

Jay Koh offers, through this eminently readable book, an excellent example of social practice pedagogy: an artist with extensive practice in several cultural contexts, deeply committed to social change, who takes on the project of clearly articulating his framework – one grounded in ethical, aesthetic, and, most importantly, in actual art practice.

Suzanne Lacy, artist, activist, writer, Graduate Public Practice Chair, Otis College of Art & Design, Los Angeles

Through the preciseness and sincerity of his committed inner search and contextual exploration, Koh has become one of the leading referents for dialogical art. With his relentless investigation of meanings, Koh performs as a catalyst for coexistence in art and life; and with his communicative actions, Koh performs the task of enhancing and facilitating the transition between real life situations towards vital processes.

Alejandro Meitin, law-activist, artist-educator, member of Ala Plástica, La Plata, Buenos Aires

The artist Jay Koh opens rigorous new ground for anyone interested in relational and dialogical practices. Building on the ideals of pragmatist philosophy and liberation theology; he sees social art practice as a performative ground for the co-evolution of a justice-based subjectivity. He presents a unique performative approach to the construction of localized sites of social justice, with real impact.

Timothy M. Collins & Reiko Goto Collins, artists, authors, planners, designers, Collins & Goto Studio: Environmental Art, Design and Research, Glasgow

This research shows how dialogue and performance in everyday life can be an art form when artists include people's participation via art-led strategies. Koh's perception and practice of art-led participation encourages us to move into art-led mediation among diverse and uninitiated communities. This is truly an interesting research based on people's participation and gives us more understanding of others' points of view.

Ma Thida, MD, surgeon, writer, President PEN Myanmar, multiple human rights and freedom of speech and freedom to write awards recipient, Yangon

Jay Koh has written what is without doubt one of the most penetrating and original contributions to the debate on dialogical and participatory art in recent times. This book is a must read for anyone with an interest in contemporary art theory and practice.

Marco Marcon, writer, organiser, director of Spaced, Perth

Art-Led Participative Processes (ALPP) encapsulate artist Jay Koh's public participative methodology, which emphasises agency, critical engagement, the ownership of actions and knowledge, the answerability of self to others, and a contribution to social change. It is the outcome and distillation of twenty-four years of a rigorous and reflexive practice and of rich experiences in social engagement with others, subjected to a cross disciplinary doctoral research at the Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki. This book, condensed from Koh's thesis, offers ALPP as a viable, responsive and dynamic methodology for an intersubjective participatory art practice that motivates and validates the independence of participants.

