussed by Hannah Arendt, beautifully referenced here in the following passage from Judith Butler:

*Freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us or, indeed, among us. So this is not a matter of finding the human dignity within each person, but rather of understanding the human as a relational and social being, one whose action depends upon equality and articulates the principle of equality. Indeed, there is no human on [sic] her view if there is no equality. No human can be human alone. And no human can be human without acting in concert with others and on conditions of equality. I would add the following: The claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together or, rather, when, through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being. This space is a feature and effect of action, and it only works, according to Arendt, when relations of equality are maintained.<sup>2</sup>*

I remember also a scene from Howard Zinn's memoir *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*,<sup>3</sup> about an incident in which the black students pressure and attack the racial policy of the main library by asking the library staff to provide them several reading materials that they were not allowed to read. In the end, the library must concede and provide them with the reading materials. This anecdote really left a lasting impact on me of how books can indirectly create change and be used as liberating tools of critical consciousness.

Yes! For Arendt, the idea of the *polis* stems from the Greek city-states as the place in which some have the right to speak, act and vote, but thus also represents a space in which we are allowed to be heard, seen and acknowledged as bodies and as human beings.<sup>4</sup> This space of appearance relates just as much to tools of power like books, which are made visible or invisible by those who control them. It seems very much in line with what you mentioned previously in regards to using books and discourse as a reaction to the stifling of it by the state. Is that how you saw it from the beginning?

Buku Jalanan's beginning in Shah Alam was natural, since most of us are from here. But Shah Alam is also a city with five different universities in the area, which is superb for us because most of our visitors are either university students or the local community. Although Shah Alam is actually a university town, there is a lack of a functioning public library (one exists, but is quite far from the centre) and also a lack of bookshops. This provides us with the opportunity to intervene strategically.



Participatory literary installation of Cerita Pendek Terpanjang during Buku Jalanan, 2013

So you were actually beginning in response to a specific need. What kinds of books have you then focused upon to do this?

We are responding to the reality of the space in Shah Alam, which mainly consists of university students. For me personally, the ideas

must come out of specific needs of the society but always with the idea to rethink society together. The selection of books as outlined in our Buku Jalanan manual follows the principle of "books for all, all kind of books". We are always focused on bringing quality reading materials in any form possible: zines, pamphlets or even flyers. From the reality, of course, it is our desire to allow the culture of discourse, and most importantly, the culture of dissent, to take place within our community.

Has there also been a circulation of certain books coming out of your activities that surprised you, or a readership that you didn't expect to emerge?

When we hold a Buku Jalanan session, it is quite common for us to share all kinds of books. Since we openly share some sensitive books, one time a visitor actually questioned our selection. The thing is, though, the book in question, *Memoir Shamsiah Fakeh*, was published by the university press and openly sold in bookshops. Shamsiah Fakeh is one of the senior leaders of the Malayan Communist Party and a pro-independence fighter. It is funny, even when a book is in the bookshop, people are not aware of it, but when it is put into public space, the perception becomes very much different.

In regards to the phenomena that emerge, I guess the openness of various individuals to organize their own Buku Jalanan within their localities is something that has surprised me. With more than 80 chapters worldwide, it means that we do have some kind of readership that is open to the ideas and possibilities for a new cultural movement to take place. But the question is how can we make it sustainable and radicalize it further?

For the chapters outside of Malaysia, are they also reading and sharing books in foreign languages, or is the emphasis still placed upon Malay and Malaysian issues?

Most of it is still very much Malaysian books, but the issues discussed are very much global. There are lots of ideas that we can venture into, and I am looking forward to see how the international communities of Buku Jalanan, like Buku Jalanan Beijing<sup>5</sup>, Buku Jalanan Germany<sup>6</sup> or Buku Jalanan Mansurah<sup>7</sup> translate the books from the respective countries into Malay languages. This will prove to be a good initiative as well.

Are there specific rules that every chapter has to follow in order to maintain its status?

We do not have any specific rules for each chapter, though we have produced a manual on how to set up your own Buku Jalanan. It is merely a checklist on certain aspects you should maintain and emphasizes our principle of "B.A.C.A.: Books. Arts. Culture. Activism." *Baca* literally means 'read' in Malay, and this is how we develop our activities.

It is very flexible, such that people with books can actually organize their own Buku Jalanan. The act of sharing and encouraging mutual belief and solidarity are what make all the difference in how we organize Buku Jalanan.

Encouraging the public to set up their own Buku Jalanan, or to take part in the process of organizing it, stems from the belief that nobody owns public space, clearly it belongs to everyone and yet to nobody in particular. In terms of the book collection, for now most of the books come from local contributions, and we also work closely with various groups. We hold bi-monthly discussions and sharing sessions. For us in Buku Jalanan Shah Alam, we utilize the park, which has a very strategic location in front of the playgrounds. So there are also a lot of children coming over to do *conteng-conteng* — scribbling and painting together with us. From there, we document the artwork done by them and turn it into some sort of guerrilla public art gallery to enhance the ambiance of the surroundings.

Usually, the turn out for each event is around 20–30 people, not including those who come and go along the way. The way we keep track of attendance is through our book-borrowing list, because most of them come for the books and discussion. Basically, we are very interdependent in terms of organizing, since we believe in the most organic and sporadic forms of organization, which allow it to be adapted and open-sourced in different dynamics and contexts.

One thing is that it is very clear that we do not advocate any selling of books, and we are very fond of the idea of 'copyleft', especially for books which are out of print and hard to find. We believe that knowledge should not be commodified, and sharing sessions should be democratic. Having said that, we are also aware that some chapters of Buku Jalanan do sell books and zines, but we completely



Installation preparation during second year anniversary of Buku Jalanan, 2012



Visitors during Buku Jalanan's Conteng-Conteng session, 2011

understand, especially if they are outside of Kuala Lumpur where it may be quite hard to obtain books, or if selling helps to sustain their activities in the long run.

It is our belief that Buku Jalanan should be an open platform to advocate cultural change and exchange. The 'conscientization' as put forward by Paulo Freire is something that we hold dear to allow critical reflection to take place in both our reality and desire.<sup>8</sup>

Is Buku Jalanan goal-oriented?

We do have an open-ended goal, but it is always based on the different interpretations of the active members in Buku Jalanan. The aspirations and the goals might be different, but always with the focus to agitate different forms of cultural output, from discussion groups and making songs to writing articles and getting involved with community art projects.

Besides that, we do charter our own long term planning every five years, and this year is our fifth year. The dynamics of the group are changing but it can be stated positively that we have achieved and learned new things along the way, which is the most important thing as a collective.

The five-year plan is a very good measure for an organization—seen everywhere from the anarchist-leaning activist group Autonomous 8 in Hong Kong to the Communist Party of China!<sup>9</sup> I am impressed that you all had the foresight to consider this manner of flexible institutionalizing so early on. And how does it work? Does it mean this year you will have to draft a whole new charter, and do you expect that it will change very much from the previous plan?

In a way, yes. It is not really a charter but a retrospective and reflection of what we are doing, from our collective and individual experiences. It involves everyone who is active in coordinating Buku Jalanan; we are going to brainstorm on how to make it to the next level.

For now, we are very much in the process of reflection, especially concerning our own practices and approaches. Buku Jalanan, from my own understanding, is merely a tactic. For it to be successful, we must develop as a tactical-based collective toward some sort of diverse front, to allow for broader collaborations and initiatives to take place.

The dynamics are changing, and of course will continue to change. To otherwise be in a state of stagnation is suicidal. There must be continuous dialectical processes within the group to enhance the best ways possible for experimenting with space. We never know what the outcomes from the process will be.

I like this idea very much, that you do not fix the collective in terms of a solid form, but refer to it as a tactic. It really turns the act of reading into something more embodied, with the power to activate subjects rather than rest as mere objects of consumption. There has never been a time when we had so much information readily



Compilation of artworks during Conteng-Conteng session at fourth year anniversary of Buku Jalanan, 2014

available at our fingertips—to read, to watch, to hear—but when I ride the metro, it only depresses me to see the rows of passive robots scanning information via mobile phones. Of course engagement may also occur, but very often the taking in of media is left at the level of consumption. Lately, I have also been dwelling upon the possibilities for the act of reading to become embodied, towards a subjective empowerment. Your words and Buku Jalanan’s ideas create a lot of resonance, but we have yet to answer the question of how organized reading could go beyond consumption towards that form of liberation of which you speak.

Yes, reading levels have increased, but we end up merely being consumers and worse, addicted to various confluences of information. For me, the answer of how organized reading could go beyond consumption lies in the word ‘organized’. Organizing is something that we do not see much of, especially in Malaysia. It is always within the confined spaces of party politics or NGOs that society is organized for us, and thus we feel a genuine, grassroots popular initiative must take place. The act of reading has always been seen from the individual perspective; it is very personal. For us, the personal is politics; the way we perceive our reading materials, or even why we choose certain materials to share with the public, is political.

The unfortunate and very difficult predicament that independent practitioners find themselves in during our time of late-capitalism, however, is one in which everything can be appropriated and capitalized upon, even self-organization. Isn’t that what the DIY ethos is all about? Grassroots has come to mean for many people making your own start-up. Talking about the relation between activity and space, how do artists and other cultural workers not simply end up being gentrifiers?

The question of artists, or in our case, the cultural workers, ending up as gentrifiers is a non-question since we start our initiative from the act of reading, which can be deemed as a very passive and neutral act. The question of gentrification would only exist when those who come are isolated from what we are doing. Maybe the word gentrifiers should be changed to ‘agitators’, since that is what we are actually doing—to continually agitate the public by our presence in these spaces. We are aware of its potential.

In this regard, I am very much influenced by Louis Althusser and his theory of the apparatus,<sup>10</sup> especially within cinema, where the whole industry is very much interrelated, from the producers (filmmakers, film producers, cinematographers, etc.) to the masses. What we are doing here is exactly the same, breaking and dissecting the chains between cultural producers and the masses. By taking action directly in public spaces, maybe and hopefully we can have the negotiating power to influence and work towards liberating the whole apparatus of a systemic industry.

Can you give a specific example of how you felt that Buku Jalanan’s activities were left at mere consumerism or addiction to information? What did you do to try to go beyond or resist that?

It can be as simple as people sharing and retweeting on social media without going deeper into what is happening. I guess it is a global thing—information or news is something that we consume from time to time, for people to forget, so that we can produce more and, of course, consume more.

The idea for Buku Jalanan to go beyond this is to ensure that we are organizing something that will not be detached from the interest of the masses—it sounds populist, but in an era of viral information, popular initiatives must be a double-edged sword. Maybe it would not work in the short-term, but if we stay long enough to be a part of the process and rooted in the community, then only will cultural formation take place.

What is community to you personally?

As we are organizing in public spaces, our sense and idea of community is always ‘in-between’ and nomadic. For example, those who actually participated in a previous Buku Jalanan might not be involved for the next one, and this allows us to be experimental in our approach.

This is because the time of interaction with different individual participants in Buku Jalanan will produce different spaces of contact, especially in terms of contributing to the development of Buku Jalanan. For example, during our meetings, we do have different settings for discussion and sharing sessions – some in which open topics are encouraged and some others which are topic-based, in which we usually collaborate with different collectives and individuals who are keen to share.

Buku Jalanan advocates the idea of community space, and it is our concern to agitate the public space from time to time to reclaim its functionality. The public space, which we idealize, corresponds to the idea of community that we believe in and aspire to: egalitarian and critical.

In the last years, there has been a huge shift and emphasis placed upon local context and rootedness, especially with regard to community-related and activist projects. This is something you see quite often in Hong Kong, where with an easy enemy such as



Interactive sculpture during third year anniversary of Buku Jalanan, 2013



Banner displayed during the Buku Jalanan session, 2014

‘the Mainland’, I sense that people feel the urgency to over-assert some kind of separate local identity, sometimes to the point of xenophobia and neo-fascism, unfortunately.

So when you talk about nomadism in the context of community building, I find it a very stimulating juxtaposition because it seems to differ from the idea of fixed, long-term identities that try to utilize historical fundamentalisms. How do you balance a certain kind of ‘in-between’-ness and fluidity of identity with activist causes, which very often need to be simple, direct and concrete?

Of course, activist causes are always perceived to be simple, direct and concrete in dimension, and that is exactly what Buku Jalanan in practice is. We are only in our fifth year and the question of cultural formation is very much out of our reach since it must be done with continuous analysis to see how it unfolds.

Cultural formation is a space of interaction and intervention, and that is how we are advocating the idea of opening up space, by ensuring everyone has their own active role in ‘in-between’ space.

I think I remember you telling me before that the group has changed a lot over time, or stagnated in periods because of the lack of structure or motivation from the protagonists. How does the group persist then, despite that?

Yes, the changing dynamics in groups can sometimes be ‘fatal’, especially if we do not anticipate any changes to it. The *raison d’être* for Buku Jalanan is crystal clear: to go against the bureaucratic structure of knowledge production and allow the democratization of it to take place within the community.

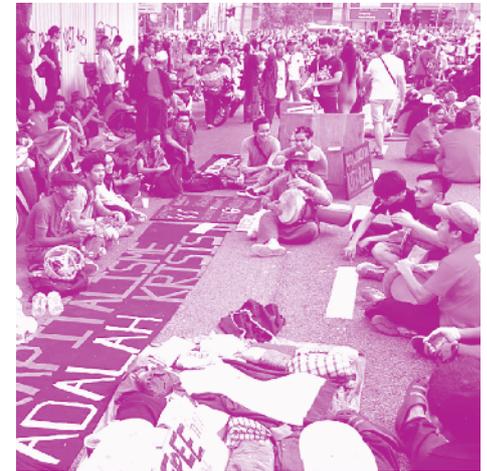
Having said that, as a group, the only way forward is to continually engage the public through any cultural means necessary. It is very clear that from the start we have been made up of different individuals with autonomous decisions made collectively. From here, Buku Jalanan will serve as an open platform, and the most important thing to make it persevere is by working together, to make it open-source, for people to replicate the idea and to start working together in their own community; to rethink the idea of community as a whole.



Preparation for Padang Jawa Street Arts Festival, Shah Alam, 2013



Shows during Padang Jawa Street Arts Festival, Shah Alam, 2013



Peace camp during May Day rally, 2014

1 [facebook.com/buku-jalanan/](https://www.facebook.com/buku-jalanan/) and [timeout.com/kuala-lumpur/books-and-poetry/buku-jalanan-titi](https://www.timeout.com/kuala-lumpur/books-and-poetry/buku-jalanan-titi) (accessed Aug 31, 2016); [facebook.com/literacitykl/](https://www.facebook.com/literacitykl/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

2 Butler, Judith. “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street” *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies*. [eipcp.net/transveral/1011/butler/en](http://eipcp.net/transveral/1011/butler/en) (September 2011) (accessed Aug 31, 2016).

3 Zinn, Howard. *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train* (Massachusetts: Beacon Press) 1994.

4 Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press) 1958.

5 [facebook.com/buku-jalananbeijing](https://www.facebook.com/buku-jalananbeijing) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

6 [bukujalananjerman.blogspot.my/?m=1](http://bukujalananjerman.blogspot.my/?m=1) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

7 [facebook.com/BukuJalananMansurah](https://www.facebook.com/BukuJalananMansurah) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

8 Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of The Oppressed*. (London: Penguin Books Ltd) 1996

9 The Five-Year Plans of the Communist Party of China are a series of social and economic development initiatives that map “strategies for economic development, setting growth targets and launching reforms” within five-year periods. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five-year\\_plans\\_of\\_China](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five-year_plans_of_China) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

Autonomous 8, a coalition of activists greatly involved in the social movements of Hong Kong, also reorganises its charter every five years. To read the current charter and learn more about Autonomous

8, please see: [smrc8a.org/about-us/](https://www.smrc8a.org/about-us/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

10 Ferrer, Luke. *Louis Althusser* (Routledge Critical Thinkers). (New York: Routledge) 2006.

Image Copyrights: Buku Jalanan (50, 53, 54, 55, 57, 59) Padang Jawa Street Arts Festival (58, 59 top)

# QUESTIONS

Lee Chun Fung

# OUT OF THE

in conversation with

# DEMONSTRATION

Elaine W. Ho

# AREA

**Lee Chun Fung** (b. 1984) graduated from the Chinese University of Hong Kong's Fine Arts Department in 2007. His artistic interests include: Art activism, urban space, autonomous self-organized practice, and independent publishing. His practices cover different media and disciplines, ranging from art action, video, photography, zine-publishing, workshop, writing, curating and etc. He is the co-founder of the community/art space Wooferten.<sup>1</sup>

Few Few Prize, Many Many Praise, 2009, HK



Lee Chun Fung is an artist and curator from Hong Kong, best known for his work with Woofertent<sup>2</sup>, the artist-run community art space active in the Yaumatei area of Kowloon from 2009-2015. As a young practitioner whose art school days coincided with what critic Jasper LAU Kin Wah describes as the “late arrival of ‘the real 1997’”<sup>3</sup> and growing politicisation of art and artists in the early 2000s, Lee has grown to become a veteran of the Hong Kong aesthetics of protest. He is the only original member of Woofertent to staunchly stay with the project, from the time of its initial stewardship as recipient of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council’s (ADC) Shanghai Street Art Space commission all the way until the lamentable closing of its doors after a two-year controversy and stalemate. The following interview is an insight into Lee’s reflections on the practice of Woofertent and socially engaged art practice in the context of Hong Kong.

## CONTEXT, LOCALITY, CRITICALITY

**Elaine W. Ho:** During the *TransActions in the Field* master class, a great deal of discussion was placed upon context-specificity, which at times makes the possibility for learning and exchange difficult when we are all working in extremely different situations with diverse resources, socio-political backgrounds and intentions. While terms such as site-specific, context-specific or site-conditioned have been often used in the art world to describe varying degrees of relations between time-space and the artwork, within the discussion of socially engaged practice, the consideration of these terms perhaps needs to be refined further. I think a lot about the place-making nature of people, events and situations themselves, which then creates an ongoing dialogue between time and space.

**Lee Chun Fung:** Actually I don’t really understand the differences between context-specific, site-specific or site-conditioned, but context and site are very often considered together; they have an interactive relationship. Generally, my practice begins from the concept and topic. How can meaning be established between people, groups and society at large via the dialogical capacity of art, and can this meaning also trigger action? Very often, context and site are misplaced targets; the ideas and relations between people take the real leading role.

To speak of a practice exactly triggered towards action needs its own vocabularies and categorization to understand it more fully. Because you address work, and a way of working inherently tied to human relations, perhaps there is no way to compare the final ‘piece’ or resulting outcome of much context-specific and site-specific art. Considering relations is a constant feedback and feed forward dialogue of a never-ending, processual nature.

But looking at the more recent work you’ve done this year in Zürich, were there any elements directly taken from your practice in Hong Kong that could be transferred to the new context?

Zürich this time was not really a residency or period for my own creative work. I was working together with friends there to develop a trans-regional education programme. At Woofertent, many of our ideas and activities began out of impromptu talks between members of the community or friends. The accumulated rhythm of these kinds of ‘jam sessions’ is very important.



The kind of coming-and-going practice of entering a new environment is different from my work at WooferTen. It takes time to go more deeply into a place, and it is not easy to develop closer interactions with others. So in cases like these, I rather take the position of the observer or share perspectives from my own background. There was one time when we visited an elderly woman in Tokyo and listened to her story of protesting the highway to be built in her community. For several consecutive years, she went every morning to the station to hold up her sign in protest, but even then many of the city residents were unaware of the situation. So I organized the details of the story together, and by means of several artistic interventions and workshops hosted by 3331 Arts Chiyoda was able to connect the protest, an exhibition space and several different people together.<sup>4</sup> However, what I want to stress is that while these kinds of externally imported practices have a certain significance, my focus is still upon the rooted locality of Hong Kong.

Is it possible to have the same measure of criticality when working in an unfamiliar environment? What is the relationship for you between criticality and locality?

I think criticality is universal and not something limited to those from certain backgrounds. Self-criticality is an evaluation of the degree of sincerity between concept and praxis, and criticality towards the other points out the orientation and meaning of one's action, revealing the complicated power relations and structures of reality.

As for localness, I think of it as the identity and relations created by the 'soil', which has nourished your development, including the political soil, economic soil and the socio-cultural soil. It is also a commitment. For example, I grew up in Hong Kong in the 80s and 90s, and all of the major events, urban development, pop culture, education system, and resistance movements *etc.*, of those before me, make up who I am today. This is reflected in my thinking and action, like the accumulation of history. I create a promise with these layers of history in order to protect that which I value. Similar to receiving a gift, the soil becomes my property, but also something I am indebted to, and for this I am thankful; there is a need to acknowledge it.

Another thing to take note of is that 'localness' takes on distinct meanings in different contexts. For example, the Chinese translation of 'local' has different versions: 本土 *bun tou* (local referencing an ideology?), 在地 *zoi dei* (referencing

a mode of action?), 本地 *bun dei* (referencing place/space?), 地道 *dei dou* (referencing common or folk culture?), *etc.* To use these concepts without a clear grasp of which particularity is being referenced can often lead to serious misunderstandings.

#### PO, LAAP: COMMUNITY X ART X ACTIVISM

From what I understand of WooferTen's practice, media and communication were very crucial aspects of the project. But looking at it from another angle, I sometimes sensed a kind of conflict between the internal organisation of the group and its external publicity or representation. Where does community stand within this conflict?

In the context of neoliberalism, 'community' in Hong Kong could be understood on one hand by the word '破 *po*' (to destroy), and on the other as '立 *laap*' (to establish). At WooferTen, a majority of the artists' practices tended towards 'po'. Rather than direct creation or building up, we smash down and critique issues relating to the current situation as a way of pointing out new possibilities. As a result, in our context of *po* it becomes rather difficult to grow the process of publicising and communication. In the long-term, it is a reason for internal conflicts and the inability to sustain our development. Community cannot wallow at the levels of posturing, activity or critique; it must also include the establishing of a 'common' and continuous communication. But many community art projects in Hong Kong suffer various constraints, and it is difficult to push towards that point.

If the attitude tends closer towards destruction, can it still be called 'community'?

I think that to destroy and to build up, unmaking and making, are parts of the process of establishing and constructing. The reality of critique or destruction is one phase, and the organisation of smashed fragments to re-establish something new is another. They supplement and complement one another. But within the situation of Hong Kong, usually too much emphasis is placed upon thorough destruction, with too little know-how to positively ask, "What kind of life can we create?" Actually, the reason is probably that here you have little possibility to take hold of the power necessary to create change. On the contrary, a so-called freedom of speech means that action at the level of posturing will always manage to be seen. Does the ability to continue only point out our greater powerlessness or

our continued hope? You could say hope and despair are both fabricated, but at least it is through hope that we go towards a future.

Why is this label of ‘community art’ so important for describing WooferTen? Are there better terms to describe you and how you perceive community? If we take two projects from WooferTen as examples in order to make a comparison, like *Few Few Prize, Many Many Praise* from the early period, and one of the last projects, *Pitt Street Riot: Rolling Theatre of Tiananmen Massacre*, how did these two projects conceive of community differently?

During the early period of WooferTen’s practice, ‘community’ corresponded to those quickly disappearing and ruptured social relations. But as those social problems were addressed, the responsibility shifted toward ideas being practiced in real life. Those later projects all hoped for longer-term development.

*Few Few Prize, Many Many Praise* and the *Pitt Street Riot* projects have five years’ distance between them. The concept behind *Few Few Prize* was quite flashy, but the actual publicly participatory elements were rather cheap. Artists went out to interview neighbours, look for interesting bits, later made trophies, and then the neighbours became the happy recipients. This project was of course much more down-to-earth than those public sculptures that appear to drop down from the sky into a community, and it is also a bit more inspiring than “let’s paint murals together with the neighbours.” But did we really create something deep within the community? Probably it was only just stirring things up, and maybe it was somewhat inspiring, but the project only lasted one to two months. What was interesting was that because of that project, we were able to engage in longer-term relationships with the neighbours, like for example with one neighbour who

came back three years later with her trophy asking for it to be repaired. That meant that trophy was really quite important to her. But the key point is, that also could only happen because we were continuously active.

*Pitt Street Riot* was actually not so different, but it could only happen with entering more deeply into the context. Actually, we had been investigating this historical incident for many years,<sup>5</sup> so once the project kicked off we were able to refer to many people and research materials. Considering



Battle of Tamagawa  
Josui, 2011, Tokyo

the factors of time and space, the significance and spirit of this project are very different from *Few Few Prize, Many Many Praise*. For example, on the day of the performance many good friends from the Yaumatei area came to participate, and the whole event was like an explosive climax; there were many lengthy discussions afterwards. Not long after the performance, there was an action to raise funds against the northeastern New Territories development plan, and a few months later the Umbrella Movement began. All of these are the echoes of spontaneous resistance from the people. The group organization of *Pitt Street Riot* actually brought the greatest number of possibilities to the project, because after entering the community to look for answers, together we were able to gain a picture of how, back in 1989, the Yaumatei community was able to support the student movement. For those of us of this generation, not present at the scene in ‘89, we were able to make a connection to this history. June 7th is precisely an event that goes beyond that time-space; it is our connection to the past via this place today. As for the community, at least it’s possible to say this event could resuscitate a vanished history to become an ‘event’ after all. In one instance, during our street play we re-enacted the action of a neighbour who had been there that year and hung banners at a nearby middle school. Seeing this, he also began to ask himself, “This incident has been discarded for so many years...what can we still do today?”

If you ask me to compare the two projects, I would actually say both were one-time experiments, unable to communicate very deeply, and unable to reach a more in-depth ideological reflection. They stress a form of questioning and inquiry, not a long-term thinking about building-up and organizing.

What kind of relations have these projects created? What kinds of connections, futures or possible movements? That is what is really important. Allowing for the accumulation of time, for an intertwining, can lead us towards real relations of resistance, and only then can the foundations be laid for social change. Otherwise it’s only populism and emotional catharsis. This is the general meaning of “Community x Art x Activism”.

Because the term ‘community art’ is often referred to, even in the Hong Kong context, in English, it is easy to make the connection towards its genealogy in the west, like its use by state-supported initiatives in the United Kingdom from the 1960s. Seeing that WooferTen also stems from a government initiative, do you think community arts in Hong Kong have extracted certain elements from this history of western social practice? Where do they depart from western practices to become something specific to the Hong Kong context?

From the Chinese to the Japanese speaking worlds, the translation of the word ‘community’ itself varies based upon different local cultural and political contexts. For example, the word ‘街坊 *kaifong*’ in Cantonese is relatively closer to ‘community’ in English than the word ‘社區 *se keoi*’ (more like district or subdivision). If you look at it from the angle of intimacy between people, these words are created from particular historical, temporal and spatial, political, economic and cultural contexts (like how residents self-organized a “*kaifong* mutual welfare association” under colonial rule). ‘街坊 *kaifong*’ does not necessarily have the same associations and connotations in Taiwan and mainland China. Therefore, ‘community art’ becomes a complex discussion, and different cultural contexts necessarily explain ‘community art’ in varying ways. Without starting from the

cultural context, grounding why people go and do something, genuine dialogue and exchange is almost impossible.

To put it simply, no matter whether in Hong Kong or any other place, we must ask upon what relations do the practice of 'community art' reflect? What values does it propose? What problems does it reflect in that society? What temporality and spatiality does it correspond to? What are its methods, its content? Who are its targets? What ethics are embedded? These are the questions to be answered when using this word, otherwise it is only a casually applied diversion in reaction, without any greater possibility for deeper development—only a consumption of the radicality of this concept. As for strategies adopted from the west, I think it is mainly an issue of the discrepancies of 'modernity'. Some things that have been experienced in 'the west' and brought to a different context will naturally diverge and have their own specific development. But to stress again, it should not be a kind of mere 'cultural transplantation', and it is very necessary to tie in to a contextual background in order to answer those questions.<sup>6</sup>

As *TransActions in the Field* participating artist, Zulu Kageyama, also brought up during the master class, this word has indeed created many misunderstandings in the Asian context. I would like to hear you explain a bit further about the meaning of 'community' in the context of the art and activist spheres in Hong Kong particularly, including how you would answer those challengingly posed questions above. Can you answer them with respect to your own practice?

It is exactly when we discuss 'community' within the context of Hong Kong that we can be more precise about what is meant, but the questions above are already answers, and they are what give meaning to community. Does the *Pitt Street Riot* project correspond to the questions of who controls the voice of history? If history is in the hands of individuals, are the methods and hopes underpinning it a rhizomatic, decentralising platform for action? What are the reasons this can or cannot be realised? If we think that Hong Kong's manner of grieving June 7th is too simplified, would a more diverse and spontaneous form of civic discussion be feasible? Between the lines of these questions is the hint of a commonality or individuality amidst authority (the multitude?). How do we resist the oppression of the system and conceptually link together? Would that be a possibility for saving ourselves?

### TIME, ETHICS, 'THE DEMONSTRATION AREA'

I heard before that criticism towards the ADC's decision to end support for WoofertTen was premised on the question of time: "How can you place a time limit on community?" How do you see this issue?

It is exactly that the ADC sees the Shanghai Street Art Space as temporary, so the longer WoofertTen stayed there, the greater the pressure for us to leave. This is actually how the government understands the resources of these spaces and programmes as their 'demonstration area'. They control 99% of the resources anyway, and the invitations are in their hands. The significance of WoofertTen lies in whether or not it was able, despite these kinds of rules and limitations, to break through this 'demonstration area' to some degree. What relations and imaginaries of resistance could be created outside of their frameworks for production,



WoofertTen, 2015, HK

and what are the knowledge and ethics of them? How to continue? At that moment and place of existing as WoofertTen at the Shanghai Street Art Space, these were the main questions on which to reflect.

If that is the case, I think to some extent perhaps you were always clear that what WoofertTen was doing did not necessarily fall under the label of community art, and actually the urgency of action and response follows what you mentioned previously concerning criticality. If the space was merely a 'demonstration area', what kind of power does your criticality have? Looking back, do you think the practice of

WoofertTen was indeed able to break through the 'demonstration area'? And yes, what were the relations and imaginaries of resistance created outside of their frameworks for production? To ask you that question exactly, what were the knowledge and ethics of the work?

It all refers back to the problem of the vagueness of the concept of community art. Without referring to a particular context in reality, it is harder to focus. Are we saying we want to create community? To service the community? Or to solve some problems within the community? Can art solve problems? If what it resolves are not real problems, then what are they? I think what I actually wanted to address with the practice of WoofertTen was in between 'community art' addressing issues of the community and the community as a target of 'community art'. The former is like many of the art projects that come from the system—relatively focused upon the ego of the artist and actually grounded by the elite. The latter is like many of those neighbourhood beautification art projects. Their protagonists emphasize participation itself, and aesthetics and criticality play relatively small roles. Even so, whether or not there is a kind of platform for equal dialogue, is there a place for each one's ego?

Simply put, what I want to do is rebuild 'heterogeneous relations', and the aesthetics within these relations can spur on and inspire dialogue and creation. Under neoliberalism, can the role of artists come down from that of the elite and privileged classes in order to organise and revolt, to become a role of positioning? I don't dare to say clearly going forward one step at a time will bring about revolution, but at least it will be the right direction, and we will be able to create a social space in which we can live sincerely. Maybe our generation will not bring us to the point where each person can live with dignity and freedom in equality, but there is still hope for the future.

Are we able to break through the 'demonstration area'? If the knowledge and relations accumulated by our actions can positively enter the situation, I think our resistance will already be stronger than simply remaining inside the demonstration area. There are reasons for artists to choose to remain inside feeling self-satisfied; the demonstration area is safe. But this zone cannot directly lead to action, because it is also programmed by the system. It is only in the moment when you actively cross its rails or border tapes that you really strike at the nerve of the system, and only then can it be called a real movement. Isn't that the reason for the demonstration in the first place? Ask yourself the ethics embedded within this: is there a responsibility to take that which has been accumulated from within the demonstration area to the next level? Or do we remain forever within the demonstration area attracting people's favour and support with Facebook 'likes'? Artists can grasp cultural resources and the right



Fools of the World United,  
2015, HK.

to speak more easily than the weakest or lowest levels of society. Therefore, I think that responsibility exists, and we cannot say each person just does their own thing, doing what they're good at without discussing the ethics of it. If we did that, then it would be too easy for artists to gain from those oppressed and in the end, play a part in the machines of oppression.

### CONTINUITY, GOING BACK TO THE BEGINNING, REAL RESISTANCE

Looking back at WoofertTen's work, which project do you think is most worthwhile to continue in the future? What is the most important lesson for you personally as an artist?

Basically I believe that there is a great deal worth criticising throughout the process to the present. The question of what the team and the community reflect upon is more important than which project will continue. Whichever plan should continue is a technical question. To speak about continuing without having addressed the discussion of values would be to fall into another repetitive cycle, and it will be impossible to ever break through toward transformation of the social structure. In the end everyone only feels good and warm, and that is not something artists need to deal with.

Well said. I also think that the practice of HomeShop fell into the trap of hiding criticality behind fun and warm feelings, and too many people never saw beyond that. This veiled way of working is of course also due to the realities of the mainland context,

but outside of technique, you must have learned or felt inspired by something from the experience over the years, no? Can you give an example? If we are to not linger at the level of 'feeling good', what have we changed after feeling critical or feeling bad? Depression is also a symptom of our individualisation under neoliberalism! So how do we turn individual subjectivities, both the elated and the despondent, into collective action?

Like what was mentioned before, what have these practices actually established? What have they resisted? You must, very clearly, ask yourself these questions, otherwise movements will ultimately have no solid meaning. To build and to resist, you must point out the structure, not simply the appearance of problems. If you make a rooftop farm and propose a type of green living, but in the meanwhile many urban spaces that could be self-organized for greening and planted upon are regulated, farms are repossessed and everywhere is gentrified and developed, how can you, with your bit of luck, continue to ignore the situation and keep watering the plants and flowers on your tiny rooftop? Can you call it the best of your ability? Is there a need to point out more radical possibilities? Are you willing to put forth more of a stand, or remain in a comfort zone? That is the question. To many of my friends who have rooftop gardens, please understand that these questions are not personally directed; what I want to emphasize is an ethical responsibility over 'each does his own'. People like to do as they please, but who isn't thirsty after eating salted fish? Things shouldn't be like this, and it is necessary to overcome this kind of neoliberal logic, to interrogate the integrity of our ethics of responsibility. We must realise that there are some things that cannot be easily done or resolved alone. The premise of "Each person does their bit!" is personally directed, and there is a communitarian and altruist slant to feel good that you can play your little part without the ideas really changing. It's not so simply "Each person does their bit!"

One other point: where do resources come from? What is the significance of autonomy? What is the relationship between resources and that which you fight against? Some people think that going inside the system to take resources is one kind of strategy, but how far does the strategy then drift from intention? Where is the limit? As a basic, you shouldn't take from those whom you fight against. If you oppose redevelopment together in the neighbourhood, then take funds from the Urban Renewal Authority in order to make community projects, are you not selling out, for very cheap, the very image of grassroots radicality in which you try to operate? Is the goal of taking resources from the system, in hopes for reaching more people, to mobilise a stronger resistance? Or have you only manufactured another kind of populism? If there is no in-depth dialogue, is it not merely a fast-paced consumption of the idea of resistance or a kind of replication by the system? In the long term, are you able to help everyone to persist in revolt?

I've seen many cases in which unrealistic results are homogenised by the majority. So it is still relatively important to have a solid concept before action. If the foundation is not even steady, who would assure positive change before even getting to the point of change? Most people are interested in action, experimentation and self-practice without asking about the starting points of the situation, and this can never lead to real resistance.



Pitt Street Riot, 2014, HK

1 leechunfung.blogspot.de/ (accessed Aug 31, 2016) and curatorsintl.org/collaborators/lee\_chun\_fung (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

2 wooferten.blogspot.de/ (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

3 LAU Kin Wah, Jaspar. "Politics of a Bio: Hong Kong Art from Dissemination to Usage". *Hong Kong Eye: Contemporary Hong Kong Art* (Milan: Skira Editore SP A) 2012.

4 For more information about 3331 Arts Chiyoda, please visit: 3331.jp. (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

5 On the 7th of June in 1989, just a few days after the tumultuous events at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, a riot spontaneously erupted from Pitt Street in Yaumatei. Over 7,000 protesters became involved and several injured or arrested, resulting in the cancellation of a planned public strike

in support of the students in Beijing. Woofertent's *Pitt Street Riot* project encompassed a street theatre performance based upon oral histories collected from the Yaumatei neighbourhood. The video documentation of this re-enactment, with additional documents and texts, were compiled in 2014 for a publication of the same name. pittstreetriot.blogspot.com (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

6 Lee collaborated with FOA-FLUX in 2015, a researcher group based in Zurich, for the idea of launching an interregional education programme. foa-flux.net/ (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

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# ADDING

Yeoh Lian Heng

# LETTERS TO OUR

in conversation with

# TRANSACTIONS

Elaine W. Ho

Malaysian butoh dancer performing during the Jalan Sultan Project, 2010



Yeoh Lian Heng was born in 1978. In 2004 he founded the art space and collective Lostgens' Contemporary Art Space with artist peers, pursuing eclectic expression in the exploration of art's role in society. In his projects, Yeoh utilizes art towards increasing awareness and understanding of various social issues such as the loss of cultural heritage through Pudu and Petaling Street community art projects.

As I talk to Yeoh Lian Heng via an online video chat one evening, he is soft-spoken and modest, as he has been at each of our encounters. His words come out in a fast flurry, giving me the impression that there is much more activity running in his head than can be expressed in the space of his sentences. The self-described combination of “quietness and edginess”<sup>1</sup> of Lostgens' Contemporary Art Space (of which he is one of the co-founders) seems to describe him as well. Despite the incredible amount of pressure and sedimentation that one could imagine from an art space that has been operating for 12 years, Yeoh is self-critical and reflective in a manner that reveals a genuineness to the ‘quiet edge’ of a work that he loves doing. In this conversation, we weave together a combination of looking back at the *TransActions in the Field* master class as an example of the dynamism of Yeoh's practice, juxtaposed with his rich experience as a Kuala Lumpur-based artist, curator and activist.

**Elaine W. Ho:** After the *TransActions in the Field (TATF)* master class ended, there were two concerns that continued to reverberate with me in the following weeks. For one, how to find a form of continuity to reflect and build upon all that we had experienced? And secondly, why was the programme abbreviated TATF and not TITF or TAITF? Well, *ha-ha*, okay perhaps the second one is not so important to discuss...

**Yeoh Lian Heng:** This was not a one-time activity. Many connections that emerged out of *TATF* have quietly unfolded, like the fact that participant Zikri Rahman visited others he met during *TATF* while travelling through Shanghai, Beijing and Taiwan. One of the main sites of the master class, *kampung Banda Dalam*, recently hosted *Teater Atas Pokok* (“Theatre in the Tree”) about historic preservation and included our visit to the *kampung* in their play. Two participants from *TATF*, Bhumini Dhanaketpisarn from Thailand and Paik Yin Lim from Malaysia, were invited to perform.

I remember also reading, not so long ago, about another event that took place in the *kampung*; wasn't there a mapping workshop?

Yes, it was led by visiting architecture scholar Huang Jiu-Mao and curator Sandy Hsiu-Chih Lo from Tamkang University in Taiwan. The exercises from this workshop have catalysed the realisation and publication of a *kampung Banda Dalam* art and culture map, now to be produced as a completely self-organised project by *kampung* residents. Actually, this was an idea that was first hatched during *TATF*. On the tenth day of the programme, some participants from our group visited the Madrasah Tarbiyah mosque and community centre, where a brainstorm meeting was held between myself, Alice Ko, Zikri Rahman, Chen Guan-Jhang and Soleh. The idea to create a map of the *kampung* had started here.

It's a great way to collate the subjectivities and sense of place of residents as well as introduce newcomers to the sites and culture of the village.

Yes, and while of course this map was impossible to materialize during the brief programme of *TATF*, I am happy that it has now become an autonomous initiative.

Most importantly, it is the kind of intervention that, like Indonesian artist and writer Moelyono Moel describes, finds “a sustainable configuration that guarantees the persistence of the work done”.<sup>2</sup> I've heard that the socially-engaged work of Moelyono has been a strong inspiration to the founders of Lostgens'.<sup>3</sup>



Save Jalan Sultan (February 2013). Malaysian dancers Lee Swee Keong and Jack Kek performing during the Save Jalan Sultan Project

Like Moelyono, I think that art workers that pay attention to social issues must keep up the contact and exchange. This is included in his ideas of “sustainable configuration”. I understand that actually these kinds of relations and communication need a great deal of time and resources to be sustained. I believe—just like the design of the *TATF* logo—that at the same time that it appears that distinct atoms may be coming together, they are also loose and nebulously aligned. Different elements will collide, repel away from and/or merge with one another. These are all necessary parts of the process. I am very thankful to the Goethe-Institut in Malaysia for their support and for allowing these kinds of connections to have their start. Whatever happens later is up to us.

Funny, the fact that you bring up the design of the logo is actually related to what I mean about the *TATF* acronym! Forgive me for indulging in negligible details, but the point is that the arrangement of letters refers to these building blocks for what become words, sentences, novels and information—basically all that we can communicatively conceptualize in the spaces that exist between human beings. I refer to Roman alphabetic notation in this example, and in the case of the logo, the visualization of this idea takes the form of cellular-like shapes. The relations between these forms, between the words that are exchanged between us, can exactly be described as transactions in a field. If we imagine ourselves as units within these fields, then we are natural points of energy, reflecting off of one another, some gaining speed, others slowing down, but all in a constant motion that speaks of the kind of continuity that relays our activity in this world.

This juxtaposition somehow also encapsulates for me some of the multiplicities of your role as initiator and co-organizer of *TATF*. On one hand, you had clear responsibilities to be fulfilled, but there were also more loose and amorphous visions for what the workshop could become.

Among the projects I have done, *The TransActions in the Field* master class employed the greatest amount of resources, financially, materially and socially speaking. Even though I have organized bigger projects in the past, like the Pudu Community Art Project,<sup>4</sup> which lasted around half a year and engaged more than 300 participants, gathering a group of artists, activists and curators with different backgrounds as we have for *TATF*, to discuss, work and live together, has been a new kind of methodology with enormous possibilities and risks. Actually, it’s exactly in the spirit of *Lostgens*!

Can you tell me a bit more about the Pudu Community Art Project and how it compares to your experience and methodology working on *TATF*?

In 2010, *Lostgens*’ organized a community outreach project in the Pudu area of Kuala Lumpur. Pudu is one of the most significant historical places in the city, having witnessed the development of Kuala Lumpur from being a little trade settlement, serving a few surrounding mines, to being the prosperous capital city it is today. According to historians, the Pudu village has existed for 120 years and was mostly occupied by early Chinese settlers who were involved in the tin mining industry and other small-scale local trade. It was predominately a Chinese community from the start, and the area is largely populated by the Chinese community even today, with an increasing number of foreign workers.

Due to the rapid development of Kuala Lumpur, a few significant landmarks have been demolished, including five cinemas and the 117-year-old jail. They are part of the collective memory of locals who have lived or are still living in the Pudu area. This project was initiated as an attempt to rediscover the cultural value of Pudu via a series of community-based arts and culture programs that engaged the locals. The aim was to build the groundwork for social bonds with

the hopes of revitalizing the community. The project included oral history sharing, performances, workshops in schools, installations, a community newsletter, a Pudu history exhibition and a lantern-lit moon walk in the neighbourhood during the Mid-Autumn Festival.

The biggest difference between these two examples from my practice is that the Pudu Community Art project was curated by Lostgens' with a very clear working goal. Making an art project or festival creates the production base which defines the working method. On the other hand, TATF offered a framework, but the content within this structure was flexible, opening up many possibilities. Things could suddenly erupt (or at least there was the latent potential for eruption). When you put a group of people of varying backgrounds together for an extended period of time, there will of course be sparks, and this is exactly in line with the nature of contemporary art.

It's true, TATF was a first time experiment, and one of a manner and scale that has never been tried in Kuala Lumpur. But I also think this opening up of possibilities, and the uncertainties that accompany it, were balanced because of the trust and support for the people involved. This includes not only the long-time art workers deeply embedded in communities in Yokohama, Hong Kong and Sarawak, but also young initiatives from Penang, Taiwan and the Philippines. We have all been additionally supported because of the strong team behind Lostgens', and that is probably one of the most crucial foundations behind both of these examples.

So, going back to this idea of open-ended experimentation and surprise, the sparks and eruptions, there is this interesting contradiction that emerges: how does one go about organizing and structuring a field of openness and surprise? This is probably the most fundamental learning lesson for both the organizers of TATF and its participants, yet it is not so clear a package as to say, "We've learned this; our knowledge is recorded; here is our certificate." How, therefore, do we begin to reflect upon an experience such as TATF, and how shall we 'acronymize' in words and pages the kind of experiment it was, so that it not only opens, but spurs us further?

