

**ARTIST'S RESEARCH TEXT ON PUBLIC AND PARTICIPATIVE ART:
PERFORMANCE IN EVERYDAY LIFE**

Draft by Jay Koh

INTRODUCTORY NOTE:

The following text - commenting on the initial stage of a public and participative art project that I am working on in Ireland - is a minor excursion into the methodology of public and participative art practice that I have been developing with Malaysian artist Chu Yuan. This work would come under the initial stage of our methodology, which involves activities in engaging the local and setting up a foundation for sustainable relationships. This methodology uses art led participatory processes (1) to create an open learning, experiential and reflexive platform. It serves as Practice-as-Research (PaR), for us to try out the methodology and be informed by communicative, interactive and critical processes in the field. The acquired experience and generated knowledge will in turn be used to update the methodology.

A LOOK INTO METHODOLOGICAL APPLICATION (2)

In the initial stage of my research in 2007 for *Ni Hao – Dia Duit* (Hello in Chinese and Irish), a cross cultural interactive project in Dublin between a “new community” - mostly mid term transitional migrants from the Northeastern part of China - and Dubliners, I had organised a series of conversational get-togethers in places considered most comfortable for the Chinese.

One of these took place in a private room of a Chinese restaurant equipped with a large LCD TV and karaoke, set up to create privacy and a pleasant, relaxed and friendly mood. Present were a few members of the Chinese ‘new community’ and a few Irish artists who had intended to participate in the project. After the initial introductions and the partaking of some refreshments (non alcoholic beverage), I noticed that one of the Irish artists was in concentrated exchange with a young Chinese

who seem to be replying to the enquiries directed at him without any expression of interest. I also noticed that the Chinese avoided eye contact with the Irish artist but as I had to play host to the group, my attention was scattered and I felt I could not intervene without intruding on their exchange.

A young Chinese artist from Beijing (whom I had met in Singapore had been invited to Dublin to participate in this project) was responsible for inviting that young Chinese to the gathering. She told me later that the young Chinese felt very ill at ease at being questioned by the Irish artist and that he felt as if he was being on display in a zoo, being scrutinised and examined closely. This person then decided not to take part in any of our future gatherings. When I retold this to the Irish artist, he expressed astonishment, responding that he got good replies to his questions. The impression he had was that a fruitful conversation had taken place.

So I think that the Chinese young man and the Irish artist were both correct to arrive at their respective conclusions - which may then lead to a conclusion that I did not do a good job in setting up this social get together.

The Chinese young man, coming from a particular social and cultural background (and not having any prior knowledge of artist initiated public and participative art) and relying on his personal criteria to evaluate this encounter, decided not to participate in the project. If I were to apply the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (3) (URT) - a social communication theory that explains initial social encounters between strangers – onto this experience, I would conclude that the young Chinese would have at some point of this initial encounter already decided that he does not wish to develop any social relationship with the Irish artist. Due the scope of this essay, I will here only briefly detail URT as a set of axioms and theorems and strategies put forth by Berger and Calabrese to deconstruct initial social encounters into stages of entry, decision and exit or continuity. The strategies are passive (as observations), active (as enquiries) and interactive (as conversations), manifest in processes where the set of axioms and theorems are applied to reduce uncertainty. However, applying URT onto cross cultural encounters highlights some inconsistencies. Taking

Axiom 1 as an example:

Strangers enter an interaction with high levels of uncertainty about the other. However, as they begin to talk to one another, the level of uncertainty decreases. In turn, as the uncertainty decreases, the interactants will talk more.

This axiom seems applicable in the social world of respective individual cultures but does not seem applicable in this situation of a cross cultural interaction to reduce uncertainty, as the meaning that this initial conversation between the Irish and the Chinese carries is different for each of them.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

An individual's social communicative and interactive skills are predominantly determined by his/her perception of the 'self' in relationship to others. These perceptions are formed through one's primary and secondary socialisation processes (4). An important factor in development of the 'self' are the pool of memories acquired from individual relationships, engagements and experiences accumulated from everyday encounters including the social narratives of memories anchored in social collectives and local histories.