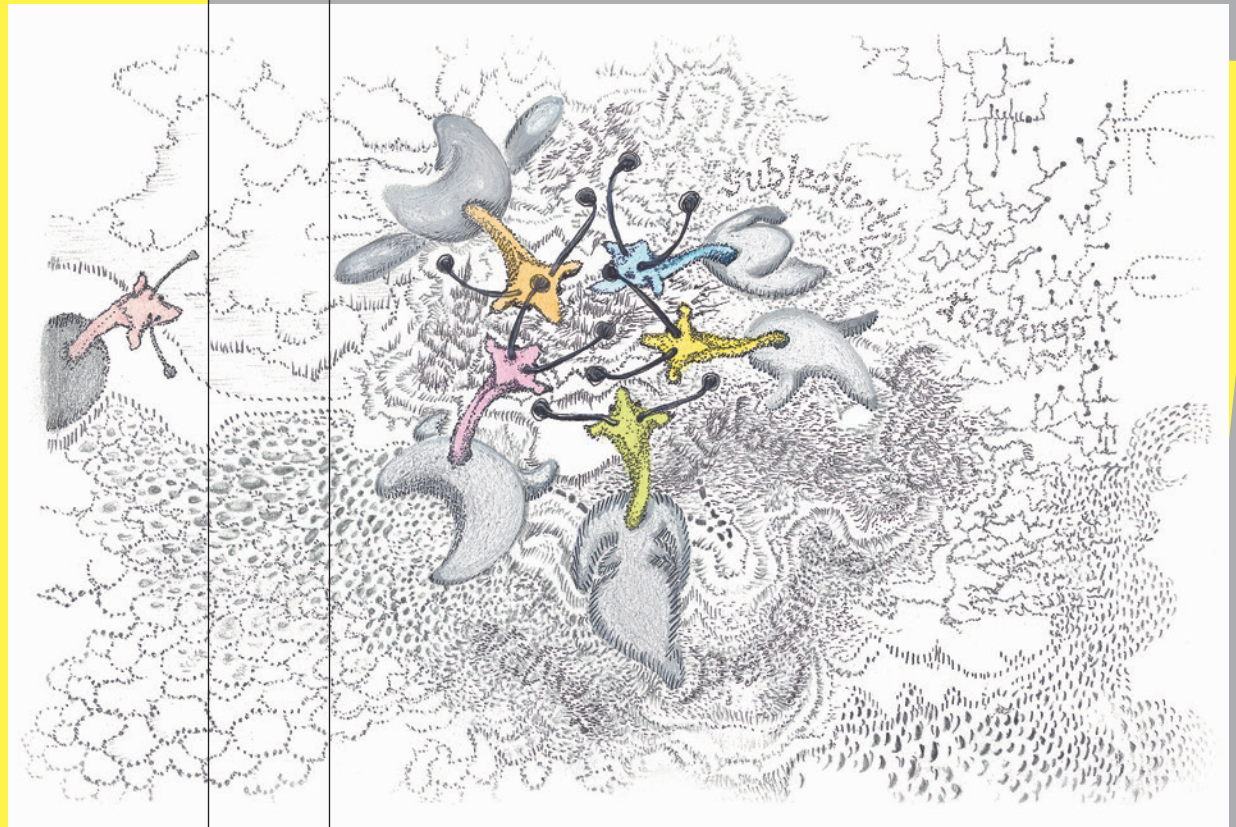


Art-Led Participative Processes

Art-Led Participative Processes



*Dialogue & Subjectivity
within Performances in the Everyday*



Jay Koh

Foreword *Arts & Answerability* by Grant Kester
Complementary essay *Negotiation-as-Active-Knowing*
by Chu Chu Yuan

Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki

Art-Led Participative Processes

Jay Koh

Art-Led Participative Processes:
Dialogue and Subjectivity
within Performances
in the Everyday

Condensed from the
Doctoral Thesis in Fine Arts
*Art-Led Participatory Processes: Subject-to-Subject
Communication within Performances in the Everyday;*
at the Academy of Fine Arts,
University of the Arts Helsinki

© 2015 Jay Koh and Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki

All rights reserved. No part of this book in printed or electronic form may be reproduced, transmitted or utilised in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without written permission of the author.

Copyright of images belongs to the authors unless otherwise stated. Every reasonable attempt has been made to identify owners of copyright. Errors or omissions will be corrected in subsequent editions.

Publisher:

Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki
www.uniarts.fi/en/kuva

Cover drawing: *Manoeuvring the Grounds of our Rich Inheritance*

by Chu Chu Yuan, 2014

Book design: Andy Tran Duc Anh

Printer: Unigrafia Oy, Helsinki, 2015

ISBN 978-952-7131-03-9 (softcover)

ISBN 978-952-7131-04-6 (electronic PDF)

Distribution and marketing rights:

Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki
www.uniarts.fi/en/kuva

Distribution of electronic copies by the author.

Contact [ifima7\[a\]gmail.com](mailto:ifima7[a]gmail.com)

To Yoke Lin, in loving memory

to Chu Yuan, for her unwavering support

to Juline and Sajan, for the joy they bring me.



Contents

Foreword by Grant Kester	
Art and Answerability in Jay Koh's Work	1
1 Introduction	7
The methodology of my practice	12
Steering factors of the methodology of practice	20
Bringing processes together as	
Art-Led Participative Processes (ALPP)	28
A working definition of ALPP	30
2 The framework of praxis	37
(1) Dialogue	44
(2) Participation	60
(3) Construction of Subjectivity	72
(4) Performances in the Everyday	78
Bringing it all together: dialogue, participation and	
construction of subjectivity within performances	
in the everyday	99
3 Public Participatory Art Projects in Ireland from 2007 to 2010	105
Anxieties of the new	106
Cross-cultural complexities	113
Reading the Self, Reading the Others (RSRO)	124
Activities following from RSRO	138
Conclusion: the working of ALPP in RSRO	141
4 ALPP as constructive model for public participatory art	145
Creating gradual shifts within the everyday	146
Non-specific human bonding	147
The artist as outsider	148
Decentred authorship	149
ALPP as negotiated relational practice	150
Freire's public pedagogy and participatory practice	152
ALPP and Augusto Boal's forms of emancipatory theatre	155
Conclusion: the four key concepts underlying ALPP	157
Implications and contributions to knowledge	159
Selected Bibliography	166
Complementary Essay by Chu Chu Yuan	
Negotiation-as-Active-Knowing: An Approach	
Evolved from Relational Art Practice	173
Bibliography	200
Colour Section	202
Index	211