As art workers, or perhaps even more to the point, as members of society, I think there is a need for us to pay attention to social issues such as demolition and relocation; there is a need to be more sensitive to the changes going on in our local surroundings. Art can be used in so many instances. Besides being able to move the soul, art can also move us to action.

I see that today we are up against the enormous totality that is the capitalist system. It is not easy to find a way to respond to a profit-driven system, but art is one possibility.

I agree. Not to reduce everything to binaries, but this balance — between a totalizing, hegemonic structure and the flows that are able to leak through, create fissures and open up possibilities — is exactly what we are addressing. That brings us back to examining the master class as a framework for achieving *what we don't yet know*. You planned TATF together with Susanne Bosch and Soleh for nearly one year prior to the event, and I think it becomes the perfect case study for rethinking the practices that it seeks to address. Indeed, this opportunity to look back at TATF via discussions among us for this publication draws another common field and allows another kind of continuity to deepen and strengthen the "transactions".

Yes, we must try to forge links with other communities and mutually help one another. Part of the TATF activities took place in a Malay village, *Kampung Banda Dalam*, and this was possible because we had worked together with community leaders from the *kampung* in 2013 during the anti-MRT demonstrations.

From 2011 to 2013, I lived in an old district surrounding Petaling and Sultan Streets, also the area where Lostgens' is currently located. When faced with impending demolition and expulsion due to the building of a new rapid transit line, we brought art and culture, things foreign to the authorities, as our response. We planned many art activities in defence of the old neighbourhood: oral history storytelling, guided tours of the historic streets and the publication of a cultural map of the area. We celebrated the Mid-Autumn Festival and Chinese New Year's all together, and we even made a "moving great wall" march to appeal for support. These art and culture practices affected the way that people viewed the issue, creating pressure on authorities and eventually leading to the preservation of most of the buildings in the area.

Coming together with residents of *Kampung Banda Dalam* at this time, we gained a mutual understanding that racial problems can be overcome despite the political problems, which increase racial tension in Malaysia. Art can be a very good bridge towards this.

I remember, during one of our previous talks, you mentioned that "Malaysia is a country which can refer to many". This multiplicity of culture and language ironically chimes in with the country's slogan "Malaysia, truly Asia." Being able to directly connect to Indonesia, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and China on varying levels, it is possible to see the advantages of working with you all, our Kuala Lumpur hosts. Malaysia provides a contextual foundation for each of the participants to reflect upon practices in their own country, to give a framework from which to establish a concentrated and dynamic dialogue. I think you tried to catalyse this by introducing some young local practitioners to the group with the presentation series "Malaysia as context: The role of participatory art/activism and collective action". Lee Cheah Ni, Alex Lee, Lim Paik Yin, Okui Lala, Zikri Rahman and Tey Beng Tze each spoke about their recent work.



Cikgu Ishak, the village's chief' is accepting the wood printing artwork from Indonesian artist Duwadi and accompanied by Malaysian artist Zikri Rahman, TATF, *Kampung Banda Dalam*, November 2015



Malaysian artist Tay Beng Tze and Indonesian artist Djuwadi working with children of migrant background on wood carving in Kampung Banda Dalam, November 2015

But did you feel there were ample private conversations going on during the master class?

Well yes, unfortunately, this session was squeezed between a full day programmed with other talks and activities. The necessary directness of straightforward presentations (*i.e.* speaker plus PowerPoint-type visualisation) did not bleed over into the also necessary informality of relaxed conversation in response to these presentations. It is obvious that you place a high degree of significance upon the unplanned as part of the planned. Again, it is a question of designing a platform in which the unexpected can occur. The undocumented casualness of affective conversations between two or three people are perhaps the place where our “transactions” are amplified. While their ephemeral nature makes it more difficult to position points of success or concrete output, it may be possible to say that it is actually in those interstices, between scheduled activity, where we can push further into understanding community and making active “feedback-feedforward” loops towards new action.

We must consider both, just as we must consider those who are outside of the system and yet still controlled by the system. There is a constant need to adjust and reorganise, as we experienced multiple times during TATF, for example during the intervention initiated by Ichimura Misako during the “Open Space” session.<sup>5</sup>

With Lostgens’, ideally we would have a storefront space similarly situated as WooferTen in Hong Kong or Art Lab OVA in Yokohama, but because we are independently funded, we aren’t able to afford rent for a more expensive street-level space. There’s no elevator in the building, so many old people in the community aren’t able to come up and visit the space. Because of this, we’ve had to adjust our strategy and position ourselves more as a contemporary art space. It is definitely a challenge, and 70% of our time and resources go towards the contemporary art programming, with the other 30% going towards continuing our efforts in the community. Based upon our past experience, we’ve come to understand that community-engaged practices need a great deal of knowledge and human resources, so recently we’ve also started to host a philosophy course as a way to build upon our thinking and activate greater potential.

What else have you been working on more recently?

I am currently working as an independent curator to co-curate a public art programme sponsored by a state enterprise (GLC), so it’s completely separate from my work with Lostgens’. Of course it’s a completely different way of working than the more grassroots projects, and taking the project was something that I debated upon for some time. Is it appropriate for me to do it, and what is the meaning of it?

But as a part of the art circle here, and seeing that this is the largest public art project to ever be hosted in our country, I began to think that I should work further to develop art in the capacity that I can. Whether or not this project succeeds, it will have a large impact upon the way mass society, the government, and businesses view art in public space. At the same time, I have been thinking about what the possibilities for art can be beyond resistance –what about strengthening dialogue?

Resistance and dialogue are not necessarily contradictory; they are always in process together. It’s something I also talked about with Lee Chun Fung from Hong Kong, and he mentions it in relation to the concepts of the characters 破 *po* and 立 *laap* in Chinese.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, I still stand by the directly and indirectly critical capacities of art.

Moelyono brings it together very well when he describes “a form of person-to-person relationship” that “enables us to adopt a critical perspective” such that “everyone is a creator of culture”.<sup>7</sup> There are beautiful possibilities built into this kind of transaction between the deconstruction of critique and the building of culture. So let us continue adding letters and subtracting words to this dialogue! I joke about TATF, TAITF or TITF, but they are all equations that do not necessarily add up. But we can continue to play with the variables.

1 Yeoh Lian Heng is one of the co-founders of Lostgens’ Contemporary Art Space in Kuala Lumpur, described on their website as, “established in early 2004 by a group of artists. Though situated in the bustling capital city, Lostgens’ has managed to take on a certain quietness and edginess that comes from being off the beaten track. This self-managed experimental space aims to encourage originality, creativity, individuality, as well as to promote contemporary arts. It provides an alternative space for budding innovative exhibitions and performances. Lostgens’ has entered a next phase

of unique development and operation. What started as a small private group has now moved out into the public, Lostgens’ aims to weave itself into the multicultural artistic atmosphere. More than just a place that brings together artists, it also provides a platform for a dynamic growth of multi-layered artistic culture.” [lostgenerationspace.blogspot.com](http://lostgenerationspace.blogspot.com) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

2 Juliastuti, Nuraini. “Moelyono and the Endurance of Arts for all Society”. *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Issue 13 (Spring/Summer 2006) pp. 3-7.

3 As mentioned by Alex Lee, architect and participant of the *TransActions in the Field* master class. Active since the 1980s, Moelyono Moel’s roving projects with various local communities across Indonesia could be seen as a model for future sustainable configurations of TATF.

4 For more information and documentation about the Pudu Community Art Project, see: [puducommunityartproject.blogspot.my](http://puducommunityartproject.blogspot.my) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

5 Read more about the “Action!!” intervention in the interview between TATF participant Ichimura

Misako and Ota Emma p194 of this publication.

6 Read more in the dialogue between Lee Chun Fung and Elaine W. Ho p.60 of this publication.

7 Juliastuti, Nuraini. “Moelyono and the Endurance of Arts for all Society”. *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Issue 13 (Spring/Summer 2006) pp. 3-7

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# FINDARS

Tey Beng Tze

# AND

in conversation with

# IMAGINED

Zikri Rahman

# COMMUNITIES

**Tey Beng Tze** (b. 1983 in Kuala Lumpur) graduated from the Malaysian Institute of Arts (MIA). He is also one of the founding members of Findars. He has been actively participating in various group exhibitions locally since 2003 that were held in Galeri Petronas, Valentine Willie Fine Art and The Annexe Gallery. He held his first solo exhibition, "Dirty Mary Crazy Mickey" at Findars@Annexe in 2009.<sup>1</sup> Tey's work is a self-exploration through painting, using visual language and owned experiences, from bits to specific, sometimes nonsense, sometimes practical, but preferably darkly presented.



Jamming during the #KL112 Protest, 2013

Findars [noun: find ars (plural form of ar: arts in Latin)], in their very own term, means "the unbounded cultivation of self-exploration in arts." Findars is represented by a group of local aspiring artists, graphics designers, photographers, filmmakers and musicians. Formed in early 2008, the collectives share strong passion for the arts, and the influence of independent music, both local and international. Findars is a non-profit, centric, independent art collective with a self-sustaining physical form art space.

Findars is highly active in developing and encouraging contemporary arts by bringing it closer to engaging the public through its events, projects and exhibitions. It is gaining interest and traction amongst students, professionals, artists and anyone from the public, with the objective to inspire creativity, critical thinking and intellectualism.<sup>2</sup>

Our conversation took place with the aim to unravel the artist's practice and approach in engaging with the idea of individuals in public and private settings. With the urgency to dissect the practice in agitating change within the society, we talked about Findars' aspiration of the "imagined communities" in connecting with the ever-changing and continuous form of their ideals through collective principles and practices.

To be interdependent, within different collectives, is the key manifestation of a practice which involves work in multidisciplinary and diverse platform. Of this, Findars has been active in collaborating with different forms of art practices at their space on a weekly basis. The openness of the collective in working with interdisciplinary participation and framework allows complex relationships to be borne out, resulting in valuable inputs to mould the collective open structure.

The focus on "improvisation and experimentation" (*zeitgeist*), resonates with Findars approach, especially in cultivating participation of cutting edge collaboration in various niche areas, be it in music and/or film screenings. The flexibility of its open structure helps Findars to open source its space to content with different collaborators, thus creating a unique and vibrant relationship.

Tey Beng Tze, in this conversation, shared with us his relational and contextual experience running the art collective, Findars, in Kuala Lumpur's China Town.

**Zikri Rahman:** How do you perceive your art practice individually and within Findars as a collective? Maybe you can share with us the dynamics within Findars itself.

**Tey Beng Tze:** For myself, I produce more visual arts and for Findars, actually, it is more diverse. For example, we produce a lot of experimental arts within the space in Findars, from music to new media forms of art, focusing on improvisation and experimentation. Even our members are made up of different art practices, be it graphic arts, illustrations or fine arts. At Findars, there are those who stayed during the first few years of its formation. Right now, there are three of us who run the space.

From there, how does the relationship and exchange process in Findars, as a collective, work for you as an individual artist? How does the space influence the individual approach and process, especially in creating arts?

It works both ways. Actually, from the space itself, it works as a platform for the artist to expose his/her self to different practices. Artworks here does not necessarily mean painting, but also includes new media and experimental stuff. Working with different international and local artists exposes me and makes me



more open to collaboration. It also helps me to understand the process of how the artists approach their arts.

How does Findars work with the local community here in Jalan Panggung? Is the collective sensitive to the issues and its surroundings?

Yes. The work might not be long-term but, for example, we worked with Lostgens a few years ago when they had the “Bangun” arts project. At that time, they invited local artists and some of them are our collaborators and we were called to help them with their work, even in Penang.

We have also worked with the Save Jalan Sultan campaign in the year 2012 when Yeoh Lian Heng from Lostgens was calling for artists to be involved in designing the banners and posters. We helped to create some awareness of the locations where some of the structures were being demolished to give way to the development of Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system.<sup>3</sup>

How does Findars work, exactly, as a collective? Is it an open collective where people can join and contribute freely to the development of the space?

Right now, we have three members involved in running the space and

providing the technical expertise and publicity for our programmes. Findars is open for those who are willing to help in certain ways or on some projects. The recent programme, the AWAS<sup>4</sup> animated shorts screening project, was organized by Findars but it was curated by our fellow Canadian collaborator, Fabrizio Gilardino since he has a wide network in the animation industry. That is how collaboration works in Findars. Besides that, we also organized Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film & Music Festival (KLEX)<sup>5</sup> which went through a similar process to the AWAS event. This is because the curator, Siew-Wai, one of the founding members of KLEX, has a very good network in the industry.

As a collective made up of different individuals, how do the collective members perceive aesthetics in their practices? Has it been influenced by other collective members and, if so, how?

No, it is individually based, but we always have discussions and criticism. The discussion happens with a lot of interaction but yet, the decisions are always made by those who are involved directly in the project process.



During the #KL112 Protest , 2013

The aesthetic level is also very much different, whether it is an individual or a collective effort. It is comprised of two different things and we have to look at it from different perspectives.

Are there ideas at Findars of the organization as framework or structure? This is important if we are to discuss Findars as a working model for reimagining how a collective works.

Actually we do not have any certain model, as we learn from everyone. Especially those who are “passing by” our space. They can be an artist or even a visitor. As I mentioned earlier, both internationally or locally, the artists who come to our space are open to share their thoughts and practices which will help to enhance the exchange between the artists and us.

Usually, most of the work in which Findars collaborates, includes different disciplines. Maybe you can elaborate more with some examples of interesting projects in which you have collaborated together. Besides, how does Findars achieve consensus and agreement in working together?

We collaborate with different multidisciplinary creative forces from time to time. We have our weekly session of experimental music. When we do an experimental show, we always look out for contacts through one of our members who will be in charge of the music. Other than that, we also work on different aspects like the designing and publicity process. It is a very loose concept in which everyone will cover each other’s back. Actually we try to build our own community by engaging more young people and old friends who are willing to help and join together.

You were saying that Findars wants to build its own community. How does it happen and what does the term “community” mean in your opinion?

From my experience, it can be as easy as inviting like-minded people to converge at our event. Through the event, we can identify whether there are any individuals who are actually interested to do something together, like to run the space. If there are, usually we will do a follow up with them. Most of them who are involved with Findars are those who come to join as audiences. One of our active members, he is actually from our audience but now he is in the core group of Findars.

So that is the idea of community to which Findars aspires and people can actually involve themselves actively and interdependently within the collective. So from there, you are very open to the idea of inviting people from different society levels to be part of Findars. How do you negotiate the complexities of working with different people? What is the goal for Findars in working as an open collective?

The goal for Findars as I stated just now is to be the platform for a multidisciplinary and experimental arts community. This is because the experimental arts scene here in Malaysia is relatively small and Findars provides a niche area for that. There is a lack of space for this kind of artist (experimental arts) to showcase their works because most of the time, it is quite hard to sell or commodify this experimental art.

Other than that, from the research I did, Findars also does get involved with community projects. In this regard, how does Findars grasp the opportunity to enhance public engagement and leave impact within the community?

We create community through the engagement during the Findars events.

Most of the audiences are involved, they will follow us and will help to spread the word through social media. From there, we establish relationships and friends, by knowing and communicating with each other. This helps us to develop interaction.

Besides that, for the international artists, that we are collaborating with from time to time, they usually come to our place and do a performance. This process helps us in exchanging ideas and working together. This happens not only among the artists but also the visitors and audiences.

As an example, Fabrizio, the curator of AWAS, was actually our visitor, who happened to hang out at our place and café. He came here during one of the exhibition openings and he liked the place. As we have the right connection in terms of space and organizing team, he was open for collaboration after getting to know us better in terms of our own practice.

How do you engage or work with the people here at Jalan Sultan?

Most of the residents here at Jalan Sultan are an older generation so they do not really partake in our activities. Having said that, Yeoh from Lostgens, who is more focused on community art is the one who is actually working more with the community here.

During the *TransActions In the Field* sharing session, you shared with us the video<sup>6</sup> that you did collectively during the 13<sup>th</sup> May protest against racism and during the *Bersih* rally which called for free and fair elections in Malaysia. Is there any particular objective when Findars is involved in such art “interventions” and from the artworks that you produced collectively?

Preparation for making “Art In The Park” sculpture project, 2014



Actually when we were doing it, we did not have anything to achieve. We always have some random ideas and talk with friends when we are hanging out at the space. We work spontaneously. As an example, when we think of doing something and those who are present agree, then we just do it.

When we are having conversations, there are a lot of ideas, especially on the question of who needs to take action. This is something we wanted along the way, especially as we have a space like Findars which is a pool of like-minded people who are willing to share and have some sparks (of ideas) to do something.

Having said that, how is Findars’s relationship with different collectives in the Klang Valley?

Of course we are having a good relationship with other collectives. For example, we work with people from Rumah Api (subcultures and music space in Ampang)<sup>7</sup>, the Kuala Lumpur Experimental (KLEX) team and Lostgens (gallery and community arts practitioners).

When working and collaborating together with different collectives it usually involves only short period of times in which we actually help each other, but also work on an individual basis. Of course, we do not mind to give a hand, especially in working on different projects, if we are needed.

From the activities, be it in the form of producing artworks to being an organizer within the community, how do you perceive the idea of success? Is there any definition of success that Findars as a collective agrees on? You did mention that there was no goal for Findars as it is enough if people are working and organizing together. Is that your definition of a successful collective?

In my opinion, if we are to talk about success, people will judge it from the perspective of whether we can do it on a fulltime basis; then only it is considered successful. I do not know how any other person perceives success. I paint and draw for my living. Even one of my freelance jobs is related to the arts industry. I believe I am successful. For Findars, success is when we are able to build a strong community especially in advocating art and culture activities. As for now, it is still a process and we are moving in the right direction.

If you are already successfully running the space and working together with the community, then what could come next for Findars?

Maybe the idea is to have “Findars” everywhere from Petaling Jaya to Seremban for example. I could consider this as one step further for Findars.

This is supposed to be the first question but it would be great if you can respond to it as a continuation of the ideas that we have discussed – what are the ideas behind the formation of Findars?

Most of the art students, when they graduate from the institution, they don’t really know what to do. Instead of going straight to the commercial art gallery, in Findars, there is an opportunity to actually see arts as your “business”.

We take the approach that this is your career and you have to learn how to be an independent artist. You must know how to do it by yourself. You will get more exposure and opportunity when you are independent.

Lastly, it is very clear from certain works that Findars bears an amount of social criticism. How can we understand the dynamics of politics and arts within Findars as a collective?

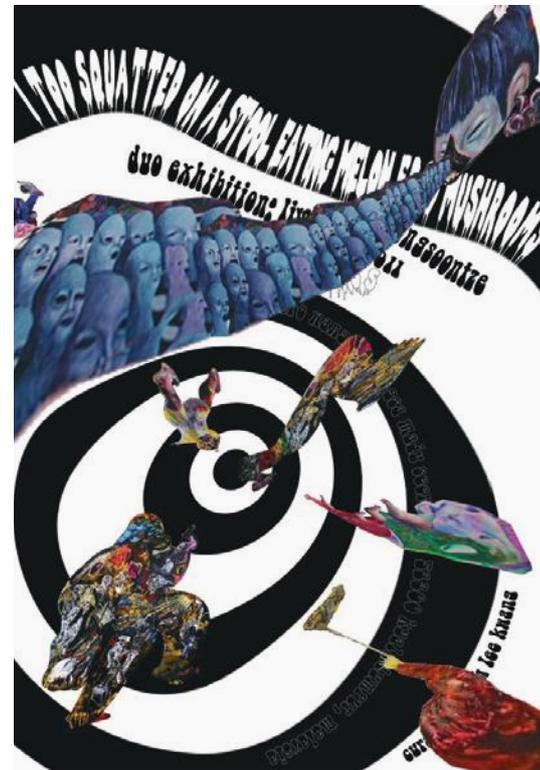
Our videos during the 13<sup>th</sup> May protest against racism are an example. For some Findars members, they have a very strong political stand but it does not reflect the group as a whole. I don't think that we do have a certain political stand as our focus is always on producing arts.

I would say that art is life and life is art. First and foremost, the idea is to bring art to the society. Art is wide and everyone is related to it. It is not just for certain people to enjoy. For myself, art is something to make you think. We always have enough food for the stomach but never enough food for thought.



Opening shows in Findars, 2014

Experimental music performance in Findars, 2013



Duo exhibition by Tey Beng Tze and Lim Keh Soon, 2011

Literary sharing session with Unrepresented KL, 2014



1 [findars.blogspot.de/2011/12/tey-beng-tze.html](http://findars.blogspot.de/2011/12/tey-beng-tze.html) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

2 For more information see: [findars.blogspot.de/](http://findars.blogspot.de/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016) and [facebook.com/FINDARS/](https://www.facebook.com/FINDARS/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

3 [findars.blogspot.my/2012/02/event-last-broadcast-light-lantern-save.html](http://findars.blogspot.my/2012/02/event-last-broadcast-light-lantern-save.html) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

4 [facebook.com/events/1697174313882904/](https://www.facebook.com/events/1697174313882904/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

5 [klexfilmfest.com/](http://klexfilmfest.com/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

6 [youtube.com/watch?v=mvaA6Qx61ys](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvaA6Qx61ys) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

7 [rumahapi.weebly.com/](http://rumahapi.weebly.com/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

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# NGONGKRONG

Djuwadi in conversation

## AND ART

with Lim Paik Yin



**Djuwadi** (b. 1974) is a self-taught artist from Blora district Central Java, Indonesia. He began an informal apprenticeship in traditional Javanese woodcarving at age 15, learning from several master practitioners

living in his village in Randublatung. In 2005 he became a member of the Yogyakarta-based art activist collective, Taring Padi, with his art reflecting strong political and social activism.

Djuwadi and Taring Padi's work seeks to raise awareness of human rights through the culture of sharing. While traditional Javanese woodcarving skills are the basis of Djuwadi's artistic expression, his commitment to community-based arts has diversified his forms of expression to woodcut printing, visual and performance arts and street art. He frequently takes on the role of a workshop facilitator for communities focusing on the environment and social political issues. He has participated in numerous exhibitions and festivals and ran workshops as an independent artist and as a member of Taring Padi in Indonesia, Australia, East Timor, Thailand, Papua New Guinea and the USA.<sup>1</sup>

*"I believe that art is a tool to develop knowledge and culture that can be used for change, to make life better, equal, fairer, and friendlier, for all life in the world."*

Djuwadi and Lim Paik Yin had a conversation about growing up in countries grappling with social reforms and how this influences their art practice. He shares the origins of his art practice in times of social and political changes in Indonesia since the *Reformasi* (the reformation era in Indonesia) and his participation in the artist collective, the Institute of People Oriented Culture of Taring Padi (TP).

### GROWING UP IN BLORA AND LIVING WITH TRADITIONAL ARTS

**Lim Paik Yin:** You grew up near a Teak forest and learned to carve wood from master woodcarvers; please share with us more about where you come from.

**Djuwadi:** I grew up in a small village in Blora during the Suharto New Order era. My early memory of Blora is the teak plantations, oil mining and Pramoedy Ananta Toer, a Javanese preeminent prose writer of post-independence Indonesia. During the Suharto era, the teak forest was managed stringently and became monoculture commercial plantations run by the government. You needed a license to harvest the wood. After the fall of Suharto, illegal logging, by people from the community, became rife. This, combined with the shift to monoculture plantations, left very little of the original forest intact, meaning the forest near my village isn't the same anymore. This was one of the things that made me become politically aware. It also made me realize that working with community is really important to making change.

Traditional arts are an important part of our living cultural heritage and represent a sense of beauty, skills, knowledge, and community values refined over generations. When art is steeped in tradition, how do we bring values of the past to the present-day?

The master woodcarving practitioner's home also functions as their studio and I started learning to carve wood at the age of 12 from several traditional woodcarvers in my village. They mainly carved traditional Javanese motifs and Arabic calligraphy with themes from the Mahabharata and Ramayana stories<sup>2</sup>. My teacher first taught me the basics of woodcarving as well as drawing ornament patterns and this process took about three months. After two years, I could carve traditional ornaments as well as a professional. Actually, I could say it was like an apprenticeship in today's context.



In 1994, after high school, I migrated to Jakarta to seek employment. I took on various jobs from selling vegetables to working in construction. At that time, I was selling vegetables near a university in Jakarta. The student movement was strong and I became politically aware through the student movement protests. After four years in Jakarta, I moved back to my village in 1998 and started woodcarving professionally.

In 1999, at the tail end of the South East Asian economic crisis and *Reformasi* movement, that brought the downfall of long-term dictator Suharto and the New Order regime, I was introduced to Yogyakarta based art activist collective Taring Padi that had emerged around 1998 from this political climate. From then on my art practice began to incorporate political and social activism themes and I started to focus on woodcut printing, but it was not until 2005 that I became an active member of Taring Padi.

When I make new work, the traditional values, motifs and iconography that I have learned come into the work, as it is part of my blood. I believe this makes the work easier for Indonesian people to understand. It helps them think about what they are seeing and hopefully question it, as it draws on what they already know. This is also a core component of Taring Padi's collective work. Taring Padi uses art as a tool for political expression and education for all. Our mission is to revive "People's Culture" and to advocate and strategize for a united front supporting democratic and popular change in Indonesia. We try to do this through art being made by and for the people.

### SOCIAL RELATIONS AND COLLECTIVE WORK

We have grown up in a hierarchal society that is very much based on respect for the elders. However, living in a time in which everyone knows each other, the community/ neighbourhood functions as a unit. *Gotong royong* (communal work) is very much part of our familiar life. After all, there is a saying in Malaysia and Indonesia "*Berat sama dipikul ringan sama dijinjing*" (An Indonesian and Malay proverb – "Heavy work is lightened when everyone works together"). This also has connotations of how social relations are formed among us. I wonder if it is in this spirit that Taring Padi operates?

As we are a collective organization, the works of Taring Padi are created together with an inclusiveness that means collaborating with the general public. The works created collaboratively defy private ownership and are often large pieces that further enforce the spirit of communal working. We use various mediums such as woodcut prints, performance art, murals and banners, community education and music. We have focused on themes such as corruption, anti-neoliberalism, workers' and farmers' movements, to issues such as the protection of the environment and gender equality. Our works are made often with, and for, those who are fighting for justice.<sup>3</sup> We begin with the process of discussion before beginning new works and then collectively work and paint together.<sup>4</sup> In creating banners and puppets with farmers and fishermen facing aggression from corporations with vested interest in construction and land grabbing, the symbols and artwork created serve as a reminder to stay together in solidarity.<sup>5</sup> Recently we spent time in the village of Batang, East Java, working with the local community to campaign against the building of what is planned to be the biggest Coal Power Plant in South East Asia. We lived with the community



and together made murals, cardboard puppets, sang music, printed t-shirt and undertook a parade and media stunt to draw attention to the issue and support the community to take action. We also made a video about this project.<sup>6</sup> Living and supporting the community's voice is a really important part of our process. We hope that it helps the communities know that they are not alone in their fight, while also giving them energy and new skills.

You also did work on your own that speaks another language that is different from traditional woodcarving, like the 'Melati Sampah' (Jasmine Rubbish) work, which looks like sculpture. Please share how the *Melati Sampah* project came about?

The *Melati Sampah* project came about when I was invited to work on Festival Mata Air (Water Spring Festival)<sup>7</sup> in Indonesia in 2007. The festival highlights the importance of water. I have been invited to work on the festival for the past ten years now. Every year the festival moves to a different village. Festival Mata Air invites artists to live with the community. In 2007, the year I developed *Melati Sampah*, I lived in the community where the festival was being held for one month prior to the festival. It was a self-initiated artist residency.

During the time spent in the village I *ngongkrong*<sup>8</sup>, and made conversation with the youth and kids and tried to find out about their concerns. I noticed that the main problem is plastic waste and I wanted to explore how we, as humans, can manage our waste in relation to our environment. In the past, when I was growing up, there was no plastic and the packaging was biodegradable; so there was no problem. Now there are a lot of plastic packaging and waste, especially *permen* (candy) wrappers. I thought about how we can excite and stimulate our imaginations with this plastic rubbish. I started a workshop with the children and youth to turn the plastic into costumes and toys. It was like a treasure hunt with rubbish and we created costumes and toys for a parade during the opening of the festival. I spent so much time focusing on the children's costumes that I forgot to make my own costume. In an act of improvisation, I made a spontaneous performance and had the village pin rubbish onto my clothing during the parade. This performance gave me the idea to create flowers out of plastic rubbish.



The *Melati Sampah* project was also done in Australia during a three-month exchange programme. I worked with kindergarten children in Australia to create awareness of their waste.

So would the process then be a type of sculpture and the object is the change in perspective of how the children in the kampong (neighbourhood) view the *permen* (candy) wrappers today?

An important aspect of my artistic practice is expressing where I come from, which is traditional Javanese woodcarving. However, when I look back at my *Melati Sampah* pieces, I can see what you mean. It's true that the form seems like a 3D object, but for me, it is the process of exchange and meaning-making that creates "melati sampah". This holds true for my other projects, which include performance art and found object elements. The difference is that instead of picking up rubbish, we headed for the rubbish bin to get our materials. The idea worked even in Australia and the children enjoyed themselves but more importantly they view their waste differently.

So by using found material or rubbish to create art objects, you are stepping into a virtuous circle of restraint in matters economic, based on reduce, reuse, recycle and redistribute the final art product as a gift.

Yes, that's right.

One of the ways to be part of a kampong (neighbourhood) is to have a person who vouches for your trustworthiness. When you do work that engages with society, how do you and Taring Padi establish a relationship with the people in the village? Also when is a project in a community complete?

Every year the Mata Air Festival moves around to different villages. My relationship with the village is dependent on the festival's relationship with the community. Depending on the situations, I sometimes decided to stay after the festival to try and support the activities. Sometimes, because of my tattoos, I need to work harder on building a relationship. It is much easier to build a relationship with the community when someone from the community invites me to share my skills. Different communities mean different projects. When I go back to the communities I have worked in, there are people who remember me. I talk to them and they have a different perspective on their waste. A plastic bottle is seen differently, and because the youth and children accepted me, their parents are also happy.

Taring Padi uses a similar approach. Generally, we are invited by members of the community or people working with the community. We try and maintain the relationship over time, staying in contact with community members, supporting them further down the track. Trust is really important, as a lot of communities have lost trust in NGOs and other bodies that have been perceived to "use" the communities for personal gain (profit, prestige etc.).

Sometimes, in the art scene in Malaysia, we have to play many roles and work around lots of uncertainties especially in projects with an informal nature. Projects and collaborations happen in a sort of spontaneous setting and people just pick up roles, how is this for you?

In my work, there is a lot of self-organization and the main thing for me as an artist is responsibility. We have a responsibility to educate ourselves on democracy, the political situation and on humanitarian issues. So sometimes I act as a performer, an arts workshop facilitator, a community art trainer or organizer for an arts festival or community project. In Taring Padi, it's the same, and generally it is very organic, particularly as we are an open, unstructured collective that anybody can join. Generally, members will take on different roles based on what is needed, their strengths and who is available and interested at the time.

The parable a “bundle of sticks” comes to mind. It is from a collection of fables credited to Aesop, a slave and storyteller believed to have lived in ancient Greece between 620 and 564 BCE. “A father had a family of sons who were perpetually quarrelling among themselves. When he failed to heal their disputes by his exhortations, he determined to give them a practical illustration of the evils of disunion; and for this purpose he one day told them to bring him a bundle of sticks. When they had done so, he placed the bundle into the hands of each of them in succession, and ordered them to break it in pieces. They tried with all their strength, and were not able to do it. He next opened the bundle, took the sticks separately, one by one, and again put them into his sons’ hands, upon which they broke them easily. He then addressed them in these words: “My sons, if you are of one mind, and unite to assist each other, you will be as this bundle, uninjured by all the attempts of your enemies; but if you are divided among yourselves, you will be broken as easily as these sticks.”<sup>9</sup>

When I had my woodcarving business, it was always my intention to teach the youth in my community the woodcarving skills which I learnt from my teachers. Giving back to my community is important to me and my studio was open and welcoming to youth and children who were interested. Taring Padi's studio is also open like this. It is also important for us to pass on skills such as silkscreen, batik and woodblock printing. In my practice I enjoy working with the community in collaboration with youth and children and I think it's really important in creating grassroots change.

The art scene in Malaysia has always been a little more fragmented. Sometimes it's because of language and often times collectives dissipate as members travel overseas to study or to find a better future. Having this conversation and getting to know you and Taring Padi, the situation isn't as bleak as I thought it to be. There are alternative educations, the underground and various NGOs all working together for a better future in Malaysia. It may help if we learn to be as inclusive as Taring Padi. Our meagre resources, when pooled together, will become abundance, our work to sustain the organization will be easier, and making a cultural change with a group will allow our convictions to grow stronger and firmer.



1 To see more of Djuwadi's and Taring Padi's work, visit the following sites: [taringpadi.com](http://taringpadi.com) (accessed Aug 31, 2016) [djuwadiprints.tumblr.com](http://djuwadiprints.tumblr.com) (accessed Aug 31, 2016) [etsy.com/shop/Djuwadi-Prints](http://etsy.com/shop/Djuwadi-Prints) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

2 The Mahabharata and Ramayana are ancient Sanskrit epics.

3 Keller, Anett. "Art for the People" *Inside Indonesia*. Indonesian Resources and Information

Program (IRIP) 1983-2015, April 2012. [insideindonesia.org/art-for-the-people](http://insideindonesia.org/art-for-the-people) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

4 Sinago, Dolorosa. "Taring Padi: Not for the sake of a Fine Arts Discourse" Taring Padi Seni Membongkar Tirani (Art Smashing Tyranny). Bambang Agung, Lauren Parker, Annie Sloman, Emilia Javanica, Menik Siti eds. (Yogyakarta: Lumbung Press) 2011, pp. 23-35.

5 Roger Peet, *Back in Yogyakarta with Taring Padi*,

Just Seeds, 4 Feb. 2016, [justseeds.org/back-in-yogyakarta-with-taring-padi/](http://justseeds.org/back-in-yogyakarta-with-taring-padi/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

6 [youtube.com/watch?v=h\\_1Rcke\\_5qE&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_1Rcke_5qE&feature=youtu.be) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

7 Festival Mata Air is a community Art and Music event which raises awareness about the environment and the issue of water, [festivalmataair.com/FMA/Welcome.html](http://festivalmataair.com/FMA/Welcome.html) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

8 Ngongkrong = a hanging out approach to networking or socializing

9 [umass.edu/aesop/content.php?n=4&i=1](http://umass.edu/aesop/content.php?n=4&i=1) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

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# WORKING IN THE

Jennifer Teo &

# REALM OF THE

Tien Wei Woon

# DEAD AND

(Post-Museum)

# UNDEAD: LAND

in conversation with

# CONTESTATION

Susanne Bosch

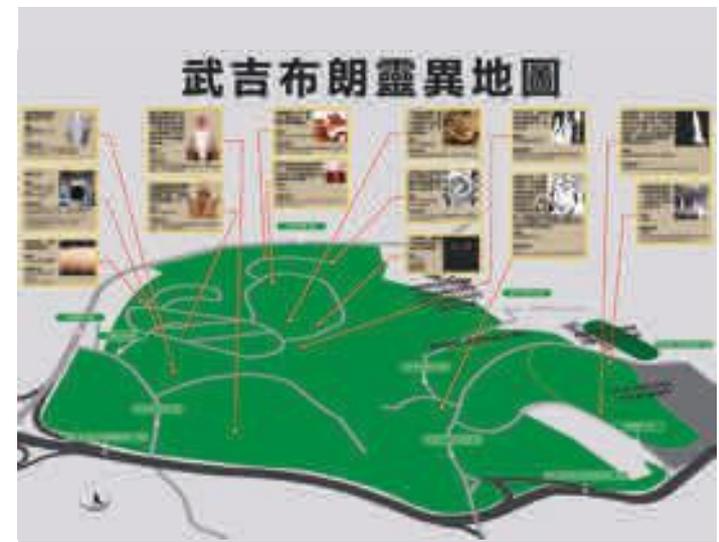
# IN SINGAPORE

Post-Museum is an independent cultural and social space in Singapore which aims to encourage and support a thinking and pro-active community. It is an open platform for

examining contemporary life, promoting the arts and connecting people. Through their social practice art projects, Post-Museum aims to respond to its location and commu-

nities as well as find ways to create micro-utopias where the people actively imagine and create the cultures and worlds they desire.

Supernatural Map of Bukit Brown (Traditional Chinese), Digital Print, 237.8 x 168.2 cm, 2015



*The Bukit Brown Index* (2014-) is a project that indexes the case of Bukit Brown Cemetery. The struggle to conserve Bukit Brown is not read as sentimental conservation but a struggle over Singapore's soul. Part of a worldwide movement, Post-Museum's *Really Really Free Market Series* (2009-)<sup>1</sup> forms temporary autonomous zones based on alternative gift economy. The project creates a temporal physical manifestation of a 'free market' where the fundamental economic structure is altered with a structure that values acts of 'giving, sharing and caring'.

Currently operating nomadically, Post-Museum continues to organise, curate, research and collaborate with a network of social actors and cultural workers.<sup>2</sup>

**Susanne Bosch:** Jennifer and Tien, how do you work as team?

**Post-Museum:** Curator and art critic Okwui Enwezor identified 'networked collectives' as collectives which work across affinities of interest. The emphasis is on flexible and non-permanent courses of affiliation, privileging collaboration on a project basis rather than on a permanent alliance. Enwezor thinks that such collectives emerged as a result of advances in communication technologies.<sup>3</sup>

Post-Museum fits this description of the 'networked collective'. We occupied a physical space previously (2007-2011); it was a period when social media exploded in Singapore; while there was a lack of a dedicated space for creative and non-mainstream energies to come together. Post-Museum became an offline place where online people with similar interests in social participation came together. As such, Post-Museum is not just a physical space but is also an ideological space. Currently, Post-Museum operates without space, so its activities take place with different hosts.

Why the name Post-Museum and what is the inner and/or outer driver of your work?

Post-Museum is a ground-up project initiated by a Singaporean curatorial team p-10 which was subsequently 'directed' by us. It functions as a co-constitutive space for art, research, and civil society. It is a response to Singapore's

Renaissance, when the Singapore government implemented a set of new cultural and social policies designed to push the country through rapid cultural development and liberalisation, starting from 2000.

We have always believed that art and culture are important components of everyday life and we felt that Singapore's Renaissance focused too much on cultural infrastructure and funding for large-scale events, which were divorced from the ground. Post-Museum was created to bring the focus back to the community and the issues, which national art institutions, such as the museum, are not dealing with. We were also keen to explore the interests and efforts of people on the ground, which were beyond and alternate to top-down directives.

Bukit Brown was a cemetery - unknown to the public even though it has a long history as a cemetery, which takes up a large land area in the middle of Singapore, and has been used as a park by residents in the area. What is known about the social, historical, political, economic and cultural layers of Bukit Brown as location and how much does your artwork, *The Bukit Brown Index*, respond to that?

In 2011, the Singapore government announced a plan to build a new highway through Bukit Brown. The stated reason was road congestion on Lornie Road. The announcement prompted a series of actions by the people of Singapore in a bid to overturn the decision.

Our involvement with Bukit Brown started by attending an afternoon symposium organised by Singapore Heritage Society. In the session, various speakers spoke about the different rare and important aspects of the place. It was an eye-opener for us, as with many others who never even knew about the existence of Bukit Brown.

Some of what's known is as follows:

Bukit Brown was a Municipal Cemetery in operation from 1922-1973. It is the only public cemetery dedicated by the British colonial government to the Chinese community. Bukit Brown occupies about 233 hectares and an estimated 100,000 persons are interred in Bukit Brown, more than half of the total number in the 'greater' Bukit Brown area, which includes three other cemeteries, namely Seh Ong, Lao Sua, and Kopi-Sua.

Bukit Brown, situated in the midst of a large nature area in the centre of Singapore, is part of the country's green lung. Rich in biodiversity, with many of the country's endangered species sighted there, Bukit Brown is also an important wildlife sanctuary and connected to the other green spaces around the country.

The people interred in Bukit Brown embodied the important narratives of Singapore's colonial to early independent years. They were also people who held connections to the region, to countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and China. In their various life-paths, they contributed to the Singapore of today.

Inspired by what we learned during the session, we got together with other interested audience members to form SOS Bukit Brown,<sup>4</sup> an advocacy group, which campaigned against the highway, through online methods and an open letter to the government, which was signed by a few thousand people.

From 2011-2014, we also held monthly tours of Bukit Brown, which took members of the public on a two hour walk around the cemetery. On these tours, we spoke about various nature, historical and social aspects of the site, as well as the campaign to save it.

It was only in 2014, when we began to make an artwork entitled *The Bukit Brown Index*. The work indexed materials relating to the case of Bukit Brown, framing it as an important land contestation case in Singapore. For us, land contestation in Singapore is a story of the struggle over Singapore's soul. *The Bukit Brown Index* shows the complex ideas and dialogue behind the contestation of the space. *The Bukit Brown Index* is a materialisation of the case of Bukit Brown that allows audiences to reflect upon the issues of development and conservation.

How do you define the local community of Bukit Brown?

In the case of Bukit Brown, we define the local community as the people who came together to do something about it. Some were descendants of the people buried there, some were academics and researchers, aka experts, many were just enthusiasts. They were equally important to us, though we were mainly fascinated by how people, who had no personal relations to the site, were attracted to it and felt strongly about saving it.

We are part of the group who started SOS Bukit Brown, the advocacy group against the highway. We are also artists who create artwork about the case and continue to talk about the issue outside of immediate circles. We consider ourselves a part of the community we speak about.

You are part of the advocacy group, SOS Bukit Brown, against the highway. What does public space mean in Singapore, a sea-locked city-state with very limited space?



List of Names of the Deceased to be Exhumed to Make Way for the New 8-Lane Road through Bukit Brown and Seh Ong Cemeteries, 2015. Exhibition View, Clay on Glass.





Plywood, Fruit Crates, Acrylic Paint, Enamel Paint and contribution of 'things' from the public, Jakarta Really Really Free Market: Installation at Gudang Sarinah', 2015



Acrylic on Banner and contribution of 'things' from the public, Jakarta Really Really Free Market: Rusun Marunda, 2015



Acrylic on Banner and contribution of 'things' from the public, Jakarta Really Really Free Market: Rusun Marunda, 2015

We mentioned earlier Singapore's Renaissance in which we see our government making attempts to liberalise Singapore through opening up civil society and opening up political spaces through the creation of Speaker's Corner.<sup>5</sup> These attempts at liberalisation are criticised by some as being 'gestural' and the state was just moving towards a form of a soft-authoritarian style of governance.

In our practice, we are more interested in why, when and how people get involved in public discourse. We adopt the strategist position, described by political scientist Kenneth Paul Tan<sup>6</sup> as an ideological position in engaging with Singapore's Renaissance, by working out strategies and tactics for dealing with what are perceived as windows of opportunity created by shifts in the government rhetoric, in the hopes of realising a more open and liberal Singapore. Also, even though the space is limited in Singapore, there is ample space for sustainable development, and important heritage places need not be destroyed.

You certainly faced many expectations, demands, wishes and hopes with the SOS Bukit Brown advocacy group as well as with *The Bukit Brown Index*.

In the case of *The Bukit Brown Index*, we didn't begin with specific expectations or hopes. We were just concerned with indexing what happened and showing a somewhat complete 'picture' of the case. For example, some people felt depressed that we could not reverse the government's decision on the highway in Bukit Brown. Maybe because of that, people feel that future efforts are futile and thus re-consider their future participation in anything. We think that it is unfair to judge an event only on what happens in the end, as what happens along the way always has an impact. Nothing is going to be exactly like it was, and sometimes the real results are only apparent after a long time.

From the campaigns and the making of *The Bukit Brown Index*, we met so many passionate and inspiring activists. Their deep convictions moved the general public to want to save our heritage. Even if they did not succeed, their efforts and struggles shifted the discourse of heritage conservation in the public sphere.

With whom, and how, did you develop communication around *The Bukit Brown Index*?

*The Bukit Brown Index* begins with the process of indexing all things related to the case of Bukit Brown. To give an idea of the 'things' that are indexed, they could be in the form of a quote, an image, sound, video and more. It is important to point out that Post-Museum authored the work by taking the position of co-creator, collaborator and participant within the networks of the Bukit Brown Campaign.

Hence, Post-Museum does not claim authorship for all the activities presented within this network. Instead, our creative work is the activity of 'indexing' and engaging in a reflexive process, which allows the project to 'frame' the ephemeral nature of an advocacy network like the Bukit Brown Campaign. In that way, we hope that *The Bukit Brown Index* reflects the sentiments of the people, and through that, shows their connections to the land (Bukit Brown) and the visions for Singapore.