I would like to draw out a few points for discussion such as culture specificities and practices and how they determine or pre determine reception of others. They are:

1. SPECIFIC INHERITED BELIEFS AND CULTURAL PRACTICES

The Chinese who recently migrated from China place much emphasis on the value of guarding one's and other's 'face' (dignity), prefer to socialise in familiar cultural spaces and feel uncomfortable when exposed to other cultural practices such as languages and behaviour. These can be confirmed by the creation of Chinatowns around the world and each Chinatown normally houses a dominant Chinese ethnic group. They are uncomfortable even amongst their fellow Chinese nationals who originate from other Chinese regions.

When they are looking for accommodation or housemates, they will prefer to share with

Chinese who originate from their own region believing that their common language and culture produces similar personal habits and these would ease tension when living in close confinement. This is no exception in Dublin, the community business representatives have applied officially to the city council to name Parnell Street as Chinatown and over 80% of the Chinese in Dublin are recent migrants (from less than 10 years ago) originating from the Northeastern part of China.

Initial encounters between Chinese usually function as occasions for the exchange of friendly gestures, which then may pave the ground for mutual undertakings that can benefit both parties. These joint undertakings are mostly in business, money making or to gain useful connections or references for economic activities. So during initial encounters references on critical issues such as political thoughts and affiliations should be avoided. After all they have gone through the experience of living under a communist regime and trust for strangers is certainly not easily dispensed. Therefore they have developed personal networks that can facilitate such activities to meet their social and economical needs. From their background they certainly have no experience of encountering artists working in engaged art projects such as *Ni Hao - Dia Duit* or experience with NGOs working on promoting social interactions and cohesion. Some of them thought that I may be a spy sent to be in their midst by the authorities which led to my action of initiating a series of dialogical mass communications in the local Chinese newspaper Sun Emerald in order to introduce and publicise the reason for my activities in the community. The online platform of the newspaper allow continue dialogue with the respondents to the publicise materials.

2. *ETHNOCENTRIC PRACTICES AND RITUALS*

My use of the term ethnocentricity here is not to denote feelings of superiority of one's race but rather the narrow viewing of other culture's practices from the perspective of one's own. For example, initial social encounters between the Chinese occur normally over food and

usually much more food is ordered than can be eaten, a sign of the host's generosity, hospitality and desire to make the guests feel comfortable.

Referring to the narrative above, the young Chinese who came to our gathering probably did so not because he wanted any favour from those present but was probably interested in exploring possibilities - on the pragmatic side, cultural activities of this sort is not of value to him as they do not bring any immediate financial rewards except for the potential of enlarging his chances of getting better employment. During that exchange with the Irish artist, he probably did not want to be impolite by not answering the questions put to him by the Irish artist, but in fact his body language of avoiding eye contact was a sign of unease. He later confided in the young Chinese artist of his displeasure and discomfort. The young Chinese artist also did not possess the experience and knowledge to explain and defuse the tension that can arise from cross cultural differences and to convince him of the potential possibilities of how an engaged art process can benefit him and the Chinese community and therefore could not persuade him to sustain the engagement.

Although the Irish artist who participated in this project has acquired several years of experience working with local youth from the working class in long term community art and education projects, he was in this instance not sensitive to the non verbal and verbal dialogue that the young Chinese visually and orally projected (e.g. his body language, the contents in the answers, etc.) but relied solely on his own rationalisation that as long as verbal dialogue is taking place, it must be positive. This reliance solely on single track rationalisation to draw a conclusion is precisely what Kant was critiquing in *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁽⁵⁾ The artist's rationalization is I believe, a prior made judgment, based on his previous experience of working with local Irish youth - where dialogue is the crucial element, and almost functions as a ritual. Such prior made judgment is subjective and closes off understanding (*Der Verstand*) that is important to the whole process of knowledge acquisition.

METHODOLOGY AND PRACTICE-AS-RESEARCH

I have been developing a methodology with Chu Yuan through the years of working on engaged art projects that investigates social encounters between strangers in the process of creating collaborative relationships. The research is informed by knowledge derived mostly from sociological research and the dialogical aesthetics as theorized by Grant Kester (6). Dialogical Aesthetics as coined by Kester denotes the processes in artistic activities that place values on the act of listening, communication and the formation of intersubjective meanings between participants in creating collaborative relationships.