List of Abbreviations:

AAA	Ayeyarwaddy Art Assembly
ALPP	Art-Led Participative Processes
CNRM	<i>Collaboration, Networking and Resource-Sharing: Myanmar</i>
ICCSA	Irish Chinese Culture and Sports Association
iFIMA	international Forum for InterMedia Art
NICA	Networking & Initiatives for Culture & the Arts
RSRO	<i>Reading the Self, Reading the Others</i>

List of Art Projects by the Authors:

Public Acts, Yangon, 1998
M-Project, Yangon, 2004
Open Academy, Yangon, 2003–2007
Portraying Ourselves: Rauma Residents on Rauma, Rauma, 2005
Performance Site: Myanmar, Borders Within Without, Yangon, 2005
Ni Hao - Dia Duit, Dublin, 2007–2010
Conversation Pieces, Seri Kembangan, 2008
Open Academy, Ulaanbaatar, 2008–2011
Reading the Self, Reading the Others (RSRO), Dublin, 2009–2010
Imagining Possibilities, Ulaanbaatar, 2009
Thinking Together, Ulaanbaatar, 2011

Acknowledgements

This book grew out of my cross-disciplinary artistic research that re-examined my art practice that began in the late 1980s when I was working as an activist-critic in the field of genetic and reproductive technology with the *Gesundheitsladen-Koeln* in Cologne. Being actively engaged across disciplines and sectors, it was there that I first experienced the camaraderie and learnt about critical discourses that fuelled our actions in response to the lack of social justice and inequalities of power. Our activities engaged with the complexities of everyday perceptions, and the immediate impact and future ramifications of social, health and political practices in society. For these experiences, my heartfelt thanks go to all of my fellow activists and colleagues, especially to Christian Döring, Mirjam Rose and Ardalan Schamlu. For their roles in the process of my development as an artist in the rich, provocative and multifaceted environment of Cologne, I give special thanks to Eva Ohlow who introduced me to her mainstream art practice; to Karin Zimmermann who assisted me in setting up and running the independent art space *arting*; to Dr. Hans Werner Peters; and to the Kulturstadt Koeln (especially to Dr. Gerdner and Johannes Bunk) for their support. I also thank artists George Kohlen, Inge Broska and Hans-Jörg Tauchert and the hundreds of local and foreign artists who contributed to the *arting* and iFIMA (international Forum for InterMedia Art) projects and activities in Germany and abroad.

Special mention goes to the Littoral Arts symposiums in the late 1990s, where I met important practitioners and writers who strongly encouraged me, such as Suzanne Lacy, Grant Kester – who greatly motivated me and later became my DFA supervisor, Barbara Steveni, the indefatigable ‘living archive’ of the

Artist Placement Group (APG), later renamed Organisation + Imagination (O+I) – who challenged my practice, and John Latham, whose theory of the ‘incidental person’ inspired me. In Finland, my thanks to Lea and Pekka Kantonen, for their encouragement and introduction to the Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki in the mid 2000s, where I later enrolled as their first foreign doctoral candidate in 2007. To the academy I give thanks for the feedback and support of my fellow students, the support of coordinator Henri Wegelius and the innumerable advice from the Head of Doctoral Studies Programme Jan Kaila, who saw me through completion of my research.

In Ireland, I would like to thank the artists, coordinators and migrants who worked with me in the Irish Chinese Culture and Sports Association; with special mention of Ed Carrol, Thomas O’Connor, Philip Gaston, Dierdre O’Mahony, Alibhe Murphy, Li Binbin, Sam and Lily Sun, Mick Wilson, Sarah Tuck and the organisations, Create Ireland and Common Ground, for their generous support.

My grateful thanks to those who examined, reviewed and/or commented on my thesis and the condensed text for this book: Bruce Barber, Chu Yuan, Tim Collins, Reiko Goto Collins, Mika Elo, Grant Kester, Suzanne Lacy, Jan Kaila, Ray Langenbach, Marco Marcon, Alejandro Meitin, Dr. Ma Thida, Anna Thuring and Gillian Whiteley.