*The Bukit Brown Index* should not be read as a narrative, or any chronological order, but as a set of possible connections across the different people and/or positions within the case of Bukit Brown.

Within *The Bukit Brown Index*, you worked closely in a kind of collective authorship. What are the signifiers of a participatory art process like this?



Basket, picnic mat, one artist book, drinks and food for four pax, Extreme Picnic, 2015

We believe everyone has different skills and strengths, and we are interested in seeing how these can come together to forward a concept/project. We don't think there are fixed signifiers and that there should be a kind of spectrum of good or bad participatory art processes. We feel that participation in art comes from a desire to de-stabilise the artist within modernist art. The participatory art process in art complicates the artistic process and the artistic output – issues of authenticity and all that.

Why are artists, curators, art theorists drawn to participatory art processes and projects? There is no common goal, as motivations could be quite varied. In that sense, there are many variants of participatory art projects, and each have their strengths, weaknesses and lessons.

What is your experience with how these different degrees of participation affect the artistic quality of a project?

We don't work on the premise that degrees of participation in art determine the quality of the project. In thinking that there is a direct correlation, we limit the potential of the participant. Roland Barthes notion of the Death of the Author<sup>7</sup>, Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model<sup>8</sup> and more recently, Jacques Ranciere's Intellectual Emancipation<sup>9</sup>, all point towards the potentiality of the reader, audience and student. Similarly, we shouldn't limit the capacity of art where only a certain degree of participation in art has the possibility to transform the audience or participant. We don't see limitations in participatory art projects. On the other hand, the problem is also the limited imagination of what non-participatory art projects can do.

What was your way to deal with time within the Bukit Brown project?

We spent more than two years working on the advocacy campaign and leading tours before we felt comfortable with making an artwork from our experience. We don't have a particular way with time, but we were really captivated by the people involved, the supernatural stories and historical materials. It was mainly a decision based on "feeling". However, the Indexing process is done at a different pace. The activity of indexing needed us to engage in a reflexive process – we differentiated the activist mode of working from the artistic mode of working.

What is the learning process of Bukit Brown? How do you measure emotional impact and transformation of a project like Bukit Brown?

Most of our projects take us on learning journeys that are quite enriching. We meet all these 'crazy' people who are so passionate about what concerns them. That was surprising because people tend to think of Singaporeans as conservative and very practical people.

Bukit Brown also taught us more about nature, Chinese culture, Singapore history, the complexities in the social and political scenes, as well as the psychology of the people. In exhibiting *The Bukit Brown Index* overseas, we also learnt of the commonalities and differences with other cultures.

Emotional impact and transformations differ between people and we don't need to measure them. As mentioned, we believe that every effort is important, and it may take a long time for us to see the true impact.



Cooking Pans, Spatulas, Wooden Pedastals, Induction Cookers, Gloves, Dry Ice and Smoke Machines, 2013

1 [postmuseum.wordpress.com/](http://postmuseum.wordpress.com/) (accessed on Aug 31, 2016)

2 [post-museum.org](http://post-museum.org) (accessed on Aug 31, 2016)

3 Enwezor, O. *The Artist as Producer in Times of Crisis*. In S. McQuire & N. Papastergiadis eds. *Empires, Ruins + Networks: The Transcultural Agenda*. pp 11-51 (Melbourne: Rivers Oram Press) 2006.

4 [sosbukitbrown.wordpress.com/](http://sosbukitbrown.wordpress.com/) (accessed on Aug 31, 2016)

5 Speaker's Corner is fashioned after Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park, London. Although Singaporeans are required to submit the identity details

to the Police stationed there, political expression is allowed here and no license is required; non-Singaporeans are not allowed to speak there.

6 Tan, K. P. *Optimists, pessimists, and strategists*, In K. P. Tan ed. *Renaissance Singapore: Economy, Culture, and Politics*. pp. 253-269. (Singapore: NUS Press) 2007. Kenneth Paul TAN is Vice Dean (Academic Affairs) and Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, where he has taught since 2007. He has written widely on (1) principles of public policy and administration (focusing on meritocracy,

pragmatism, and public engagement); (2) liberalization, democracy, and civil society; (3) Asian creative cities and the culture industry (focusing on film, television, popular culture, and theatre); (4) race, gender, and sexuality; (5) spatial justice in Asian cities; (6) nation branding, soft power, and nation building; and (7) politics, society, and culture in Singapore. He has published in leading international journals such as *Asian Studies Review*, *Critical Asian Studies*, *International Political Science Review*, and *positions: asia critique*, and has authored two books: *Renaissance Singapore? Economy, Culture, and Politics* (NUS Press, 2007) and *Cinema*

and *Television in Singapore: Resistance in One Dimension* (Brill, 2008).

7 *The Death of the Author* is a 1967 essay by the French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes.

8 *The Encoding/decoding model of communication* was first developed by cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall in 1973.

9 Rancière Jacques. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster, Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* abahali. [org/files/Ranciere.pdf](http://org/files/Ranciere.pdf) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

Image Copyrights: Post-Museum

# THE

Alecia Neo

# HIDDEN

in conversation with

# SELF

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio



Unseen: Constellations, Singapore, 2014–2016

## EXPLORING REALITIES AND DREAMS THROUGH UNSEEN: CONSTELLATIONS.

**Alecia Neo** is a practicing artist and the director of Unseen Art Ltd., a non-profit arts company based in Singapore. Her work involves photography, video installation, site-specific artwork and relational and experiential workshops. Since 2012, she has been developing projects with communities living with visual-impairment. Working together with project participants and collaborators, she invites them to collectively

explore how meaning and narratives are translated in the absence of sight.

She has been commissioned by the Singapore Art Museum, M1 Singapore Fringe Festival, the National Library Board (Singapore) and the National Arts Council (Singapore) for several art projects. Her works have been exhibited in various international festivals and galleries such as Singapore Art Museum

(Singapore), Valentine Willie Fine Art (Singapore), Singapore International Photography Festival, the International Orange Festival (China), University of Bangkok (Thailand), Cittadellarte (Italy) and Noordlicht International Photo Festival (Netherlands). She is also co-founder and Artist Lead with Brack, a trans-border arts platform for socially engaged artists.

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio had an in-depth conversation with Alecia Neo<sup>1</sup> about her projects and practices, revolving around notions of transformation, unpredictability, the visible/invisible, the hidden and the role of desire.

The dialogue is focused mainly on her latest project *Unseen: Constellations*, a long-term art project that “provides a platform for seven youths living with visual-impairment (VI), to explore self-identity and dreams through a creative process led by the artist and her collaborators.”<sup>2</sup>

Other concepts and ideas such as the intimate relationships between art and experience, the perception of the self, the concept of introspection exercises, the involvement and understanding of the audience and the blind walks practice, are also explored in this conversation.

**Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio:** As an artist working with social and participatory art practices, the main initial elements and questions you have to deal with, I am thinking, are related to the complex and subtle mechanism of engaging with people. Envisioning a participatory process and creating the right conditions for establishing inspiring and enriching collaborations and cooperation, require a set of skills and abilities that go, let’s say, beyond the ‘artistic and creative’ sphere. When you do engage, at the beginning with new people, the most urgent and important task is to build trust and confidence; it requires dealing with relational and intimate elements; it can be at the same time, a creative, social and psychological approach. So, before talking about your specific projects, I would really like to know your thoughts about these elements, and understand what are the very initial steps in your creative practice.

**Alecia Neo:** People are indeed very complex and inherently different. And I guess that’s what makes work in this realm so challenging, unpredictable, and necessary! I’ve always been fascinated with our personal relationships with ourselves and with others, and how a person navigates the world with these different selves. In the very beginning of my artistic practice, I worked primarily with the camera, observing and photographing and videoing people in various contexts, obsessing over their possessions and how they lived. After some years, I began to realize that beyond the photograph and visual aesthetics, I was interested in the dialogue that takes place before the photograph happens, and their relationship with the work that is created about or from them. Increasingly, I wanted my participants’ slice of the pie to be bigger. Why should the artist be the sole storyteller? I was discovering that my projects could have a life of their own, perhaps with more “truths”, without me determining wholly how it would eventually be. This process often contributes to how much they connect with the project and their self-understanding. I think no one escapes such processes without realizing, no matter how silently, that their own perspective is subjective. The very conflicts that arise from differing perspectives tend to enrich the process.

My work usually begins with understanding the context and the individuals’ desires, both present and for the future. Desires are a powerful thing, and that’s why I like to go with that in the very beginning – because people tend to want to turn desires into action.

Desires are also contradictory, in the sense that we tend to live through the desires that have been projected upon us. Perhaps we can say, we don’t always realize



Unseen: Constellations, Singapore, 2014–2016

how much of our desires come from the outside, from external influences. So a large part of my interest and projects are driven by this... how do we distinguish between our own, perhaps more authentic, desires and desires that we think we should follow, because society says they are important. This also influences how I choose a context to work in. I look for contradictions, gaps and imbalance in the site, it's organizational structure and potential for change.

There are so many interesting concepts and layers that you are mentioning here, which I would really like to discuss more in depth and that would take us in diverse directions! On the one side, there is the multiplication of perspectives

and the multiplication of “truths” that underlie these critical and essential steps, from monologue to dialogue to participation. We are learning day by day – especially in the field of social art practices – about the meaning and consequence of working and talking “with” others, instead of “about” others. On the other side you mention the powerful element of the desires and the importance of a context-specificity. Therefore, my questions would be: how do you play with this delicate and subtle element, such as the desires? I'm thinking about strategies and methodologies that imply playfulness and games. And, how do you choose the context and place you want to work in?

Usually in my artwork, at the beginning of the process, I begin by asking my participants questions about the self, and how they perceive this self. These questions usually begin privately, with themselves, and then I ask them to engage their peers to either do a visualisation exercise or peer interviews, with the intention of discovering parts of themselves that they rarely think about or have not fully considered. This is usually quite an interesting process, as each person will often provoke their friends in an unexpected way. I often use role-playing as a technique for my participants to express their desires as well. These role-playing exercises may be unscripted or scripted, depending on the situation, and may at times include members of the public. Members of the public may not necessarily know that we are creating an activity or performance, or that they are included in a performance. What is also very important to me is the documenting of the performance or exercise with video or photography. Video is better as the dialogue and expression and actions are documented fully. With photography, I will ask for text from the participants, which describes the process and what it means to them.

Our desires are often revealed in the positions we take, and the physical and spoken language we use. How we view our future selves is often a simple and effective way of understanding our desires. It can be so revealing when we review the videos and documentation of the process together. What's great is that role-playing games also allow for creative distance between reality and the roles we perform, and this allows for deeper discussion. This is often done with the group so that everyone can ask questions and share their interpretation of the narrative or action created. This again raises questions and understanding of our subjective perceptions within the individual and in the group. This act of questioning is a huge part of the later stages of the project, which helps the participants and all of us involved in the project gain deeper insight into the meaning of our actions and the work we are creating.

When I choose a context to work with, I tend to gravitate towards situations or sites with inherent inequalities, obvious ones or perhaps seemingly invisible ones. For instance, it could be situations where art or education is available for some and not for others. Sometimes I also choose to work in situations where there is a fixed narrative about an issue or condition, or a belief that there is only one way to do something, and these beliefs perhaps limit the potential of individuals or the site itself. In these cases, it's about seeking out opportunities to disrupt the status quo, and opening up possibilities to reimagining ways of living and learning together. It can also be about redirecting narratives, both personal and collective narratives. In the process, I'm also learning that seemingly benign interventions can have negative effects on a group or place. So it's really a sensitive process that needs a lot of constant reviewing in the process itself.

We should always take into account the “unpredictability”, the unexpected elements, of these creative and participatory processes. Transformation is such a powerful, vital and essential component that affects the “self”, the “identity”, of each person involved in the process. In this sense I think that being open for transformation is a fundamental requirement and condition – especially in this kind of project – that the artist himself/herself should consider from the beginning of the process. Transformation is also something that we cannot totally control. Before entering more profoundly into one of your projects – where most of the aforementioned components play a very central role – I would like to know your ideas about the issues of transformation and unpredictability, and know how do they move your practice.

I think that what's interesting with regards to transformation in an art practice in the social realm, is that, contrary to what a lot of artists and audience feel, it needs to be dramatic, epic and instant. However, we often overlook the subtler but necessary and important sorts of transformations that take place in long term durational projects. These transformations in relationships are often difficult to document and discern... making them seemingly invisible at times. But it does not mean that they don't take place. What I look forward to is the change or disruption of perceptions about social norms, the ability to nurture individuals and collective agency and forms of behaviour, and how we relate to each other. These changes are, of course, always in flux as so many factors come to play in society. Each process is unpredictable, and often involves both consensus and conflict by all participants, including myself as the artist. I think you are very right in highlighting the need for openness in this process, because most people tend to see things as black or white.

I would like to focus now on your latest project, *Unseen: Constellations*. Since 2014 you have been working on this long-term art project that tackles a very delicate field and condition, the one of visual disabilities. In our contemporary era, which is driven by the image, the simulacra, the representation, the appearance and the exteriority, *Unseen* seeks to explore the imagination, the stories, the essence and the inner dreams. It seems to me a kind of mystical journey that goes towards the interior of ourselves. It reminds me of the words of the Sufi Najmuddin Kubra who said: “Close your eyes and observe what you see.” Would you like to expand on the ideas and first steps that gave origin to the project? Can you also explain the structure of *Unseen* and the methodologies that you use for its complex process and elaboration?

There were a couple of events and situations, which drew me to start this project. In 2012, I participated in two residency programmes. One was a four-month programme at UNIDEE (University of Ideas) in Biella, Italy,<sup>3</sup> with part of it spent in Sanremo. A group of artists from the residency programme began working in the context of an old heritage town called La Pigna, engaging the local residents to rethink the importance of the forgotten town, via the creation of a pseudo cultural association named UNIDESCO (a play on UNESCO).

The other was a one-month long programme at Bamboo Curtain Studio,<sup>4</sup> in Taipei, where I had the opportunity to develop an art workshop with Eden Welfare Foundation’s Ai Ming Centre, which cares for clients with visual impairment. At that time, I was curious about reimagining the possibilities of art making, and what it would mean to create visual works without being able to actually see them. Especially in the times we are living in, with the bombardment of images constructed largely by entertainment and the media and people in power, a different sort of blindness is taking place. “Close your eyes and observe what you see...,” I would link closely to the idea of a person’s interiority that cannot be fully comprehended from the outside. In Taiwan, I began to be fascinated with the possibilities of rediscovering our social and imagined realities through the desires of my participants, who live with varying degrees of blindness.

There were attempts to spend significant time with the community and individuals, listening to their stories and trying to understand various issues they were facing. I also experimented with various ways to question and challenge my participants’ perspectives about situations they shared, and invited them to try working with ideas and materials that they might find impossible or difficult. At Ai Ming, I worked with six individuals intensively over a month, one-on-one, and I invited them to create self-portraits and stories about their lives using images, both

Student Nurul receiving the transcription of her music composition for the first time during *Unseen: Constellations*, Singapore, 2014–2016



Student participant, Nurul performing her original composition live at Singapore Polytechnic. *Unseen: Constellations*, Singapore, 2014–2016



Blind Walk (*TransActions in the Field*), Kampung Banda Dalam, Malaysia, 2015

drawn and photographed. It was, on one hand fascinating and revealing to learn about their worlds and how access and opportunity are often determined by the needs of the majority. On the other, I struggled with the outcomes and the agency of the communities involved. Many questions were left unanswered as I returned home to Singapore.

In both programmes, I left the residencies feeling simultaneously inspired and unsettled. This was because in spite of feeling encouraged by the potentials of the group in various projects, I felt that there were several problems in our approach to the people we worked with. Primarily, there was a predetermined outcome that was primarily artist-led, and there was not enough time or the opportunity for on-going critical reflection. Could the artist occupy a decentred position that gave participants more space to develop autonomy and greater agency?

In 2013, I began researching groups in Singapore, and was finally connected with a teacher, Penny, who worked at a mainstream school, Ahmad Ibrahim Secondary School. The school has an inclusive education system that caters to visually-impaired (VI) students. Penny is a VI resource centre’s teacher, and she also lives with blindness, and helps students living with VI with their schoolwork. Her support and trust, as well as the school’s openness, allowed the project to grow.

One of the main reasons I decided that this would be the right context for the project to develop was that I recognized in its system, the same exclusion process in the education process that I experienced as a child. The students with VI are exempted from specific classes, such as Art, Physical Education (Sports), Design and Technology and Home Economics. In addition, they were also exempted from school camps. During the time when the other students would be camping, they would be assigned other programmes. In general, the perception

was that these subjects were not as important for students with VI to take as compulsory subjects, and in some cases, these activities were perceived as dangerous for them.

One of the criteria I set for myself, was that the work to be developed with the students would be led by their desires and needs, but also would include provocation and support from myself and others. Especially, because the primary meeting place of the project in the beginning was a school, I also wanted to create a space where the power relationships were visible to the students, and that they became aware of their own autonomy and ability to act. We made it known to the students from the start that their participation was based on their consensus, and they could freely choose to be part of it or leave at any time they wished to, if they were uncomfortable. Seven visually-impaired students and some sighted volunteers participated.

My preference was for a workshop that would occur once or twice a week at the school, almost like a regular class, where the students could learn about art. However, it was difficult to organize something so regular for the students, due to their hectic schedules, so in the beginning we had to settle for something simple – an eight-day programme, that would replace the camp that they could not participate in. My intention in the workshop was to create an opportunity for the students to provide access to art, for them to experience and expand their notion of art, and the opportunity for them to discover themselves, and make meaning of their desires and fears.

In the eight-day workshop, I explored their interests via self-reflection, and more interactive exercises with games, peer interviews and questionnaires. The students were also given point and shoot cameras to bring home for the entire period. They were given little assignments to interview loved ones, and create little narratives by playing host on camera.



Stills from Student Neo Kah Wee's project during Unseen: Constellations, Singapore, 2014–2016

As most of the students enjoy communicating using social media and images in their daily lives, they took to the camera fairly easily. The main idea behind the introduction of the camera, was to have the students experiment with the concept of self-representation, to give them control of how their stories would be told.

In the last days of the workshop, the students were invited to look to the future, and role-play how they saw themselves in the years to come. These short performances were largely improvisational, while some of the students decided to script their performances, and engaged their fellow schoolmates as co-performers. Interestingly enough, the students all chose to centre their futures on a profession. On the last day of the workshop, we reviewed their role-playing performance together as a group, and had deeper discussions about their performances, and the ideas and experiences that have informed their stories.

This then began the proposal for the beginning of a mentorship programme with invited professionals from different fields of the students' choice. It was a conscious decision during this time to involve professionals without artistic training or experience, unless the student was interested in a specific artistic discipline, such as performance, music or related art fields. The project involved long processes of negotiating differences which were relational and experiential.

It was also an experiment in developing new audiences while simultaneously influencing social strategies (visibility for groups with disability, employment for minority groups, changing social stigma, reimagining learning environments etc.) and also to expand the notion of art-making and art-production. Everyone invited into the project, including the students, had their own unique experiences, background and knowledge of various issues to be explored together. This created the much needed decentralisation of power, while bringing a charged energy in the exchanges.

These professionals were invited to mentor the students voluntarily, over a course of three to four months. But as the project developed, the mentorship programme extended to one and a half years, with some of the relationships continuing in an unstructured way after the two-year long project. The relationships between the different groups of mentors, students, volunteers and myself, developed over time through both tension and disruptions, as well as alignment and temporary solidarity.

The project was structured in a way to allow both positive and negative feelings to surface, while having constant critical dialogue about the process and purpose of this interaction, project and participation. The students were also encouraged to develop their own projects during the course of the mentorship programme, and to use their projects as a form of introspection and also dialogue with others. I believe that art can provide a generative and experiential process that leads to freedom and responsibility for people involved with it.

Another component that is worth exploring is the question of sharing. What stories came up during the process with the students? How did they share their intimacy? And how finally did you – as an artist – share the stories and the results of the different workshops and activities with the general audience of the project? I'm thinking about this process from inside to outside, but I'm also thinking about the different documentation strategies and outputs.



Student Dallon working with Mentor Allen Lim during Unseen: Constellations, Singapore, 2014–2016

Student Claire with Mentor Sharda Harrison during Unseen: Constellations, Singapore, 2014–2016

Sharing was indeed a large part of the process, and it's so difficult to mention all the different forms that took place over the two years, and translating the process was truly one of the most difficult parts when it came to presenting the work! Either myself or our project assistants were usually present to document and facilitate during the meetings between the students and mentors, or when the students were leading projects amongst their friends. We moved between structured and informal forms of sharing, and the sharing also varied between private and public. The sharing also often took place on the move, when we picked up the students from school or home, and travelled on public transport. Train rides became an essential part of the getting-to-know-you process, and the interactions in public spaces also became fodder for reimagining ways of access and living.

In the beginning, with each of the students, we held private sessions where they got to know their mentors personally, and we tried to strike a balance between sessions held at the school, and sessions held outside the school's premises, so that they would enter the discussion fresh and more focused. Building trust and rapport was essential and we spent a lot of time teasing out the various issues with each group. It was more difficult, in some cases, for some mentors to gain rapport with students who were more rebellious, provocative or passive in the start.

For instance, with one of the groups, the student was initially unhappy with the mentor he was paired with, due to the perceived age gap and lack of chemistry at the very first introduction. At one point, the student suggested working with another youth leader of his choice, and after some open negotiation between all parties, the student decided that he would continue working with our mentor. It took several sessions and a lot of determination from our volunteer mentor to finally achieve constructive dialogue with the student.

During the project's process, a student, Dallon, who has an interest in motivational speaking, proposed sharing sessions at school, after school hours, where other students could freely come to listen in and offer feedback after listening to his speech. The mentor and our team would also be present to offer alternative views

and suggestions. Some of the stories that emerged, that tend to echo through the other students' stories, are of social stigma, strength, and the overwhelming desire to show society that they were more than their disability.

During a public event at a local shopping mall, where some of the students from our project were invited to perform, Dallon shared on stage, "Many times I just feel like giving up and killing myself. This is so unbecoming of a motivational speaker, right? You have no idea how many times people have said this to me. 'If you can't even keep yourself motivated, how are you going to motivate others?'" Believe me, I agree. But I am working on it and I am getting better. A step closer to my dream coming true. It took me two years to move a step. I still have a hundred more yards to go. Just the thought of the amount of work I have to put in is a complete turn off. But if your dream does not scare you it is not big enough."

During this event, Dallon also collected public feedback about his speech from the audiences via feedback forms. This process was also extended and became part of his installation at our art exhibition, where visitors gave insightful feedback and offered new perspectives.

One of the most memorable sharing experiences emerged from the two Conversation Circles led by Dallon's mentor, Allen Lim, who is the founder of Conversation Circles Singapore. We had the privilege of having Allen volunteer his time to host a circle for the VI students participating in this workshop, and another with invited members of the public, who were selected because of their diverse backgrounds and life experiences. Each of these circles threw up unexpected situations such as the inability to command attention and focus due to the reliance on visual quest when leading the session. However, after improvisation, and setting the right tone for the process, intimate stories began to emerge from the individuals in the circle. The student Dallon also had the opportunity to co-host the circle and experience the act of listening with intention.

Another participating student, Claire, who created several experimental video works, shared, "I feel it's more interesting when people disagree with my thoughts or hate my work."

It just means that my work had made a great impact on their lives as they would think and formulate their own conclusions. If they walk out of my [installation] having a new insight of life's offerings, I'd be the most contented person in the world... Sometimes I have triple-vision: I'm on the road so if I take the wrong path, I might get killed. This is what I'm creating with [the audience], a pitch black place and they have to choose a road no matter where it leads to; whether its freedom, love or danger, that will be just their fate. No matter where they go, they will end up in a danger room because I feel that danger is an element in life that we cannot escape from. You have to embrace it." Claire's project was a series of videos developed in collaboration with mentors Sean and Sharda Harrison of Pink Gajah Film and Theatre Collective, in which Claire not only co-directs but also acts and sings in her coming-of-age stories of love, freedom and danger.

Apart from the diverse workshops and programmes that took place over two years, I curated a month long exhibition at Objectifs<sup>5</sup> in Singapore, which presents and documents the intimate relationships between art and experience, through the worlds of these teenagers. The myriad of projects sprouted have led to a series of collaborations with very different communities: a symphonic band composition, music videos about friendship and discrimination, a short film about a visually-impaired recruit's journey in the army, coming-of-age experimental shorts, an audio story book featuring a blind criminal investigator, a study for motivation, and a proposal for an alternative orphanage. Priority was given to the students' intentions and messages in terms of the presentation of their installations. However, what is really important to me is the process, which is collated and discussed in our publication featuring different perspectives from invited writers, and all our participants.

Also important was the presentation of our ongoing video documentation, which offers glimpses into the makings of the project via multiple lenses. We are in the midst of creating a feature film from the documentation. I hope that the film can offer insight into the complex axes of engagement that can be reimagined between artist and subject, medium and interaction, between art and community or audience. The exhibition of works by the students was also supported by weekly programmes of extended dialogues with the students, mentors, invited artists, and the public about mentorship, alternative education, disability rights and presentations on organizing knowledge.

I am also, presently, in the midst of delving into research on alternative education and am developing some art works as part of an experience art lab.

A very inspiring activity I had the privilege to participate in was a blind walk you organized in Kampung Banda Dalam in Malaysia. Feeling what others feel, putting ourselves in other's shoes, is essential to create empathy, learn something new and change perceptions. In the blind walks the senses work differently and the trust in others becomes indispensable. What do the blind walks represent to you?

I was really thankful for all those who participated in the process in Malaysia. The blind walks were actually inspired by one of our student participants, Kah Wee, who had such a strong desire to be part of the National Cadet Corps (NCC)<sup>6</sup> in school, to be part of a collective, a team. This was evident in his project about finding strength within yourself, told through a simple story of a blind

recruit's journey in the army. He shared with me that in the school's NCC training, the students were tasked to build a tent together blindfolded. And it was the first time he felt that he was equal in the team, and in his own words, "not a burden to everyone else".

So the blind walks are that for me. An act of solidarity, shared responsibility, and a nervous, courageous step out into the unknown. What's fascinating about the process is that it encompasses so many things at once... the hyperawareness of the surroundings and others, the negotiation between caution and risk, and the absence of sight really forces you to use your entire body to navigate space. The process also allowed non-movers to be more free and less self-conscious and participative.

One of the most memorable "blind walk" experiences for me also took place in Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, at *Dialogue in the Dark* (DiD)<sup>7</sup>, Malaysia. But this time just in our workshop room. This was an experiment with my artistic collaborators Christopher Ling and his team from theatrethreesixty<sup>8</sup>, and musician Ng Chor Guan from Toccata Studio<sup>9</sup>, for a new workshop called Unseen: Shift Lab, in December 2015. We split into two groups, one blindfolded and the other group would plan our experience in the dark. The lights were dimmed, and the blindfolded group was allowed into the room, and we began a surprising journey of discovery, navigating the space through sound and our bodies. The space started to become "known" through multi-sensorial exploration. I remember the heaviness of the sensation of another person coming to sit next to me, sighing. In the darkness, a warm hand was placed on mine, and I was then introduced to another presence in the room who took me around the room and signalled to me with his hand that he would leave me now. At this point the room was a symphony of sounds...

In order to conclude I would like to ask you about the evaluation aspects of your projects. Considering the complexity of *Unseen: Constellations* – a project that is involving several partners, funders and participants – its multiple directions and outputs, and its human, emotional and sensitive components that are not easily quantifiable, my question would be: how do you measure the learning process of the project? What are the elements that can determine its success or failure? Can we really talk in terms of success and failure? Finally, how do you reflect on your own process and what do you convey – or think is worth highlighting – to others?

The evaluation process of this art project was challenging, and it has taught me so much about the importance of setting very clear intentions and directions for any project, and this would involve asking all the hard questions in the beginning, and making sure everyone is on the same page, even if that means having to let some things and people go. I also learned heaps about being consistent in my communication as an artist, ensuring the consistency of exchange and dialogue amongst all the moving parts and people in the project, while maintaining flexibility and being very open to unexpected changes. These preparations taken in communicating and developing a common vision is crucial for any project to work well.

I also think that more can be done to distinguish between or define each of the key players involved the project, the different levels of participation, such as collaboration versus cooperation.

A clearer definition and communication of the mentor's role in the project and the expectation of the students involved, before the commencement of the project, is also critical, so that it becomes clear that the exchange goes both ways, and each person has the autonomy to propose and negotiate changes and needs.

For this project, the evaluation is an on-going process that takes place constantly during the process of the project when we check in with everyone on their concerns and reflections of the project. For me, this is how the learning process of the project is measured... via the feedback and development of the students, mentors and other key contributors. We do this formally, via sit-down group sessions with invited writers who ask questions, or informally, either individually or in different groups.

It's also important to vary the situations and formats in which feedback is collected, as group dynamics and relationships create different responses. We also collect feedback from the public when we do public interactions and events, as well as people who are not directly involved in the project, but who meet with the students and mentors on a regular basis (such as school staff, family etc.) to get fresh insight on our programme, and also to get critical feedback on any areas we have neglected, especially when most of us are so "into" the project.

During the course of this project, I was also reflecting a lot about how else to deepen the questioning of the students dreams and aspirations and how to further involve the community in this understanding. How do we better cope with issues of self-victimisation and ableism?

I guess success and failure really depends on the objectives set out by the artist and groups involved in the beginning. For example, when a student composes music, we're not just looking at the quality of the music produced, but the conditions of its production, the communities that grow from this process, how music is used as a tool for communication and personal development, changing environments and perspectives of different actors in the process. Personally, I think that when audiences assess this project, especially in situations in which they are confronted with a documentation or visual representation of the project, they have to expand their notion of art to consider the more invisible aspects of the work, which often remain hidden.

In the process of long-form relational and experiential art engagement, acts of failure become attempts at breaking through previous notions, moments of realignment and reorganizing how we understand knowledge and emotions. Failure is no longer perceived as a step backwards, but a progressive momentum that can become a transformative force through self-reflection and a feed-back loop with others.



Exhibition at Objectifs, Singapore. Unseen: Constellations, Singapore, 2014–2016

1 [aleciano.com/](http://aleciano.com/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016) and [unseenart.co/](http://unseenart.co/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016) and [brack.sg/](http://brack.sg/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

2 [alecia-neo.square-space.com/unseen-constellations-2015/](http://alecia-neo.square-space.com/unseen-constellations-2015/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

3 [cittadellarte.it/unidee/](http://cittadellarte.it/unidee/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

4 [bambooculture.com/en](http://bambooculture.com/en) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

5 [objectifs.com.sg/](http://objectifs.com.sg/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

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8 [theatrethreesixty.com/](http://theatrethreesixty.com/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

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# ORGANIZATION-

Elaine W. Ho

# IN-BETWEEN:

in conversation

# ART, ACTIVISM

with

# AND COMM-

Susanne Bosch

# ODIFICATION

## Version 1.2

Elaine W. Ho works between the realms of time-based art, urban practice and design, using multiple vocabularies to explore the micro-politics, subjectivities and alter-possibilities of an intimate, networked production. The act of describing takes on a number of forms—a kind of grammar, a documentation, a gesture, a biography—or an experiment in Beijing known as HomeShop. She is the initiator of the artist-run space, active from 2008–2013, and continues to ask questions about the

socio-politics of syntax, more recently as fellow at the Institut für Raumexperimente (Berlin, 2014) and editor & collaborating artist for the three-day embodied knowledge *HK FARMers' Almanac* spontaneous book event (2015). She likes to drink coffee and tea mixed together and is a frequent contributor at [iwishicoulddescribe-ittoyoubetter.net](http://iwishicoulddescribe-ittoyoubetter.net).

## Version 2.0

Elaine W. Ho works between the realms of time-based art, urban practice and design. She received a Bachelors in Art and Art

History at Rice University, thereafter continuing to broaden her fields of inquiry through fashion design (Parsons School of Design, 1999–2001; Academy of the Arts Arnhem, 2001–2004) and critical theory and communications (European Graduate School, 2007–2010). These extended forms of learning created the basis for HomeShop (Beijing, 2008–2013), the artist-run project space, self-organised as an experiment in collaborative learning amidst the aporetic spaces of contemporary Chinese socialist capital.

Rooftop view of the first "WaoBao!" community swapping event that functioned as a miniature experiment in moneyless economies, Beijing, 2012

She continues to explore such questions through writing, performance and time-based installation, most recently by way of collaborations with the Institute for Spatial Experiments and Display Distribute.

Recent work has been presented at the Power Station of Art (Shanghai, 2016), Guangdong Times Museum (Guangzhou, 2015), Spring Workshop (Hong Kong, 2015), Neue Nationalgalerie (Berlin, 2014) and Tate Modern (London, 2014), among others.

Elaine and Susanne had a conversation about Elaine's work in Beijing, with HomeShop, and The *HK FARMers' Almanac* spontaneous book event in Hong Kong in 2015. Much more than just "work", Elaine lives, through and through, what she holds as values, as questions and as the spaces in between.

**Susanne Bosch:** I was very intrigued by your statement of intent for the *TransActions in the Field* master class last year. This is an excerpt of what you wrote:

*"Regarding my own work and practice, in all honesty I find myself in an extended period of transition, as HomeShop, the artist-run project space that I founded and co-organised for five years in Beijing, came to a close at the end of 2013. The retrospective distance from which I am able to look at this project now leads me alternately to a sense of accomplishment or feelings of foolishness, and the period since then has involved a great deal of reflection, transformation, and the regaining of new ways to continue. With a practice that involved art (both self-initiated projects with HomeShop and my individual practice), writing (as part of my practice and publisher of independent publications), and organisation (trying to find infrastructures of collaboration), HomeShop has allowed me to question every aspect of the creative act and the social sphere. This is not only about questioning what "public" can mean to us today, but about how networks and splintered means of production and reception have altered those connections between publics.*

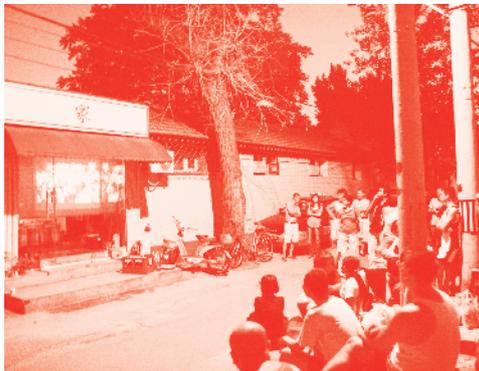
*At the same time, I am often cynical about artists' ability and responsibility for enacting political change."*



What intrigued, touched and resonated with me was your honesty to speak about difficult things. Back then, you wrote to strangers. I am interested in understanding more about your cynicism, your learning, where you are at now. For you, does this cynicism have to do with the system “art” that we all belong to, which is highly hierarchical and exclusive? Or is it a more general cynicism towards global, man-made systems that we try to change, break or inhabit?

**Elaine W. Ho:** Cynicism is a strong word, but yes, maybe sometimes it is that, or we may also call it forms of resistance, or “finding one’s way” when one doesn’t feel like he/she has a place. I listened recently to a podcast from the sociologist Pascal Gielen<sup>1</sup> and he talks about how there is a plethora of artist-run organisations that “started to do community art because they hated the art world and they wanted not to be involved in the art market”. See also this exhibition catalogue which includes a text I wrote, “Organisation-at-Large”, about starting from ‘disappointment’.<sup>2</sup> Also to answer your question directly, it is both the ‘disappointment’ with systems in art but also systems in the world in general. Because anything that becomes an industry—and yes, *the art world is indeed an industry*—will inevitably be a global, economic and institutionalised question.

The ironic counter to this is that a curator once asked me about what he felt was a contradiction in the ‘anti-aesthetics’ of HomeShop, which was very funny to me because I actually always found our work to be very aesthetic, simply not a mainstream kind of aesthetic. He pointed out the fact that to be ‘anti-art’ is always in reference to ‘art’ as well, which is indeed true. But thinking again now, I realise that his sad mistake was more so to substitute our stance in opposition to the hierarchical systematics of the art world with a misaligned assumption against art itself. This is not the case at all.



So even if we may be marginalised from the elite of the mainstream (commercial) art world, there are quite a few of us (of many different varieties) on those edges. Finding situations that you feel are unfair, self-indulgent or exclusive can be a very good directive for exploring alternative realms of living and working that may be more fair, more nurturing and/or more inclusive. So maybe not so dissimilarly from the 1000+ practitioners that Gielen has interviewed, HomeShop also began because I wanted to make a space to work in a way that was stimulating for me as an artist, when I could not find



Neighbours and friends gather around the hutong public broadcast of the closing ceremony of the 2008 Olympic games

Hanging out and passing by HomeShop on the opening day of the “Ten Thousand Items’ Treasury”, a public library for borrowing books, tools, DVDs and other ephemera, Beijing, 2011

it otherwise. This was the first step. But as you mention learning, resistance as reaction is not enough, so as you begin to build the space and people begin to gather together, you have to be attentive to the context that is created from out of the pre-existing context. These are not the same things, if we are talking about the kind of work that we do as artists working with communities or in consideration of collaboration and a kind of commons-building. And so perhaps it is also because there is such a strong disjuncture between the different social communities that HomeShop had lateral relations with—old retired Beijingers living in the *hutongs*, a kind of hipster young foreigner crowd, the Chinese contemporary art world and curious young Chinese people with interests in a kind of ‘cultural consumption’ but not necessarily coming from the art world—the kind of mish-mash created led to the wild journey that was HomeShop’s five-and-a-half year course.

When I look at your various bios, you come across as global nomad, coming from two backgrounds—Hong Kong and the USA, having studied in Asia, Europe, the States, and now living in Shanghai, China. Can you give me an idea of your role or the positions you hold, as you seem to embody the “insider and outsider” of various fields... you seem the amalgamation of various cultures within and outside of Asia, of your gender, of your profession, of your time and space.

*Aiaiai...*the identity question is a fundamental, yet very difficult one for me, and maybe that’s why the biography as a format becomes something highly suspicious. As you see with the various versions that have come up over time, there is a need to play with it as a way of deconstructing forms of representation. The ‘global nomad’ description is one that I’ve heard about myself quite often, especially in the last couple of years, but it actually strikes me with surprise, because I never saw myself like that. My life and practice were so heavily invested in Beijing for the previous nine years, movements didn’t feel nomadic. I suppose this was the case for the previous bases as well, in the Netherlands or the U.S., because it is about your attitude within a context that marks a differentiation between being the nomad or not. Somehow I see the character of the nomad as insistent upon his/her own outside-ness to the point of a small-scale colonisation, whereby one simply implants oneself onto new ground and continues the same practices as always, moving every so often to different places when the resources are dried up. This is something similar to my impression of the expatriate, another kind of character with which I would rather not identify, because as you say, there is a desire to find a better understanding of some kind of ‘inside’ of a culture, a field or set of relations, rather than simply remain an outside imposer. And I have been fortunate enough to perhaps gain different glimpses of several ‘insides’, but yes, at the same time I am inevitably always an outsider (in my insecurity the latter always feels the strongest). So there is an inherent contradiction at work here...

What is your personal inner driver to do what you do?

Maybe some of this question is answered already from question one, or from the “Organisation-at-Large” text. I have a very deep desire to learn, know more and understand the wealth of contradictions created from diversity, singularity and the attempt to come to terms with our being in the world. As you encounter such complexity, there is a desire to find ways to reflect and decipher that complexity. As you find problems, there is desire to seek solutions and find alternatives. And as you learn, there is a concurrent desire to share knowledge.

Your question of “how we can live together” in the “Organisation-at-Large” text is answered by Gielen with some suggestions to us, the creative crowd. I liked his analogy to circus life: if we move away from an idea/belief of freedom that takes the freedom of others away, it becomes what he calls “negative freedom”. Instead, Gielen emphasizes the need to shift thinking toward a shared or collective freedom. He calls upon artists to build more and more collectives to work together, to find our singular voices and respect the voices of others. The “multitude” is about parallel singular voices that can live with each other. So Gielen suggests that we organise ourselves as with life in the circus, with a mix of private and public life, a mix of creativity and economy, all in a tent. A tent is not only mobile; it marks a structure in public space which has an inside containing its own vertical institution. This institution can only be made within the collective; it can be fantastic and very cheap to make, due to social relationships, *and* it is mobile; it marks an autonomous self-governmental space for a moment in a context that can be shared. As it is not rigid like a museum or other institutions, it moves, then builds up another structure again somewhere else. He asked if we can re-think art today like this.

However, the flexibility Gielen attributes to the tent is an admirable form of auto-reflection and willingness to rethink one’s own structures; you see it in the kind of five-year planning or time-based charters of certain organisations including Zikri Rahman’s *Buku Jalanan*. So, in my view, the great possibility that circus life, as a metaphor, affords us is then a repeated process of learning and unlearning, or building and deconstructing the ‘tents’ which organise and systematise our ways of working and living together. The difficult part would be to avoid what I mentioned about the figure of the nomad or expat, where sedimented ways of doing and thinking are simply repeated and implanted into different contexts.

He also touched upon a theme that you have written about as well: the contradiction of being invited by commissioners and institutions that set up a structural framework which artists actually question and even try to break. Artists sometimes naïvely enter into this type of socially-engaged public art practice to build social cohesion, and sometimes they succeed. But artistic interventions can also be cheap solutions to fill up holes in neoliberal systems. As temporary and project-based formats, this type of work on the micro-social level most likely remains far from real structural change. When artists realize structural problems, when they start reasoning on political levels, that is when the role of the artist becomes very dangerous. Gielen warns us not to fall into the trap of “NGO art”, to work from both ends of the spectrum by helping people with good intentions and a good heart, but at the same time preserving political-structural situations that help a neoliberal system to stay alive.

Within Asia, this problem is very much relevant in Hong Kong (see the work of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council), or perhaps places like Japan where there is a lot of government funding for culture, but less relevant at least from our perspective in the Mainland, where there is virtually no government support for art (though there are huge pushes being made in recent years for soft power via film and certain other aspects of the ‘creative industries’).

But a related trap that I think artists very often get into, and which you touch upon by saying how artists naïvely “help a neoliberal system to stay alive”, is the issue of gentrification, and the wholly flexible ability of capitalist interests to appropriate, engulf and swallow artistic endeavours. The fact that we see the collusion of the Chinese government and private interests very skillfully being able to utilise the phenomenon of urban gentrification as a *top-down*



In response to the difficulty and frustration of working as an independent publisher, as well as in note of the dearth of dialogue between small-scale practitioners in East Asia, Elaine has most recently joined the Display Distribute platform with its “LIGHT LOGISTICS” project—aiming to support an alternative distribution network for the exchange of independent publications from Asia, 2016

strategy to rejuvenate land and value, is a kind of gentrification ‘with Chinese characteristics’ in which young creatives are very happy to take part. Located in an area of the city that is highly gentrified, HomeShop’s naïve role as contributor to such trends is something that plagues me. I would like to be able to emphasise other, non-quantifiable forms of value that HomeShop has been able to effect and affect with its practice, but unfortunately they still also come with numbers like rising rent costs and the inability for HomeShop to sustain a longer-term relationship to the community.

A former banker, nowadays a permaculture farmer, said to me last year that the one amazing, extraordinary quality of capitalism is its ability to adopt and subsume absolutely everything in its structure and turn it into its favour. The feeling of a contradictory “trap” where your work has effects in ways you do not wish it to, is a difficult one for me as well. Therefore, I wonder if you ever discussed within HomeShop, for example, the gentrifying aspects of your work? I’m thinking of artistic strategies where you “mirror” the downfall of a system.

Yes, we were very aware about our possible role as “gentrifiers” in the neighbourhood, and there is a series of discussions on the topic in relation to us and other developments in Asia on our blog, humorously titled “Gentrification

Disco".<sup>3</sup> I think that playing with the realm of ambiguity of productive outputs in our practice, as well as trying to avoid the commodification of many contemporary art exhibitions, were some of our strategies to confuse or intercept the gentrification and capitalisation process. Making a clear decision to end HomeShop could also be described as cutting off the possibilities for capitalisation on the HomeShop name and accumulation of value created by this so-called 'portfolio of experience'. But there's no need to heroicise our failures, *haha*. We've thought about these aspects of our nebulous activities, decorated with this ironically very blunt endnote. But closing HomeShop was not a consensual decision, and the democratic vote that led to our dissolution was very disappointing for some of us.