The methodology has social stages and begins with our researching into and understanding of social and relational dynamics (factors influenced by dynamics of the relationships of local specificities, local power structures, local cultural practices) on site and building relationships with a few individuals from a particular locality or community. Then we start to set up or frame a series of social situations that are anchored in everyday activities for the purpose of building conversations. As a form of Practice-as-Research, (7) these situations and actions respond to the social environment and space and allow potentiality for parties to meet without commitment; to initiate relationships through a phase of activities aimed at reducing uncertainties amongst strangers, where participants can decide whether they would wish to move toward creating relationship. These meetings and interactions may then lead to the creation of trust, bonding and the desire to explore cross cultural differences, similarities, tensions and identify directions for some form of collaborative actions to take place. These activities run parallel to efforts in allowing key persons to be identified, who will then lead initiatives and share responsibilities so that the ownership of generated knowledge can remain with the local group, people or 'community'.

Knowledge on local specificities and power relationships will also emerge and be transmitted and translated during this period of interpersonal verbal and non verbal communications. I call these

communications “dialogue” as the term signifies not only the exchanges that take place but also the production of consequences from an initial communicated meaning or action. These dialogical processes can create *transitional dynamic social bonding* that is necessary for the exploration of issues and identification of similarities and objectives; negotiation of differences, formation of confidence and mutual trust so as to open the way for the sharing of embedded information, and allow tension to emerge for address, discussions and scrutiny.

Our methodology incorporates a longer term timeframe so as to allow intersubjective meanings to develop and surface amongst participants, and to address these meanings in subsequent activities, thus enabling all participating parties to reduce their own feelings of uncertainty about each other and hopefully move forward to create some form of constructive relationships. My use of the term “intersubjective meanings” here, developed from Grant Kester’s research into the development of relationships that can lead to collaborative artistic led projects, refer to meanings generated through an active conscious process, dynamic and conversational in nature and are different to those that arise from the definition of ‘intersubjectivity’ as put forward in Charles Taylor's essay “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man” (8) which refer to ideas that are fundamental to the construction of a society's values that exist and function beneath awareness. In my own investigations, I have found that for intersubjective meanings to produce any consequence or effect in constructing collaborative relationships, these meanings need to be mostly positive in nature, as they are being formed in the initial ‘trial’, transitional and ‘tolerative’ stages of relationships, therefore if these meanings do not carry the promise of positive values for the individuals participants, then the encounter would probably stop there, halting any further development in relational or collaborative possibilities, or the relational process may develop in an unpredictable direction and may not serve the original intention for initiating it.

Kester’s theorisation does not delve into the social conditions or the individually acquired knowledge of the participant that can pre-determine the success of a dialogic process. From my experience I observed that participants coming from different cultural backgrounds (and belief

systems) each possess different concepts of the meaning and purpose of dialogue that would lead to misinterpretations. These different forms of understanding will affect the reduction of uncertainty and the formation of intersubjective meanings. Intersubjective meaning can also be produced by individual actions in public such as by being present or participating in the social events organised by others. This participation would be seen as generating meanings of goodwill or to show respect or affiliation to a cause and/or contribute to the maintenance of the other's social environment, positions or everyday practices. Such interactions have been defined by Erving Goffman as individual and collaborative (team) performances to communicate intentions, collaborations and act out representations. (9)

CRITICAL FRAMEWORKS

This essay's parameter is confined to discussing only the interactive processes that take place within the 1st stage of our working methodology, and I will now bring in some critical frameworks to discuss the processes and actions that take place here.

