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

Jay Koh

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Dialogue & Subjectivity within Performances in the Everyday

Foreword *Arts & Answerability* by Grant Kester
Complementary essay *Negotiation-as-Active-Knowing* by Chu Chu Yuan
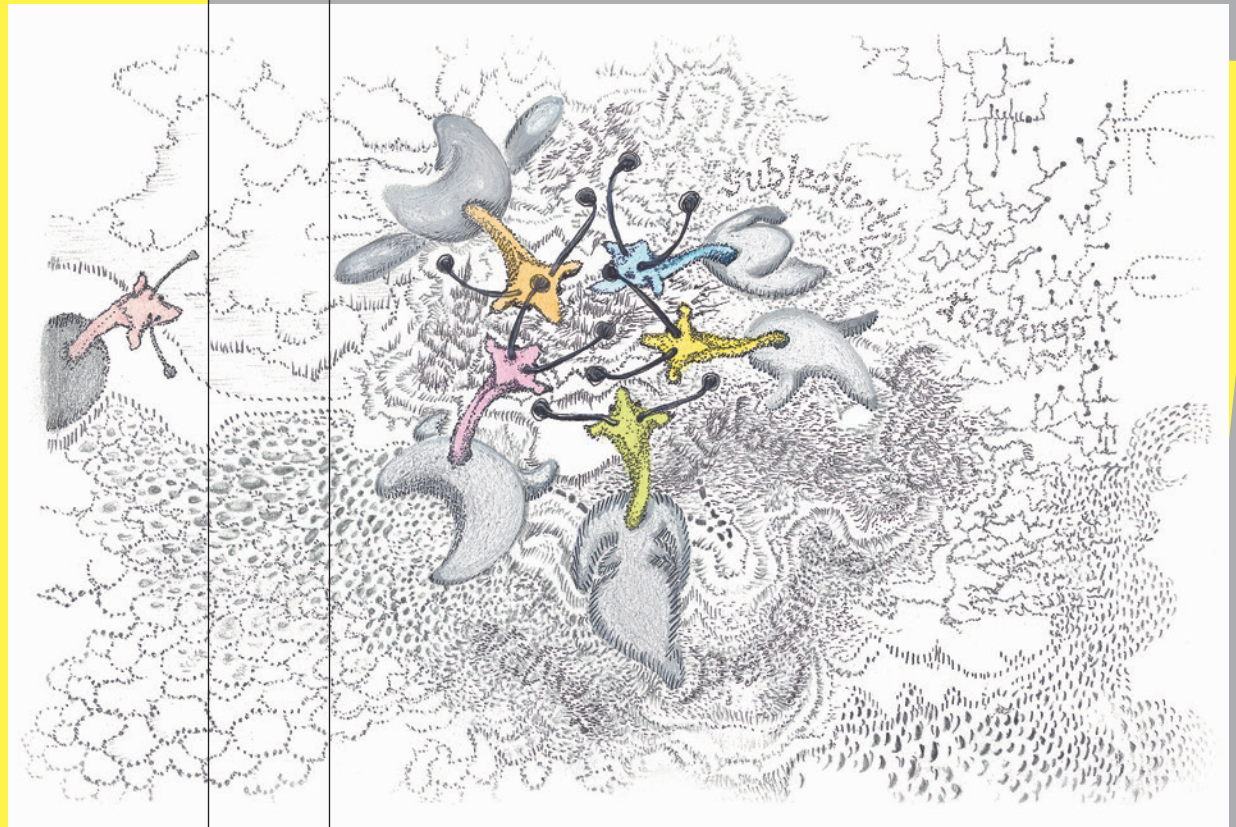
Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki

Art-Led Participative Processes

Jay Koh

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

To Yoke Lin, in loving memory

to Chu Yuan, for her unwavering support

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

Contents

List of Abbreviations:

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

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

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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]

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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 dissensus 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 Kunsthalles. 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.'