And not to forget the people and artists who so generously supported Networking & Initiatives for Culture & the Arts – NICA’s activities in Myanmar from 1997 to 2013. Special thanks to San Minn, Tito, Phyu Mon, Chan Aye, Cho Cho Aung, Zeya Maung Maung, Aung Myint, Latt Latt Soe, Maung Maung Thein, Vicky Bowman, U Khin Maung Yin, Daw Mi Mi, C.Y. Lim, Juliana Tan and the late Maung Wuntha; and to the artists and young adults in the public projects in Chiang Mai, Dublin, Hanoi, Hue, Singapore, Yangon, Ulaanbaatar and many other places who motivated me to relearn and to do more.

And lastly, for the critical input of my collaborative partner, Chu Yuan who has seen me through many difficult times.

FOREWORD

Art and Answerability in Jay Koh’s Work

Grant Kester

I was delighted when Jay Koh asked me to contribute a foreword to his book. I have known Jay for nearly twenty years and have the greatest respect for his work as both a practitioner and a thinker in the field of socially engaged art practice. While there has been a dramatic expansion in the creation of various forms of collaborative, participatory or relational art practice over the past decade, the fact remains that much of this work has been produced with an extremely attenuated understanding of the nature of collaboration itself. The complex process whereby the spatial and temporal horizons of a given project are established, transgressed, and re-asserted, and the various subject positions (of artist, witness, collaborator, antagonist, and so on) are formed, modified and differentiated, is little understood, and seldom treated with any real theoretical or analytic sophistication. We continue to encounter a singular lack of interest among critics in studying the specific modes, mechanisms and effects of collaborative practice. As I have noted elsewhere, this form of art practice (and in particular, what I would term its ‘dialogical’ variant) makes demands on the critic and historian that are quite different from those imposed by more conventional art forms.¹

¹ See Kester, Grant (2013) ‘The Device Laid Bare: On Some Limitations in Current Art Criticism’, *E-Flux Journal*, no. 50, December 2013.

As a result it has often been left to the practitioners themselves to provide some of the most important navigational markers for the analysis of this work. With the publication of Jay Koh's *Art-Led Participatory Processes* thesis in an edited book version we have an extremely valuable report from the field, by an artist with nearly thirty years of practical experience.

Koh's work draws our attention to the importance of the shift in contemporary art from a creative paradigm based on expression to one based on what Bakhtin termed 'answerability.' Here every gesture or action is understood in terms of its relationship to a concrete, rather than a generic, interlocutor. The concept of answerability produces something like a Copernican revolution in our understanding of art, as we re-imagine the viewer, participant or collaborator as a creative agent who can answer back, and whose answers constitute a decisive contribution to the formation of a work. This approach challenges the conventional avant-garde matrix, in which the viewer is defined by their passive subordination to dominant ideological systems. It entails, as well, a decentring of the creative personality that is difficult for many artists to tolerate. This concern with answerability or reciprocity by no means implies a lack of conflict or critical tension. Rather, it suggests an understanding of conflict that is instantiated in specific bodies and institutional loci, rather than conveyed through a merely rhetorical agonism addressed to a hypothetical viewer. As Koh's extensive case studies make clear, dialogical projects are often produced out of moments or modes of dissent and conflict. This is important to note, since collaborative art practitioners are often accused of indulging in the naïve belief that one can suspend power differences in some utopian moment of communal interaction which, inevitably, masks a logic of imposed or coercive consensus.

In my own writing I think of reciprocity as a technical description of certain fundamental shifts in the nature of artistic production. It refers to the fact that the artist no longer thinks of the viewer or participant's consciousness as a kind of raw material, to be unilaterally worked on, corrected or expanded in various ways. Reciprocity should be opposed not to consensus per se, but to a condition of sovereignty expressed by the artist relative

to the viewer. Reciprocity means that the transmission of values and experience runs both ways (that the participant exercises a level of creative agency and that the artist's subjectivity becomes open and receptive rather than simply expressive). This movement is never complete or all-encompassing. Reciprocity as such has no necessary relationship to the form that these values might take. Within a given dialogical situation it's not uncommon for insight to be generated that challenges normative values and beliefs (in fact, that transformative process is really at the basis of a dialogical aesthetic). This is a byproduct of a reciprocal context, but there's nothing about reciprocity per se (as a formal transformation in the way in which art is produced) that guarantees this outcome. Rather, the outcome is dependent on the fluency with which the artist and their collaborators respond to a reciprocal dynamic. Koh's book provides us with a series of object-lessons in how the artist seeks to achieve that fluency.