The Institute of Human Activities<sup>4</sup> is an artistic example of living with these tensions. Renzo Martens gave an impressive talk about their struggles at the Artist Organisations International conference in Berlin.<sup>5</sup>

He said, our critical gestures of boycott obscure the connection between art and global economies. By making beautiful art we give the impression of being on top of the social injustice we identify. To meaningfully deal with war, capitalist exploitation and social injustice we need to understand them better. Gatherings of critical art producers in the form of biennales, etc., represent these tiny, beautiful exceptions that provide the world with good feelings and satisfaction. But we are somehow all involved with "gentrificationism". For Martens, solidarity would be to present beyond the centres of capitalist accumulation (social, cultural, financial, etc.) in the old centres of empire. These centres add value to art and that value has a real outcome for bankers, politicians and real estate managers. To be present with the fruits of this critique, in the locations where the critique is actually aimed, is the centre of their solidarity attempt. We are not always aware of structural conditions, but we as artists can choose to try and make the fruits of our work happen exactly where the injustice takes place. So for example, the Institute for Human Activities (IHA) invited Richard Florida<sup>6</sup> to help them "gentrify" their Unilever Planatage Workers' living conditions and be part of the creative economy amidst their transformation from the Fordist economy to something else. For me, this seems a very radical twist to mirror the structural conditions, to try and turn them for the locality. I wonder what your take is on that.

I did see Martens' *Enjoy Your Poverty* some years ago and was completely blown away, which is no easy feat in a biennial-type setting with an overload of video content. He has mastered the tendentious self-awareness of his power as a white male creator, and that is what makes it so funny and frightening at the same time. While I understand the logic of his attempt to redirect capital, unfortunately, I heard that the exhibition of artworks created with the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise did not sell very well at all...

That leads us to practical examples, because these aesthetic potentialities where we question and deal with obvious inequalities need to be strategized in the current situation in a practical way. HK Farm and the three-day *HK FARMers' Almanac* spontaneous book event (2015) interests me. You brought together several farming/activist/art groups from Hong Kong and mainland China to create a three-day publication-making workshop in the form of a collaborative, performative event of embodied knowledge. What happened? What was your experience and what was the outcome?



To kick-off The HK FARMers' Almanac book sprint, participants engage in a compost ritual of untangling over 20 meters of pumpkin vine that spontaneously grew from the HK Farm-designed plexiglass compost box, Hong Kong, 2015

Urban farmers also work on computers. Day one of the The HK FARMers' Almanac book sprint, Hong Kong, 2015

Working installation for The HK FARMers' Almanac book sprint, Spring Workshop, Hong Kong, 2015





The text "Organisation-at-Large" was written on the occasion of the exhibition "Can We Live (Together)", curated by Lee Chun Fung and including this semi-autonomous viewing hut built by Elaine W. Ho. Visitors were encouraged to bring their own video material to be shown freely within this context of a government-managed art space, Hong Kong, 2014



The final compilation of The HK FARMers' Almanac special edition includes zines, artist editions, digital content, postcards and seeds harvested from various urban farmers and collectives around Hong Kong, Spring Workshop, Hong Kong, 2015

Basically, the form of this book event came out of the natural coincidences of the HK Farm collective's image-making as an important part of their process, our mutual interest in zine culture and the fact that farming is a very hands-on, embodied kind of practice and knowledge. So how to turn reading, writing and publishing into something equally embodied and collaborative? This book sprint was an attempt to do that, bringing the skills, perspectives and interests of several protagonists of the urban farming landscape in Hong Kong together to share knowledge and experiences together within the context of an intensive three-day workshop. The goal was simple, to work together to write, edit, illustrate, design and put together a specially published edition that includes both printed matter and digital content, a few artist editions and even a packet of seeds, all enclosed within a wooden box that doubles as a planter.

Because the Spring Workshop team for the organisation of this project was so incredibly on top of it and supportive, this project was for the most part smooth-

going in its experience and outcome, and I have to say it's the kind of luxury I don't usually experience working as an independent practitioner with fewer resources.

We described it as a 'spontaneous book event' following the same-named projects from the Institut für Raumexperimente (IfREX)<sup>7</sup>, where in 2014 I had first participated in a similar workshop for one of their publications. At IfREX, the spontaneous publications are produced as a one-day session with a guest critic to lead a collective editing process of A4 contributions made by each of the participants of the Institute. The final production was co-ordinated by the organisation team.

In our case, we stretched the one-day conceptualisation and editing process to three days, because we wanted to also include the possibility for on-site production (not simply on computers)—to make space for the embodied and hands-on work that could reflect the kind of knowledge process more akin to farming/gardening as crafts. I developed a kind of spatial arrangement and installation for the working area to reflect this kind of chain of production, which included everything from a relaxed discussion area to a silk-screening station and the ubiquitous photocopy machine. The time was divided such that there were intervals where we worked in teams on personal contributions to the *Almanac*, and also collective sessions where we tried to develop content together. There were moments of play and enjoying meals together, and there were moments of concentrated stress in consideration of upcoming deadlines.

Regarding location and context-specificity of *The HK FARMers' Almanac* spontaneous book event, you certainly faced many expectations, demands, wishes and hopes. How and where do these expectations differ based upon the context? What kind of expectations could you handle best? When and where did it become problematic?

In the end, the most ironic surprise that I had not anticipated can be summed up as the gentle and funny contradiction between 'spontaneity' and 'embodied' when working with a large group of people, in an organised fashion. Because in fact it was impossible for our 'spontaneous book' to emerge after three days, and coordinating the production of the final outcome eventually twisted and stretched into an over five-month process. While we know about the kind of spontaneous event that can occur in crowd situations, our embodied commitment toward 'perfection' perhaps detracted from real spontaneity (*ha-ha*).

Regarding the kind of expectations that I can handle best, *hmmm...* I think for sure that my idea and expectation for the project was not the same as for HK Farm, but this is not a problem at all because of mutual respect for one another's work and openness to ways of working. However, those kinds of multiplicities contribute to the complexity of a project like this one; even when there is very clear final outcome to be reached, there is the difficulty of numerous strands of interest and skill to reach that outcome in a compressed amount of time. This is of course a common problem in many contexts.

That issue of 'perfection' was one that I had not anticipated, because while I had hoped to experiment with a rougher, unedited sharing, the direct outcome of which would be whatever we could put together in three-days' time, I think it is much more a part of Spring and HK Farm's aesthetics to make a beautifully crafted product, which of course cannot happen in only three days. Knowing this themselves, Spring and HK Farm anticipated the large workload to be mediated



Neighbours and friends play Wii sports when they can't get tickets to see the Beijing Olympics. "wii would like to play // wii don't have tickets" was part of the HomeShop's day nine 2008 Olympics event in honour of all the 'losers'. HomeShop, Beijing, 2008

by asking contributors to submit their individual contributions, equal to one chapter of the *Almanac*, before the workshop began. Of course with everyone's busy schedules, this, for the most part did not happen, and a great deal of the collective working time during the event was sacrificed so that people could work on their individual sections.

#### How did you negotiate the roles in your process?

What I found remarkable about Spring Workshop was the amount of care and nurturing that goes into operating the institution, in a manner such that there is not much need to explicitly negotiate roles because everyone helps out on multiple levels based upon awareness and need. Despite its international stage presence, it is a very small organisation greased by a tiny team of six-seven people, and while of course there are divisions of responsibility, it is not unusual to see the director of the space washing dishes too.

I became acquainted with HK Farm<sup>8</sup> in 2013 via Michael Leung, one of its founders, and while they operate as a collective, the nuances of their collaboration were for a long time a mystery to me because I did not have the opportunity to meet the others in the group until beginning to work on the *Almanac* project.

The goals, orientation and scale of practice for Spring Workshop and HK Farm are very different, making their relationships to the *way of working* also variable.

But my intuition senses that there may also be gender differences at work (Spring Workshop's team is primarily female, HK Farm consists of four young men) in terms of the unsaid understandings between these two highly divergent examples of working together, so my insertion in between as editor of *The HK FARMers' Almanac* was indeed an insertion negotiation itself. You could say I work more similarly to Michael's grassroots ethos, and that means we can work quite independently within collaboration; adding the support and logistical assistance from Spring Workshop really expanded the scale of things we could do and facilitated the entire process.

#### Did anyone else support the process and how was it supported?

There are many, depending upon which level of the process you are examining! Of course, there are the individual contributors, each making a zine chapter of the *Almanac*, but yes, there is also the intern who helped bind 100 copies of the edition, the farmers who donated soil from the North-eastern New Territories of Kowloon, the translators, the hipster café near Spring that donated food waste for compost, the disgruntled worker in the copy shop, the online retailer in the Mainland that Michael hesitantly conceded to buy from because one tool we needed was too expensive to produce locally, etc. There were couriers and the carbon emissions that delivered the tool; there is the capital, which allows Spring Workshop to operate and support artists; there is a network and culture of media that promotes and disseminates the project. And of course, very importantly, there are the readers.

1 "SON[I]JA #218: Pascal Gielen". [rwm.macba.cat/en/sonia/pascal-gielen-podcast/capsula](http://rwm.macba.cat/en/sonia/pascal-gielen-podcast/capsula) (Barcelona: Radio Web MACBA) 2015 October 12

2 Ho, Elaine W. "Organisation-at-Large". 《假如「在一起」can we live (together)》 exhibition catalogue (August 2014) pp. 11-14.

3 To follow the "Gentrification Disco" series posted on the HomeShop blog, see: [HomeShopbeijing.org/blog/?s=gentrification](http://HomeShopbeijing.org/blog/?s=gentrification) (accessed Aug 31, 2106)

4 The Institute for Human Activities' (IHA) goal is to prove that artistic critique on economic inequality can bypass it—not symbolically, but in material terms. Since 2014, the IHA has collaborated with the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (CATPC). Together they set up the Lusanga International

Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality (LIRCAEI). Through exhibitions, presentations and by instigating critical reflection, the IHA is reaching out beyond the Research Centre in Congo. Furthermore, the IHA facilitates the global dissemination of artwork created with the CATPC, whose profits return directly to Congo to support the makers and their families as well as other community projects in Lusanga. [humanactivities.org/about-3/](http://humanactivities.org/about-3/)

5 "Solidarity and Unionising". Panel: Artist Organisations International, [vimeo.com/119233427](http://vimeo.com/119233427).

6 Richard Florida is one of the world's leading public intellectuals on economic competitiveness, demographic trends, and cultural and technological innovation.

7 The Institut für Raumexperimente e.V. (Institute

for Spatial Experiments) developed out of the Institut für Raumexperimente, Berlin University of the Arts. A registered association (e.V.) since January 2015, the Institute continues the work of the original five-year project and its goal of supporting artistic research and education. The Institut für Raumexperimente was affiliated with the Berlin University of the Arts from 2009 to 2014 as an experimental education and research project, led by its founding director Olafur Eliasson together with co-directors Christina Werner and Eric Ellingsen. [raumexperimente.net/](http://raumexperimente.net/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

8 *The HK FARMers' Almanac* collection of zines, artist editions, USB, seeds, wooden planter box collaboration between HK Farm, Farms for Democracy, Sangwoodgoon, Very MK, Yaumatei Gardener, Bishan Commune, Hu

Fang, Ming Lin, Kit Chan, Christopher DeWolf and Laine Tam, edited by Elaine W. Ho and commissioned by Spring Workshop in Hong Kong 2015. Inspired by both the ancient *Tung Shing* divination guide and *The Old Farmers' Almanac* published in North America since 1792, *The HK FARMers' Almanac* was a publishing project and practice in embodied knowledge. For three days, urban farmers, artists and writers gathered for a performative production, where words, images, sound and the compost piled up for an in-situ exercise of thinking through farming practices in Hong Kong. [spring-workshop.org/?lang=en~/the-hk-farmers-almanac-online/](http://spring-workshop.org/?lang=en~/the-hk-farmers-almanac-online/) (accessed Aug 31, 2106)

Image Copyrights: Elaine W. Ho

# AN

Renan Laru-an

# ORGANIZATION

in conversation with

# CALLED

Susanne Bosch

# TO BE DONE

**Renan Laru-an** (b. 1989 in Sultan Kudarat) is a researcher, curator, and the founding director of Philippine-based DiscLab | Research and Criticism. He holds a degree in Psychology from the University of the Philippines-Diliman, and is a member of SYNAPSE – The International Curators' Network at HKW in Berlin.

His practice lies in the differentiation of knowledge sites and scenes as an interval to inaugurate forms of criticality and *naïveté*. Interdisciplinary and transversal, his research

constellates around histories of development and integration and discursive architecture. He takes the unformed place of the curatorial as a space for theoretical production and institution-building.

Projects include *Pasa-pasâ (Etiologies of Bruising)* (Lopez Memorial Museum & Library, 2016), *lend me your softness* (ArtCenter College of Design, 2016), *Lightning Studies: Centre for the Translation of Constraints, Conflicts, and Contaminations (CTCCCs)* (Hangar, 2016), *From Bandung*

*to Berlin* (with Brigitta Isabella) (trans-regional, ongoing), *Herding Islands, Rats, and the Anthropocene* (ongoing). He edited *An Auto-Corrected Journal of Printing Properties* (The Office of Culture and Design), and has contributed to *open! Platform for Art, Culture, and Public Domain*, *MOMUS*, and *Green Lantern Press* Chicago. His lectures and other projects have been hosted by OK. Video Indonesia's Media Arts Festival, Akademie der Bildenden Künste München-NTU-Singapore, and Academy of Media Arts Cologne.

He has been the 2016 curator-in-residence at Hangar and at the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw. He is an alumnus of the Gwangju Biennale International Curator Course led by Ruth Noack.

## ABOUT DISCLAB | RESEARCH AND CRITICISM<sup>1</sup>

Formed in 2012, DiscLab | Research and Criticism is an independent, non-aligned, and not-for-profit organization composed of researchers, writers, artists, and other cultural agents. As a multi-disciplinary platform and *virtual* organization, DiscLab aims to document the recent history of Philippine contemporary art, while actively expanding its lines of inquiry in local and international contexts, and in other knowledge sites.

Past projects include: *The Criticality Questionnaire Project* (2012-2014), *Amalgam* (2013-2014), *Approximating* (2014), and *The Singapore Biennale Interview Series* (2013-2014), and *Squatting Knowledges* (ongoing). Its publication *An Auto-Corrected Journal of Printing Properties* (published by The Office of Culture and Design) was presented at the 2014 and 2015 New York Art Book Fair.

DiscLab served as Artistic Director of the First Lucban Assembly: *PAMUMUHUNAN (Waiting for a capital)*, initiated by Project Space Pilipinas. In 2015, DiscLab launched its flagship program *Waiting Sheds* Cooperative Study and Research Program.

DiscLab has received support from Ateneo Art Gallery, Purita Kalaw Ledesma Foundation, Goethe-Institut Malaysia, and Arts Collaboratory. DiscLab has presented projects at NTU-Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, Lopez Memorial Museum and Library, and Akademie der Bildenden Künste München. DiscLab is a Gwangju Biennale Fellow 2016 and Future Generation Art Prize Partner Platform 2017.

Susanne Bosch spoke with Renan Laru-an about DiscLab | Research and Criticism's artistic directorship of the First Lucban Assembly: *PAMUMUHUNAN (Waiting for a capital)*, a research-oriented, month-long biannual festival that took place in 2015 in rural Southern Luzon in collaboration with the artist-run space, the organizer and initiator of the project, Project Space Pilipinas.

Exhibition view of *Order of Objects after Arrival*, part of *Systems of Irrigation* (May 2015). PSP Studio. Courtesy of the First Lucban Assembly



**Susanne Bosch:** Renan, what is your personal inner driver to do what you do?

**Renan Laru-an:** I grew up in the southern region of the Philippines, in Mindanao, where access to what has been called “basic needs” are limited and only accessible to a number of people. It suffers from a high incidence of poverty and, generally, a low human development index. Pre-colonial history tells us that it hosted a number of sultanates. Naturalized violence and systemic conflict have also been enfolded into the daily life in the region. My parents are Christian settlers in what used to be a predominantly Muslim region. My hometown is 30-mins away from a site of massacre where 50 journalists were slaughtered in election-related violence in 2009. Now, I work freelance and I am based in the capital, Manila.

I am not sure how I can locate my “personal inner driver” or motivation in what I do, or if it is necessary at all to think, then articulate it. I am not sure if the inner/interior/inside is a reliable index, in reflecting on what I do.

What did you study, what did you encounter, what triggered you? Several times I have read the sentence: “My practice lies in the differentiation of knowledge sites and knowledge scenes.” What does this mean exactly?

I was socialized in the public education system. I studied psychology at a state and national university in the Philippines, at a department in which the movement and discipline of Filipino Psychology (*Sikolohiyang Pilipino*) was founded. Immersed in this intellectual context, I slowly realized how knowledge systems and their processes of constitution can be violent.

I operate within the differences between knowledge sites and knowledge scenes, in which the former is a place where I situate myself in order to engage with knowledge, while the latter is a staging of systems of thinking for a temporary space, a makeshift theatre of knowledges perhaps. The tension between these two keeps me moving.

I am a big fan of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s exposition of the immersion of the human body in a world – an act that reconstitutes it as being ‘in’ and ‘of’ space. “Classical phenomenologists practiced some three distinguishable methods.

(1) We describe a type of experience just as we find it in our own (past) experience.

Thus, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty spoke of pure description of lived experience.

(2) We interpret a type of experience by relating it to relevant features of context.

In this vein, Heidegger and his followers spoke of hermeneutics, the art of interpretation in context, especially social and linguistic context. (3) We analyse the form of a type of experience. In the end, all the classical phenomenologists practiced analysis of experience, factoring out notable features for further elaboration.”<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty speaks of the connection between body and mind. He writes that it is via the body as our main sensing apparatus that we learn the world and our position in it.

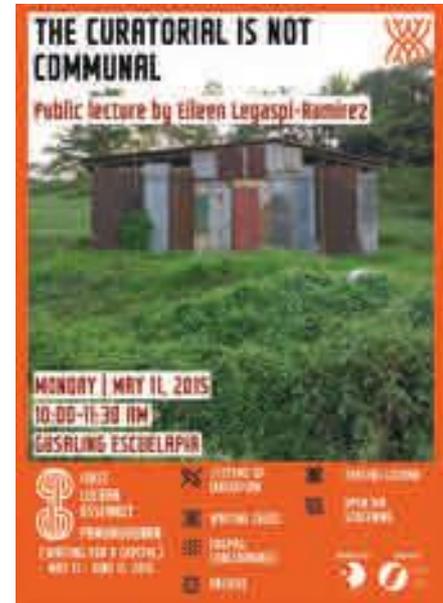
I remember reading Merleau-Ponty in 2009 when I started my professional transition to working in the arts. It served as makeshift intellectual self-help. I worried though that it might be turned into a dogmatic reference.

We need to remember and attach phenomenology in what Heidegger established as hermeneutic circle, the circle of understanding that mobilized the scientific analyses of objects and subjects.



Installation view of Mahardika Yudha’s “Sunrise Jive” (2005), part of *Systems of Irrigation* (May 2015). Lucban, Quezon Province. Courtesy of the First Lucban Assembly

Poster of *The curatorial is not communal*, part of *Pagpag (Unlearning)* Forum (May 2015). Gusalang Escuelapia. Courtesy of the First Lucban Assembly

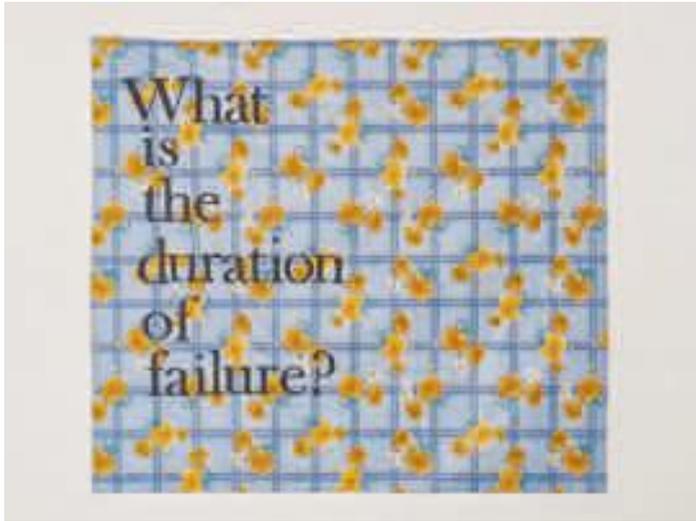


The fundamentalism that could be elected with this “right way of thinking” has opened up channels to continue epistemological violence.

A number of thinkers, such as Kaja Silverman, have injured this circle already. It is equally important to adopt a parallel field. For instance, reading a critical history of science as a way to apprehend disciplines like phenomenology would be productive.

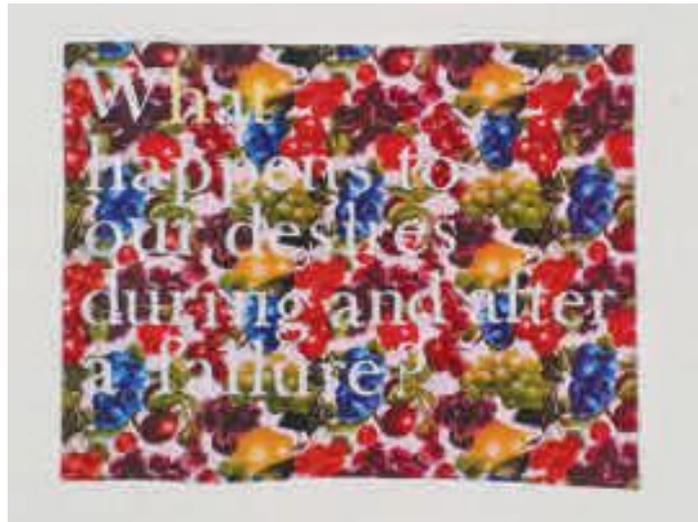
Therefore, I am always open to see the work of someone in a context of an entire biography, the personal as well as the political, social, cultural... context.

There is a necessary incommensurability in grasping the context, an insufficiency that relates to a context. A biographical burdened with marginal can always betray storytelling and representative narration.



Text installation of *Failure/s in a constellation and as a tribunal*, part of *Post-Museum's More than [show] business* (October 2014). NTU-CCA Singapore. Courtesy of DiscLab | Research and Criticism

Text installation of *Failure/s in a constellation and as a tribunal*, part of *Post-Museum's More than [show] business* (October 2014). NTU-CCA Singapore. Courtesy of DiscLab | Research and Criticism



You wrote that you studied psychology. How and when did the arts move into your sight and become your professional field of practice?

The possibility of doing research attracted me into arts as a professional practice. This might be unpopular, or in my local ground, it might be called out as bluff or pretentious. But I am not referring to the productivity of higher education in crisis or to the way anti-intellectualism approaches it. There are sets of objects, subjects and events that cannot be nurtured in some familiar domains. I was and am hopeful that arts could host a research.

And as you work both as an individual and also as DiscLab: who are you as team, who is the team, on what basis do you meet and collaborate? Do you collaborate?

DiscLab | Research and Criticism is an organization that is virtual and practical. DiscLab is primarily composed of researchers and writers, who might have assumed curatorial and managerial roles independently or with institutions. First, it recognizes different levels of precarity that its members deal with, who navigate in a context with benign and unreliable infrastructures for working and living. It is very loose and in its first three years, members work on voluntary terms, unpaid most of the time. There are five to seven people, with two-three individuals who can afford to do it as a regular part-time or full-time job. I consider it as my full-time job.

When DiscLab maintains its position as a "virtual" organization, it absolutely does not refer to the online, the internet, or to the network. It might have been associated to it most of the time, but "virtual" here means "to be done," and maybe the surfaces to be undone. The collectivity or collectivism that is and will always be paired with its formation and administration is based on struggling to work on what needs to be done. Thus, it challenges tokenistic solidarity. DiscLab, clearly as an initiative different from the emergence of convivial artist-run spaces or organizations in the Philippines, pursues uneasy non-alignment to produce critical collaboration. That collaboration may be slow and riddled with difficulties.

DiscLab, the way you describe it, sounds like an announcement that invites you into or involves you in a situation or project, in which you will have to deal with honest, straight forward and maybe uneasy action and interaction. I wonder how that looks like in real life, with partners and institutions, who invite you, like in the First Lucban Assembly, and also with participants?

I love the invocation of the term "announcement". Working closely with it is the notion of pronouncement. How it flows into our actual and material conditions is slow. Slow is painful and difficult. This flow might eventually take the form of long-term collaboration and strategic partnership i.e. sharing resources. Representation precedes any flows that initiatives wanted to produce. And this is how alternative initiatives in places with benign infrastructures of support could come across as bureaucratic or could ingest bureaucracy. Bureaucratic protocols remain in the Philippine context regardless of positioning as independent, affiliated, or as an individual. This uneasiness is true as it results from a combination of professionalized and informal ways of doing.

Bureaucratism is something that comes up repeatedly in your work. You address bureaucratic protocols, you examine them, I understand your work in partly making the impact of bureaucratic practices tangible. I am curious to understand more about how your attention started to focus on bureaucratism.

DiscLab's work as a virtual organization concerns itself with the notion of "to be done," the virtuality of organizing. The preposition and presupposition of *what, how, when, where, and for whom* have been dropped. It hints at the urgency to think through the im/material basis of (re)composing an organization in relation to the encroaching demand of neoliberal tactics of individuation. While pointing out that the methodological signifier (*what, how, when, where, for whom*) might not be working, DiscLab takes its precarity seriously and how this emerges in its operation. Bureaucratism is one of the concrete challenges of organization/organizing. This bureaucratism has expanded from institutional to hyper-

networked individualism. It is both internal and external. Bureaucratism is a chronic collaborator in any initiative, and it is rare to hear people admitting it. And that's another major problem.

DiscLab's role as Artistic Director of Lucban Assembly did not result from a negotiation or proto-bureaucratic relationship with the organizer and initiator of the project, Project Space Pilipinas<sup>3</sup>. It was born out of trust and resonances with them. With that spirit, we carried it in the process of collaboration in the first iteration. Together with PSP, we built the project around individuals and organizations we have had experiences in working with.

Did DiscLab's approach grow in the Filipino context or is this to be seen as your response to global "sleepiness"? (It reminds me of the term "aggressive humanism", that the "Centre for Political Beauty"<sup>4</sup> in Berlin uses to describe their practice. Their target group is European governments in order to understand more of their potential and responsibility to ACT in this time and age.)

And perhaps internationalized sleeplessness, too? I think it might be coming from the tension we can hardly locate. DiscLab works on continuity of what we make and as contexts. We don't have a declaration that we were organized only to go against the "market", a blanket statement, less likely wrestled with by some artist-run initiatives. Or, only to go against the West. The blind over-investment in institutional critique must be challenged now.

*PAMUMUHUNAN* (Waiting for a capital) classifies the Assembly's position as a draft—not based on art, but transposed from values and struggles of communities—in forming ways of connecting and organizing.

I would agree to that characterization. It is my wish that I could also claim that as a slice of practice, a geography, in my context.

You have said, "There are sets of objects, subjects and events that cannot be nurtured in some familiar domains": Can you tell us a bit about what objects, subjects and events you have in mind? Do you refer to the critical history of science feministic sources that you often draw back to?

De-colonial discourses have been efficiently accommodated in familiar domains. Discourses from places that are double peripheral, responding to multiple centres, whether political or economic, are carefully managed in familiar spheres of knowledge. Their objects, subjects and events have and will always be tamed. Their suppression might find ways in fundamentalism, essentialism, ethno-centricities, and nativism; and therefore, the possibility of nurture is difficult if not violent. The managerial "niceness" of the international is not productive too.

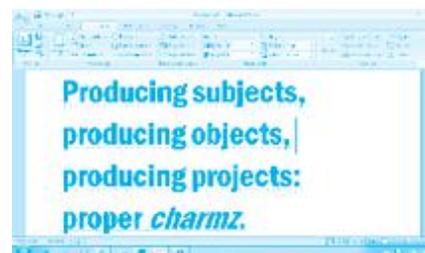
The location of this month-long biannual festival was in rural Southern Luzon. Can you tell us a bit about this location and therefore context of the festival? Were the venues, artists-run space Project Space Pilipinas and Escuelapia (Lucban Museum & Library) as well as public space, "just" hosting and/or seen as a working environment of some of the local artists, thinkers and cultural producers?<sup>5</sup>

It was clear for DiscLab as the artistic director and Project Space Pilipinas as the organizer and executive director that we could only mediate across the economies that thrive in the context. The first iteration was also an opportunity to introduce the sincere desire to work in the economies of the political, social,

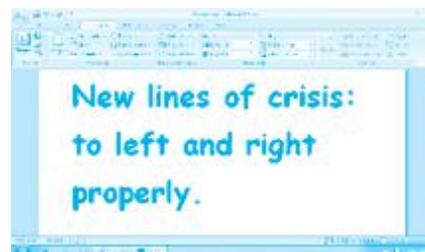
artistic, and even critique on a long-term engagement. But of course it would be aggressive to do it with equal intensity. Some participating artists treated it as their working environment. We commissioned six artists, four of them were artists-in-residence, to create a site-specific work in the town. At Escuelapia where the community museum and library is located, the engagement was prompted by the curatorial, then the town artists and artists from Manila. The said exhibition was more intimate with the difference being the production of artists and museums operating in the "centre-periphery" dichotomy. At PSP studio, we hosted an exhibition of new paintings supplemented by old video works installed in familiar places, such as barbershop, internet cafe, and souvenir shop.

How did the international artists, thinkers and cultural producers relate to the site?

How many of the 70 invited were present in person?



*Squatting Knowledges*  
001 (Ongoing since 2012).  
Virtual. Courtesy of DiscLab  
Images and Graphics



What type/kind of audience did the festival attract? Did the festival congregate with your aspirations/expectations of engagement with the artistic work and interventions?

The participants we invited have had work with similar and parallel contexts. We didn't have the luxury to be adventurous with our selection process. DiscLab and PSP did not see the point of taking Lucban as a site where artists or thinkers have to pay some sort of coin in order to relate to it. I think we operated without the so-called "white guilt" or the NGO rhetoric of leaving the site with impact or empowering people. As one of the artists candidly described, "They did not feel the need to devise some livelihood workshops to make metaphorical soaps." Obviously, the artist was pointing at the proliferation of projects located in the provinces or in poor urban areas where they have been appointed as social workers. *PAMUMUHUNAN (Waiting for a capital)* is obviously an attempt of queering the relationship with "capital".

I think it helped a lot that the Assembly was not concerned in taking it as a "relevant" project and was not interested in the spotlight of the international. There was no imposition to congregate it. Maybe the next Lucban Assembly would still be positioned as an introduction, a procedure of always getting to know and always struggling to de-escalate the initiative's perceived position from the outside as a specialist, a visitor, or a social worker.

I am trying to understand your terms "white guilt" and the "NGO rhetoric" and "*PAMUMUHUNAN (Waiting for a capital)* is obviously an attempt of queering the relationship with 'capital'." Do you mean what sociologist Pascal Gielen calls "the trap into the NGO-art": Helping people with good intentions and a good heart, but at the same time to help a neoliberal system to stay alive? Gielen recommends artists to work on the micro-social level and to emancipate people to get aware of the political-structural situation. Is this your understanding of "queering"?

The capacity and proclamation of Help is and will always be the agency of the Western White Male. We could deny him after the accusation of complicity to the emancipated non-white subject, but it still holds true, occurring in very sophisticated forms and various intensities. White guilt and NGO rhetoric are parts of the Development Project. The Development Project has collaborated with International Contemporary Art. I am more interested in the practical dimension of queering as a struggle to work within immanent foreclosures, limitations, and difficulties. Yes, it could include awareness.

Duration seems a fundamental need when dealing with an art practice involving people and site or context. Time became the de-materialised material of the relational work, as it moved from objects to processes. "Time should not be managed and deployed by artists according to a single ahistorical principle that is meant to be true no matter what the circumstances. Different conjunctures will call for different qualities as well as different quantities of time. Pace must be adjusted not fixed according to ideological imperatives." Miwon Kwon expresses her uncomfortable feeling around the artworks (and the artists) having lost their bond with the physical condition of place, calling this itinerant lifestyle of projects and artists politically progressive.<sup>6</sup> How do you relate to time or duration in regards to *PAMUMUHUNAN (Waiting for a capital)*?

To be honest, we did not have enough time to prepare for the Assembly. DiscLab was commissioned to do it less than six months before it unfolded in the town.

I understand and value the notion of long-term in any cultural projects. That is the position of DiscLab: to make small-scale works that embody long-term projects. We launched *Waiting Sheds Cooperative Study and Research Program<sup>7</sup>* at the Assembly. It shows that commitment to duration. However, with the logistical difficulties of organizing a festival, it might be helpful to take up the notion of emergency, as a scale, in discussing time.

There are tensions between the intrinsic and instrumental values of the arts. *PAMUMUHUNAN (Waiting for a capital)*: Was this for you a successful work? How do you "measure" success or failure? How do you "measure" emotional impact and transformation?

It was a good starting point. I find it helpful to create starting points, instead of belabouring on any forms of measurement. It was a good starting point for emotional alliances.

How do you see the relationship between arts, culture, economic and social developments in your given context?

In the context we call the Philippines, arts and culture presupposes access to basic im/material conditions. They play a negligible role. Their affinity is loyal to multiple forms of exclusion, be it financial, social, or politico-administrative. As a disclaimer: it is not pessimism towards arts and culture. The arts and culture that we are talking about here is the legacy that we have to engage with since colonialism.

Thank you, Renan.



1 [discussionlab.org/](http://discussionlab.org/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

2 Woodruff Smith, David, *Phenomenology*, first published Nov 16, 2003; substantive revision Dec 16, 2013. [online] Available at [plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

3 [projectspacepilipinas.com/](http://projectspacepilipinas.com/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

4 [politicalbeauty.com/](http://politicalbeauty.com/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

5 Lucban is an agrarian town at the foot of Mount Banahaw in the south of the capital Manila. Every 15th of May, the town celebrates their town fiesta to honor the patron saint San Isidro Labrador for their harvest. The First Lucban Assembly coincided with this historic festival, and therefore,

it operated according to the terms of viewing and showing of a religious activity. In other words, the Lucban Assembly, which was designed and desired to be "contemporary" and "artistic", had a preceding and existing logic of what is and could be communal, curatorial, and exhibitiv.

6 Kwon, Miwon. *The Wrong Place*, in Claire Doherty, ed. *Contem-*

porary Art: From Studio to Situation, (Black Dog Publishing) 2004 p.31

7 [youtube.com/watch?v=syLdAhUYKRQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=syLdAhUYKRQ) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

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# “BREAD

Caique Tizzi in conversation

# IS LOVE

with Herman Bashiron

# BETWEEN

Mendolicchio and

# STRANGERS”<sup>1</sup>

Susanne Bosch

Caique Tizzi is the co-founder and Artistic Director of Agora Collective and is the mind behind AFFECT, Agora's flagship artistic residency. Agora is interested in investigating the development of relational artistic practices, experimental methods of group work and interdisciplinary processes. It is also known for its artistic approach to food. Part

studio, part laboratory – Agora's kitchen has become a place where notions of collaboration, self-organisation and sustainability are put into practice. Tizzi's projects have received the support from Creative Europe, Nordic Culture Fund, Nordic Culture Point, and Goethe Institut in Kuala Lumpur and São Paulo.

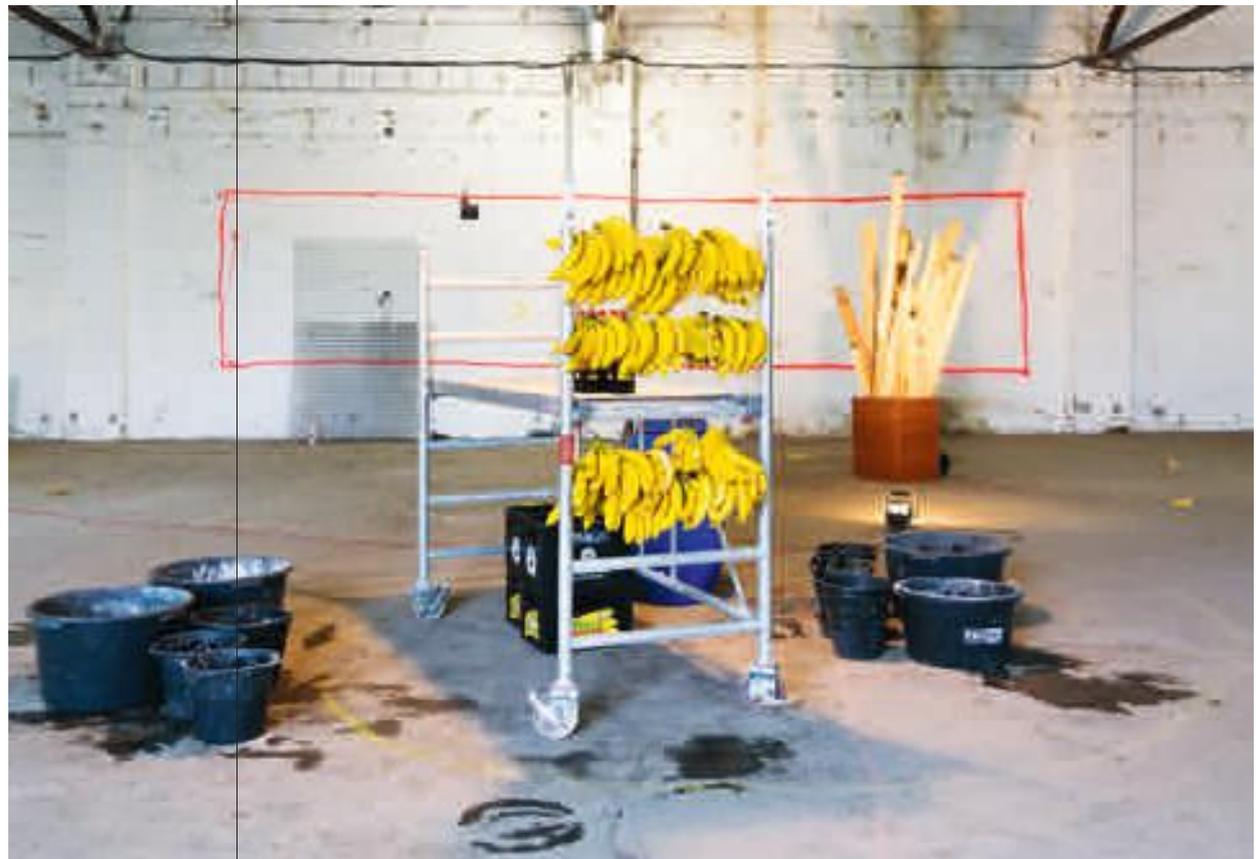
WHILE WE WORK:  
A Temporary State of Affairs, 2016. Curated by Judith Lavagna in the frame of AFFECT I 2016, Agora Rollberg

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio and Susanne Bosch had a conversation with Caique Tizzi about his multiple personal projects and his role in Agora collective<sup>2</sup>. Topics included food as a tool and methodology, and the specific project of a participatory dinner that he developed collaboratively with 15 members of the master class, *TransActions in the Field*, in the village Kampung Banda Dalam in Malaysia.

**Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio / Susanne Bosch:** In order to start our conversation - and before approaching some of your specific projects -we think it would be interesting to know more about your own trajectory and hybrid profile. You are an artist, curator and cultural manager, currently working in several transversal projects at an international level. Where do you place your main focus? In which kind of activities and situations do you feel more comfortable? How do you work in-between different tasks and missions?

**Caique Tizzi:** To work at multiple things is not simple, but I have a natural tendency to work interdisciplinary. I think I would not be able to do it differently. I am very interested in people, what they do and their diversity. I like to access my relationship with humanity in different fronts.

My main focus and the biggest part of my work is related to how we communicate, how we create interesting situations for interaction.



Running a space makes a lot of sense for me because within this physical constraint one can hold many interests, many moving images are created all the time, it's a choreography, it's alive.

I think, nowadays, many of the people of our generation are really operating in this transversal manner, and I am truly interested in these entanglements and crossovers. I guess it's a generational thing provoked by the web – we can open one tab here, close another one there, but it doesn't mean that we are not linking things. We are entangled; as an artist it is important to pay attention to these entanglements and from there to connect some dots.

My interest in art doesn't come from what the outcome or result it may produce, but, particularly, what art is able to make. I am not particularly interested in what artists can make as objects, even though I love beautiful objects, but more about how artists live their lives. I'm interested in the generosity, hospitality and care that reside in artist-run communities and how we find alternatives within these.

Your different interests and approaches found a stable base at Agora Collective: a project, a space, based in Berlin, where you have been involved since the beginning as one of the founders. According to its definition Agora “hosts people and collaborative projects based on a philosophy that reflects the values of its community: diversity, self-organisation and social ties.”<sup>3</sup> Can you talk a bit about the origin of Agora? It would also be interesting to explore more the connection between you and Agora: what did you bring to Agora? And what is Agora giving back to you, in terms of vision, learning process, and development of your practice?

I, of course, can't separate what I do from Agora Collective. I am an artist when I manage a project, when I make an artwork, when I write these lines. I am comfortable with this grey-zone, the 'in-betweenness', I am a chaotic person, but I believe that in the chaos is where we actually exist, suffer and feel. I think Agora, the project space I helped to set up in Berlin in 2011, became this framework where this flexible practice could take shape and become more visible. It's definitely a place created to encapsulate all these desires.

Agora is important to me because it's alive, it's a house, it requires maintenance, care, openness to new ideas; it's a very independent idea. It's a place to re-imagine life. Agora means “now” in Portuguese, it's a place that responds to what is important in the here and now.

We started as two people in 2011. We had a community of people in the background who naturally joined. So there were more or less 30 persons involved. Since the beginning we wanted to decentralize creation and authorship, two key elements of collaboration. We did it organically and naturally as we practiced how we ideally would see a community operating on different levels, learn about alternative economics and work with four pillars constituting our community: food, work, learning and art. These pillars functioned like a framework. We try to cross over them constantly in our way of thinking about space and community. The 'in-betweenness' is our strength. Agora is also a space of physical encounter, offline, based on presence, meeting real people in our often long-distance online world of work and relationships.

Agora organically evolves and changes periodically. In 2011, the first space we had was the ground floor of the building. In this one space, we had a running

kitchen, studio and offices. We all lived and worked together. I painted in one corner and at the same place I made food. Throughout the years we got more floors in the building and we started to accommodate more activities within the physical space. We were open to friends and our friendly community and this intrinsic open-door policy enlarged. We handed over the key and trusted people. Ownership was decentralized and distributed. People felt responsible. That allowed a natural growth of the community.

Since day one, we developed a clear business model for how to pay the costs of such a space. The only way to afford it is to share. Sharing also pays off through functions like a co-working space.

Once a week the core steering committee meets and takes decisions. We agree in this core group how to divide the tasks, responsibilities and financial constraints. We are a fixed group, with a representative from every entity in the house. There is 'dissensus' all the time, but we embrace that, as we understand conflict as a positive thing. It enriches us. The decisions are still based on consensus. It sometimes takes time. We all know everyone's competences and we know each other now over years of working together, so there is trust in each other. People for example trust my curatorial sensitivity to invite someone suitable.

This explains a bit about our form of self-organisation and our social ties. Diversity as a value in our case refers to putting multi-activities and perspectives under one roof. That way we force ourselves to look at things from many different perspectives, like economical, philosophical and artistic ones.

Currently we are going through a complete transformation. Due to the engagement of the Edith Maryon Foundation<sup>4</sup> we have now expanded to a second building in Berlin. We are now a merged team of 3 Agora initiators and new members each with different competences that allow us to expand. Taina comes from film and production, Marcela from choreography. Alice and Simon<sup>5</sup> are with us now to work on the strategic development of the new space. They look at infrastructure and investors. They bring competences that we did not cover up to now. They look more into political agendas. They have an additional scope of understanding, acting locally, knowing which stakeholders to bring on board and communicate with to make this project more embedded in its surroundings. The impact of Agora is growing, not only the space. The new space complements our activities. We have 2200 square-meters more now. We have space for big events, for artist studios, for metal and wood workshops, for a dance studio; generally, we now have a place to make work, to produce. Our old space will be the hub for thinking and conceptualisation, the bigger new space is a “making” space and a space to engage with the surrounding community. Our team expanded to five core people with ten staff members plus a fluctuant situation of many people coming and going. This also includes artists such as the AFFECT artists, which is seven per year.

One of the keywords of Agora is “community”. There are several interesting issues focused on the practice of “community-engagement” which would be really worth talking about. In your experience – and also specifically in the projects developed from and by Agora – what is the role of the arts and the artists in the community? How do you negotiate the power relations, roles and responsibilities in the public space?



Hard and Soft  
Dinner and Exhibition, 2016.  
Bon Bock, Kuba  
Paris, Agora



And, on the other side, what role should local communities play in the context of local cultural development?