PERFORMANCES IN EVERYDAY LIFE

These actions - the artistic processes initiated by the artist - can be framed as *performances in everyday life*, whereby existing opportunities and situations in everyday life are used as the vehicle for interactions to take place. The process of 'constructing' these performances consist of activities such as listening to everyday articulations, narratives of thoughts, memories, concerns, hopes/wishes and experiences of potential participants and understanding their needs, reflections and assessments (values, judgments, positions etc. expressed in their opinions) related to social situations and contemporary issues. In Grant Kester's writing concerning my practice, he wrote that these processes can "create a "discursive" model of the aesthetic that allow context specificities to emerge and to form and transform subjectivity in a series of dynamic and dialogical exchanges".(10) Participants need a space that is familiar and comfortable for such initiated

exchanges to take place. The reduction of anxiety and absence of cognitive stress will facilitate embedded knowledge to surface and open door to share intimacies, opening up what can be likened to a 'safe space' (11).

The performances in everyday life, in the early phase of our methodology, function in specific senses (a function that would change in different aspects of our work. i.e. initial, intermediate and ending stage). My use of the phase here differs in meaning from that evoked by Richard Schechner when he describes performances in everyday life as “make belief” versus “make believe”:

“Make-believe performances maintain a clearly marked boundary between the world of the performance and everyday reality. Make-belief performances intentionally blur that boundary” (12)

I see the function of these performances in everyday life from cultural anthropological, social communications and experiential perspectives, that is, for the purpose of establishing transitional bonds and to reduce uncertainty in the initial stage of the encounters. Through these performances, artists and participants can create connections, find commonalities and develop familiarity as well as construct and develop insights and understanding for 'new' as well as existing experience and knowledge. The focus is on creating relationships and on allowing intersubjective meanings to form. These performances are located in the very real exigencies of everyday life, are given time and space to develop organically and not powerfully/ strenuously (in the sense of 'forcefully or 'going out of the way') manipulated or directed for “effects” as described in Schechner's “make belief” performances.

The performers in these everyday life situations need to be aware of the type of “front” being selected as mentioned by Goffman (13) for these encounters. The “front” here is explained as that part of a performance that creates a continuous presence and exerts influence on observers. These “fronts” are categorised into “setting”, “appearance” and “manner”, physical attributes that lend

substance and provide information to the geographic site, social status and mode of interactive roles that the performer takes on and are active in. These “fronts” also aid the creation of meanings and messages as conveyed by the performers and strengthen the positions taken by the performers.

These activities and performances of the artist in engaged listening, the interactions to acquire local knowledge and initiate relationships are long term actions similar to the research strategy framed as "Participant Observation", (14) which is commonly adopted in the discipline of cultural anthropology as well as in communication studies and social psychology. This form of research has its limitation as information gathered are very group specific and many ethical concerns have to be addressed. Some of these concerns are the non-acknowledgment of the privileged positions that researchers occupy (“expert”, resource rich person, objectification, etc.) and possible influence on the outcome by the observed who intentionally perform for the observer. Engaged artist needs to recognize, acknowledge and work on rectifying such shortcomings.

REDUCTION OF UNCERTAINTY

The necessity of working to reduce uncertainty is necessary in contemporary life which has constructed various meanings, responses, behavior patterns, protective structures, barriers and institutions around ‘otherness’ and strangers. Chu Yuan and I often find ourselves being placed in position as outsider or stranger when we work with different communities or groups, and we also believe that it is necessary to engage and work with ‘others’ and ‘otherness’, with participants in groups/ circles who are ‘other’ to us and also to bring them into contact and connection with those whom they are unfamiliar with. To us, to realize/ understand the ‘other’ is a necessary ingredient to realizing/ understanding the self. The “other” is the door to understand reality in relation to oneself, as mentioned by Lacan as the mirror stage of the self.

“I am led, therefore, to regard the function of the mirror-stage as a particular case of the function of the *imago*, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality –

or, as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*.”(15)

We would also define the ‘other’ or the ‘stranger’ as not only the one from outside one’s social space, but also ones who hold different views, habits, practices that is form within one’s own social space. A lot of energy, time and dialogical processes needs to go into addressing the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, and the kinds of misunderstandings that can occur, which in ordinary circumstances, is difficult to expect from persons who are busy with their daily life, and also requires the development of certain amount of trust and openness between participants (the artist here is also addressed as a participant). As in the case of the young Chinese, in the early stage of introduction, not enough trust and familiarity has been built up in order to open up to difference, and in contemporary social life, if there’s no perceived ‘necessity’, one would not invest much energy into something which one on first experience find ‘strange’ or divergent from one’s own ways.