Dialogical projects are defined by four key parameters. The first is the physical site in and through which a given project is developed. This site is defined by specific geographic, spatial, cultural and political variables. In the case of Koh's work the sites have included Chiang Mai, Danzig, Dublin, Hanoi, Hue, Seri Kembangan, Rauma, Ulaanbaatar and Yangon, among other locales. These cities are not generally seen as major centres for contemporary art. This relative distance from the habitus of the global art world is a telling indication of Koh's desire to work independently of many of the structuring constraints of art practices that are dependent on biennials, museums and Kunsthallen. Second, dialogical projects are defined by a specific ensemble of social actors, with whom the artist establishes a set of working relationships. The mindful negotiation of these relationships is at the centre of Koh's artistic practice. Third, these projects revolve around a particular problematic, or set of tensions. In some cases this problematic is identified at the outset of a project and at other times it only becomes apparent through the unfolding of the work. The process by which the artist is introduced, or gains entrée, to a given site and ensemble of agents is a key component of the problematic. Finally, dialogical projects are defined by a temporal dimension. In his key projects, such as the work he

produced with Chu Yuan in Myanmar, the duration of the work was dictated by the unfolding logic and potentials of the project itself, rather than the a priori curatorial or conceptual limits of an institutional commission. As a result, Koh and Chu Yuan had to work for some time to collect the resources necessary to sustain the project over a period of several years.

Needless to say, the interrelationships among these four factors are highly complex. Thus, Koh's work begins with a process of conceptual, political and affective mapping. Simply learning how a given site is structured, who speaks and who remains silent, what is left unsaid or unexpressed, and what norms, constraints or protocols govern the act of self-expression requires a highly focused form of attention, as well as an awareness of the ways in which the artist's own presence diminishes, enhances or transforms these norms and constraints. Koh's book is especially valuable because he provides us with direct observations and reflections about this mapping process. As noted above, his works often unfold over a period of several months, and in the case of his most ambitious projects, years. This durational condition is one of the most difficult aspects of dialogical art practice for many critics to grasp, accustomed as they are to works of art that are designed with the specific intention of being disclosed to a viewer during a single viewing encounter. Conventional, object-based practices rely on a spatial logic in which the work is oriented towards the viewer within a planar field; object and ground, or artwork and gallery space, with clearly demarcated horizons (where the gallery begins and where it ends, the architectural constraints of walls, floor and ceiling). A given object or installation may attempt to challenge or transgress these spatial parameters, but it is, ultimately, always contained by them. The work of art sits within this space and presents itself for a viewing operation that is both anonymous and temporally limited. As Michael Fried notes, in his famous description of the 'literalist' object, the work of art appears in the gallery 'almost as though it has been waiting' for the viewer.² Fried of course was writing about what he viewed, in 1968, as a renegade tendency towards theatricality that has, by now, become the normative condition of contemporary art. The work awaits the viewer for its consum-

mation (to be both 'consumed' as an object and completed as a teleological project).

In dialogical practice the work of art doesn't resolve itself into a single artifact or product into which the 'real' art content is deposited. Further, the dialogical work doesn't require the presence of an external viewer in the conventional sense, and this closed-off or bracketed condition is seen by some critics as representing an abrogation of the artist's obligation to a public intelligibility (typically expressed as a perceived indifference to the broader audience ostensibly addressed by more mainstream art practices). I would contend that the dialogical work is not more 'private,' but rather, that it's relationship to the Other (viewer, participant, collaborator) is precisely not generalizing and anonymous, but specific and intentional. It is a relationship that unfolds over time through episodes of disruption and conflict as well as conciliation, rather than being fixed in a single perceptual event. Moreover, it is a relationship that is defined by un-visualizable moments of haptic, somatic and aural expression (which constitute what we might term, following Bakhtin, the 'intonation' of a given dialogical encounter). Koh, as an artist, has developed a finely tuned sensitivity to these intonations. They are, in a way, the very material of his work within a domain of aesthetic, affective, and gestural labor. To follow Koh along on his analysis of these projects requires us to uncouple the concept of the aesthetic from a purely visual referent: an image or symbol that you can see and therefore verify as truthful. Rather, we must expand our understanding of the aesthetic to encompass its original meaning, of sense-based experience that constitutes a form of thinking the world through the body.

- 2 Fried, Michael (1998) *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 163.
 'Someone needs merely to enter the room in which a literalist work has been placed to become that beholder, that audience of one – almost as though the work in question has been waiting for him.'