There are many communities, and communities are made of people. People produce culture. I can't see real cultural development without civic engagement. Community building is key for it. One example of the practice of "community-engagement" within the Agora collective is e.g. Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga<sup>6</sup> work about *Mittelweg* (The Middle Way).<sup>7</sup> Fotini was one of the AFFECT artists in 2015 who ran a month-long workshop within the framework of AFFECT. Fifteen international artists joined her module called *Mittelweg – A publication unfolding in space*. She proposed to look at the location of our space, which is based in Neukölln in a street called *Mittelweg* which, translated, means "The Middle Way" – a great metaphor for our purpose. The group did a month of site visits and had conversations with people on the street. They set out to map and temporarily occupy various instances and forms of the in-between—of buildings, bodies, identities, temporalities—within the diverse realities and interconnected scales of the local. They overheard conversations of passers-by, pondered the opacity of lace curtains, and observed kids learning how to safely cross the street. They walked through the nearby cemetery, debated on issues such as multiculturalism and gentrification".<sup>8</sup> The group developed, as an outcome, an experimental newspaper and zines called the *Mittelweg*. They covered

the findings of the area with interviews, drawings and photographs. Agora distributed these back to the neighbourhood and we had a public launch where we invited everyone. We used many languages, but mainly visual language in the *Mittelweg* publication.

In the new space, Agora will be close to the elderly community. As it is now under construction, Alice invited the association of elderly to come to the new space and get to know it. We hosted them with coffee and cake. We asked for their necessities and how we can co-exist (practically and in terms of noise etc.) We try to listen and start a dialogue with the surroundings. It is a continuous process and work. We now have to dialogue with all the district councils for them to understand our intentions, the activities and where we are coming from. This is a political act of taking responsibility for our roles and potential in the neighbourhood.

The "community" question brings us to a similar field, which is the issue of "context-specificity". Each place and context has its own rules and dynamics. Each place and context requires a different approach, attitude and methodology. According to these assumptions, how do you choose the context and place where you want to work?

I hardly choose the context I want to work in, I'd rather see myself as someone who is in a context that was not created for me. But maybe it's not exactly that, I chose to live and work in Berlin because it still carries some type of resistance and it has so much free space, not only physical, but emotional space.

Neukölln, where AGORA is based, is a very particular area with an interesting mix of immigrants and current refugees, with a broad social diversity and, of course, an international creative crowd. The mix affects the politics of the neighbourhood. Many of our neighbours' fear and accuse AGORA of being an engine for gentrification in Neukölln. We struggle with that, as we are, of course, embedded in a system. We struggle to engage with our neighbours as we started from our ideal community idea amongst "us". I personally find it delicate to engage with our neighbourhood, as we come from a privileged position where we might impose things onto people. Approaches like Fotini's are more investigative and helped us to understand the subtleties of the area. This is one of the functions of the AFFECT programme: research first before going into action.<sup>9</sup>

Let's talk a bit more about the AFFECT<sup>10</sup> format, developed in the framework of Agora and defined as Agora's programme for collaborative artistic practices. Can you expand more on this programme, its methodology, aims and main focuses?

This is a very important project to me. AFFECT places emphasis in the bodily experience and how in physical presence we affect one another. For Spinoza,<sup>11</sup> affects are states of mind and body related to (but not exactly synonymous with) feelings and emotions, of which he says there are three primary kinds: pleasure or joy, pain or sorrow, and desire or appetite.

This programme affects the entire space and works also as a research method for everyone involved. Through this programme we investigate topics that we consider relevant for our community, the city we live in, etc.

We have been running this programme for three years already and it always changes and it is affected by the people who take part in it. This year, it is conceived as a 7-month-long programme consisting of seven consecutive modules, each led by an international artist who invites participants to collectively explore a topic, develop a set of practices and research methodologies over the period of one month, culminating in a public event presented in our space.

Resembling an immersive academy, the programme offers a diverse curriculum of workshops growing out of the research and practice of the Berlin-based facilitating artists and curators. Fifteen international applicants spend a month working together closely. They come from all over the world; they use our studio space; they eat together and spend the time talking, making, being. The leading artist structures the time and process and guides the participants on an individual level through time and space. The intense activities try to create a chain of affections within the group. We as hosting institution take up the role to archive all the outcomes of each module and create a joint knowledge hub. Agora does not always have an intense connection to each module, that depends on personal contacts and time. A one-month period is very short to establish relationships. It is a bit frustrating at times.

As Agora, we are interested in setting up a kind of school, as we learn through encounters. I do not agree with the official higher education models nowadays. They do not deliver what our world demands to know. We need to include fundamental questions of life as well as practical answers on how to manage work and life. I am learning so much within Agora; it is on-going. I think life is where we learn and where things happen.

Methods and methodologies in order to trigger participation are a very central factor when dealing with people and social art practices. Among the different existing methodologies there is a "tool" we know you have been working with: we are referring to "Food". The universe of food implies a constellation of multiple elements: cultural diversity, conviviality, collective moments of preparation and testing, flavours, aesthetics and many other issues that involve individual characteristics and social relationships. What does food represent to you? How do you use food in your art practice?

Working with food came from the Agora context. It is a great place of encounter. Food is our strongest connection to earth. It's our common denominator, and an accessible and powerful tool to softly tackle political and social issues. Basically, everything revolves around food. It's so diverse, you have so many options, it's so sensorial and sensual. It is the most complete material for me.

And you can utilize so many elements of performativity when you work with food. It's definitely a great media for someone who is interested in articulating situations, in hosting, etc. Hosting is another complex art in itself. It lives with two contradictory qualities that you have to hold within the setting: on one hand there is the openness and welcoming attitude of the hosting team towards the guests, the idea of perfect pleasure through a choreography. But before you welcome the guests, you have been through a phase of complete stress and exhaustion in terms of vision, planning and realising a usually complex setting around food, including the space decoration, drinks, .... How do you combine these two total opposite qualities of hosting without frictions, at the wrong moment, in the process?

We do "crazy" dinners within the Agora collective. In 2015, we did a dinner performance called "Paradies" (Paradise). It was about what it takes to host. We served great food but were honest to the audience about what it takes to create the "perfect" event. It is a lot of stressful work to cook and prepare the space for the perfect atmosphere in which to enjoy. By the time guests arrive, the staff is usually already exhausted. But they have to pretend that things are easy and all right. Notions of labour and service have to come across as easy, light and fluid. It is a capitalist response to service labour with the dictatorship of happiness. So in "Paradies" we exposed our exhaustion and frustration. As service staff, we performed these tensions. We threw bread on the table due to the common time pressure, we served with hands, we cooked and cleaned in front of the guests. We gathered the dirty dishes visually as sculpture in front of the guests to show them the amount and kinds of work behind the idea of hosting and our idea of paradise for guests. The guests, mainly art people, identified a lot with the situation; it was a bit like a tragic comedy. We, as artists, understand the paradigm to sustain our unsustainable life. We also stuffed the guests with food. They had a hard time enjoying it and many refused the food at the end. That was a realisation for us as 'class' to be able to refuse food in our reality of plenty.

This year, in winter 2016, we will produce and host "*I am hungry: plays on the Nordic kitchen manifesto*." I work with Dafna Maimon.<sup>12</sup> Dafna and I are collaborators in this, she is the artist and I am the artistic director. We developed the concept jointly. We already worked together in 2015 in *Everything Under the Sun*.<sup>13</sup> From that project on climate change came the desire to develop a more radical performance toward food. We are developing a dinner play with actors, lighting and language of theatre. We are using food as material, service as performance and location as stage. The title "*I am hungry: plays on the Nordic*



*kitchen manifesto*" is related to the suffering of malnutrition and hunger in the world. On the other hand, we have the Nordic countries, where a group of chefs wrote in 2004 a manifesto on how to eat well. We work with this juxtaposition of an unsustainable privilege of the north. We will go this year to Copenhagen to research. We will visit and talk to the top chefs and their food labs to investigate the food scene in the North. Gastronomically speaking, it is a very influential scene globally. All the trendy ideas are from there. In the 1980s and 1990s it all came from the food and science scene. Now it is all about "From the backyard to the table", seasonality, locality, from nose to tail, discourses initiated by René Redzepi, the chef and co-owner of the restaurant Noma in Copenhagen.<sup>14</sup> This research, a form of investigation and fieldwork, will be a video work based on interviews. Dafna will then develop within the Agora community a play with non-actors. There will be a dinner play at the end of 2016 based on this research. It will be radical.

One of your specific projects focused on food was a participatory dinner in Kampung Banda Dalam in Malaysia during *TransActions in the Field*. A street restaurant was the location of a food performance where both people from the local community and international artists and cultural practitioners, coming from several countries, met and played a role. The whole process, including the preparation phase which was very deep and intense, created the right conditions to strengthen the trust, the confidence and the relationships between people. Everyone was a commensal, but at the same time a performer. The methodology chosen required everyone to break the ice and engage in conversation and negotiation with others in order to get the food and drinks they wished. Would you like to talk more about this experience, its preparation and development?

We responded very spontaneously to the context. On the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the master class, we were invited to offer peer-to-peer workshops within the group. We were based at this stage in a Malay Muslim village. I proposed to workshop the idea of an intervention in the village, based on food. I wanted to host a dinner for the group anyway, either at the beginning or end as a way to celebrate our togetherness. The right moment arrived in the village as we were invited to intervene. Elaine W. Ho, Renan Laruan, Okui Lala, Alecia Neo, Lee Cheah Ni, Rika Aki, Manila Bartnik (on and off) signed up to my workshop on day 9. I had done this type of workshop a number of times at Agora: how do you set up a dinner? I always provoke to find a common thread between the 3 teams, which is a kitchen team, a service team and a space team. And then I invite the teams to work independently. In the *kampung*, we looked at all the flags of our nations that they put up everywhere and we wanted to respond to that. We intended to make food belonging to these nations and to intertwine them. We also intended to create a slow and long lasting dinner, so we talked about eleven nations, eleven flags and consequently eleven courses of food. Another key point of our exercise was to respond to the question of the master class in general: What is a transaction and how to initiate a transaction?

For the workshop, we sat in the street restaurant where they occasionally served dinner to our entire group. I had made friends with the owner and negotiated with him the possibility of taking over his kitchen and space for one night on day 10 of our programme. You have to imagine this setting: a basic shed with 2 gas cookers, an outdoor cooking region, some 50 plastic chairs and tables, some basic roofing

Gala, 2015. Neu  
West Berlin.



against the rain. No walls. The street restaurant had an ideal location on the entrance road of the village, a small road with a barber and a tiny supermarket next door. We decided to invite the entire village and our group in the next evening, as we were invited to think about an intervention in the village on day 10. We grew on day 10 to a staff team of around ten people.

The kitchen team did fusion-cuisine in the village with local ingredients. The shopping at a nearby wet market with Alecia and Okui was fantastic. It was all sensorial shopping. My two Asian colleagues taught me how to smell and touch my way through these mainly unknown foods. The most interesting thing was this fieldwork – to go to the local markets and to discover the way people were trading and obviously the diversity of things one can see in Malaysia! Part of the food also arrived as donation from the village such as self-caught fish and herbs. We did a lot of raw dishes as we only had two huge gas fires to work with.

The space team worked with a gap: we had not enough cutlery and no facilities for washing up. So they had a different idea of plating by using plants and leaves, stones and wood to serve the food. It not only looked beautiful, they went through a process of finding all these materials within the village and with great help from the villagers. They also created a sign for the place: “Welcome Café”.

The service team developed a choreography for the dinner: They worked with the idea of introducing “trade” in a moment of generosity. So they set up an inner table and an outer ring of tables. The inner table was gated by a little village boy as a bouncer. Okui introduced the rules. No cutlery to be used and the inner table was the centre of a huge mountain of rice and water. Rice is the basic food of Asia, like bread in many other countries. The small group sitting around the rice did not get any of the eleven dishes. So they had to trade rice and water for a course, if they wanted to try. The outer group, which was mainly villagers and the largest part of our group, did not have any rice, but got served the eleven beautifully arranged courses.

So, when the dinner began, a huge and diverse negotiation process started. People are not used to eating with their hands and to negotiating for their rice. Some learned really quickly, others did not negotiate at all. The chief of the village, an old and wise man, did not touch any of his served courses as it is a basic rule for him not to eat unless everyone has food in front of them.

We experienced moments of insecurity as people reacted so differently to the setting. Our good intentions tipped at times. Some started to give out rice by invading the inner circle. It got really wild and messy at times. Others entered our open air kitchen and organized their food there. Our service team did a beautiful job in serving one course after another and they really looked wonderful, these little fusion dishes. We ended at 10pm. We had to do a quick clean up as we had an appointment at the mosque to learn local drumming. We were really exhausted as we started cooking at 1pm and had a 12-hour day to get it all done.

It was an intense day – we worked for more than 12 hours non-stop. I personally love the physical demand of this type of work. I like to think what it takes to host; it is a position of humbleness and respect towards others. And I think that position helped us to connect with the population of the village. They were curious and thankful, but also intrigued and maybe confused.

Every project comes to an end, or at least to a moment of pause and reflection. In this final phase we normally open the space to reflect on the whole process, on the experience, on what we achieved and learned. Art practices in the social and human field could be considered as a path, a journey, a chain of experiences that generate new knowledge. How do you elaborate the impact of a project? What are the learning elements you consider in order to evaluate the process and the outputs of a project? How do you measure success or failure?

Within the *kampung* dinner, I learned a lot. The biggest challenge for me was to cook this number of courses with totally foreign ingredients and to cook under these conditions. The biggest surprise was to prepare for so many hours and the master class was not flexible with the programme structure to respond to this intervention. As we had a drumming workshop scheduled spontaneously for the evening, we left at a great moment in the programme to attend the workshop. It was important to respect these invitations by the villagers, but it was a rupture.

There was a tension in general between the local village culture and wanting to do a “correct intervention”. Maybe it was imposing something onto them and invasive. But to put us as a group into the village was invasive in the first place. We asked several times why we were there, as it didn’t feel good to go on excursions to observe their amazing handicraft and skills. It felt to me as if we were treating them as exotic. In hindsight, it was not clear to me what our role was there overall. This type of clarity of intention is necessary to create the type of interventions that suit the context.

I measure success with how long an idea resonates after it is born. And I find failure a central element to reach what we understand as success. It’s like one can’t exist without the other. I think success exists when a project comes alive, when you lose control of it, when it becomes a bit bigger than you. My mind-set somehow allows me to be in a constant trial and error condition and it leads my life to quite interesting places.

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| 3 <a href="http://agoracollective.org">agoracollective.org</a> (accessed Aug 31, 2016)  | 7 <i>ibid</i>  | 13 <a href="http://everythingunderthesun.agoracollective.org/">everythingunderthesun.agoracollective.org/</a> and <a href="http://agoracollective.org/cafe/">agoracollective.org/cafe/</a> (accessed Aug 31, 2016)   |  |
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| 5 Alice Grindhammer and Simon Lee, <i>agoracol-</i>   | 9 <a href="http://agoracollective.org/projects/affect/">agoracollective.org/projects/affect/</a> (accessed Aug 31, 2016)   |  |  |

# ART, EDUCATION

Haymann Oo and Ko Aung

# AND COMMUNITY-

in conversation with

# BASED PROJECTS

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio

# IN MYANMAR

**Haymann Oo** is a young curator based in Yangon. She learned curatorial studies at a one-year professional art development training program by New Zero Art Space.

After the training she started her curatorial practices and became the curator of New Zero Art Space.

She especially focuses on art education and audience integrity to art society. She has written several articles for the *New Waves Art and Literature Magazine* and

is still writing as a freelancer for the *New Wave Magazine and Art Monthly: The Magazine of Myanmar Arts*.

**Ko Aung** is an artist who studied at New Zero Art Space in 2011. Since 2011, he's been volunteering in New Zero and became official staff in 2015.

He is working full time as gallery manager at New Zero Art Space.

He is also an art teacher at all the art classes conducted by New Zero and participated in several group exhibitions in Myanmar.

From Craft to Art: Community based Art Development Project, 2015. Regional Workshop in MyitKyinar, Myanmar

New Zero Art Space<sup>1</sup> is the non-profit visual art organization established in Yangon, Myanmar in 2008. The Art Space promotes contemporary art and artists with an intention of promoting new young art spirits of the next generation. They are unique in Myanmar. The meaning of *New Zero* symbolizes “new” as the welcoming of new artists and “zero” represents the value of infinity. (Zero is the nature of the non-valued, yet increases into highly valued when combined with the other numbers). They aim to augment the abilities of each artist to increase their value and individual experience but they also foster cooperation amongst each other as artists, to support the collective.<sup>2</sup>

**Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio:** In order to start our conversation, I would like to ask you about the story of *New Zero Art Space*, your aims and mission. Can you talk about your main focus and what is your role in specific contexts and locations in Myanmar?

**Haymann Oo / Ko Aung:** In 1990, a group of artists named *Modern Art 90* was initiated by contemporary artists in Myanmar. A series of group exhibitions happened between 1990 and 2000. In 2000, the name of the group changed to *New Zero* and the activities happened continuously in the name of *New Zero Art Group* until 2008. The artist group organized one exhibition to fund an art space by contributing and selling their paintings. That way, *New Zero Art Space* was founded in 2008 and started as non-profit independent art space. In 2009 – 2012, the *New Zero Art Studio* was active. But since rental prices started to rise in 2012, *New Zero Art Space* is organized as only one space that includes a library, a residency space, a studio and an exhibition space. Art books, magazines, DVD and literature books are available in the library.

Our main objectives are to encourage a new generation of contemporary artists and art in Myanmar, to promote Myanmar contemporary art internationally and to support the contemporary art education in Myanmar. We work with artists who



are practicing conceptually based works in different mediums. Since *New Zero Art Space* is based in Yangon, most of the activities happen in Yangon and sometimes we invite the artists from different parts of the country, such as Mandalay and Taung Gyi. For the purpose of our objectives, we do art exchange programmes as well as solo and group exhibitions of local artists. We invite artists from different countries to our residency programme to create a platform to exchange experiences and practices between Myanmar artists and foreign artists. We are also doing community projects and art education projects. The activities are taking place not only in Yangon but also in different parts of Myanmar.

One of the main components of your work is focused on the role of artistic practices and education in the communities. The needs, the voice and the fundamental contribution of the communities in policy design, urban strategies and in the process of definition of the “common goods” are reclaiming their space and are emerging in different contexts and spheres, including the cultural and artistic ones. Can you explain the specificities of your local context? How do you operate in and with the communities? What is the role of the artist – as well as the role of the curator or cultural practitioner – in relation to the local context and local communities?

Actually, Myanmar is still not familiar with contemporary art works and movements. The art scene of Myanmar is still developing and trying to educate the public and the audience. We only have two Universities of fine arts, one is in Yangon and one is in Mandalay. Only two state schools of fine arts are in Yangon and in Mandalay. But the universities and state schools are about traditional arts. The art curriculum in primary schools and high schools is not that active and applied. We have art education but it is very weak. Most of the contemporary and conceptual based artists in Myanmar are self-taught. Some of them are from art and culture universities, but they explore themselves and change their way of practice on their own but not by the schools’ influence. That is why *New Zero Art Space* operates itself as art institution for contemporary arts and provides the art education platform for a new generation. Since we are working with fewer than ten persons, we cannot reach very wide. But we approach the public and the communities as much as we can. Several activities were organized in public areas and some education programmes have been done in rural areas.

Art and artists are still not very appreciated in society, most of the Myanmar arts are collected by the foreign buyers. We have not more than five collectors in Myanmar. Most of the artists have to rely on other jobs. Curatorship is very new to Myanmar art society and there were no curated exhibitions until 2012 – curated by Myanmar curators. In 2012, *New Zero Art Space* was the first to start a curatorial exchange programme and curatorial training programmes. Until now, there are only a very few curators in Myanmar. Other cultural and artistic movements are still slow and few, as we had a military government for more than 50 years and the artists were strictly treated by them. Since the country is changing to a democracy, there are other priorities lined up to be resolved rather than the arts.

Several projects developed by *New Zero Art Space* deal with education: I’m thinking about the “New Zero Art Village School” the “Art Training” or the “Art and Education based community development project”. How do you envision - generally speaking - the relationship between art and education? Can you expand on these specific projects? And, who are the target groups of these projects?

*New Zero Art Village* is still only a project drafted on paper to create a sphere of art in the village, which is a one-hour drive from Yangon. It is currently in a stage of having land and buildings only. The “Art Training” or the “Art and Education Based Community Development Project”<sup>3</sup> is the project, which is based in that village. The project is a collaboration between *New Zero Art Space* and KDDI Foundation<sup>4</sup> in Japan. Classes in arts, English communication skills and applied computer skills for both adult and children were provided within the school year; students from the PaneNaeGone village, the NyaungDaGar village and nearby took part.

Since the Village Art School project is the pilot project for Myanmar, there are several things to improve in the school and some aspects to add in the future plan. According to the first year experience from May 2015 – March 2016, it still needs to encourage the children and the youths in the village to find an interest in art and education. We especially need to encourage the youths to turn their interest into learning and studying. Only the children show interest; the youth is still not familiar with the classes.

The teaching approach of the school is to invite the students to explore their ideas and creations freely and to support their confidence in what they do. On the other hand, the school focuses on art based educational development; the curriculum was designed to support the education of the children. The teachers allowed the children to think and to explore freely; a right of freedom they should have as children. The approach tried to free them from the fear they experience in the government education system. And children are allowed to play in the garden in their free time. The classes in English, art and computer skills operate with a flexible schedule and the village youths can negotiate the starting times with the teachers as most of them are working in factories and have full-time jobs. Though the school is based in the PaneNaeGone village, the idea of the whole project is to spread the art education programmes to reach villages nearby and also other parts of Myanmar.

In connection to this last issue, I would like to ask you about the library you established in your space. Disseminating knowledge, increasing resources and providing a space for learning, meeting and sharing are some of the useful capacities the library can offer to its audience. Can you explain more in details this project and the meaning of the library in your art space?



From Craft to Art: Community based Art Development Project, 2015. Regional Workshop in MyitKyinNar, Myanmar

From Craft to Art: Community based Art Development Project, 2015. The Exhibition of Myanmar Crafts (Goethe Institute, Myanmar)

I do dare to say the collection of art books we have is rare and you cannot find these in the other places in Myanmar, even at the arts and culture universities. Most of the books are collected by our director, Aye Ko; he is also one of the leading artists in Myanmar. We have nearly 3,000 art books in English and over 2,000 books of different categories in Burmese. And there are also the DVD collections of video arts, performance arts and documentaries. We have a membership system so that anyone, not only artists, can access the library for 5,000 MMK [about 5 USD] annual fee. But so far, only very few people use the library, which is a pity. Because of our general education system, the young generation does not read anymore. Reading practice and library culture is very weak in Myanmar. Though there are state and regional libraries, most of them are not active. We opened this library to create the opportunity for the young artists to learn about contemporary art; art books are rare to look at and hard to buy in Myanmar. Studying abroad is very expensive and we created this platform for the artists to study and inform themselves onsite. But there are not that many art books written or translated in Burmese, so people don't read. The library is only active when we have the art class at New Zero. In our art class, we invite the participants to read. Unfortunately, besides the participants of the art class, no one else ever enters the library.

Another specific project which I would like to ask you about is “From Craft to Art: Community based Art Development Project”<sup>5</sup>. According to your website, the project has “the aim of exploring and creating opportunities for combining artistic creation with traditional crafts in the ethnic regions”. The connections between tradition and modernity – in art as well as in many other aspects of social life – seem to be very important in the local context of Myanmar. What does the project contribute – in theory and practice – in relation to this reflection?

For “From Craft to Art”, we collaborated with the British Council Myanmar and SDC.<sup>6</sup> The project intended to enhance the design-skills of the artisans in different regions of Myanmar to raise internationally the role of crafts and Myanmar artisans. We did something similar in six different regions of Myanmar from 2014–2016. We mostly offered workshops, which were based in different regions and also in Yangon. In the local workshops, we encouraged the artisans to dare to create new things and not to copy or rely on the already existing works. Since most of the people doing crafts in Myanmar are not family with sketching, we also gave basic ideas, how to approach a design process. The second thing we did was to convince them to produce better quality products. Since the art education is very low in Myanmar, we did not approach them to make more artistic objects. But we showed them how to get away from copying and producing the same things over and over again.

We also had workshops led by the foreign designers in both years. These workshops opened their eyes by seeing the role of crafts in different countries and how people appreciate the arts and crafts. Actually, we did not attempt to modernize our crafts but rather to see our own craft history with fresh eyes. Myanmar has a very strong and diverse craft culture from each ethnic group. People keep producing the style they sell without trying new creations. So our input through the workshops was about sharing the knowledge of the value of history, design approach, quality control, business management and other

management skills. A two-year process is a very short time to develop the community and we have to find more time and energy to continue in the future.

Talking about connections and going from the local to the global, I saw that you have wide “International exchange programmes”<sup>7</sup> and a dedicated section of “global partnerships”. What does it mean – geographically and conceptually – cooperation and collaboration for *New Zero Art Space*? What are your aims and expectations when you engage in collaboration with other organizations and people in the ASEAN region and abroad?

We have done several international exchange programmes previously. It is a tool to encourage the contemporary art scene in Myanmar. In that way we build a network between us and artists, art spaces, museums, galleries and organisations around the world. “Global partnerships” does not mean only cooperation and collaboration for *New Zero Art Space*, but for all Myanmar artists and our art society. By having the exchange programmes and the other activities with the artists from the ASEAN region and abroad, we believe that artists from Myanmar can connect and have opportunities, themselves, to explore internationally. We hope to widen the Myanmar contemporary art scene and reach out to the international contemporary art world by networking ourselves at different points into the global art scene.

One of our main expectations of having the exchange programmes is to create a learning platform for the artists in Myanmar. The artists in Myanmar, cannot learn inside of the country, as there is no educational platform, and cannot learn outside, as it is expensive. By being involved in the exchange programmes, they can learn from the artists coming from different countries and witness the different practices and approaches. In that way, we expect that artists in Myanmar – especially young artists – will get the connection to the art world and get opportunities in other countries such as participating in exhibitions,

Art and Education based Community Development Project, 2016. The Exhibition of Village Art School (Hmawbe, Myanmar)



exchange programmes, residency programmes and other art activities. If so, we believe that the artists can stand on their own two feet in the future without relying on *New Zero Art Space*. One of our aims as an Art Space is to bring the artists to a place where they can position themselves, but we don't want them to rely totally on us.

Dialogues, conversations, exchanges, creative collaborations and other participatory practices are all tools, methods and strategies that are used to produce active social relationships and community-engagement. What are the methodologies that you are researching and/or applying in your projects? What do you think about the emerging of the “relational” aspects in the contemporary artistic practices?

We mostly “work” together with the artists and the community. We found that “dialogues” and “conversations” are sometimes not good enough to reach our expectations or objectives. We show the practical “How” and “Why” to the community. Compared to the last four years, I think there is now more involvement in the contemporary practices in Myanmar by individuals or through group activities. But compared to other Southeast Asian countries, we still reach few.



Free of Charge Art Class for Adults, 2015-2016:

Lecture by Artist Satt Aung T.T (New Zero Art Space, Myanmar)

Art Class for the Children (Hmawbe, Myanmar)

The Exhibition of Village Art School (Hmawbe, Myanmar)



In Myanmar, the artists mostly stay in groups with a similar approach such as realism or modernism. Contemporary and conceptual based art practices are still not familiar to the audience due to lack of art education. In that situation, some projects are challenging to engage in sometimes, because the nature of people in Myanmar is to fear trying or experiencing new things they have never experienced. In some projects, including events, classes and art programmes, we also have limited participation as artists stick in their own groups and the audience does not have an interest in their contemporary and conceptual practices.

All projects become learning processes that change us and all the people involved. The final stage, the legacy and the process itself are different phases where we can measure the effectiveness of our initial aims and the presence of new components that were not initially considered. What is your own process of evaluation? Can we measure a project in terms of failure or success? What is the main knowledge we should get during and at the end of participatory practices in the social realm?

We also experienced un-expected results in the project “From Craft to Art”<sup>8</sup>. The initial aim of the project was to introduce contemporary art by using craft. At first, we thought that craft - such as lacquer wares or handmade home accessories - is more familiar to the people in Myanmar than art works like paintings or other mediums. And we tried to convince the crafts people in Myanmar to produce contemporary crafts based on specific concepts. But the crafts people in Myanmar do not know how to approach a new design, as I explained before. Finally, the project was changed to improve the design and business skills as well as the quality control methods of the artisans. The project turned more into a social empowerment and capacity building programme. Within two years of the project, we could introduce the term “art” to some artisan participants and a small percentage of input about a more conceptual mind-set. We do not take it as a failure that the project changed and took another direction. When we evaluate, we think of the situations of the country and the education standard of the people as first priority. Then we considered how effectively we acted within the project, if there was any weak point or if there was anything, which was not necessary or relevant. We think that gaining people’s interest, their participation and increasing understanding is a level of success in a project. “From Craft to Art” was a good example for that.

|   |   |   |  |
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| 3 newzeroartspace.com.mm/index.php/education/village-school (accessed Aug 31, 2016) | 6 Swiss Agency for Development and  | 8 newzeroartspace.com.mm/index.php/activities/from-craft-to-art-community-based-art-devel-            |  |

# MORE

## Jakob & Manila Bartnik

# IN THE

## in conversation with

# LESS

## Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio

*I DO* - Office, 2015.  
Kunsthalle  
Osnabrück, Germany

**Jakob&Manila Bartnik** are an artist duo based in Osnabrück (Germany). They are a husband-and-wife team of Jakob Bartnik (b. 1974, Węgorzewo, Poland) and Manila Bartnik (b. 1973, Manila, Philippines). Both were trained in art, philosophy, and sociology at Osnabrück University. After having worked individually and evolved their art in the sectors of performance, installations, and painting, they began to develop a vision together of art as a tool for knowing, evaluating, testing, and

connecting individuals and social groups. In fact, their projects involve participatory methods and undertakings that envisage the public's direct involvement: art for them means sparking off a mechanism for "learning by experience" and, as a result, their performances always call for a moment of confrontation and dialogue with the participants.

Their creative partnership started off in 2012 with *Many things we don't need*, in the DORIS gallery,

Berlin; since then they have created projects in Germany, Poland, Malaysia, America, France and Italy. *I DO*, one of these projects, was realized for the first time in the Osnabrück Kunsthalle in December 2015 as part of the Collaborative Arts Partnership Programme.<sup>1</sup> In 2014 they founded the BartnikProjectRoom, a non-commercial space to host artists in residence.<sup>2</sup>

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio took up the challenge to talk to the artist duo Jakob&Manila. It was a challenge as the two are complementary in their differences and an answer is always formed by two complementary thought processes. They spoke about their Project *I DO*, that they initiated in 2015 as a long-term artistic process and research on abstinence or renunciation. In a time in which performance and functionality are increasingly significant and consumption and entertainment are seen as enrichment, the *I DO* project is an offer, to be an offer, which indicates quality and joy of life as well vitality regardless of material consumption and external animation. The formula is: Gain through renunciation. Interested citizens can pick up a working document for participation in an *I DO*-office/info point. The working document consists of a diary in which the type of renunciation is self-documented. The diary also covers the experience, transformations and findings observed in the process of renunciation. Other documentation media, like audio and video, can be used as well. *I DO* extended an invitation for an experience exchange afterwards, in a type of exchange bar, where visitors and participants share their findings, either through direct dialogue or through the various documentation media. Jakob&Manila work currently on a form of archiving in order to share these findings with a larger audience and to empower a movement of imitators all over the world.

**Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio:** In order to start our conversation focused on your artistic practice, my first question is centred on your internal methodology. As a collective of two people working, mainly, in participatory practices, it would be interesting to understand your internal structure. How do you work together? How do you build and develop your ideas? What are the specific contributions and differences between the two? Who has to 'convince' the other? In a way, I guess that the concept –and the complexity- of participation begins in your small nucleus.





**Jakob&Manila:** As a couple we develop our work together during the whole process. That was not easy when we started as a collective.

We often struggled and couldn't find agreements. For a while, we tried to work with compromises, which frustrated both of us at the end. So we decided to develop an idea to the point of 100% satisfaction for both. Our artistic structure within each work is built on three essential elements, which must be agreed by both in each case: Willingness, friendly openness and trust.

We complement each other. Jacob's focus during process is on structure and format. Manila's focus is on interpersonal contact, emotion and intuition. Depending on the situation or the development stage, one of us comes to the forefront while the other steps back. That means a lot of flexibility and a process of fast and efficient co-creation. Sometimes circumstances require both of us at the forefront, sometimes we both stay in the back.

I think that what you mention regarding your internal methodology could be also very useful in order to understand your approach and structural-organization towards the 'external' elements of your practice. I mean that when you work with participatory practices, the main elements you deal with are the people.



I DO - Office, 2015. Kunsthalle Osnabrück, Germany

In this sense: how do you communicate your art process? How do you transfer those essential elements of willingness, friendly openness and trust? How do you involve others in your practice?

If one of those three elements was missing in our external practice, we could not work: Willingness, friendly openness and trust are necessary. For us, the very first step is to let people know: there is a project you are invited to participate in! This is done in different ways: newspaper, exhibition invitation, Facebook or other media, personal invitation.... So:

*Step 1: Let people know, there is an open invitation, an offer*

*Step 2: Inform people about the nature of this invitation! This is a crucial point. People get informed about the content of the action, about the set-up or rules of the action; they have the option to clarify open questions by contacting us in person or online. Step 2 also serves to form the yet not developed trust through*

Step 1. No one wants to be involved in something, not knowing what he/she will get her/himself in to. Getting and receiving information offers a sense of safety and a secure framework.

*Step 3: Contract/ agreement*

At this point, the informed person makes an active decision TO PARTICIPATE by signing an agreement with us.

The first three steps are set before the involvement. They serve as a check-in for people and also for us, if there is willingness, openness and trust to go into the process.

*Step 4: Involve participants to become collaborators*

From Step 4 on, we involve people actively in the work process. By being involved, the participants become part of the collective creation process. It's not us anymore, who create the form and flow of process. After a symbolic contract signature, the process is open to all the participants. We work in a set of seeming contradictions. In order for a participant to have their own intrinsic experience, we set up tight rules to narrow the space for communication, creation and experience.

For us, these rules give safety and stability, too. It is a lot easier for us to notice feelings and reactions by the participants, as the potency of these seem higher in the narrowed field. Emotions can just blow up in your face without introducing these rules; and at the end the entire action might lose meaning and intensity.

This is a direct bridge to talk more in depth about your *I DO*<sup>3</sup> project. But before stepping completely into it, there are a couple of issues that you mention that I really would like to discuss with you: first is the role and function of rules, restrictions and instructions. These elements are considered essential and necessary in some participatory art practices. What do they represent for you? How do they trigger creativity and participation?

Rules, restrictions and instructions limit the options and therefore build a kind of "path". Restrictions enable people's resources, sharpen the direction as well as the focus on a clear and powerful essence. Restrictions seem to reduce possibilities at first sight, but by having less, you are forced to find the possibilities and versatility in the less. That is a trigger for creativity. Using rules and instructions is useful as by knowing WHAT and HOW to do or NOT to do, people gain security and trust. Of course, we talk from our position. There are many other working methods. In essence: We see restriction and rules useful for versatility, creativity and also freedom.

The other issue I want to take into consideration is the idea of 'open development' or 'open process'. When you say: "It's not us anymore who create the form and flow of the process", in a way you allude to the unpredictability of some of your projects. This makes most of the social art practices open to the unknown and surprise effects. How do you deal with this interesting element of the unpredictability?

We welcome the unpredictability as part of a process. It is boring without. Incorporating the unpredictable in an unprejudiced and openhearted manner gives the opportunity to find many versatile process forms. But we do not accept any type of open process. If it seems to endanger other participants, us or the project fundamentally, we intervene.

Let's focus now on the *I DO* project. Could you please tell me how it started and how does it work? I would like you to take into consideration both the personal dimension - in terms of approach, inspiration, thought process - and then its translation to the organizational sphere.

We are personally observing what is happening in the world and with us as well as the people around us. How does today's world have influence on us? We identify things we struggle with and try to figure out ways to understand things better. There are so many misunderstandings in what is supposed to be a good and satisfying life, the idea of being successful and happy. There seems so much ego development because people seem to believe this is the way to gain significance and power.

Everyone's effort seems to be doing things the 'correct way', defined by established features like being active, being fast, being in a good mood, getting a good GPA, having a decent job, getting married, having two kids, earning good money, staying young and fit ... The material features that go along with that are owning property, owning a car, being fashionable, owning different kinds of consumer goods, owning more property, buying another car, buying more fashion, buying more different kinds of consumer goods, etc. These are all features of a cycle of a happy, successful and good life in our Western World.

As a result of this cycle, we have observed, in general, stressed and unhealthy people who have lost contact with nature and their inner resources, who are trapped in everyday processes in order to function and to meet the requirements: we are not the first ones observing this and this realisation is nothing new. It is not that Jakob&Manila are standing here with their raised fingers to tell people what they should or should not do.

The art project *I DO* is a way we choose to challenge people to rethink and to find alternatives, creating their own 'correct way' depending on their ideas, affiliations, personal and social resources, and independent of externally imposed standards or requirements. We trust totally in the inherent creativity of every human being and in the belief that, if we unlearn or lose creativity because of external or internal circumstances, the opportunity to relearn creativity always exists. What/how/whoever you like to change, what/how/whoever you want to transform, changing something that is meaningful to you... to do so, you need to be creative.



*I DO* - Office, 2015.  
Kunsthalle Osnabrück, Germany

*I DO* - Café, 2016.  
Kunsthalle Osnabrück, Germany

The project surely is not an ideal approach for all things in the world that we think are currently not working in our human favour. It is an *Experiential Learning of Creativity by Participating* project. Learning through experience, learning through discovery and exploration, learning by doing, learning by being active and hands-on.

*"I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand"*

- Confucius, 450 BC

*"Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I will remember. Involve me and I will learn."*

Benjamin Franklin, 1750

The instructions generate engagement by participants through direct experience. The invitation is to either not read, not speak, not criticize, not eat out of the "fridge" or cupboard; not use wheels - meaning no bike, car, bus etc., not use electronic devices, not spend any money - for a self-defined period of time.

*I DO* - Café, 2016.  
Kunsthalle Osnabrück,  
Germany



The project is organized in 5 steps:

- experiencing/exploring
- reflecting/sharing
- what's important to me?
- so what?
- now what?

Experiencing/exploring: This describes the whole process of a participant discovering *I DO* as an approach that can be applied on a more long-term basis in their lives. This exploration can be seen as a process for the participants. The last three steps (analysing, generalising and application) can be seen as forward thinking after participants DID and SHARED. For us, as artists, forward thinking means to evaluate the openly shared observations and develop new forms of proceedings from that.

Asking people to engage in a 'not doing experience', opens a different space –in terms of thinking and acting– we are not used to anymore. We often misinterpret freedom, thinking that it is simply the possibility of doing whatever we want. In a way this illusionary 'open freedom' produced automatism, routine, a repetitive, predictable and controlled existence that prefers not to face the unexpected mystery of life, including its obstacles and absurdities.



*I DO - Café, 2016. Galleria Massimodeluca, Mestre Venezia, Italy*

*I DO - Café, 2016. Galleria Massimodeluca, Mestre Venezia, Italy*



We are referring to a definition or meaning of freedom: in this case, it means proceeding by personal need and personal given circumstances, not proceeding by social constraints or imposed standards. The meaning of freedom loses intensity in our daily life through misinterpretation; as you well described "thinking that it is simply the possibility of doing whatever we want." The restriction in *I DO* of 'not to do' absolutely focuses the experience on finding possibilities of freedom and versatility beyond this false freedom illusion. If one thinks that *freedom is the possibility to do whatever I want to do*, it postulates a deep understanding of *WHAT DO I WANT*, right? So the question of *WHAT IS FREEDOM TO ME?* obtains a new meaning.

I would say that the *I DO* experience deviates from the normal daily course of life through the paradoxical application of limitations and restrictions. Having said that, I see the opening of this new space and the centrality of the experience as the main part of the *I DO* project, addressing and questioning the sense and meaning of our daily lives. What kind of different visions, ideas, reflections and revelations came out after the *I DO* experiences of the participants?

Many participants reflected about and had their revelation on freedom and creativity. Many shared that in the very beginning, they felt not free and lonely. By proceeding, most participants had revelations on freedom in a new or unexpected way. One participant, who did not use any mobile devices, recognized, that he reached a new level of being free of all the annoying WhatsApp messages for 24 hours, and he felt relieved to NOT get information and NOT having the pressure to answer and react. From these gained insights, many participants started to create new options out of the situation of giving up and abstinence.

A woman, who started with one day "no food from the fridge" ended up in a one-month project, eating only seasonal things, things she preserved from last year (applesauce, tomatoes, etc.), home baked bread, inviting herself for dinner at friends' houses or inviting friends for a bring-something or potluck party. One participant, a professor, who did not read for one day, had the most touching moment of the day, when instead of reading a good night story to his son, he started to tell a story, invented by himself. His son told him that this has been the best good night story ever. There were so many wonderful things coming out of the project: two poems, one in German and, one in Italian, a video (an artist couple put the camera into the fridge for one day, so imagine, the video is just black), several essays and many more outcomes.

I guess you did also take part in the project with a direct experience of "renouncing". The personal involvement, the inner transformation and the challenge of adapting to – and playing creatively with – a new situation and condition are clearly at the core of the project. There are anyway, as you were mentioning before, further steps to the project – no less important – which consists in sharing with others the experience and the reflections that came out of it. How do you organize the "sharing part"? Is it something that you contemplate as the final part of the project? Is it something that you organize as an archive or documentation?

We have done the *I DO* project twice now: In Germany and in Italy. The sharing part can be seen as a reflection part for the participants. In the past, it has always been planned as a platform, where people meet face to face to discuss and talk

for one good reason; reflection happens deeply through dialogues. The exchange helps to formulate and syndicate; of course to understand the shared experience of others but also for a deeper understanding of the self-experience. The sharing part is organized as a platform, containing four documentation-stations (**read**: documentation books, poetry, writing; **see**: video, photo; **listen**: sound, spoken text; **discuss**: 7 discussion tables, one for every restriction). It depends a lot on the documentation of the participants and the forms we received from them. In Italy, we received no visual outcomes, for example, so we screened videos from the German *I DO*, so people could watch and share. In the future, we will collect all documents from *I DO* sites. The documentation of the participants will grow in time and in different languages. We started thinking of an internet platform, that could also be an archive of the documentation of the participants and also our documentation of the whole project as a kind of collaborative platform.

This idea arrived to us during the process. We developed the idea of an *I DO*-community, ideally with a platform for exchange and sharing experiences with people from different countries. This could also be a platform to develop new ideas and projects from the *I DO* project from other artists, researchers, writers, designers, all kinds of makers... so this would actually be an ongoing archive and process. A final situation for us could potentially be when a new idea is created by another maker who participated in the *I DO* project, that creates a new form or a new project from this *I DO* experience and content.

The sharing part sounds very enriching as it brings the project towards multiple directions and variations. It seems to me also very important this passage from the individual experience to the collective one: I see a kind of philosophical approach that includes the “knowing yourself” element and the consequent dialogues and exchanges with others.

Your summary is perfect. Nothing left to add. We really like this “knowing yourself” you mentioned as an element.

In order to conclude our stimulating conversation, I would like to ask you a couple of final things. On one side – according to your experience as one of the participants – I would like to ask you about the learning process of the *I DO* project. I imagine a sequence that goes from uncertainty to liberation; an initial feeling of insecurity that could become finally a sense of emancipation. Is *I DO* a kind of therapy against the accumulation of useless “doings” of life?

Well, we think that the sense of emancipation and liberation is definitely a strong element of the work. But *I DO* is not against anything. It is for doing things, that might be seen useless by others, but useful for yourself. It is more about breaking the standards and finding an individual third way of doing, which is not necessarily useful for others. That seems to us the actual freedom and emancipation.

On the other side I would like to know about your evaluation process. How do you measure the *I DO* development? How do you measure the transformation, the visible/invisible outputs and the emotional impact?

Very good question. We would be happy to have an answer. We don't, though. At the beginning we were kind of “blind”, to be honest. We thought: *Great, people will get introduced to the work, get into their action, share and learn - done.*

During the process, we recognized our blind spots. Or better, we understood *I DO* would need more, after getting people involved, to make the experiential learning visible, to transmit it from the personal to the collective knowledge, etc. People will document their experience, if they know about the sharing and reflexing element, so why not go further? Why not built a community of *I DO*-people, who share a platform also for new upcoming projects and why not make all of that widely visible and accessible as part of the discussions? Of course we wish to work on evaluation and quantitative measures to make the work visible for scientific and material-based entities. This realization developed as a consequence of the process. We are currently working on an analysis sheet for the participants to find out about the emotional impact, any changes in daily life situations, and we examine the different values systems of our participants once the analysis sheets are returned to us.



*I DO* - Café, 2016.  
Kunsthalle Osnabrück,  
Germany

*I DO* - Café, 2016.  
Kunsthalle Osnabrück,  
Germany



1 [cappnetwork.com](http://cappnetwork.com)  
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Aug 31, 2016)

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# THEATRE, DANCE

Bhumin Dhanaketpisarn

# AND MUSIC

in conversation with

# FOR JUSTICE IN

Susanne Bosch

# SOCIETY

**Bhumin Dhanaketpisarn** graduated from the Faculty of Engineering of King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, Thailand. He is now working as a senior volunteer at Makhampom Foundation and gathered his experience in arts since the 1980's by learning Thai classical music, Thai traditional dance and Thai folk opera, Likay.

Makhampom Theatre Group (MKP) was founded in 1980 by a group of pro-democracy activist.

Utilising the theatre as a tool for grassroots action by involving the social community made up of volunteers from different generations. The touring theatre groups aim to raise awareness and engage dialogues between Thailand and overseas practitioners. The focus is on developing youth theatre groups throughout Thailand by creating a theatre style that merges the traditional and contemporary by practicing the popular art forms of Likay, physical theatre, puppetry,

circus and intercultural theatre. Makhampom Theatre Group strives to promote the art of theatre in schools and universities, utilising theatre as a tool for peace-building and conflict resolution. The group has grown into a large collective of volunteers. They have a team in Bangkok at their Makhampom Art Space and another team in Chiang Dao at their Makhampom Living Theatre. Activities of MKP are theatre productions, youth theatre projects, community programmes,

Theatre in Education as well as tours, events, conferences and festivals. Bhumin Dhanaketpisarn has worked with the theatre for almost 30 years now.

Susanne Bosch and Bhumin Dhanaketpisarn spoke about his engagement, motivation, talents and visions in dance, theatre and singing and his 30-year involvement with the Makhampom Theatre Group.

Tobong Art Festival, Kediri, Indonesia, 2015.

**Susanne Bosch:** You are a professional engineer by training and graduated from King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkabung Campus, in the faculty of Engineering. I know you stopped working in your profession about two years ago and you are currently a full-time artist. As I understand, you work 150% for the Makhampom Foundation/ Makhampom Theatre Group. You sing, you dance, you perform Likay. You facilitate workshops. Can you start by telling us how you got involved in this field of dance, singing and Likay? Engineering seems far away from the world of performance and dance. How did you get in contact with the Makhampom Theatre Group?

**Bhumin Dhanaketpisarn:** As student from 1982-1986, I took part in many activities of the student's clubs such as Drama, Thai Classical Music, Environment Conservation, Swimming and Rural Development Clubs. In my second year of studying, I had an experience with Basic Drama and this is how I got to know Makhampom Theatre Group (MKP), as they were our trainers. At the end of that workshop I was very impressed by their activities. In the followings years, I continued as a student practicing to be a good actor and how to manage and run a theatre play. In the meantime, I learned how to play a Thai Classical Music instrument and how to sing Thai Classical Music songs. Every weekend, an event was arranged by the Thai Classical Music Club. In 1988 I got a permanent job at the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), which is a very firm state enterprise with good salaries. I joined MKP from time to time to do some activities as a volunteer.





Likay Workshop for Indonesian students, Pacitan, Indonesia, 2015

International Likay, MKP Chiang Dao, Thailand, 2012



Makhampom International Reunion, MKP Chiang Dao, Thailand, 2012

#### Why have you worked with Makhampom Theatre Group for such a long time?

During that period the main focus of MKP was touring street theatre productions and student workshops. Most of the MKP productions focused on social problems. MKPs aim was to produce high quality theatre with a low budget and maximum impact on the audience. The social problems campaigned in the play had the power to gather big audiences and to lead to further discussions after the show. I have never seen that in commercial theatres. MKP is organized by a few permanent staff and the project survives through volunteer work. This is a beautiful structural model; for each MKP production we can put the most effort towards the artistic side and we can worry less about the economies. As I worked in the half government - half business sector, these models of organization are totally different. I can feel and touch other volunteers in MKP, as this is the place we all share and where we exchange our knowledge, experience and love. MKP focuses on traditional Thai theatre styles.

I have an excessive passion in Thai Classical Music - both playing and singing - and in traditional Thai theatre styles. I can make a big contribution to any production. This way I became part of the MKP family.

After 4-5 years as volunteer, I realized how weak I was in classical Thai dancing compared to others so I tried to find someone to teach me dancing. It was very difficult to find someone who could teach me classical Thai dancing. The word "teacher" means in Thai "giver", so the teacher dare not get paid by their students but rather receive good wishes and respect. They got their talent from their elder guru who taught and coached them for free. It is shameful for the teacher if they earn this way. I finally met some people to teach me, but the class was only for beginners. They taught me to dance without any fee and it took a long time as I always had to change teachers as I developed my dancing skills. One important thing for the beginners learning classical Thai dancing is practicing closely with the teacher and to repeat the same dance again and again. It took me more than two years to dance the beginner song.

While I was learning classical Thai dancing, MKP got more experienced in Likay. Likay is a form of Thai folk opera and it is very beautiful and amusing, so most people like to watch Likay. Through Likay we could reach the audience with our messages better than with western theatre styles. Many of us were not familiar to act in a Thai folk opera. To put a Thai folk song into a production is very impressive to the audience because of its meaning, beautiful melodies and emotional intensity. A Likay performer shall have three abilities - Thai classical dancing, Thai classical music and/or folk song singing, and acting. We decided to learn how to be Likay performers by watching Likay performances. At first, every night, we found a Likay troop performing somewhere and we learned by watching. We all have been familiar with Likay since childhood, as in Thai society, Likay is an entertainment for grassroots.

Finally, we met a Likay troop who taught us Likay. Likay is also a lifestyle; you live and work together as a troop while moving around. They did not know how to teach us, so we learned through the real situation, meaning the way of real Likay life, learning by heart every night by familiarizing ourselves to the songs and melodies, we would memorize the whole story and the roles. After testing three to four nights we all failed and found that we cannot learn this way. But we got lots of knowledge from the professional Likay troop.

We finally organized our first Likay production, providing a script and songs which we rehearsed many times. We mixed western techniques with Thai styles. The show was a success, but one could not call it a real Likay because we did not sing well, our dancing was not beautiful, we did no improvisations as the real Likay always do. But this was the starting point for MKP and we produced many Likay productions later. They were accepted by the audience, and most people know us as "Likay MKP" which is different from the real Likay, because we adapted the political content to the performance, something one cannot see in a real Likay.

Around 2002-2004 we set up a Likay Academy in MKP opened for people who were interested in learning Likay and here was a space for us to study more about Likay. How to do the make-up, how to make the costumes, how to wear them and their way of life, were more things to learn about Likay. I learned Likay fast as I got two important basics; classical Thai music singing and acting. I understood the art

of Likay very well, because I was familiar with the music and I knew how to create a poem, I knew its tradition and so on. This led me to become a Likay scriptwriter, a Likay director and, of course, a Likay performer.

The Likay Academy survived for two years before it collapsed, due to many reasons. The Likay Academy disappeared at the same time that the MKP Bangkok Base down-sized. For MKP, Likay returned into its fundamental form, as to build up one Likay performer takes a long time. Right now MKP sometimes still uses Likay and mixes it with other theatre forms such as physical theatre, shadow puppet, acrobatics and so on to create a production. I still volunteer and I am happy to join the MKP work, knowing that we have impact on people; we make them more aware through our theatre methods.

What political content does MKP look at? Can you give examples?

The political content of MKP is justice in Thai society. We want to see Thailand's politics more developed. We also address the gap between people, equality of people and social fairness. These issues are much bigger than our potential as a small theatre group. But we have one example of work where we pushed over a long period of time. We managed, via theatre, to achieve more human rights actions by both private and government sectors for one ethnic group called Dara-Ang<sup>2</sup>.

Dara-Ang ancestors were located and spread out in forestry and highland areas both in Burma and Thailand, long before the borderline was drawn. Some Dara-Angs escaped from their homeland Burma to Thailand, because of the battle between the minorities and the Burmese government, and moved close to the border more than two or three decades ago. The newcomers have no ID cards and do not speak Thai (except for the younger generations) and kept their own language. Unfortunately, the area they settled in was in the national park of Thailand in the Chiang Dao district, so Thailand's government tried to push them out as well. Having left their homeland a long time ago, they did not know where to go. They prefer to stay in Thailand, knowing very well it is against the law. Their status had changed so that they had become the lowest class of people, doing cheap labour, having limited living areas, and no public voice. They were often put in jail to squeeze money out of them, their women were raped and some compared their lives to being a small bug just escaping death.

We went to their community and ran our theatre processes. It was quite hard in the beginning because they were afraid of us. They hid their identity and dared not to talk. But after talking with them many times, until they were familiar with us, they began to feel comfortable and they started to speak. Our process moved step by step. We asked for permission to offer the theatre workshop for their children. Child labour is important for the family and a workshop takes a long time. They were not sure whether this workshop would impact on their food rations. Fortunately, we were able to set up a young theatre group in their village. In the workshop we tried to energize our trainees to think about their problems in the village and always took the identified problems as a theme of each group story. All stories expressed the children's depression, with their tiny voices. Finishing our workshop, we continued to contribute by making a production to tell their story. Most scenes were picked up from the lessons during the workshop. We developed the stories and rehearsed many times. It was the first time in their lives that the

people saw a play performed by their own children. Most important was that the children were telling their own story, the Dara-Ang Story.

Everybody in the village joined the show on one night and our performers became super stars at once, as, although not perfect actors, they touched people's hearts and minds. Most people were crying, villagers sat together and started talking about their future. It was maybe the first time this circumstance had happened among them. Someone thought that they should spread this play, to tell how they got in trouble and how they need help. They needed land for living, they didn't want to be jailed anymore, they needed their basic rights, and from this moment, MKP knew that we had a big project to follow up on.

To spread the word in Thailand, the play needed to be translated into the Thai language. That was very difficult for the children at the time, because they were very shy to speak Thai in public. They knew that they cannot speak Thai well and they didn't want to be ridiculed. Thai language courses were implemented for our performers. MKP actually loved the way they spoke, we believed the audiences must like them because all performers were authentic Dara-Ang. For the tour of the play to Chiang Mai, Bangkok and other big scale provinces to collect donations, we had to improve the production and the management.

As a theatre group, we wanted to support a minority's human rights cause and make Thai people aware of the Dara-Ang problems. We turned to our alliance, getting help from NGOs to join our network and also some government officers to take up roles, a TV producer to promote the ethnic group and the publishing press to write the articles. The theatre tour was a big success; they got money to buy their own land. The money was not for individuals, but instead, government officers suggested that the land should be bought as a community title, for the Pang Daeng community, to limit the numbers of Dara-Ang residents and to set up their own management committee.

This project was setting the standard to solve conflicts between government officers and minority groups. It was called the Pang Daeng model. This achievement happened in collaboration with many sectors.

Performance Exchange,  
Pang Daeng Village  
Chiang Dao, Thailand,  
2012



Likha Asya 1, Philippines  
Art Festival, Makhampom  
Presentation/University  
of Bohol, 2013



MKP was the little starter to move towards a better life for our friends, fighting for basic human rights with our theatre abilities. It also made MKP well known. The Dara-Ang now have a new homeland and can live peacefully. They still have big struggles to face. MKP gradually withdrew from them, remaining only with some continuing theatre workshops.

As a volunteer, I helped to organize the event in Bangkok at the time. I always visit the Pang Daeng community when I am in Chiang Dao to bring some food and clothes donations as they are still poor.

Makhampom was born in the 1980s as a social organization that works in the medium of theatre, emerging out of the Thai pro-democracy movement to apply micro media for awareness-raising. Makhampom believes in the power of theatre. Adapting various styles of performing arts has been your signature for decades, not to be the master, but



Art for community and Inspiration Seminar, Silpakorn University, Thailand, 2014

Likha Asya 1, Philippines Art Festival, Likay Solo, Abatan Village, Bohol, 2013

Art for community and Inspiration Seminar, Likay demonstration, Silpakorn University, Thailand, 2013



to communicate, to encourage creativity, to express, to prompt dialogue, to entertain, to provoke debate, to strengthen cultural practice, to open the creative mind and body, and to facilitate direct social activism.

Your term Social Circus reminds me of something that Elaine sent to me recently: Pascal Gielens Podcast. He also made an analogy with the circus life: He calls our current idea of freedom negative freedom, as it injures the freedom of others, and he emphasises the need to shift this thinking to a shared or collective freedom. He calls upon artists to build more and more collectives to work together, in which to find our singular voice and respect the voice of others. "Multitude" is about parallel singular voices that can live with each other.

Do you face in Thailand the same quandary as we do in Europe: the contradiction to be invited by commissioners and institutions that set up a structural framework which we actually question and even try to break? Artists enter into this type of socially engaged public art practice to build social cohesion and sometimes they succeed. Artistic interventions are cheap solutions to fill up the holes in the neo-liberal systems. As temporary and project-based formats, this type of work on the micro-social level most likely stays far from structural changes. When artists realize the structural problems, when they start reasoning on political levels, it becomes very dangerous. Pascal Gielen recommends us to do both and to emancipate people to become aware of the political-structural situation and to not get trapped into the "NGO-art": Helping people with good intentions and a good heart, but at the same time to support a neo-liberal system to stay alive. What experience do you have in Thailand, as your objectives is social transformation? Do you touch upon structural change or is this too dangerous in your context?

I would love to compare Western and Eastern ways of thinking first. Western societies have an issue with time due to geographical location and race through the year. In the Eastern mentality we feel we have some food to survive all year long and we have time. Western societies struggle with long periods of cold weather so they have to plan how to prolong their food production through the year. That makes Western societies good in systematic thinking. Eastern societies live mainly in a tropical zone with a rich daily supply and therefore have a lot of time to think about nature and life. This is why we have many life philosophers in the east and many scientists in the west.

One Chinese philosopher once said: "Picking up one flower affects the stars." I totally agree with Pascal Gielens podcast on this point. MKP is a space for many artists and activists; all projects are run by staff and volunteers and will be discussed among us. If the majority does not accept a project, we reject it even though we might lose big money. Of course, all projects might affect others, like our project for Dara-Ang. It had an impact on many people in many sectors of Thailand. We decided to do it for reasons of humanity, from our hearts, and our good minds just wanted to help.

I don't pay much attention to the effects, as I believe I'm going to be mad if I think about all the possible effects. How can I relax from this stress? Thanks to Lord Buddha, there are the principles of virtuous existence - kindness, generosity, rejoicing with others in their happiness, and prosperity. Finally - if we practice these principles - calmness. The other saying is: "There are many leaves on the tree, so focus only on the leaf in your hand". I think that one leaf is enough for me



Fund Raising for disaster in the Philippines, Likay Solo for Fund Raising, Xavier Auditorium, Thailand, 2014

Political Play for novelist, Kularb Saipradit, MKP studio Bangkok, Thailand, 2010



and I can do any work happily trying to reduce the effects as much as I can. As you said in the *TransActions in the Field* master class: "Whatever happens, is the right thing to happen."

You recently performed in the Teater Atas Pokok<sup>3</sup> project in Malaysia together with Paik Yin Lim. Can you share some of your experiences from this practical work?

The director and writer Dinsman<sup>4</sup> saw my dance in our PAKSI<sup>5</sup> performance night in the village Kampung Banda Dalam during the *TransActions in the Field* master class. He contacted me two months later via Facebook and invited me to join a theatre play in a tree. As PAKSI is poor, they offered me food, accommodation and transportation.

This was good opportunity to gain more experience with other theatre groups especially collaborating across cultures, which was wonderful for me. And as I said, I believe that theatre is a wonderful tool not only to make impact on audiences with impressive content but also to experience strong powerful teamwork. I also planned to help the village of Kampung Banda Dalam group to organize a more interesting cultural action. Unfortunately, I missed that, due to time.

Actually, I never asked for a script, trusting Dinsman that he would not give me something too difficult to me. I think he knew me quite well. At first I had my own ideas to maybe just show some dancing in a scene. But the script was rich

and I had dialogues in both Malay and in English. The first day I met all the performers, they tried to help me connect the lines together. My problem was how to pronounce the Malay accent correctly – what did the lines mean? We had a very short time to practice. As an actor, I need to know the meaning of lines and my role in the entire play so I can synchronize my emotions to the role play. Dinsman made a short introduction and Paik Yin helped to translate the content. After finishing the script reading, I needed to memorize my role in one night because the next day it was my first rehearsal with other performers. I took one night to understand the content of the script and the next half day I remembered all lines with the support of some Malaysian performers. It was a bit difficult for me to remember Malay lines. The English was not as difficult as the Malay, as English is more familiar to me. In the MKP theatre process, we always use this technique to take one or two days to memorize a Thai script by connecting the lines bit by bit together. I did this with Teater Atas Pokok as well.

My role in this play was two scenes coming basically from real situations – travelling to Kampung Banda Dalam to visit old friends and my dance last year in the mosque. Dinsman created a trance scene in which a woman sang a song and I started to dress in a Likay costume. Dinsman was wise to bring me to perform this because he wanted to inform the Malaysian audience about their own culture and tradition by bringing me with my dance and dress on stage. He made a clear point.

The Teater Atas Pokok was not high quality theatre, compared to other international theatres, but this type of street theatre does not happen easily in Malaysia. The audience, some actors, staff and backstage hands had no experience in this type of work. There are many limitations and obstructions to running a street theatre, especially in a Muslim country. I think one problem was that the quality of rehearsal was not good. I wondered about some actors still reading from the script while being in the dress rehearsal. It reflected that, throughout the practicing period, they did not realize why they are in the scene or why they speak their lines, resulting in mechanical language; no need to mention the boring moments in a text-based theatre like this. The other problem was the strict time for prayers. Mostly Muslims are very strict in their prayers. The rehearsal always stopped and, especially at night, the interruptions lead to rehearsals until 2 or 3am the next morning. Lastly, the theatre management was quite poor. I believe if the organizational management could be of better quality, the quality of the play would be better.

The audience, I spoke to, loved the play; they did not think it was boring and enjoyed it very much. The back stage team, staff and most of the performers felt the same. So it might not be fair to compare this play to other international theatres. I believe if they could have more time to develop a production, it would be better. I always give my best every time I perform as I will have a chance to act again, but the audience has only one chance to see it.

All involved people in Teater Atas Pokok were very happy. I noticed, this atmosphere always happened every time the curtain fell. A saying of a theatre guru in Thailand: "If we present a good play, the audiences will feel happy and therefore we feel happy too". I don't know if Teater Atas Pokok left any impact on the audience but I believe the new, younger, spectator generation will have a good memory.

I hope the PAKSI group may develop more contingency by expanding their group with younger people and stronger contributions. The youngest one is currently about 40 as far as I observed.

Another work I did: In 2013 I was invited to the Likha Aysa 1<sup>6</sup> for a one-week seminar, to deliver a Likay workshop and perform at Bohol in the Philippines. Everything was very nice and impressive; I made lots of Philippines' friends. In October 2013 there was an earthquake along with a typhoon in Bohol. I was shocked and very sad to see the pictures of some damaged churches I just had seen in March. My first question was: What should I do? I thought to do Likay as fundraising. But where? I asked for help from old engineering friends to organize the event at their old school. But it failed so I asked one colleague in the office if he could talk to the priest at Xavier church as he is Catholic. This process took more than two weeks until the priest agreed. I asked one musician friend and he agreed to join. I had five days to prepare for the show. A Likay solo show was easy for me. The problem was how to gather the church audience to the auditorium and how will the audience know about the purpose of this extraordinary event.

I put on my Likay costume and waited in front of the Thai Catholic church, after their religious service, to invite them to walk to the auditorium 60 meters away. I also prepared a small exhibition in the form of some disaster photos. In the auditorium, my friend and I cleared the place, arranged the chairs, predicting that only 20 people would come, and tested the sound and technical equipment for the show. We prepared the musical instrument and a donation box, then I put on makeup and dressed up.

I was very excited and nervous. The audience gathered in front of the church. They were stunned for awhile, but, at the time, they had already heard the news about the disaster from TV. I walked along with the slowest group to the auditorium and invited them to sit down, talking a bit while we walked there. Then the Likay solo went on for 25 minutes. When I started the show by singing with music, more and more people came in. They organized themselves seats and when the show finished, everybody put money into the donation box. It was very impressive for us; just three people were able to do a very big thing. We collected about 400 USD from 50 people. I also posted this activity on my Facebook and some friends donated another 100 USD. I sent the money to my friend in the Philippines. The more we give, the more we receive and create happiness.

You are a practicing Buddhist. I read something interesting and I would like to know how you relate to this: In a text about the 31st Century Museum of Contemporary Spirit<sup>7</sup> in Chiang Mai, the artist and founder Kamin Lertchaiprasert says that art production for him is considered as dharma practice and a living routine. I learned that, in Thai, there is no word for art, but "sippa" or "silpa" meaning "beauty". And beauty corresponds with truth and virtue for Buddhadasa. As we all have a virtue, we all must have at least one good quality. Kamin asked artists and non- artists to give this one good quality in the form of one object, that represents meaning in their lives. He presented the collection in areas of individual and social spirit and invited the visitors into his temporary container-museum that existed until February 2016. Kamin's question is: What is the "contemporary spirit" that everyone in society is searching for? How do you relate your art practice to your life practice and to spirituality?

My art practice and my life are the same. I resigned from my paid job; life is now slower than before, and I can pay more attention and select what kind of work I should do. Of course that work must bring me deeply happiness. We act and work as MKP for poor people to bring them some happiness. We learn a lot through the arts in a theatre process and that makes us concentrated and focused. I believe life in this current world is a balancing act of art and business, giving and receiving. I am not looking for an easy-going life.

Thank you so much Bhumin.



Contemporary Likay for conciliation of Red and Yellow shirts, Thamsart university, Thailand, 2013

Contemporary Likay for conciliation of Red and Yellow shirts, Thamsart University, Thailand, 2013



1 [makhampom.net/makhampom/makham2008/de-tail\\_en.php?pcoid=15](http://makhampom.net/makhampom/makham2008/de-tail_en.php?pcoid=15) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

2 [Circus on the Edge: theabs13.wix.com/circusontheedge#!makhampom/cliwz](http://circus.ontheedge.com/circusontheedge#!makhampom/cliwz) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

3 [Teater Atas Pokok – A play that is set on the tree. tourismelangor.my/event/teater-atas-](http://teater-atas-pokok.com)

[pokok/](http://pokok.com) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

4 Dinsman – Stage name of Shamsuddin Osman – a playwright, theatre director and author of literary and political issues in Malaysia

5 [Seniman Paksi Rakyat \(PAKSI\) senimanpaksi.blogspot.my](http://senimanpaksi.blogspot.my) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

6 Bohol played host recently to Likha Asya 1, the

first international creative industry and community theatre festival. Local theatre groups and foreign artists in the performing arts gathered and shared their experiences and background in terms of Community Theatre through discussions, forums and cultural performances. Four countries participate in Likha Asya 1 – Philippines, Indonesia, Japan and Thailand. It is a program by the National

Commission for Culture and the Arts' (NCCA) National Committee on Dramatic Arts (NCDA).

7 [31st Century Museum of Contemporary Spirit in Chiang Mai. 31century.org/](http://31stcentury.org/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

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# “FUNDAMENTALLY,

Lim Paik Yin

# WHAT DRIVES

in conversation with

# ME IS

Susanne Bosch

# INTEGRITY”

Born in 1980 in Malaysia, **Lim Paik Yin** is an interdisciplinary artist working with performance art, photography and spoken words. She graduated with a B.A in Multimedia (Media Innovation and Management).

Her art education is supplemented by workshops organized by galleries, collectives and cultural institutions with bases in Malaysia.

Paik Yin's practice in the-atre evolved to the visual arts through workshops organized by women's rights groups and debuted in the *Scripted Bodies Art Exhibition* in 2005. This group show used the human body

as a visual motif to explore the various ideologies and political forces that shape attitudes towards the human body. This theme has been revisited by Paik Yin in various forms.

When she was an artist assistant with New York-based artist, Digital Safari, she was introduced to photography as a medium in her art, through a photography intervention project, *U R Loved Project*.

This project was undertaken at Union Square, New York City, 2007. The following year, Paik Yin performed the same project in Malaysia.

After returning to Malaysia

in 2008, she worked as a photo researcher in a stock photography company and started creating photo essays in 2011. Her photography work has since evolved to incorporate her practice in performance art. She is influenced by her activism in gender equality, permaculture as well as her dance practice in contact improvisation. Her photography work has been exhibited in the South East Asian region, in Spain and most recently shown in the Chennai Photo Biennale in India with the Asian Women Photographers' Showcase.

'Teater Atas Pokok' rehearsals, Technical set up at the site of 'Teater Atas Pokok', 2016.

*“By using the presence of oneself and transforming everyday space through performance, I can view the self as a separate entity and thus intervene in my everyday routine, creating a temporal opportunity to express what is unspoken or hidden.”*

Lim Paik Yin was in conversation with Susanne Bosch and spoke about her experiences in two projects in which she participated in different roles. In the theatre production of *Teater Atas Pokok*, 2016, she was invited to be the lead actress performing in a tree in Shah Alam, Malaysia. Within the collective, Young Women Making Change (YWMC), she was active as performer, trainer and activist in *Speak Out*, in 2012. The performance was part of the YWMC Malaysia collective campaign for a stand-alone sexual harassment bill in Malaysia and the collective came about through a 2.5-year long programme initiated by International Womens' Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP-AP) and Knowledge Rights for Youth Through Safer Spaces (KRYSS). She spoke about the artistic process in an activist group process.

## TEATER ATAS POKOK, 2016

**Susanne Bosch:** You seem to negotiate tensions between theatre- visual arts- writing- activism in a search for your own position. Is that correct? I liked what you wrote: “... I realize that the seemingly random intentions in my lived experience, not fully



identifying with photographers, dramaturges and dancers, was a search for content and the medium that best gives it form.” Teater Atas Pokok<sup>1</sup>, how did this theatre project come about with PAKSI?

**Lim Paik Yin:** The theatre piece is fundamentally about humanity and the relationship between Malaysians/Malaysia with development and modernity. It questions the value of local culture and what is lost in the name of ‘development’. The poems and the play is about the loss of the natural environment and living in harmony with the environment. The play also takes a critical stance on holding the people who are in power accountable for their duties in managing the harmony of the living environment, and for their tendency to prioritize currency in the name of development.

We had a large audience on the first night. Also on the first night there was an award ceremony from the Malaysian Books of Records as the performance was recognized by the Malaysia Book of Records as the “First Theatre Performance on a Tree Top”.

You made your first contact with the theatre director Dinsman last year during the *TransActions in the Field* master class and your performance left some traces...

Bhumini and I, as well as others, from the *TransActions in the Field* master class performed at the Bacaan Puisi Madrasah Seni<sup>2</sup> organized by PAKSI<sup>3</sup> November 2015. After that, Dinsman<sup>4</sup>, a play-writer, theatre director and author of literary and political issues in Malaysia, approached me and asked me if I want to do an improvised performance on a tree based on the Usman Awang’s<sup>5</sup> poem *Surat Daripada Masyarakat Burung Kepada Datuk Bandar/ Letter from the bird community to the lord mayor*<sup>6</sup> and *Balada Terbunuhnya Beringin Tua di Pinggir Sebuah Bandaraya/ The Ballad of a Murdered Beringin Tree on the outskirts of a city council*. I bought a book on Usman Awang’s poems at the GerakBudaya bookshop<sup>7</sup> with translations from Malay into English, Tamil and Mandarin. Based on the poem and imagining climbing a tree, I constructed a series of movements on Posthumanism.

By virtue of growing up in Kuala Lumpur, I knew that, because of the culture of allowances and not wanting to make demands, Dinsman would not instruct me to climb the tree. So when I went for an audition at Madrasah Seni, Kampung Banda Dalam, I wanted to climb a tree, and so I did. I think it is the fact that I climbed the tree in a long dress that seemed like *kain*<sup>8</sup>, that sparked the inspiration for the script for Dinsman.

The play was developed in Malaysian style, seemingly unstructured and very much going with the flow, but there were updates of activity, as Dinsman kept posting the progress of the play on Facebook. When funding came in, one of the conditions was that the play had to be set in Selangor and so we had to look for another tree to perform in – originally we had chosen a tree in Kampung Banda Dalam. The script started to develop when the new tree was identified at Taman Bunga Raya, a public park in Shah Alam.

What inspired you to take up a lead role in this play?

The poem was meaningful and I would not have been aware of it if it was not for Dinsman. Also at the audition I attended, Soleh<sup>9</sup> and some boys of the *kampung* were clearing the area around the Madrasah. The chattering, the sounds of the

*lidi* sweeping across the sand, and the washing reminded me of a life that I missed – a friendly time before everything became centralized and ‘fast’. Also as a child growing up in the city surrounded by rain trees, I was looking for an excuse to climb a tree. It was actually on my list of things to do before I die. I needed art to squash the concerns that I am a woman climbing the tree.

## FORM FOLLOWS CONTENT

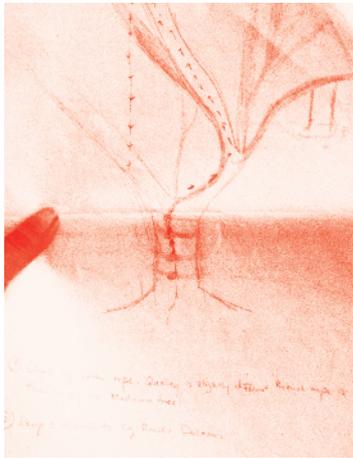
You work a lot with your body. When using visual arts, you seem to have a strong sense of, and resistance to, systemic structures that create exclusion of any sort. You seem to react to any kind of unnecessary imbalances. I know that you might question at times your choice of “form” for your inner quest and the results of your quarrels. What drives you internally; what is your quest? Why do you do what you do; why do you question?

‘Teater Atas Pokok’ full dress rehearsal, 2016

End of Day 1 of the performance, At the Angsana Tree, Taman Bunga Raya, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia, 2016

‘Teater Atas Pokok’ full dress rehearsal, Fairul Pujangga perched on the tree next to musicians Sani Sudin and Saidin Omar on the swing. Actress Naahilah Suhaimi and Lim Paik Yin at the base of the tree, 2016





Sesi pemilihan pelakon yang pertama. Penampilan Paik Yin memang mengejutkan saya. Tanpa apa apa alat bantuan keselamatan dia tiba tiba memanjat pokok Ara di belakang Madrasah Seni itu. Dua kali. Hingga ke atas. Tabek Paik Yin. \* Paik Yin's appearance surprised me. Without any safety aids, she suddenly climbed the Ara tree behind the Madrasah Seni at Kampong Banda Dalam. Twice. To the top. Tabek Paik Yin. 2016

'Teater Atas Pokok' rehearsals. A sketch of my path from the ground, climbing up the Angsana tree to sliding down a rope at the site of the performance. 2016

Fundamentally what drives me is integrity. Stories touched me as a child and I've lived in books and sports in high school. When I did theatre, I thought I knew emotions and 'life'; but can one know something without experiencing it? I was seeking out primary experience to find out about the realities of the other. There is fear and this wanting to disappear in my own imagination, hence the love for abstracts and, funnily, it is also this love for abstracts that pushes me to investigate this lived experience. This is what drove me in the past and after having the time and space to have a brief exploration of society and social structure, I have a direction of where I want to position myself in society. I have to admit, if art is only about aesthetics, I am not interested in it. But art that is about social change or dealing with society interests me very much.

My interest in practice-based research and an allowance for process-based art, suggest a clear need to go back to school - hence my thinking about doing an MA and studying. I do not want to experiment on society with a lack of knowledge about power and its dynamics, for example. And if I involve the public as participants or collaborators, I want to be clear about the role of aesthetics, authorship and ownership. In the end, I want to make the world a better place.

Aesthetics means the understanding of form, conversation formats, also technical skills and abilities. Authorship: Do I want to be the artist that only delivers a conceptual format for others to execute? I just want to be clear about these things: who gets the credit and how do I avoid abuse or exploitation. The role of the artist comes with certain responsibilities. The term integrity drives me to question all this.

So you are considering studying art?

The need for formal education came about when I heard about artistic research and I am curious. Going back to formal education is my internal YES or at least the commitment to start learning to write papers. I am naturally kinaesthetic and not a fan of writing papers but I think it is important,

especially if it will create a space for interdisciplinary and socially engaged art in Malaysia. To acknowledge the activists who have been creating 'art' but do not see themselves as artists, but looking into the future and worrying about the laws and regulations in Malaysia creates anxiety for me, so I will just keep doing what I do and let good orderly direction deal with the rest.

You have been working in this interdisciplinary field with theatre, flashmobs, activism, visual arts, pop-up events, ... a lot of your early work is based on playfulness and fun. Do you feel people are playful and enjoy playing in Malaysia?

I do like to play and that is what I can offer. In the context of Malaysia, we always have these set rules and I am questioning them. Who said so and why not; why do you stop yourself? That was my personal agenda for a long time.

On a meta level, it questions authority and systems. It is a mirroring situation when someone questions the situation and its rules. It is legitimate to offer things that excite you, like play, climbing ... is it your strategy or approach of transforming the world?

My approach is very much improvised in the sense that I use whatever method of presentation that suits the situation. On transforming the world, I did a series of social experiments on Facebook where I posted articles on saving the environment or women's rights issues etc. in early 2012 and I found that only the converted read or liked them. Since there was a trend in *foodies* taking pictures of what they eat, I did the same but wrote poetry or tied it in with composting or the food that I grew on the balcony garden. I find that when I offer and share what I like and what I am good at, it works on a micro scale. I call it the ripple effect game but of course it boils down to: what is it that the work wants to convey? Sometimes creating a shock would be effective, but in the Malaysian context, I think play is something more accessible and hopefully a structure that brings people together. Also play exists in our tradition in different forms.

Because of the political and racial situation in Malaysia, you prefer a universal approach. With your values you seem to be looking at what connects us instead of what separates us.

In Malaysia we have an issue with direct messages and we face censorship from the government. Fahmi Reza<sup>10</sup>, an artist in Malaysia, makes direct criticism of our political system and confronts the Malaysia authorities regularly. He was arrested recently along with the organizer of "Art For Grabs"<sup>11</sup>. I have been aware of Guerrilla Girls<sup>12</sup> and following groups like "Adbusters Media Foundation"<sup>13</sup> but I want to focus on integrity, on something more universal.

There is this value in the world that attracts me. Japan and Germany are interesting in their art making because of this juxtaposition of old and new, the traditional and the contemporary. I think Malaysia is going through the same process. Tradition and the contemporary has to do with forms of spirituality and attention to detail. I admire art makers from Japan and Germany for their subtlety in putting forward their messages.

### SPEAK OUT, 2005

There is a strong alternative scene in Kuala Lumpur/Malaysia just like in every city I suppose. Mainstream versus alternative, this is the norm. From the history of Malaysia, I know that one of the strategies of war is to divide and conquer and I am interested to find out what brings us together. I was interested to participate in the *TransActions in the Field* master class as, throughout my practice, I have mainly worked with women's rights groups. I started out as a workshop participant from the public and through cumulative events we exhibited the outcomes of the workshops as artworks.



Sharing sexual harassment stories and speeches. Sexual Harassment Speeches posted on the mannequin by members of the public who came by the Young Women Making Change Booth, 2014

Young Women Making Change Booth at Arts For Grabs, 2014

In part, out of all the projects that I have done, the one that is most meaningful to me is the work *Speak Out* which is part of the Young Women Making Change (YWMC) programme<sup>14</sup>. The performance was part of the YWMC Malaysia collective campaign for a stand-alone sexual harassment bill in Malaysia and the collective came about through a 2.5-year long programme initiated by International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP-AP) across South East Asia and East Timor. During the peer trainers training, the Malaysian chapter identified sexual harassment as the issue we wanted to focus on; so we came up with a pitch and an action plan. As facilitators for the 2<sup>nd</sup> national training in Malaysia, we delivered our suggestion and action plan. As the collective was to be self-initiated after the training, we (the facilitators and the participants) all had to agree if 1. sexual harassment is the issue that we all would like to take up, 2. if the campaign we propose is agreeable to everyone. There were two working groups in the collective. One group was focused on a positioning paper and the other group was focused on creating cultural pressure to support the position paper. Collectively we agreed to focus on the issue of sexual harassment.

Can you describe the artistic process in this activism group process?

As my involvement in women's rights was mainly in the arts and activism, as part of the peer trainer's group, I suggested some talks that engage art in activism as well as to pitch the idea of setting up a booth at the Arts for Grabs<sup>15</sup> event themed "AWAK: Angkatan Wanita Kreatif/ The Creative Women Force" prior to the national training. So there were some structures set up for linking arts and activism.

At the national training, we were introduced to socially engaged art and relational aesthetics by Koon Tan through a project I performed in, *Projek Sentuh*<sup>16</sup>. *Projek Sentuh*, was a performance project highlighting discrimination on the basis of sexuality in Malaysia and was performed in the Frinjan Festival in 2009<sup>17</sup>.

The booth served as a platform and a start for the collective's first activity together as a group. We (the trainers) pitched the booth as a platform to collect stories, and to fundraise for activities for a participatory collective action.

Once the collective had agreed to take up the issue of sexual harassment, each individual woman brought in her own network, skills and projects. There were filmmakers, visual artists, radio hosts and women from many backgrounds. In this process, everybody contributed through voluntary initiation and led their own project with support from the pool of women in the collective.

The performance *Speak-Up* initially came about as a suggestion to revisit my piece in *Scripted Bodies* in 2005, which uses speech bubbles and clothing. It started off as an idea with the objective of collecting stories and creating a discussion on defining sexual harassment. The mechanics of the performance came about only after we decided how to collect the "speeches".

The mechanics of getting members of the public to write down sexual harassment remarks/experiences in "speech bubble" came about when the group expressed interest in collecting stories. In the actual performance of *Speak-Up*, in front of an audience, I performed. We gathered members of the public to read the post-it notes that were posted on a mannequin, while I cut a piece of clothing for every sexual harassing "remark".

In summary, what I am interested in and committed to, is the process of being a participant in a working group/loose collective where members of the collective self-initiate their own projects in relations to the issue or cause.

Thank you, Lim Paik Yin.

- 1 Teater Atas Pokok – A play that is set on the tree. [tourismselangor.my/event/teater-atas-pokok/](http://tourismselangor.my/event/teater-atas-pokok/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)
  - 2 Bacaan Puisi Madrasah Seni – A poetry reading event at Kampung Banda Dalam initiated by PAKSI, *the TransActions in the Field* master class took part in this event.
  - 3 Seniman Paksi Rakyat (Paksi) - [senimanpaksi.blogspot.my/](http://senimanpaksi.blogspot.my/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)
  - 4 Dinsman – Stage name of Shamsuddin Osman – a playwright, theater director and author of literary and political issues in Malaysia
  - 5 Usman Awang – a Malaysian poet, playwright, novelist and Malaysian National Laureate [yayasanusmanawang.my/web/](http://yayasanusmanawang.my/web/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)
  - 6 *Letter from the bird community to the lord mayor*, Usman Awang. Sasterawan Negara, Sahabatku, UA Enterprises Sdn. Bhd., 2009
  - 7 [gbgerakbudaya.com/bookshop/](http://gbgerakbudaya.com/bookshop/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)
  - 8 *kain* – the Malay word for a cloth fabric known as a sarong, worn around the waist and legs
  - 9 Soleh is a community leader at Kampung Banda Dalam in Malaysia where the master class *TransActions in the Field* was held in 2015.
  - 10 Fahmi Reza is a political graphic designer, street artist and documentary film maker based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
  - 11 Arts for Grabs is an arts bazaar and mini fest of ideas and discourse creating more creative and democratic spaces in the city – [facebook.com/artforgrabs/](http://facebook.com/artforgrabs/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)
  - 12 Guerrilla Girls – [guerrillagirls.com/#open](http://guerrillagirls.com/#open) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)
  - 13 Adbusters Media Foundation – [adbusters.org](http://adbusters.org) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)
  - 14 Young Women Making Change (YWMC) programme - [asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2016/01/young-women-s-voices-resonate-in-asean](http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2016/01/young-women-s-voices-resonate-in-asean) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)
  - 15 Arts for Grabs is an arts bazaar and mini fest of ideas and discourse creating more creative and democratic spaces in the city – [facebook.com/artforgrabs/](http://facebook.com/artforgrabs/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)
  - 16 Project Sentuh: Sexuality and the Body (in conjunction with 16 days of Activism against violence towards women) is an art + activism event to highlight discrimination on the basis of sexuality in Malaysia using installation art, theatre performances and more.
  - 17 Frinjan festival is a festival that advocates for art as a medium for social political discourse
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Rahmanidar Syafei Putri (189,192)

# A NON-CURATED

Misako Ichimura

# SPACE OF

in conversation with

# LIVED ART

Emma Ota

# ACTIVISM

**Misako Ichimura** has been a member of a particular community in a Tokyo park, referred to generically as the Blue Tent Village, since 2003. Along with co-resident Tetsuo Ogawa, she launched Eno Aru Café, a bartering space and art centre, where both homeless and “housed” people are able to gather and paint. Later, in 2007, Misako started another organization, the homeless feminist group Nora, with other homeless women. In 2010, with the help of local artists and social activists, she founded Artist-in-Residence (A.I.R.) Miyashita, which

attempted to prevent NIKE from redeveloping Miyashita Park in Shibuya, Tokyo. Actively engaged in various projects including creating art work, writing essays, and organizing workshops on themes such as feminism, gender/sexuality, capitalism, and anti-gentrification, Misako is now focusing on an anti-Olympic movement targeting the upcoming 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

**Emma Ota** is an art coordinator, editor, writer and precarious worker based in Tokyo. Organizer of the project “dislocate”, questioning the meaning of locality in globalized technology driven society. Since 2015 she has been running the public space “Kosaten” with various other members as a multi-disciplinary commons which is built through expression and dialogue, sharing difference and nurturing change. She pursues art as a platform for the collision of ideas and debate surrounding our current social and political conditions.<sup>1</sup>

## MISAKO ICHIMURA – ENO ARU CAFÉ, NORA<sup>2</sup>

There is a certain park in Tokyo, which has a particular air of freedom about it. Whilst parks are becoming ever-increasingly regulated by the local authorities, with long lists as to what can and can't be permitted within its grounds (no dogs, no ball games, no running, even no food) it appears that the users of this park have managed to salvage some liberty as witnessed by the plethora of different activities which may be observed here at any one time. Upon the edge of this park there is one specific community which lay particular claim to this land; this is the homeless community.

Artist Misako Ichimura first came to this community in 2003. Following the wake of the collapse of the financial bubble, the years crossing the shift between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century marked for many young people in Japan the “lost decade”, an era which has never really come to an end. There is a constant precariousness that comes with the constant struggle to hold down a job and pay the rent in the ever increasing numbers of the working poor. Holding deep doubts as to this cycle of living hand-to-mouth just to pay the rent and with no time to do anything else but work, Ichimura considered, like many artists, when she would ever have the chance to actually make her art work,



and actively sought out a way of life separate from the constant demands of capitalism. It was then that a friend introduced her to the unique space of this park and its inhabitants. At that time, the number of residents of this “tent-village” was as many as 300 people, with a variety of DIY facilities including restaurants, barber, hardware stall, carpenter and more all encamped within the settlement. Here another kind of economy could be seen which didn’t depend on constant labour, in the common sense, nor the accumulation of money. Inspired by what she saw here, Ichimura started to become a regular visitor, and after evolving a dialogue with members of the community, decided to take up residence.

### A HISTORY OF OPEN-AIR LIVING

Although this site and way of living was initially a new discovery for Ichimura it did not arise from out of the blue. The oldest resident of the park has been here for 33 years and according to this resident there was an established community here even before they came to settle here.

Directly after the war the general citizens of Tokyo were essentially left with nothing, attempting to scrape out survival in a city gutted by bombing. Many of those who had lost everything gathered around the areas of Shinjuku and Shibuya, searching out food and work, with many of the displaced temporarily settling in the area of this park. Around the time of the first Tokyo Olympics in 1964 the park was more formalized as the Olympic stadium was built nearby and although various pressures were placed the open-air residents to move on, they were able to stay their ground and have continued to inhabit the park, in one way or another, ever since.

### HOW DID YOU APPROACH THIS COMMUNITY AS AN ARTIST AND HOW DID YOU BUILD YOUR RELATIONSHIP?

To this question, Ichimura observed that she was of course concerned to generate communication with the village members and was highly aware of her outsider position at that moment. She therefore utilized her art practice as a means of getting to know the residents, starting to hold collaborative art sessions on-site, and importantly, evolving a dialogue with the apparent “chief” of the village. This interaction was through a photo exchange project in which the two attempted to express their notions of happiness and existence within the city, with their photos being collated into a book which could easily communicate their collaboration. Having built this understanding with the residents of the park, Ichimura was keen to establish more of a contribution to the active life of the village and when considering what kind of “shop” or service she could provide, hit upon the idea of “Eno Aru Café”, an open-air atelier and café, the name of which played upon the Japanese word for picture “e” and the expensive Japanese café “Renoir”.

### BORDER SPACES AND ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIES

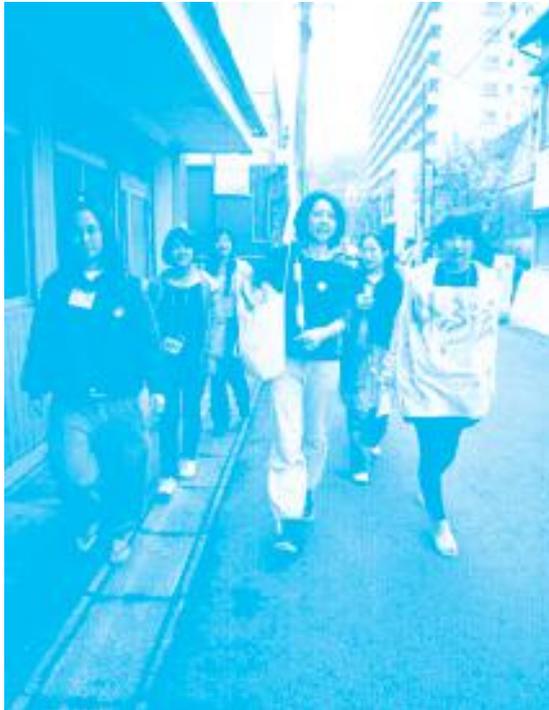
Eno Aru Café is a space for creative expression set within the tent village and functions as an in between space which allows homeless people and non-homeless to come together and blurs the line between them. Through the creation of art, it literally visualizes the presence of homeless people in a form of self-representation, not representation by others. The act of drawing or painting is in itself a communication tool and at the same

time this enters into an alternative economy as people utilize this space as a means of distributing things picked up off the street, sharing amongst their members, often in a form of bartering which generates various relations in the group. In this way, Ichimura hopes that the richness of the environment and the lives of the people who live here may become a little more understood. At the same time, she admits that, although the tent village has its own independent economy, this is also the root of many arguments and conflicts even if money is not directly involved.



## RESISTING GENDER AND SEXUAL DISCRIMINATION

In addition to Eno Aru, which is run every weekend, Ichimura also organizes the group “Nora”, which is a support group for homeless women. Being in the visible minority amongst the homeless community it is sometimes difficult for women to have their voice heard and they must face a further level of vulnerability and discrimination, which often takes the form of sexual harassment. “Nora” was formed to discuss these issues amongst homeless women and often offers practical support and advice on how to deal with the situation. When she first moved to the park settlement, there were only 30 women out of over 300 residents there, clearly a minority and clearly having to face certain behaviour and attitudes, with which Ichimura was deeply uncomfortable. So, never one to feel she has to act politely towards her “hosts”, Ichimura quickly mobilized the female population for a tea party in the very centre of the village and openly discussed the issues they were facing. Thirteen years and the group is still going, albeit with largely different members. They now meet every Thursday, although it is often the case, that instead of the women coming to the tent village, Ichimura visits them individually. Part of the activities of “Nora” include the production and sale of eco-sanitary pads in the form of cute textile matryoshka dolls which fit one inside the other. They of course serve a post practical purpose for homeless women who cannot afford to buy sanitary pads or tampons every month and also draw attention to the needs and challenges of the female condition on the street. These pads are sold in various flea markets and the profits used to support its members.



## VICTIMS OF SUPPORT

While there were at first 300 inhabitants of the park, these numbers have severely dwindled, despite there being little improvement in the general economic situation. One reason for this is, of course, the aging population, which is impacting on Japan as a whole and is reflected even in this small community. Another cause of this depletion is the so-called support offered to homeless people. There was a particular drive around 2005-2006 to try and get homeless people off the street/out of the parks by providing more temporary shelter as well as permanent social housing. Many homeless people were promised a stable roof over their heads and entered into dormitories or small rooms of their own. Whilst this may tackle some of the immediate concerns of homeless people in helping them find a safe place to sleep, this form of support could be seen in many ways as counter-productive.

Those who go it alone in the homeless community are in small number. The network and bond between people is very strong, especially when visualized in the form of the tent-village. In this way members form an identity and a set of inter-personal relations. When they are forced into sheltered housing, much of this support is lost, as they either have to cope with over-crowded conditions or complete isolation, which can cause depression and lead some to seek escape through alcohol etc. In this way, communities have been broken up by an overarching programme, which fails to see the specific context of different individuals living “rough”.

## THE QUESTION OF PUBLIC

The incident of Miyashita park brought renewed interest to Ichimura’s activities and the situation of homeless people in Tokyo. Based along the side of the railway track just before the vicinity of Shibuya station, Miyashita Park had long been the home to many homeless people, with a strong community of residents based there. In a drive to clean-up the image of the area and profit from what was considered “disused land”, the city authority decided to sell the park to the sports company *Nike*. The company proposed transforming the open space of the park into a series of concrete runways for a skate park, which users would pay to enter.

According to Ichimura, clearly, this was a treachery to the value of public space and to the citizens who had made a home within this shared environment. As a result, the homeless community and various activists rallied to stake their claim to the park and resist eviction. As part of this action Ichimura and other artist/activist friends set up the Miyashita AIR<sup>3</sup>, Artist in Resistance. Artists were invited from various parts of Japan, and beyond, to take up residence in a tent and produce forms of artwork together with the other residents. A whole series of film screenings, performances and exhibitions took place in this space as a direct action against the exclusion of people from what should be public space and their right to inhabit this park.

Unfortunately, the city government largely had their way. The Miyashita community was forcibly evicted from the park, a huge fence was built around it and the homeless residents were denied their safe-zone of space they had become accustomed to. Today many can still be seen sleeping roughly on the pavement, precariously placed along the roadside due to their inability to access the refuge of the various parks in that area. The parks are now gated and closed at 10pm each night to prevent homeless people from sleeping there. The participation of various artists in the actions which took place here, including filmmaker Hikaru Fujii, who has come to particular prominence of late, brought a new spotlight to the relation between art and activism and many key curators and artists of the so-called contemporary art world came to visit the encampment. Yet, at the same time, some artists seemed to be working against the values of public space. This was evident in Atelier Bow-Wow's collaboration with Nike<sup>4</sup> to produce the design for this new renovation, and the establishment of various art spaces in the area which are directly in cooperation with the values of gentrification.

## OLYMPIC CATASTROPHES

Having witnessed this loss of common land at the hands of the authorities, big business and other artists, Ichimura is acutely aware of the role artists and creatives play in the processes of gentrification and corporate colonialization of public urban space. She is particularly worried to see this being played out again, inevitably, in the run up to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. One of the key Olympic sites is just next to the park where Ichimura is living. A little further away, Meiji Park has been completely cordoned off in the preparation for the new Tokyo stadium. Furthermore, social housing projects, which were created for the previous Olympics, are earmarked to be torn down and pressure is being put on elderly residents to vacate, with loud construction works going on all around them. The whole theatrical charade of the Olympics, the violent exclusion of people and the destruction of spaces, is something to which Ichimura is highly opposed. While she may joke about the luggage of homeless people being cleared from the streets for the International Olympic Committee tour of the area, she is fully committed to raising a voice against this symbol of nationalism and neoliberalism. She has founded "Han Go Rin"<sup>5</sup> (anti-Olympics protest group) to take various actions around the city. Recently the group have focused their action around the site of the new stadium, holding open air screenings depicting the eviction of settlements in Seoul in 1988 for the Seoul Olympics, the earnest resistance to the fencing off of Meiji park, and the prevention of homeless residents from accessing their sleeping quarters and bathroom facilities. Actions have included painting on the fence walls and organizing a "Zombie Hanami" as well as regularly cooking together on the road outside the construction site.

## COMMUNITY AND SUBJECTIVITY

Ichimura's practice is essentially concerned with the creation and use of spaces for resistance towards the structures which enforce poverty, discrimination, exclusion and the advancement of gentrification. Her artistic practice seeks to open up multiple subjectivities which exist in the spectrum of gender/sexuality and urban living and indicating how these subjectivities are often denied. In the face of social pressure and exclusion, living together with the members of this community in the park is an act of creating a specific space and she believes it is important to make visible these circumstances. It is a daily consideration for Ichimura which method of expression is relevant or possible in order to communicate completely different positions or sets of values to her own. It is vital to her that differences are not brushed over, that right to position oneself on the left or the right is not denied by the claims that a "middle way" is needed. She sees in this a further danger of the exclusion of difference and the causes of a certain amnesia or loss. If a community does not have the capacity to speak of its difference then it cannot function as a community, she claims. If we think about a collective beyond the established concept of the company or the school, then we must constantly engage in dialogue in order to maintain that collective.

In questioning existing values, she also asks how are different kinds of subjectivity created? How do they affect each other? When joining in collaboration, providing a space for the expression of different subjectivities, she is concerned for the context, the set of relations, which she hopes to be reflected in the work produced, and looks forward to tracing the shift and change in these dimensions. At the same time, she is also a creator in that process, so she constantly references the assessment and critique of the viewer too. In utilizing the name of an artist she attempts to widen the possibilities of art from its generally perceived narrowness while, at the same time, being aware that anyone may become an artist if they so choose.





## THE PLACE OF ART

Having said this, Ichimura is not interested in generating a community or enacting a structure purely for the purpose of creating art. For example, the activities of “Nora” mainly consist of tea parties and food gatherings in which homeless women and those of sexual minorities come together to share information and encourage each other.

Then again the “Nora” napkin (sanitary pad) can certainly be seen as an artwork. Eno Aru café is of course an art activity but it realizes a role in this place, which is much greater than that.

## DIALOGUE – IN THEIR OWN WORDS

**Emma Ota:** I think you are very careful about the language you use to describe what you do and who those words speak for. Could you give me a specific example of a term you frequently use when explaining your practice?

**Misako Ichimura:** In the process of creating art work I have felt recently that the key word comes from outside of me, is even forced upon me, for example in the forms of *Haijo* (exclusion) or *Boryoku* (violence). It is our experience of this which allows us to share what we want to make. We share the same pain and the same

awareness of particular issues. We don't have the power to cut that off, so we question how to build a dialogue with it. Then we have to consider how to present this in the form of art work or performance. When I went to Malaysia I referred to this particularly as an action.

I would like to refer to your experiences in Malaysia as I think they particularly highlight your discomfort with some of the rhetoric of “socially engaged art”. You actually carried out an action during your stay didn't you?

Well it was just a few days into the program, but I politely tried to turn things on their head already at that point. There were various reasons for this action. When we arrived, we were given an intense timetable of the program we were expected to join. I thought initially when I received this schedule that it would be realized in a more flexible manner, but the wall of where we were staying was completely covered in these post-it notes outlining the program for each day from early morning to late at night. There were 22 participants in this program but the first thing we did when we arrived was not to introduce ourselves but to consider with the organizers what rules needed to be made for these 2 weeks. Perhaps it was intended to be progressive but in the end it just resulted in ordinary rules like “you must be on time” etc. There was also the rule that you must participate in the program organized by the facilitators. The workshop itself, I also had some question about.

You found a certain inappropriateness in that?

Well they didn't really make sense to me. Lining up by age or the length of your hair or whatever. It was like an ice-break camp. I must be honest that I felt quite uncomfortable about it and even more so because I was told I couldn't run away. The three of us from Japan were in a quandary and thinking what we could do. The workshops started to turn towards content generated by the participants themselves.

All of the participants were asked to write down their suggestions for a series of workshops on post-it notes and stick them to the wall. At first I wanted to suggest that we discuss, across each of our fields, the challenges we faced and the things which weren't going well, particularly examining the impact of art within this and the possibility of bringing visibility to these issues. However, I did not have enough English ability to express this and so I resorted to writing merely “ACTION.” Rather than engage in a debate with my rather poor English, I instead wanted to join with these artists and curators and transform this rather closed space in a practical way. I was thinking how to express the discomfort I was feeling. On the level that “you must participate” I felt my subjectivity was being denied somehow and felt quite demotivated. I thought how to solve the issue that I didn't feel like participating but had somehow ended up doing so.

So in our group the first thing we did was to share our feelings of discomfort. In creating an action, we wanted to break through the particular time and space that had been created here. This was very important to us but it was also difficult, making us nervous, as we were worried what impact it would have on the relations amongst the participants and the facilitators. We were concerned that this could cause some offense to some. When it came to thinking about how to actually realize that action, then a discussion commenced upon the issues of violence. The rupture brought about by this art (this action) could be problematic



if it came to target specific individuals, resulting in a violent action. So we debated the importance of preventing the action from becoming such. It was also a key concern whether we could, or could not, debate afterwards.

When it came to our turn to explain our activity we invited all the staff and the participants out onto the street to join in a party. We played instruments, drank and ate, and while all this was going on I made the post it notes of the schedule into paper airplanes and tossed them down to the street from the upper floors. Each piece of paper was brightly coloured so they appeared as butterflies twirling through the air. With a mic and speaker, I addressed the world outside the building "We are Free!"

Directly in front of the Lostgens space was a big construction site and some of the construction workers looked over to me so I called to them "We are free! Let's party beyond the fence!" To which some responded by waving. Meanwhile at the party below there were some onlookers (who may have been homeless) who said they wanted food.

It was also of significance that you held the party outside too, correct?

Yes, that's correct. We had come to Malaysia, but we were spending all of our time in this room away from the city. We had no chance to explore and had no feeling of being in KL. But when we launched the party outside we had the opportunity to mix with other people, and several passers-by came to join in and some homeless people also came to eat. So we could see more of the real social situation without artificially constructing it.

But not everyone was aware of the context of your action and may have felt tricked by this.

After we informed people that this party was a form of action we began a heated discussion. Some expressed a sense of discomfort/betrayal by the fact that they were not originally told of the purpose of this happening and its context as an "action". Others felt that the passing cars were creating too much noise and it would be better to go inside and discuss. There were also opinions that due to the constraints of the schedule we would not have time to hear the feedback from other workshops.

In the end we divided into two groups, some staying on the street to discuss whilst others continued the debate inside. Both groups persisted in questioning the action. This debate has not ended and seems is never ending and proceeds even now.

What change do you think this action brought?

This action was a spatial response to the overwhelming schedule I was met with when I entered Lostgens. I did not initiate a direct debate on this subject through verbal discourse (in English) but carried out a discussion of sorts within the previously determined scheduled time of "workshops". I took careful consideration of the fact that the positions of participants and organizers were clearly different, and proposed a discussion through art.

In my opinion that oppressive sense created by the overwhelming presence of all of these post-it notes, which made up the schedule, needed to be transformed. Rather than the people who had put those post-it notes there removing them, the participants themselves brought about a change, momentarily shifting the initiative of the space. A lag in time was created, a lag that wasn't permitted by the schedule but which needed to be debated amongst the participants. After this, we all went back to the original schedule, but I think people's mind-sets or awareness had slightly changed.

For me, I believe that criticism allows for further debate and the continuance of a relationship in which all parties impact upon each other. I hope to search for a statement of my frustration but also the possibilities of communication within this.

It seems that in some socially engaged projects there is the tyranny of participation; you have no choice, you are forced to participate and can't escape from it. At the same time there is a real danger of constructing and articulating a situation and an identity to which those forced to participate do not hold. Perhaps your action shows a means of resisting this tyranny in order to reclaim our subjectivity within the scheme of a given artist/curator.

Each artist has a different motivation and a different objective. For example, as part of my collective practice we are not concerned with representing how homeless people live. We are not making exhibitions specifically of work produced by homeless people, which is something you find quite a lot overseas.

I have observed how the art world has excluded people and harmed them. Who has been sacrificed to produce the work? When I show my work in a gallery or an art museum people try to understand it through the filter of my being homeless or someone in poverty, but I don't want to represent that perspective. Rather I want to show the exclusion perpetrated by the system around us.

1 For more information see: [dis-locate.net](http://dis-locate.net) (accessed Aug 31, 2016) and [kosaten.org](http://kosaten.org) (accessed Aug 31, 2016).

2 For more information see: [noratokyo.exblog.jp/](http://noratokyo.exblog.jp/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016) and [visibleproject.org/blog/award/award-2015/misako-ichimura/](http://visibleproject.org/blog/award/award-2015/misako-ichimura/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

3 [airmiyashitapark.info/wordpress/](http://airmiyashitapark.info/wordpress/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

4 [bow-wow.jp/profile/works\\_e.html](http://bow-wow.jp/profile/works_e.html) and [aedes-arc.de/cms/aedes/en/videode-tail?id=5773883](http://aedes-arc.de/cms/aedes/en/videode-tail?id=5773883)

5 [globalvoices.org/2014/02/18/olympics-overshadow-](http://globalvoices.org/2014/02/18/olympics-overshadow-)

[evictions-in-tokyo/](http://evictions-in-tokyo/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

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# A SHIFTING

Art Lab Ova - Zulu Kageyama

# STAGE OF FREE,

and Kuri Suzuki -

# SUBJECTIVE

in conversation with

# DEFINITION

Emma Ota

**Art Lab Ova - Zulu Kageyama and Kuri Suzuki** - is a non-profit, artist-run organization that develops art projects to explore a system of "relations" through "chance encounters" and "events/happenings" at different niche locations, such as cinemas, pubs, shopping malls, zoos, welfare facilities and schools. Since 2010 they have been managing the space "Yokohama Paradise Hall" as a multifunctional

"garage sale" shop/information centre/tea house/art studio based next to an independent cinema in Wakabacho, Yokohama, an area rich in diverse cultures and identities. Established in 1996, their work spans the realm of public intervention, politics and social engagement, exploring the possibilities of art as a means of "survival" and "expression" in the context of a complex social reality.

The Yokohama Paradise Hall, since 2010



Art Lab Ova<sup>1</sup> is a unit made up of two artists, Zulu Kageyama and Kuri Suzuki. Their "Yokohama Paradise Hall" is based on the first floor of one of the few independent cinemas left in Yokohama, Jack and Betty's, located in the area known as Wakabacho. First established in 1996, Art Lab Ova started off life first in making the rounds of various welfare centres armed with a set of drawing and painting materials and soon developed as a small 6 tatami mat room designed as a studio for artistic expression. The importance of a shared space for expression was recognized in the very early stages of Art Lab Ova's practice, which now spans 20 years. When they first established a site in Sakuragicho, they were based on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of a multi-tenant building and their participants came to this space specifically for art workshops and the free space of creation. There was a specific purpose for those who sought them out and although they never specifically labelled their workshops and atelier as a space primarily for those with disabilities, it happened that many of the participants had disabilities. Yet Art Lab Ova was careful never to categorize the people they worked with and always greeted each person as a unique individual with a whole host of skills, experiences, interests, desires, weaknesses and frustrations. Their practice is all about this meeting, collision, and exchange between one and other, and the unexpected shocks and discoveries, which well up from this. After joining an art project working with Borderless Art Museum NO-MA in Omi Hachiman, Shiga prefecture,<sup>2</sup> which involved the discovery of obsessions of local people and bringing their personal collections and creations into the museum, Art Lab Ova was determined to engage in more acts of coincidence and surprise on an everyday scale and took up base in Yokohama's Wakabacho district in 2010.

## A NON-SITE?

Wakabacho was an area largely off the map, in fact in some cases, it has been clearly omitted from such demarcation. Set between Koganecho and Isezaki shopping street it is perceived by many as a non-space, squeezed out between the former red-light district



and the large, but dated, commercial site of the area. Today it is home to a mish-mash of businesses and residents from all over Asia. There is one building, which Art Lab Ova always introduce in their “Wakabacho Deep Tour” which quantifies the area. The first floor is a Chinese Internet café, the second floor is a bar, the third floor is a sex club and the top floor is a tea ceremony room. Just opposite is a bookshop, which specializes in children’s books, traditional *kami-shibai* products and pornography. The area boasts a variety of Thai, Nepalese and Korean restaurants amongst other cuisines, as well a population of sex workers hailing mainly from the Philippines, China and Korea. The area is also renowned for once being a base for one of the offices of Aum Shinrikyo, the doomsday cult, which carried out the sarin attacks on the Tokyo metro in 1995. Going even further back in history, Zulu will inform participants in her tour that, not so far off, was a site of a massacre of ethnic Koreans that ensued in the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923. After the war the place would become an entertainment district for the occupation forces, whose base also intersected with the neighbourhood. The confusion and amalgamation, which takes place on this site prevents it from any form of easy definition, which precisely suits Art Lab Ova’s own approach.



Come on by the “Omi-hachiman Ochanoma (Living Room) Land” - The cute day-to-day life in an ordinary town - 2008 The Borderless Art Museum NO-MA (Omi-hachiman, Japan)



## CINEMA JACK & BETTY

Art Lab Ova was attracted to this area not because of its colourful flux of identity but rather because their friends had come to take on the management of Cinema Jack & Betty, the only independent cinema in Yokohama, showing an assortment of independent and world cinema not usually accessible in your everyday Odeon. Through this connection they came upon the empty space, which used to be an Asian supermarket, in which they created “Yokohama Paradise Hall” in 2010. Opening directly onto the street this location allowed Art Lab Ova contact with local people, passers-by and the audience of Jack & Betty’s, in an uncertain and ever shifting mix which they had not encountered on the same scale before. They joined this community anew, as artists, but took up positions as members of the local shopping street. Rather than having a particular mission to be realized, on any particular scale or time-frame, they instead opened up a shop and observed what happened. They made no promises, no commitments and certainly had no airs and graces about what it means to be an artist.

One of their first observations, even before officially moving to Wakabacho, was that the audience of Jack & Betty’s, mostly of an educated, intellectual class, had little connection with the rest of Wakabacho. They would walk from Koganecho station to the cinema, watch a film and then make their way quickly back, without lingering upon what the rest of the neighbourhood had to offer. It was from this that the Paradise Festival<sup>3</sup> was born, an annual event which centres upon a film screening programme of independent moving image works which touch upon issues connected with the surrounding area. The first of these events started very small scale in around 2007/2008 and focused on a programme of Thai film, after which Art Lab Ova and local children would encourage the audience members to explore the Thai restaurants in the surrounding streets. This was followed by a similar Philippine programme, which introduced the spaces of the local Philippine community too. Since 2009 they have held this event every year in conjunction with Asahi Art Festival, a loose association of art projects around the country. In conjunction with this Festival they have realized residence programmes, inviting artists with similar backgrounds to the residents of the town, in the hope of building a deeper relation in their vernacular language. This project particularly was spurred by concerns of the isolation of those who could not speak Japanese fluently in the aftermath of 3.11. Yet as they were to discover, just because you have roots from the same part of the world does not mean that you are likely to get on with one another. This was demonstrated when an artist from Bangkok, a red shirt (United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) Taksin Shinawatra reformist supporter), was invited to engage with the Thai members of Wakabacho who were largely from a different social background and belonged to the yellow shirt camp (People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) staunch royalists) and viewed the artist as a spy (clashes between these two groups dominated the political scene between 2008-2010).

## LANGUAGE

As the above indicates: even if we are speaking the same language the set of meanings drawn from that can be very different and divisive. Art Lab Ova is therefore very concerned to emphasize the instability of language and its aptness to create misunderstandings. Words such as “community”, “private”, “public”, “art world” etc. all have numerous levels of interpretation which are usually ignored in their deployment

and as Suzuki points out, one can end up talking completely in signifiers which are entirely detached from any form of signified. Whilst they attempt to maintain their own ambivalence and refuse to be pinned down, they are also cautious of utilizing words which have an assumed significance in the discourse of “socially engaged art”, for example, without first debating the attached meaning and reality of such phrases.

### GAPS AND AMBIGUITY

Following this, Kageyama and Suzuki talk of the importance of maintaining a certain opening or *sukima* (gap) so they cannot be pigeon-holed, because a definition allows for generalization which is not helpful when you are working with specific individuals. They also attempt to maintain this ambiguity on the politics of the area, and the various social issues faced here. In refraining from taking an overtly left or right position they try to open up the possibility of thinking through things through art, enabling a perspective which perhaps was never visible before and bringing individual realization, something beyond what you expected or imagined.

Walking with “Hat Man”  
2008 Yokohama-Tokyo



### ONE THING AFTER THE NEXT

The face of Art Lab Ova is always changing, with one idea leading to another. As of late, they cater to the outdoor Brazilian BBQ of a local resident who pays his lease in sales of cheese rolls, there is the regular gaggle of children who crowd around the self-made pin-ball game outside, with many coming into the space for help with their homework and to have fun playing with Suzuki who is the master of crazy children’s entertainment which also proves popular with single-parents. A local burlesque dancer and performer comes to share their space as her studio and starts a collaboration with the BBQ guy with Brazilian dance. One thing leads to another and now she is modelling for life-drawing sessions, which are bringing in the middle-aged men of the town at a pace. Then Suzuki will get out his array of instruments from around the world and the DIY man will throw down his hammer and start to grind some electronic beats whilst local sex workers clamber for faux-brand bags in the flea market. This is the natural flux and spin of the Yokohama Paradise Hall.

### SITE-SPECIFICITY

When questioned on the site-specificity of their work, Art Lab Ova denies that they are concerned with one determined space. They claim instead that what they are concerned with are the stories and experiences of people. No matter where they go they have the opportunity to encounter other people and to make contact with these narratives, so it may be said that they do not require a particular base. They speak more of following a series of coincidences, which led them to Wakabacho. In supporting the activities of the cinema, they themselves came to realize the presence of a town they had never acknowledged before and began to dig up layer after layer of Yokohama’s history here.

### COMMUNITY

Art Lab Ova is very wary of talking of ‘community’ as it is a term which is widely misconstrued and enforces an identity or set of relations where none in fact exist. As far as Wakabacho is a district with a given population of residents it may be called a community in very loose terms. However, there is no single community to be found here in a place where identities and backgrounds are very mixed and fluid, with a constant change in the make-up of the population. Art Lab Ova has observed various divisions and conflicts between different individuals due to the very idea of community or belonging, particularly in terms of ethnicity, religion and politics. The duo does not intend to cover over or heal these ruptures but rather offer up another perspective on them. Each district in Japan has its own neighbourhood council, usually made up of key members of the local shopping street or descendants of former landowners of the area. Wakabacho is no exception and the council is largely made up of those who consider themselves to be “born and bred Japanese” and who are apt to overlook the wide presence of foreign shop owners when they make their own shopping map of the district. As members of the shopping street, Art Lab Ova attempts to participate in this local council, which might be viewed as a symbol of a certain idea of community. However, they try to keep a certain respectful distance and do not try to enforce their ideas or opinions upon this establishment. By avoiding gender stereotypes, Suzuki is a very quiet, largely uncommunicative man, and Kageyama is a voracious talker who rarely emphasizes her feminine side, they also manage to avert many of the usual expectations of council associates in the town agenda, allowing them a particular freedom.

## PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

When considering how to position their work in terms of the spectrum of public and private, again Art Lab Ova does not take a singular stand. Rather, Suzuki and Kageyama acknowledge the interplay of both, providing an open public space which is accessible to all. At the same time in the adjustment of how easy it is to access or not, the planning of events and holidays, whilst taking proper responsibility for all that goes on within their space, their engagement may also be interpreted as private.

I asked them: How do you attempt to collaborate with the visitors to this space and how do you attempt to respond to their interests and needs? Suzuki and Kageyama admitted that outside of their duo they are not so prone towards “collaboration”. They like to maintain initiative and authorship in what they do and will consider carefully before engaging in a project with someone else. If there is an artist or individual that they wish to work with, they actively seek out that person and an understanding is met before embarking on something. They stressed that they are in no rush to meet anyone’s needs either and don’t claim to do so. It is more a matter of building a communication with each individual and allowing something to evolve from that. They also emphasize the importance of remaining in control so they may take full responsibility for that which they put into motion. At times people will wish to use their space for various activities. In this case, they create a clear cut understanding of responsibility, based on economy, in which they provide the space for rent. This helps to prevent misconceptions of their relations and purpose.



Art Lab Ova in lab space. International Festival for Arts and Media Yokohama, 2009. CREAM: Creativity for Arts and Media

Hand Cart Project. International Festival for Arts and Media Yokohama, 2009. CREAM: Creativity for Arts and Media



## PERFORMATIVITY

Amongst their numerous identities, the idea of performativity plays an important role. They are a place of multiple happenings in which numerous relations are enacted. They view “Yokohama Paradise Hall” as a stage for these relations and, wanting to emphasize this function, they have recently taken to renovating the space to make it feel more like a small theatre in which various characters may be encountered. This performativity is closely linked to their hybridity and insistence on not being clearly defined, and understanding that their way of being changes with each individual who comes to them.

## ARTIST IDENTITIES

Kageyama and Suzuki introduce themselves as artists to other people around them but purposely avoid acting stereotypically as artists as much as possible. It so follows that they have never been asked by anyone to draw anything or perform anything and would actively avoid such requests. Whilst existing as the ambiguous entities of artists, they are able to take their place in the town just like a bakery or a soba shop. As artists, they possess their own sense of aesthetic and quality of art but, in order to ensure diversity of value, they do not pay much attention to generally accepted notions of such things. They feel that if they can join in some relation with another person then a value beyond aesthetic and quality may come into sight. In their practice they do not separate themselves from the community. They are counted within its members and live out their lives in this town on a daily basis, so distinction between artist and resident does not make sense here. Rather than having any difficulty specifically as artists, the hurdle is that they have moved here from elsewhere and are considered as newcomers. It is always a challenge to build the local network and get a sense of history, and in this way their practice cannot be restricted to any particular time span, as it necessitates the building of a dialogue with local people on an ongoing basis.

## DIALOGUE – IN THEIR OWN WORDS

**Emma Ota:** We’ve come up against a lot of difficulties with language in our discussions, in particular negotiating the meanings of words, which are so frequently bantered around in relation to so-called social art. You (along with Ichimura and Aki) are carving out your own unique critical path and so language comes to play an important but also obstructive role in some cases. Language may be used to explain a concept, to introduce who you are, but it also brings many misunderstandings. I would like to ask you to offer your own set of vocabularies, which you might employ when attempting to describe what you do, although I understand you may be resistant to any form of definition and wish to maintain a particular fluidity.

**Zulu Kageyama, Kuri Suzuki:** The phrase which is most appropriate for our practice is perhaps *tekitou* (something rough, ambiguous, not precise). People who come here ask what is this space and our answer is a long list of shifting shapes: tonight we have a study group, tomorrow it’s a café, we might have a BBQ, drawing class, place for children, space for making art, music, a flea market – and they respond by asking if we are going to decide our identity from now? Our answer is no – you are going to decide at this moment what you want this space to be. It is decided that we continue in this *tekitou* way. They are not convinced. It is at that time that the word art becomes very useful. Then they will

Come on by the  
"Omihachiman Ochanoma  
(Living Room) Land" -  
The cute day-to-day life  
in an ordinary town - 2008  
The Borderless Art Museum  
NO-MA (Omihachiman,  
Japan)



become quiet and see some justification for our existence. Being an artist also permits this ambivalence without having to fulfil the expectations of an “artist” in terms of drawing or making music. This feels like a particular suspicion of the power of branding, the way in which each shop has to make clear cut what it does and doesn’t do. Take the website *Tabelog* for example (a listing site for eateries). Cafes and restaurants are rated by their customers who write reviews on their services. If by coincidence you had stomach ache when you went there and suggested that the food was off, then that would be the end of that shop. We are in an age when the customer is God, where everything is bent to their demand. At the same time, we are afraid to complain about things directly and turn to the internet to escalate the situation. Our problem is that if we say this space is a café then we will have to face the demands and expectations of the people who come here, so we avoid that by just saying we are artists. We always write the introduction to this space on our newsletter but at the moment we don’t want to stick with any particular phrases. It doesn’t matter how much paper we have, if we tried to explain this space we couldn’t bring it together in a single piece. Particularly as it depends who you are as to how you interpret this space. We had to write a self-introduction and motivation for participation when joining the programme in Malaysia and I wrote *henteko kawaii* (which means strange and cute) but this is a phrase we previously used for our activity in Sakuragicho and seems insufficient to capture the breadth of what we are doing in Wakabacho. If you utter some phrase ineptly, this causes further confusion, so we are really struggling to find the right words, which reflects our practice at this time.

Also in terms of funding, it is of course natural that the kind of vocabulary that we use will change depending upon the organization we are applying to. Usually funders are concerned with “results” and we have to somehow quantify something, which has no immediate result. But these days a lot of funders are interested in “the social possibilities of art” and so we are finding many different groups we can turn to for funding. It is not that we are trying to target the people we work with because they are seen as “vulnerable”, but we often work with people who are considered to be vulnerable. And if we mention these people then money seems to flow freely our way. So this is the situation of the art world at the moment that we could never have imagined 10 years ago. Previously we gained most of our funding from welfare organizations. We don’t really want to use a language, which focuses on and separates vulnerable people, but in such applications we have to talk in this way.

Right. And we can talk about this in relation to Wakabacho and the very idea of community too, I think. If we look around this area it is very diverse, particularly with a large population of residents with roots in East and South East Asia. But then some magazine comes along and blithely calls this the “Thai Street” of Yokohama and the complexity of this place becomes oversimplified. At the same time Art Lab Ova is not claiming to represent the foreign residents who live in this area either.

Yes, it’s really a dilemma. The people we have worked with from the start are those who have disabilities. But when you start to define and class people by one particular factor then it becomes segregating. For instance, some events or spaces stipulate their services are only open to those with disabilities, but we want to create a space where none of that matters. But if the funding stipulates “only for such persons” then we are in a quandary. It is really delicate. If we have



Ao-chan in drag  
Watermelon splitting,  
The Yokohama Down  
Town Paradise Festival,  
Beijing, 2013



The Yokohama Paradise  
Hall in Beijing, 2013

an open space and the people who come to that space happen to be those with disabilities and if then we define it as a disabled space, then that disqualifies the very concept of what we are trying to do. And often funders don’t understand this.

Even people who come here sometimes feel they have to define or out themselves. Depending on how you frame your activity and the people you work with, their visibility and definition changes and this can cause difficulties. But at the same time we have to utilize this way of society in order to get funding. It really is a challenge.

What we often find with “art projects” is that they attempt to define a community, which in fact has no definition. A loose network of identities and localities comes to be fixed often in a misrepresentation, which objectifies the people the project aims to work with.

Yes, this is the model for funding. It is completely based on the UK model of community art and is something which we attempt to keep a safe distance from.

It seems even more ironic, or maybe most appropriate then, that the agent of these artificial communities often takes the form of the traveling artist, who is always joining from the outside. We see a lot of artist-in-residence programmes these days.

But at the same time the artists who are traveling, who are moving from residence to residence for example, are also grappling with a lot of questions and struggling



The Air Field Project  
with Atsushi Kadowaki,  
The Yokohama Down  
Town Paradise Festival,  
2010

Various Arts Various  
Life, Social Welfare  
Council Yokohama,  
2004



Yokohama\*fait son cirque  
with Le Pied sur la Tête Arts  
for Community Growth and  
Development, Yokohama  
Triennale, 2005



A Multicultural  
Expedition Party with  
six multinational  
artists, 2014

with their own position. It is like a new day-workers' area. Everyday a pick-up truck comes to take you off somewhere, use you and then drop you back. So instead of these artists getting money from the Cultural Affairs Agency they should get money from the Transport Ministry and do the work of making roads, and "waking up" the towns. Much more money would come to them this way. Then the context would become more clear.

This leads to the debate on issues of aesthetics in relation to art created by non-artist participation, and as we might observe from the discourse of relational aesthetics this process came to be understood as a new aesthetic. Yet at the same time with the critique of relational aesthetics by the likes of Claire Bishop<sup>4</sup> there has also come to be a debate on the processes of exploitation which are involved in socially engaged projects, the set of power relations which are formed, and how the artist utilizes the participants and the difference in awareness of those involved. This has led to an ethical dilemma, which has led some to even claim a need for a standard of ethical aesthetics.

This discussion is quite relevant in our work with people with disabilities. It is a reason why we avoided organizing an exhibition of the work produced in our open studio sessions, because of the issues of representation and context. We don't place so much visible emphasis upon it, but there is always an ethical consideration when working with people, especially those who are defined as minorities or so-called vulnerable persons. We refuse this group mentality.

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2 [no-ma.jp/english.html](http://no-ma.jp/english.html)  
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(208,214,215)  
Art Lab Ova (210,212)

4 Bishop, Claire. *Antagonism and Relational*

# TRACING THE

Rika Aki

# STORIES WHICH

in conversation

# “ART” THREATENS

with Emma Ota

# TO ERASE

Cafe & Community  
Art Space  
“teshimanomad”



Rika Aki is an artist based in Teshima Island in the Seto Inland Sea region of Japan. She considers all art practice to be an inherently social engagement, and has worked across multiple platforms and joined in numerous collaborations with different groups of creatives

and local residents. Having established the artist run space Roji to Hito in 2010, with a concern for democratic processes of creative self-organizing, and discourses of resistance to dominating authorities, she moved to Teshima Island in search of a form of lived artistic

activism and embedded rootedness in land and community. She established the creative art space Teshimano-Mado in 2013, which other than being a café, also collates oral history archives and organizes workshops and events.

## TESHIMA NO MADO

Seto Inland Sea area is an idyllic region of small islands dotted between Shikoku and Honshu, only accessible by infrequent ferries, and home to largely aging populations. With the typical movement of young people from this area to the big cities, and with little strength in the local industries, it could be imagined that these islands would fade away into oblique obscurity. However, the establishment of Benesse Art Site Naoshima as early as 1989 and the following launch of Setouchi International Art Festival<sup>2</sup> in 2010 changed the landscape of these islands, quite literally. As a result, Naoshima island is now known as the “art island” with its public sculptures of Yayoi Kusama pumpkins and Yoshitomo Nara puppies. Every year thousands of tourists, from around Japan and internationally, draw upon this region for its art festivities, reaching a climax in the Setouchi International Art Triennale, the 3<sup>rd</sup> of which is taking place this year (2016). With artists from around the world gathering upon these remote communities and developing often site-specific responses to these locations, the creative and natural environment produced and encountered here is for many nothing short of paradise, but on closer inspection something appears to be afoot. A region which was once so defined by local connection and island culture passed down through generations looks set to be engulfed by the waves of mass art tourism. Teshima is no exception. Arriving on the island you are handed an “art map” highlighting where various installations are set around the island and quickly ushered towards the bicycle rental queues whereby you may make your quick round of the isle before going on to the next. The art tourists who come here will appreciate the beautiful landscape in which the art works are set, but will have little contact with the local people here other than the services which they provide for them. The island is branded as an art destination but its weave of local history and culture is given little platform for visibility. Here art has become a business and means of escape for many visitors from the landscapes of their everyday and Aki feels a sense of disquiet when people talk of this island only in terms of the art festival or the art work; she in turn feels, and has the impulse to indicate, a different kind of presence here.

## AN UNTOUCHABLE PAST

The island, in fact, has a complex history, which cannot be simply covered over by art. Beginning in the 1960s it was a waste disposal area for un-burnable rubbish from the Tokyo area and saw the worst case of illegal dumping of industrial waste in Japan in the 1970s and 1980s, becoming a toxic hot spot. For 25 years the islanders fought for recognition of the situation, bringing law suits against the local authority and protesting in the streets of Tokyo until it was finally decided to clean-up the island and try to restore its rightful condition. In this way the islanders have struggled to reclaim their land and their identity from the hazardous outputs of capitalist consumer society and are still grappling with this close history. The clean-up process has been realized over a ten-year period but it is still ongoing in some remote areas of the island, and is a point which many people feel is difficult to touch upon. The Setouchi Art Festival may be seen by some as a way of overcoming this hardship and celebrating the natural beauty of the island together with art. At the same time Aki and some others, are wary of a presence of art which assumes the form of mass capital and investment.

## FAMILY ROOTS

Rika Aki is a native to the neighbouring island Syodosshima and her father's family has roots in Teshima. After studying in Nagoya and later in Okinawa, Aki moved to Tokyo and there established the democratically run, artist-run space Roji to Hito<sup>3</sup>, which is known for its strong links with the activist network and concerns with the connection between art and direct action. However, as she observed the impact that the Setouchi Art Festival was having on her home region and having come to question her own lifestyle of living from one artist residence to the next, she began to relocate herself in the Setouchi region. Possessing family ties, she was welcomed to the island like a distant relative, not as a complete stranger, and certainly not as a mere artist who had come from the outside to make artwork. She received acceptance without conditions and despite there being few people of her own age, she was never seen as a stranger. Whilst aware of the certain gaps between her experience and that of the established locals, she is also mindful that becoming too concerned with division prevents one from doing things all together.

In order to reconnect with the people here who had known her family, she initiated a personal archive project in 2012. Aki was inspired by the work of an acquaintance who had gathered super 8 film still held in possession of local people of a particular town and had created a screening of this dated footage of the district and its people in a sharing of memory. Aki sought a similar way to touch upon the personal narratives connected with this island and did this by digitally archiving local's old photographs and hearing the stories behind them.

After the experience of this project, Aki felt the confidence and concern to move to Teshima and begin a much more rooted engagement with the land and people here. As her father's family had once lived here they had some property on the island and she decided to renovate the house and storehouse into Teshima no Mado,<sup>4</sup> a café and art space which opened in October 2013.

## SHIFTING FACE OF AN ARTIST

Aki has moved from the position of an artist showing in white cube spaces, to producing outdoor sculptures, then migrating towards the merging of art and the spaces of everyday life through project based engagements. Having participated in numerous



Rika Aki

residencies and pursuing short-term dialogues with various communities, she has come to settle upon a long-term engagement with her roots in Teshima. She was brought to consider the meaning of short-term residencies, which attempt to engage a community with an outside artist and build some rapport, and she felt that once the initial objective had been realized then it was difficult to continue a relation with that particular place. The process of research, dialogue and documentation is an important one, but should be approached with more of a long-term commitment and connection to an environment.

Her move to Teshima was greatly influenced not only by the Setouchi Art Festival but also the opening of the Tadanori Yokoo Museum<sup>5</sup> three doors down from her father's family home. Through the relations of the capitalist structures of society, suddenly, a museum dedicated to an individual artist, appeared right next door. As this place came to be accepted as a probable part of the local area, in what appeared to be a surreal situation, Aki was led to further question the purpose of artists in this environment. At the same time, Aki could see that the very way of life of the people of this island was creative and productive, and she struggled with the logic of the art world that doesn't recognize this. As a local artist hoping to promote the minor art activities of the island, she started Teshima no Mado. To be fully aware of the community from the position of an artist, to connect with key issues and share them through art is a means of deconstructing and reconstructing the power relations within the community and the problems faced here, allowing instead for a meaningful sharing of time and space with many different people.

## THE ART OF LIVING

Another motivation for Aki to come to Teshima was her questioning of economy, which in many ways reflects that of Misako Ichimura.<sup>6</sup> Feeling completely drained by the demands of capitalist life and the pressures to work and spend money, she was seeking another lifestyle in which she could gain more control over her own labour and consumption. Taking on a plot of land to grow her own vegetables, she was determined to be as self-sustainable as possible and saw this cycle of creation and consumption as an art in itself. At the same time, the determination not to buy things also became a stress. When she first arrived on the island she received many things from the locals, both in terms of food, objects and support. Even without the exchange of money, this also constitutes a political economy of relations in and of itself. As in the bartering in Ichimura's community<sup>7</sup>, there is an understanding attached to each transaction and a feeling of success or rootedness when one is able to give rather than only receive. At the same time, Teshima also has a history as a place from which to escape capitalism, having once been home to a farming commune, which instructed people in working the land and depending upon it for their own sustenance. Aki believes in the possibility of art within everyday life, in particular in relation to food. To many of the people who visit her space she is just running a café. However, for her it is important to talk of it as art, although she doesn't find it necessary to claim this overtly. Rather, she follows the assertion of Joseph Beuys that everyone is an artist.<sup>8</sup>

## REACTION TO DISASTER

Another impetus to move to Teshima was also the impact of 3.11 (The Great East Japan Earthquake of 11<sup>th</sup> March 2011) with its deadly earthquake and tsunami, which

brought so much devastation to areas of Tohoku. As many artists and individuals will testify, 2011 marked a turning point for them, when the cold values of city living were suddenly upturned and desires for more connected living came to rise. As a result, there has been a surge of young people making a U-turn from Tokyo and other large cities and actively trying to carve out a life in rural communities. This movement may also be observed amongst other residents of Teshima. In the last few years many young people, particularly artists and creatives, have been drawn to the island, perhaps initially through the Setouchi Art Festival. Some felt a strong urge to settle here or communicate with this context, leading many of them to set up their own businesses in the form of cafes, shops and small galleries.

### AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

The reality of Teshima though is that it is a fading community. Its population has dipped below that of 900 people and there are a mere 40 people, below the age of 20, upon the island. In this way, despite the influx of young people from outside, the island looks unlikely to sustain itself for much longer and must face the possibility of losing its population entirely. It is with this outlook that Aki feels even more impelled to somehow document the lives and expressions upon this land before they are completely forgotten.

With the launch of Setouchi Art Festival, an area which didn't have much interest from even locals in the region and had no facilities to boast of, is now the centre of attention and is attracting visitors from all over the world. Many of the artists coming here are doing so with the purpose of joining in "art projects". These projects are not individual private projects but are organized by the local authorities and the big art foundations. Private initiatives only come into play amongst this greater agenda. Artists too come to join these publically organized events.

### ANOTHER HISTORY

Central to many of Aki's artistic practices upon the island has been an investigation into the undocumented histories, narratives and cultures, which have been uniquely experienced by the people of this community. She has pursued a variety of principally oral history projects with locals in attempting to uncover, record and document these experiences. These have included photography projects, filming of traditional rituals such as the summer Bon Odori Festival,<sup>9</sup> interviewing local members about the past customs of the island and producing an ongoing monthly postcard project from the archive of old photos of the surrounding residents. She has also provided alternative guides to the island by organizing tours led by knowledgeable locals who help visitors navigate the land in another way to the usual tourist routes. As she attempts to bring some image to an unseen past she is also sensitive that her presence, and particularly that of a camera, can be quite invasive at times. This places her in a dilemma as to how much she should record, how far she should follow or question but she negotiates this intuitively whilst respecting people's privacy. She has produced books and DVDs of these records and donated them to the library and schools so that they may engage in another life, across another time span. As part of this, she is very keen to connect with the children of the island but despite having visited the school on many occasions, and presented lectures and workshops there, she still senses it is difficult to come to an understanding with the school staff.

### A QUESTION OF FUNDS

Aki is very clear as to the source of her funding which she gains from various art foundations and art assistance programmes. In receiving such funds, she feels her practice is given a certain legitimacy and recognition which it could not achieve under its own steam. She views this funding as a way to allow her to take something born of a personal interest and motivation and lift it up to something of wider relevance and artistic and cultural importance.

Furthermore, by sharing her practice with other organizations which have gained funds from the same sources, the conditions and issues faced in one particular region can come to be understood within a broader context which is not isolated by mere geography. This exchange of information allows for a greater understanding and solidarity between disparate artists and art organizations.

### A DIFFERENT CIRCULATION

The art festival dominates the region with its cyclic movement, as it is only when the festival is going on, or the season is peak, that the art facilities are open and the main stay of tourists come. In the off-peak season jobs are lost and people stop coming, the winter being a particularly tough time for locals seeking income and employment. Aki was determined to counter this cycle by creating a home-grown event at a grassroots level to be realized during the off-peak season. This is how *Pan Matsuri* – the Bread Festival was born.<sup>10</sup>

Motivated by her own taste for home-baked bread and the creativity involved in this process, Aki began the festival with a team of four friends and it proved to be a successful first event, drawing attention to small scale cafes and restaurants which were not usually highlighted on the "art map". As the popularity of the event grew, the weight of the tasks and responsibilities also compounded upon the organizers and relations began to tether in the second event as a result of this. Aki was concerned to maintain an even and comfortable relationship between all collaborators and responded to this as she saw appropriate by increasing the number of participating shops and attempting to generate more of a sense of individual ownership over the project. Through such programs, a community of young people on the island has become much more visible. They have become activate in helping each other to set up their new shops, etc. and aiding each other in realizing what they want to do, giving birth to a particular sense of cooperation. Yet despite the success of this project its last volume was held in June 2016. From the start, it was determined that it would only run for a maximum of five events.



Walking Seminar



Hearing about  
the Bon Odori

The Bread Festival was about starting something small and personal, based on a sharing of one's passion and interest, and not based on some logical plan to "reawaken" the economy of the island. The term *machi okoshi* is a common phrase around the areas of Japan experiencing economic downturn and literally means to awaken or to activate the town, but Aki is also critical of this term and does not intend her artistic engagements to be used specifically in this way. As she states, "the town won't necessarily wake up no matter what you do." It was with this in mind that it was decided not to make the Bread Festival a permanent feature, preventing it from copying the same circulation of economy, which the art festival enacts here and wanting to avoid being trapped in such a cycle. So the next challenge is to find other interesting and creative ways of working in the off-peak season.

### ART PROJECTS OF INSPIRATION

When asked of her opinion upon the sharp rise in "art projects" (meaning community based art projects) in Japan, Aki acknowledged that the impact of the Echigo-Tsumari Triennale<sup>11</sup> was a highly valid one. This Triennale is largely credited with contributing to the interest in and profusion of such art projects, which base themselves within particular towns and communities. A direct correlation may be drawn between Echigo-Tsumari and the Setouchi Art Festival, which leaves it open to potential criticism too, but for Aki she personally felt inspired when she first encountered the Niigata based project which seemed to have a particular embeddedness in the local community.

In contrast to this Triennale, which has the fields and plains of the local area to provide the stage for site-specific art interventions, Aki also cited a project realized by friends in Okinawa of a very different scale. This is a garden festival in which the private spaces of individuals' gardens are opened up to the public, who are given the freedom to enter into the living environment of local residents on a very personal level. The quality of organization and the genuine interest and motivation of the residents allows for a new level of communication in which they are given authentic recognition as creatives in the spaces of their everyday life. It is this kind of sensibility which Aki herself wishes to touch upon as an artist permanently in residence in Teshima.

### DIALOGUE – IN HER OWN WORDS

**Emma Ota:** You have joined many artist-in-residency programmes, which most often than not, take the form of short term creative dialogues with an area or people you don't know. How has this experience fuelled your response to the cyclic formula of the art festival in your region and how you attempt to engage with the people and land of Teshima?

**Rita Aki:** Yes, there was a period in which I travelled from one place to another living in short term residencies. It doesn't take long to get to know people – perhaps because the communities are rather closed – and people are very open and accepting. You quickly feel like you are a resident there. You will receive vegetables from the field, gifts from passers-by. Even if I have my own process of making work, if I don't research the place I am in, nothing can start. And so I do all I can to learn about this place. But there comes a point when the information I am collecting and the things I am hearing are beyond my capacity to do something to preserve their legacy. And the residents also feel that their reflection on a time and space, which is not defined by the remit of the project, is not being properly taken into account. It really depends upon the scale and span of commitment not just from that individual artist but the entire framework around them, and the NPO or art organization facilitating all of this. So this is my reaction to this, which has brought me to where I am now.

I am living as a resident everyday upon the island with no plan to leave any time soon. As a resident and as an artist I have collected personal histories and cultural narratives of the island as video, photographs and text and attempt to disseminate this by gifting it to the library, to the school etc. So even if the participants pass away, their stories can still reach the ears of others, leaping to a space beyond that of the individual.

I am also organizing my own art project, and inviting several artists to join this year. Our activity on this island is still not widely recognized but we want to pick up certain topics and bring them to shape through art works. Many of the artists, in fact, don't have an interest in this area. They get work, take on their role and make art. If that is the reality, then it is up to the facilitator to introduce the context and build a meaningful dialogue with the artwork. The artists can't make that commitment. If that facilitator is not there, then these artists wouldn't come. Unless they have work here, unless they have a mission they wouldn't come. Their mission is to make work. I have finally come to realize this situation this year.

Whilst interviewing the artists for these dialogues, I was struck by your differing relations to the so-called world of contemporary art. Kageyama and Suzuki<sup>12</sup> spoke of failing to build a relationship here, of being outcasts from this world not from lack of trying to enter of course. For you, Aki, such art world recognition appears significant in your professional stance. For Ichimura it is perhaps more of a case of the art world chasing her rather than vice-versa. Could you comment on your relations with this perceived entity of, and authority of the contemporary art world?

Having been a resident here, I cannot help but see how art is the bringing of a huge lump of capital into the area and the way it is viewed as a resource of tourism. This is how many residents see art. We were also talking about key words and for me the word would have to be *Zokei* (meaning creation + shape, creatively bringing something to form). It is quite literally to make something, but in making



Artist in residency.  
Artist Hikaru Fujii

Artist in residency.  
Artist Syo Yoshihama



something we also generate a set of relations. This may just be the set of relations between the self and the object. When another is brought into this situation, we also have to consider how to build a connection there too. In this way there is an act of making art, which is rooted in the everyday.

I think such everyday creation and expression are inextricably bound together. But unfortunately this has been overlooked in our island because the face of contemporary art is big business, big capital. This activity is my personal activity and if someone calls it a hobby then it could be understood as such, but I am working in a context where there is already an awareness of art projects etc. and in that context I create books, document the rituals of Bon Odori and invite other artists to join and make monthly postcards from historical and personal photographs donated by locals. In this way I try to build an environment in which the other will come to relate to the object of my, or someone else's, production.

Your process of sustainable creation is also one of resistance, how do you position yourself in relation to the local community with this agenda?

I previously established, with four other members, the space Roji to Hito in Tokyo. We shared the cost of the rent of this space between us but had no financial return from that. There was an issue with long-term sustainability. At the same time, it had a very clear idea of activism and we could take a direct stance on political issues. Having moved to Teshima, I see this as the very embodiment of activism, but it is often difficult to label it as such, especially to the locals. I wanted to be more involved in community organizing and have become member of the neighbourhood committee, but at the same time I have refused "my number" (the government issued ID number or mass surveillance number as some like to call it) despite the fact that I know the postman who is supposed to deliver this number, and I know the city officer who is supposed to register this number by name and face, making it even harder to refuse. The rural area is much harsher in its intolerance of things. I don't really have to push my identity as an artist to the local people. I am fine to be known as the girl who runs the café. Usually when I rub shoulders with them I am in that role. But when someone from the outside comes to this space I want to tell them this is a space for daily creation, so I should take responsibility as an artist in that respect.

So you make a distinction in how you emphasize your role to locals and to visitors?

Well, here it is not necessary to keep telling the man next door that I am an artist. But for tourists who come here, they are stepping outside their everyday, so I want to add to their journey. Well of course, sometimes someone will get a bit angry and leave, for example, when I don't give them the details for scheduled times for boats which go to the small islands. They can check for themselves and I can't remember everything off the top of my head. This is my position as an artist.

1 teshimanomado.com/about.html (accessed Aug 31, 2016) asahi-art-fes.net/english/program/2014/2014-3.html (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

2 setouchi-artfest.jp/en/ (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

3 tokyoartbeat.com/tablog/entries.en/2015/06/roji-to-hito.html (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

4 teshimanomado.com/about.html (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

5 ytmoca.jp/english/en\_guidance.html (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

6 See the conversation with Misako Ichimura, pp.194-205

7 Misako Ichimura discusses the bartering

system that exists amongst the homeless people in the park, pp.194-205

8 Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) believed that it was possible to transform society through the creativity of every individual. He emerged as an artist amid Germany's post-war reconstruction, claiming for art a unique role in the spiritual regeneration of society, in opposition to a materialistic culture. Central to Beuys's mission as an artist was his *expanded concept of art*. A frustrated questioner once shouted at him: 'You talk about everything under the sun, except art!', to which Beuys replied: 'Everything under the sun is art!' Beuys believed art should be a kind of *social sculpture* in other words, 'how we mould and shape the world in which we live.

Sculpture as an evolutionary process'. 'Everyone is an artist' simply means that the human being is a creative being, that he is creator, and what's more, that he can be productive in different ways. To Beuys, it's irrelevant whether a product comes from a painter, from a sculptor, or from a physicist. For more information, please go to [tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/joseph-beuys-revolution-us](http://tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/joseph-beuys-revolution-us) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

9 **Obon** or just **Bon** is a Japanese Buddhist custom to honor the spirits of one's ancestors. This Buddhist-Confucian custom has evolved into a family reunion holiday during which people return to ancestral family places and visit and clean their ancestors' graves, and

when the spirits of ancestors are supposed to revisit the household altars. It has been celebrated in Japan for more than 500 years and traditionally includes a dance, known as Bon-Odori.

10 [facebook.com/761060614004963/photos/pcb.907202699390753/907202682724088/?type=3](https://www.facebook.com/761060614004963/photos/pcb.907202699390753/907202682724088/?type=3) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

11 [echigo-tsumari.jp/eng/](http://echigo-tsumari.jp/eng/) (accessed Aug 31, 2016)

12 See the conversation with Art Lab Ova, pp. 206-219

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# EXCHANGING

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio

# THOUGHTS

and Susanne Bosch

## SUSANNE BOSCH

is an artist and independent researcher. She received a PhD "Learning for Civil Society Through Participatory Public Art" from the University of Ulster in Belfast in 2012. From 2007–2012, she developed and led the *Art in Public MA* at the University of Ulster in Belfast, together with artist Dan Shipsides. As an "interface activist", Susanne practices internationally in public art projects asking questions about long-term issues, and building creative arguments around the ideas of democracy and sustainable futures. Her art often involves the issues of money (*Rest-fennigaktion (Left-over Penny Campaign)*, Germany, 1998–2002; *Initiativa Centesimo Avanzato, Naples, Italy, 2008–2009*; and *Hucha de Deseos, Madrid, 2010–2011*), migration (*My European Family* video 2012, Athens and Kassel, Germany; *The Prehistory of Crisis II*, Belfast and Dublin, 2009); and societal visions and participation models (*Cities Exhibition*, Birzeit University Museum, Pales-

tine 2012–13; *Das Gute Leben, Glücklich kommt von Selbermachen, Bregenz, Austria 2014*; *Dies ist Morgen, Osnabrück, Germany 2015*; *Utopisten und Weltenbauer, Dortmund, Germany 2015*; *Das Mögliche im Sein, Götztis, Austria, 2015*).

Susanne develops site- and situation-specific interventions, installations, videos, drawings, and audio as well as dialogical formats. In her artistic research, and as facilitator, she uses formats such as writing, seminars and workshops. She is trained in Open Space and Art of Hosting facilitation (2008, 2014), as well as conflict transformation (2004) and systemic constellation work (2014). Susanne has been working internationally in Austria, Italy, Ireland, the UK, Greece, Palestine, Spain, USA, Mexico, Malaysia as well as in Turkey and is currently the independent research fellow in the Collaborative Arts Partnership Programme (CAPP), a European partner network of six countries (2014–2018).<sup>1</sup>

## HERMAN BASHIRON MENDOLICCHIO

works independently as a researcher, editor, writer and curator. He holds an International PhD in "Art History, Theory and Criticism" from the University of Barcelona. He is a faculty member and core advisor at Transart Institute (NY-Berlin) and has worked as a Postdoctoral Visiting Researcher at United Nations University - Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility (UNU-GCM). He is Professor and advisor at the Cultural Management Programme of the University of Barcelona.

His current lines of research involve the subjects of intercultural processes, globalization, participation and mobility in contemporary art and cultural policies; the concepts of utopia, journey and encounter; the interactions between artistic, educational, media and cultural practices in the Mediterranean; and the cultural cooperation between Asia and Europe. He has participated in several international con-

ferences and developed projects and research residencies in Europe, Asia, USA and the Middle East. As an art critic, editor and independent curator he collaborates with international organizations and institutions and writes extensively for several magazines and journals. He is Editorial contributor at Culture360 – Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), Managing Editor at ELSE – Transart Institute, and co-founder of the Platform for Contemporary Art and Thought, InterArtive.

## BUILDING BLOCKS

Through the logic, and sometimes irrationality, of exchange and reflection, we, Susanne and Herman, have addressed some of the main ideas that shape this publication. We met, in contemporary, mobile fashion, via Skype or in person in improvised temporary offices in Berlin, to discuss the core ideas of this work. We identified the fields, topics and concepts that – from different perspectives and moving in different directions – represent some of the current interests that emerge through the dialogues. These include, art practices in the social realm, community-engagement, context-specificity, language and meanings, ways of exchanging, interactions, and mobility-related issues.

In the process of thinking and writing, we followed a two-fold method: on the one hand, we focused on our personal and individual understanding and vision around this set of concepts; on the other hand, we paid particular attention to the content of this book, namely on the precious ideas, experiences and practices shared by all the participants.

The following narrative represents both the effort to connect with the voices of the contributors of the dialogues, and the wish to explore, in more depth, some of the concepts that drive, compound and give sense and structure to this publication.

## ENCOUNTERS AND IN-BETWEENS

**Susanne Bosch:** Through Yeoh Lian Heng's invitation, I had the pleasure to meet a number of very exciting artistic practitioners from South East Asia and other parts of the world. We met at least twice, once in person for the master class *TransActions in the Field in November 2015* and once through this publication. Emma Ota and Ko Aung are the only two people I have not yet met in person. For the master class in Kuala Lumpur, Yeoh invited practitioners in his geographical region that he knew, appreciated and/or had heard of. I was fortunate to be able to bring four practitioners based in Europe to the master class. Together we experienced a 12-day exchange that was challenging, com-

plex and exciting on many levels. There were 22 practitioners, from 11 countries, of diverse personal and professional circumstances. We met in the innocuous frame of the mega city that is Kuala Lumpur, and also spent six days in a predominantly Muslim village outside of Kuala Lumpur, to engage within our own group, within the specific contexts, and with the local residents.

In this publication, 20 practitioners, from nine countries, speak with each other about their realities as "interface activists". The term "interface activist" refers to a position and mindset from which someone is working, of being conscious of the overlaps and blurs, and aware of the interconnectedness of all matters of society – politics, culture, social, nature, economics and spirituality. This publication compiles the thoughts and ideas of a number of practitioners who operate from that position.

We all live and sit between stools; not one of us is positioned comfortably on any particular chair. This sitting-between-all is not an accidental position; it is a chosen one and the only one that allows for this type of intervention into the everyday. It demands negotiation of tensions of opposing systems of value (individual versus collective, author versus spectator, active versus passive, real life versus art, autonomous artworks versus "functional" ones). It is from these in-between spaces that we came together to share our precarious positionings and to explore the potential of our engagements.

## MULTIPLICITIES OF MEANINGS

**Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio:** Learning how to move between different layers of complexities means, first and foremost, accepting the jump into the unknown. Navigating skilfully into the twisted framework of understandings and misunderstandings is a refined practice that goes beyond the sphere of language to include the co-presence and consideration of different codes, values, beliefs, ethics and sensibilities.

The 'multi-layered structure of knowledge', the 'multiplicity of meanings', should, now-

adays, be the common and usual condition of our existence in society. It should also be natural in the fields of cultural and art. Are we really open to recognizing, accepting and learning what is beyond our sphere of comprehension? Are we really open to going beyond the cage of the intellectual egotism? Are we able to question and challenge fixed definitions, narratives and approaches? Sometimes, I think we create problematic situations of over-intellectualization and radical hypocrisy that have neither cultural nor geographical connotations.

In this sense, I highly appreciate those experiences – real breaks in time and space – of meetings, residencies and gatherings, based on the genuine expression of diversity and ‘multiplicity of meanings’. These are experiences in which everyone is the ‘other’ and the initial misunderstandings, sense of failure and feeling of discomfort can pave the way to a transformative journey and learning process.

Language – intended as a magic container with words, gestures, symbols, body movements, breaths, etc. – becomes the tool to understand and face our own limits and limitations; Language becomes the field of encounter. Language has traces of, and is composed of, diverse pathways. It is a space in which to connect and share. I also like to imagine language as a space for silence and listening, instead of a tool used to claim and impose. Visually, I’m thinking about Jaume Plensa’s<sup>2</sup> sculptures in the public space: those huge, beautiful and silent human figures made of letters and symbols from different languages, with the transparency, meditation and sense of wisdom they convey.

This vital notion of ‘multiplicity of meanings’ is also clearly expressed in the experience of this publication. Just to mention a few examples: the *gotong royong* (communal work) or the *Ngongkrong* (hang out approach to networking or socializing) as discussed in the conversation between Paik Yin and Djuwadi;<sup>3</sup> this comment by Cheah Ni: “I think we need to have our own definition of art and curating in Southeast Asia as we have our own complexi-

ties: which are very different from other countries”;<sup>4</sup> the perception of ‘local’ explained by Lee Chun Fung, and the enriching and detailed description of some Chinese concepts by Okui Lala:

“In the Chinese character, 人(Ren) represents a person; 从(Chong) (Two 人 side by side in the Chinese character) is to follow, which from my interpretation is about compromising; while 众(Zhong) (Three 人 stacked together in the character) means the public. The word 众 for me represents another view and how the public views us. It’s interesting to look at the three human characters stacked on each other. This is how I view my work”;<sup>5</sup>

These examples represent the variant connotations of approaching the conceptual elements of our work. There is a clear need to accept and engage with the multiplicities and complexities of meanings in order to reimagine our way of learning and our way of being together.

As Alecia Neo expressed so well, in relation to her practice: “Sometimes I also choose to work in situations where there is a fixed narrative about an issue or condition, or a belief that there is only one way to do something, and these beliefs perhaps limit the potential of individuals or the site itself. In these cases, it’s about seeking out opportunities to disrupt the status quo, and opening up possibilities to reimaging ways of living and learning together”.<sup>6</sup>

#### LANGUAGE FOR THE FIELD

SB: One of the most difficult tasks for us, as “interface activists”, is certainly to talk about our field of work, to put our practices into words. I call it the “invisible sculpture”, referring to a term created by artist Joseph Beuys about using first conversational forms to create a space for transformation. The nature of this work is conversational, dialogical, and therefore mainly invisible. Beuys tried to create art works that stimulated peoples communal research for meaning and realize their togetherness. “Let’s talk of a system that transforms all the social organisms into a work of art, in which the entire process of work is

included...something in which the principle of production and consumption takes on a form of equality.”<sup>7</sup>

It is fascinating to follow, through the language used in this publication, the cultural localities in which the contributors operate, and how these invisible sculptures take shape. Conversations took place in Japanese, Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and English. Terminologies to describe the nature of a space, or action, or the temperature of an atmosphere, become incredibly rich through their descriptions.

Here are some examples:

Lee Chun Fung: “Another thing to take note of is that ‘localness’ takes on distinct meanings in different contexts. For example, the Chinese translation of ‘local’ has different versions: 本土 *bun tou* (local referencing an ideology?), 在地 *zoi dei* (referencing a mode of action?), 本地 *bun dei* (referencing place/space?), 地道 *dei dou* (referencing common or folk culture?), etc. To use these concepts without a clear grasp of which particularity is being referenced can often lead to serious misunderstandings.”<sup>8</sup>

“For example, the word ‘街坊 *kaifong*’ in Cantonese is relatively closer to ‘community’ in English than the word ‘社區 *se keoi*’ (more like district or sub-division).”<sup>9</sup>

Zulu Suzuki from Art Lab Ova: “The phrase which is most appropriate for our practice is perhaps “*tekitou*” (something rough, ambiguous, not precise).”<sup>10</sup>

Misako Ichimura: In the process of creating art work I have felt recently that the key word comes from outside of me for example in the forms of *Haijo* (exclusion) or *Boryoku* (violence).”<sup>11</sup>

Bhumini Dhanaketpisarn: “It was very difficult to find someone who could teach me classical Thai dancing. The word “teacher” means “giver”, in Thai, so the teacher dare not get paid by their students but rather receive good wishes and respect. They got their talent from their elder guru who taught and coached them for free. It is shameful for the teacher if they earn this way.”<sup>12</sup>

Caique Tizzi: “Agora means “now” in Portuguese, it’s a place that responds to what is important in the here and now.”

#### THE WAY WE EXCHANGE AND INTERACT

HBM: Nowadays, reflections on the multiple ways that we exchange and interact, have become primary food for thought, research and practice. In this ambiguous era of global trade and mobility, in which the global capital and the goods have more rights than the people, and in this ambiguous era of global communications, in which we are often lost in virtuality, we are experiencing a renewed attention and a growing need to refocus on human relationships, the people, the human aspects and elements of everyday life.

Without having to rely on the contribution and impact of the ‘relational aesthetic’, I think that there is, today and in the last couple of decades, an undeniable growth in and more long-lasting attention being paid to, the field of human relationships.

Caique Tizzi, states in this publication, “I’m interested in the generosity, hospitality and care that reside in artist-run communities and how we find alternatives within these”.<sup>13</sup> The same ‘interests’ are shaping programmes, agendas and structures of many organizations, institutions, and alternative art and cultural centres.

We could talk about the rise of programmes all around the world that focus on daily life and human connections. One example is ‘food’ as a connecting tool. In responding to ‘food’, we question and explore the way we exchange, the way we stay and live together, the potential of human relationships, and the multiple models of communication and interchange. The universe of food implies a constellation of multiple elements: cultural diversity, conviviality, collective moments of preparation and testing, flavours, aesthetics and many other components that involve individual characteristics and social relationships. A direct example related to this specific framework is the dinner organized by Caique Tizzi in Kampung

Banda Dalam as part of the *TransActions in the Field* master class.<sup>14</sup>

Encounters, conversations, peculiar venues for meetings, open homes<sup>15</sup>, street libraries<sup>16</sup>, social events, walks, etc. become the field and the methodology where, and through which, we play and research the multiplicity of exchange and interactions. Caique again, talking about Agora Collective,<sup>17</sup> the space he runs in Berlin, mentions: "As Agora, we are interested in setting up a kind of school as we learn through encounters".<sup>18</sup>

In talking about exchanges and interactions, I think it is also important to consider the non-verbal tools of communication and the different ways and methods to generate empathy. Walking practices represent a very interesting field for me as they involve body and mind, and imply and enhance a connection between the self and the human and geographical landscape around. Rousseau said: "I can meditate only while walking. As soon as I stop, I stop thinking, my head works only with my feet".<sup>19</sup>

Alecia Neo, as part of her project *Unseen: Constellations*, organized a thought-provoking blind walk at night, which demanded a solid trust among the participants. It was, in her own words: "An act of solidarity, shared responsibility, and a nervous, courageous step out into the unknown. What's fascinating about the process is that it encompasses so many things at once... the hyperawareness of the surroundings and others, the negotiation between caution and risk, and the absence of sight really forces you to use your entire body to navigate space."<sup>20</sup> A night walk can also have magic and mystical connotations: "A body walking at night, more than any other, has the power to abandon itself to apparitions, to mix with them, to somehow become part of them".<sup>21</sup>

Finally, in all these examples, I see on the one side the need to go back to the social, the street, the community, the people; on the other side, the need to focus on the person, the human being, the inner layer of the self.

The two layers are obviously connected and I see also the necessity to create a fluid dialogue between the inside and the outside, the public and the private, the known and the unknown, the self and the other. In a way, different artistic practices are addressing today a complex system of knowledge that places at its centre the human presence in the social context, therefore provoking questions, ideas, insights, experiences and perceptions. As Susanne mentioned above, as practitioners, we are in conversation about approaches to these two levels of enquiry.

### COMMUNITY, BELONGING AND EXPERIENCING THE LOCAL CONTEXT

SB: One might come to the assumption that we, as group of practitioners, are a community. We share, to a degree, parallel circumstances and parallel concerns. I worry, for example, about the impact of global neo-liberal thinking and action, and that may be construed as what unites us as community. The definitions of belonging, and therefore community, are critically reflected upon by many of the practitioners in this publication. For me, naming this field of artwork is not so relevant, as all terms seem contested somehow, but I find a common ground in "interface activism", as it addresses a certain attitude and positioning and therefore ambiguous points in a context.

Belonging is no longer defined predominantly by national identity, gender or age. It is increasingly viewed as something experiential, created through the sharing of values, of being and feeling included and accepted within a group, be it social, religious, political, cultural or economic. How to define the role of the artist in certain contexts and communities and how to produce socially or community-engaged art that reflects common identities, were questions that engaged us during the *TransActions in the Field* master class. The issues are a major focus of the practitioners in these dialogues and serve to define the experience and the sense of belonging. Post-Museum: "In the case of Bukit Brown, we define the local community as the people who came together to do something about it.

Some were descendants of the people buried there, some were academics and researchers, aka experts, many were just enthusiasts. They were equally important to us, though we were mainly fascinated by how people, who had no personal relations to the site, were attracted to it and felt strongly about saving it.

We are part of the group who started SOS Bukit Brown, the advocacy group against the highway. We are also artists who create artwork about the case and continue to talk about the issue outside of immediate circles. We consider ourselves a part of the community we speak about."<sup>22</sup>

As the introduction text to *URBAN ACT: A Handbook for Alternative Practice* says about their contributors (and we could say about ourselves here as well), "Most of the contributors are usually catalogued as 'local' and their positions are minimalised as such, but in fact they are highly specific and have the quality of reinventing uses and practices in ways that traditional professional structures cannot afford. Their ways of being local are complex and multi-layered, involving participation and 'local expertise' as well as extra-local collaborations. They are based on soft professional and artistic skills and civic informal structures, which can adapt themselves to changing situations that are critical, reactive and creative enough to produce, potentially, real change."<sup>23</sup>

Something that Zulu from Art Lab Ova pointed out, is the contamination of the term "local community art" by the British model where art projects are commissioned as "fixers" for social tilts created by neoliberal politics. The artists subsequently serve as an extended arm of the system even though the initial motivation of UK artists was their concern to enable people to have more power and say in the direction of their own lives, a meaningful participation in democracy through the arts.

The contributions here highlight interesting ways of addressing "togetherness" through

an artistic endeavour. Misako Ichimura joined the Blue Tent Village, in a park in Tokyo, more than ten years ago. Belonging to this group of homeless people allows her to raise her voice: "I want to give importance to the will and desire of each individual who suffers as a result of this theft of public space."<sup>24</sup> Homelessness exists globally and Misako uses a local circumstance to direct attention to the roots of a global issue. She postulates the absolute primacy of economic issues over all others in our neoliberal social system and addresses one conscious attempt to be active for one's freedom within that.

Alex Lee represents another type of practitioner who, "ever-resistant to labels and pretentiousness, consciously produces projects in urban spaces that emphasize a desire to connect people and the importance of inclusion and accessibility through both playful gestures and "useful" initiatives."<sup>25</sup> For Alex, the exploration of local social structures refers to an important function of space: "I was trained as an architect, I bring the element of space to the conversation of art. Space is really powerful. It plays a big role in the human concept of our dimension and is inherently related to experience."<sup>26</sup> The idea of space, being the visible footprint of the invisible web of interactions, is something that Alex Lee focuses on. As "artist", as he calls himself, one holds the chance and the power to intervene in this web and to therefore challenge the visible footprint of a community.

A certain type of experience is what unites the blind, a group that Alecia Neo works with. Yet another type of experience shapes the frame of the migrants with whom Okui Lala collaborates. These artists explore, through their practices, the qualities of belonging to a certain community and how these communal experiences impact on them and the environment.

All the contributions in this publication are intrinsically related to political, economic, social and material matters and to specific temporalities, spatialities, individual and collective histories and experiences.

This kaleidoscope of contributions creates links and connections within and across various local framings of community. Multiple forms of practice address the dynamic and complicated nature of the notions of 'local' and 'culture', and the critical condition of culture in contemporary society.

## COMMUNITY, GENTRIFICATION AND LOCAL CONTEXT

HBM: Care and attentiveness towards social justice and the direct engagement of different voices – coming from local contexts as well as from the artistic and cultural fields – are vital and needed functions in the realms of politics and society. Nevertheless, I think it is also important to stress that, beyond the provocative, radical, activist “because-it’s-fashionable-and-cool” attitudes, I do prefer those projects which genuinely involve the community and are open to accepting a diversity of visions and perspectives. Otherwise art becomes just another tool of egoism. Unfortunately, most of the activists we see around us are created by the same powers that they believe they are struggling against. I mean that, nowadays, in different contexts, being ‘activists’ has become something ‘cool and young’ and this is exactly part of the perverse system of modern capitalism that expands, includes and consolidates. Artists’, as well as activists’ provocations, can work very well for the market. It’s clearly not always like this, but I think it’s important mentioning this point and being aware of this very subtle issue.

Negotiation, dialogues, cooperation, compromise, agreements, mediation, education – these are the expanded and shared tools we use to reimagine the social, the common, the public and the future together, when working within the context of community-engagement.

Cheah Ni in talking about her practice, says: “Whenever an issue emerges, I would always go back to the community. There are endless dialogues about various matters. I tend to act as the mediator between different bodies of people, and help to mediate consensus and conflict between different groups. Interest-

ingly enough, usually I do not have to physically “do” something after the dialogue, as a natural course of action to resolve various issues, tends to take place between the people and the local authorities”.<sup>27</sup>

In terms of practices that involve the community, the concept of cultural mapping is of particular interest to me as it involves sharing and sustainability. In cultural mapping, I see a methodology, a statement, a technique that changes the perspective from unilateral to multilateral, and includes different voices in its own development.

“The interdisciplinary and collaborative nature of this practice seems intimately connected to changing notions of authorship and agency, an increased interest in intercultural collaboration, the advent of new media technologies, the trend toward community-university research alliances, the spatial turn in social and critical theory, (...) and renewed interest in the rhetoric and practice of community engagement”.<sup>28</sup>

Cultural mapping triggers a sense of active participation, a renewed and central role for local players, a diversified set of goals and interests that locate, at the heart of the research, the value of the place -with its multiple meanings, its cultural character, its roots, narratives and stories- instead of merely its economic potential. All these mechanisms and strategies constitute a big shift in the practice of urban planning and in the understanding of a territory, taking care of the different layers that circumscribe a place and implicate its community.

As Professor Janet Pillai, stated: “Cultural mapping which engages the community is becoming popularized by civil society groups, marginalized indigenous communities, and inhabitants of heritage sites. In such cases, the process of mapping carries as much significance as the output. Cultural mapping is seen as a procedural tool which can strengthen a community’s identity and deepen their awareness of their cultural assets and resources”.<sup>29</sup>

The diverse activities organized by Arts-ED in Penang, Malaysia, are actually based on this practice and the ‘community’ becomes the central arena where all local actors meet, discuss and share together: “We take the community/site as a cultural lab where we bridge artists, educators, local residents and young people to make meaning through arts process: Interact, observe, research, present & reflect.”<sup>30</sup>

I think that this methodology can also counteract the most negative aspects of gentrification and the usual process in which the decisions of those who prevail profit the few and not the common needs and shared values. As practitioners we must grapple with our role in creating changes are consequential to our work, such as gentrification. Art and culture are powerful tools that sometimes are also used like ‘bulldozers’ for gentrification. I believe that instead of being passive actors, art and cultural professionals should address this ambivalent issue, reflect on its challenges and find the right balance in different situations. Several artists in diverse places in the world are dealing with the rampant development of peripheral areas, the pressure of tourism and the consequences of gentrification. It’s again very interesting the case of Penang and the work of Arts-ED in collecting oral histories and preserve local memories and traditional knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

Another interesting example of dealing with mapping and people’ histories, aimed at creating a deeper knowledge and experience with a specific territory, is the workshop, previously mentioned in this publication, that Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga gave in the framework of the AFFECT program at Agora. As explained by Caique Tizzi: “15 international artists joined her module called *Mittelweg – A publication unfolding in space*. She proposed to look at the location of our space, which is based in Neukölln in a street called “Mittelweg” which translated means “The Middle Way” - a great metaphor for our purpose. The group did a month site visits and had conversations with people on the street”.<sup>32</sup>

Working in and around the complexities of the social sphere –and the specificities of the local contexts- requires also the elaboration of ‘micro-utopias’ and wide imagination: “micro-utopias appear as (artistic, political) statements that result from the ‘neighbourhood interactions’ of our everyday lives, from the ability to imagine and create in the local sphere, responding to concrete political questions of the present”.<sup>33</sup>

## ORGANIZED, OR THE WAY WE EXCHANGE

SB: In January 2014, I attended an international symposium in Rotterdam, called ‘Freehouse: Radicalizing the Local’.<sup>34</sup> This symposium was connected to more than twenty years of urban development in Rotterdam, specifically in the neighbourhood Afrikaanderwijk, a low-income, multi-ethnic neighbourhood. It was also connected to the artistic research efforts initiated by artist Jeanne van Heeswijk. The event marked the handover of an art project called “Freehouse” to a self-organized, resident-run Neighbourhood Cooperative, which would continue the economic development and neighbourhood organizing work of the art project and scale it up.

Many critical makers and thinkers met during that symposium. A key moment for me was a short, verbal exchange between curator Michael Birchall and artist Jonas Staal. Michael provoked the discussion by expressing his views about how much we serve the neo-liberal system that we try to oppose, by taking over the bits left by the state and doing such a good job with them. Jonas answered by focusing critically on new organizational forms of artistic practices, noting that conservative governments embrace participation movements, proving how well civil society functions and society thrives when the government stays out of it. He professed that a state like the Netherlands saves money that way, which can then be spent on colonial or military movements elsewhere. He then highlighted that organizational forms, such as, co-operatives must take over as a political counter to neoliberalism and confront stakeholders with the issues of power and

force. The state should retreat and hand over its power, if citizens take over. For Jonas, the taboo, for most, within the social engaged arts, is to imagine a more or less violent force of citizen take-over that relieves the state of its multiple contradictory interests.

The question here was not whether art should interfere in context or is the right tool to use. The question was about how much we must think about the extensions of our use of art and negotiate the consequences of its use and how to find a way of acting and organising actions accordingly.

Looking at the roots of many of the practices introduced in this publication, we find artist-initiated movements and forms in Asia and Germany that step into this field and manoeuvre in complex political, social and economic settings. Taring Padi in Indonesia as well as the Makhampom Theatre Group (MKP) in Thailand were built by pro-democracy activists, in the 1980s and 90s, during the student movements and in crisis situations. New Zero Art Space was established in 2008 in Yangon, Myanmar to promote the new creative spirits of the post-military-dictatorship-generation in a more democratic Myanmar. Arts ED, Lostgens, Buku Jalanan and Findars operate in Malaysia in a context of a multi-ethnic society in which public space gets side-lined by economic agendas and the collective consciousness is blurred by the phenomenon of privatization. Art Lab Ova, Teshimano-Mado and Cafe Nora face the same ruthless economic intelligence in Japan and respond with multiple inclusive approaches. Wooferten and HomeShop are examples of spaces and formats that lasted only temporarily in politicized Chinese-dominated environments. Post-Museum in Singapore introduced the Bukit Brown Index, to preserve a former cemetery, while navigating the weighty constraints of the island state.

These projects exemplify the use of participation through the arts and other disciplines, signalling inherently egalitarian and democratized practices. Alongside the ascendance of the term "participation", theorists have

strongly criticized the capacity of these participatory practices to effect lasting structural change. In these dialogues and through our exploration of the core principles of these practices, we are also examining their ability to build capacities to self-identify and to organize people, believing, as we do, that "social networks have proven to be a very effective form for instigating social action."<sup>35</sup>

#### NOTIONS OF MOBILITY

HBM: In most of the practices discussed in this publication, we could find concepts and real experiences related to mobility in its overall dimension: the place and concept of home and belonging; the question of migration; the multiple issues connected to the term identity; the idea of travel, transformation, encounter, nomadism; and many others.

Mobility is no longer a temporary issue and condition, but a permanent one that is affecting the existence of people, the shape and dimension of urban and rural landscapes, methods of communication, work systems and definitions, the notions of distance and presence, and even the meaning of life.

In relation to this, I would like to mention two issues that are linked: on the one hand are the differing conceptions of tourism and cultural mobility; on the other hand, is the growing attention being paid to the idea of creative sustainability.

Tourism is one of the pillars of the contemporary global economy, but is a practice that does not often question the imbalanced structure of its own economics and the unsustainability of the resulting mass development. Mostly devoted to the myth of immediate joy and pleasure, certain globalized tourism does not take into consideration a respect for local specificities and varying lifestyles. In this regard, mobility – specifically its practice and understanding in the artistic and cultural field – emerges as an aware, sensitive and mindful experience that serves as a learning process in itself, and as a practice for critical knowledge.

An interesting example based on slow emplacement, operative sustainability, local understanding and community engagement is the experience of Rika Aki in Teshima Island, Japan.<sup>36</sup> Through her investigations and practices, the artist has collected and uncovered the histories and narratives of the local people, questioned the logic of mainstream art, subverted the usual tourist mechanisms and built trust by sharing time and space with the community.

The practice of Rika Aki is very close to the definition of critical emplacement suggested by Nancy Adajania and Ranjit Hoskote: "Critical emplacement, in our account, occurs when artists position themselves responsively in locations within or outside their own society, recognising that it is crucial to engage with the history of the chosen site and forge new social relationships and inter-disciplinary accounts around it".<sup>37</sup>

#### NOTIONS OF ENVIRONMENT

Another urgent topic which has not been mentioned until now, but that I consider a very central one and that is present in many practices and inquiries of different art and cultural professionals around the world, is the environmental one. In many of the practices discussed in this publication, as well as in several international art projects and research studies, the environmental conditions, the issue of sustainability and related concepts like recycling, pollution, deforestation, global warming, climate change, end of fossil fuel era, permaculture, de-growth, green energies and many others, are currently playing a very important role. The idea of 'guerrilla gardening' mentioned by Alex Lee,<sup>38</sup> Paik Yin's tree theatre and the statement of living in harmony with the environment,<sup>39</sup> the history of the contaminated trash on the Japanese island of Teshima and the struggle of its inhabitants in order to clean it up, as explained by Rika Aki,<sup>40</sup> or the desecration of a teak forest in Indonesia, as described by Djuwadi,<sup>41</sup> are just some insightful examples –we can find in these pages– of the urgent need to address this topic.

In this current and growing interest and responsiveness towards environmental issues and green practices in the cultural field, it is also worth mentioning projects like: GALA (Green Art Lab Alliance)<sup>42</sup>, the *Green Mobility Guide* by Julie's Bicycle and On the Move<sup>43</sup>, the report on *The arts and environmental sustainability* by IFACCA and Julie's Bicycle<sup>44</sup>, and the research on creative responses to sustainability<sup>45</sup> –commissioned by ASEF and realized by Yasmine Ostendorf in different Asian countries, all of which are useful examples.

#### RHIZOMATIC<sup>46</sup> EXCHANGES

SB: Along side the critical positions of the artist as nomad and as a locally embedded practitioner, is the form of exchange that happens when people with different backgrounds meet, be it in a master class or in the form of a publication such as this one. "These networks of action and affection – mechanisms of democratic spatial construction – are necessarily rhizomatic, playing on proximity, the temporal and multiplicity".<sup>47</sup>

Rhizomatic networks allow everyone to connect to every part necessary. Architect Doina Petrescu refers to a rhizome as "a way of constructing the infrastructure of the commons" and describes the "rhizomatic transmissions" in their projects, "in which the prototype has the capacity to transmit all the information necessary for its reproduction."<sup>48</sup> Similarly, this publication, *Art in context: Learning from the field*, as a result of the *TransActions in the Field* master class, invites us to enter into an open network of others, expressing an attitude of "going towards the other, not as an enemy or a competitor with the idea of destruction, but in the perspective of an alliance and the construction of a temporary micro-territoriality that will soon after be shared with others, by the new offshoots of the rhizome."<sup>49</sup>

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- 5 See the conversation with Okui Lala, p 20
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- 10 See the conversation with Zulu Suzuki from Art Lab Ova, p 206
- 11 See the conversation with Misako Ichimura, p 194
- 12 See the conversation with Bhumini Dhanakethipisarn, p 174
- 13 See the conversation with Caique Tizzi, p 142
- 14 See the conversation with Caique Tizzi, p 142
- 15 See the conversation with Elaine W. Ho for the discussion of HomeShop, p 120
- 16 See the conversation with Zikri Rahman for the discussion of Buku Jalanan, p 50
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**This publication introduces 21 passionate statements from practitioners in the field of participatory art. Their contributions help to define a complex practice, that takes many forms and is called by many names, but is united by a spirit of giving, receiving and reciprocating in art-making.**

**Mirroring the essence of the exchange within this practice, the structure of this publication is based on dialogue.**

**The idea of peer-to-peer conversations was kindled during our initial encounters in the field, the understanding we gained about each other's practices and the desire to eventually learn more from each other. The diversity and messiness of the fieldwork is part of the field, and here, that experience is expressed in the original voices of the practitioners.**



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