Sara Ahmed’s “Strange Encounters”, informed by postcolonialist and feminist perspectives, provides us with a deeper understanding of the constructions of identities and mental concepts of the ‘other’ or the ‘stranger’ that is at the heart of the ‘strange encounter’. She argues that the stranger is not without identity but rather is the one on whom we have projected our own understanding, bias and knowledge of ‘strange(r)ness’). She in fact questions the very possibility of an ontology of the ‘stranger’, claiming that present discourses, whether the discourses of ‘stranger-danger’ (which teaches fear for the stranger) or alterity in postmodernism (which encourages a celebration/ an embrace of the stranger’s difference or otherness), fetishes the figure of the stranger. Stranger fetishism work to conceal the way in which different forms of displacements are all given one name, distracting us from the very processes of inclusion and exclusion that is at work in contemporary social structures. (16)

The individual displays of desire, distraction and distrust that are revealed during encounters are the result of embedded tension that exists in the self in relation to the other, is supported by Lacan’s theorisation of the mirror stage, whereby:

“... this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatisation through the desire of the others, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence by the co-operation of others, and turns the *I* into that apparatus for which every instinctual thrust constitutes a danger, ...”. (17)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

LISTENING AND ENGAGING ACROSS DIVIDES

In order to engage across divides I use art led participatory processes to create interventionist praxis (18) to transmit educational value, catalyst change in individual awareness and acquire knowledge of criticality. The praxis is negotiated with individuals and responds to local cultural practices. It is not the intervention that is traditionally used in mainstream modernist art which is confrontational and provocative. In modernist approaches, the point of reference is always from the artist's position and they are often adopted by artists coming from modernist art training and they can only be used to initiate actions and attain positions that are often inadequate and unsuccessful in engaging meaningfully or in creating sustainability. These artists rely on the top down communicative model and the much hyped transcendental value of art's creative transformative potential to justify their unilateral and 'un-self-critical' actions. The nearest they can come to defining their works as public and participative, or as socially engaged art, is by applying the narrowly interpretable (according to Nicolas Bourriard) mono disciplinary theory of Relational Aesthetics (19) to frame and substantiate their concept and actions. As stated by Bourriard:

“The principal argument held against relational art is that it supposedly represents a watered down form of social critique. What these critics overlook is that the content of these artistic proposals has to be judged in a formal way: in relation to art history, and bearing in mind the political values of forms” (20)

From this, we can deduce that RA does not wish to engage with investigations, readings and insights from other disciplines such as sociology (communication), anthropology (cultural) and psychology (cognitive), just to name a few, that have contributed a long history of research and engagements, have informed and brought to light the complex nature of social and public interactions, cognitive perceptions, inter personal relationships, and the ever-challenging dynamics of social communication.

In public and participative art, an open mindset, inclusive processes and suspension of hasty judgment that may obscure sensitivity towards different cultural behaviors, perspectives and value systems, are crucial for the creation of ethical, sustainable and productive engagement. This is especially important when these art activities wish to engage across disciplines and sectors. Working across cultural contexts one needs to explore and acquire at least elementary knowledge of another belief system and local sensitivity so that it can inform initial social encounters.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE NI HAO – DIA DUIT PROJECT

In spite of the earlier mentioned setback, the first phase of the project was successful with other participants. In the first 6 months, art led processes were continually introduced to the Chinese living in Dublin through publications about related activities in the largest Chinese weekly newspaper and conduction of workshops on introducing Irish culture and history for the Chinese in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin Castle. The Chinese newspaper then became a major supporter of the project and together we initiated the forming of the Irish Chinese Culture and Sports Association (ICCSA). At the present moment, a grant has been given to ICCSA by the Arts Council through the artist in community scheme managed by CREATE IRELAND to initiate the project “Reading the Self, Reading the Others”. (21)

1 By 'art led participatory process', I mean creative interactive processes that can facilitate the generation of knowledge and evoking of participants imagination to envision alternatives and the acquirement of criticality to recognise differences in choices, values and relationships. These knowledge and criticality will also enable participants to 'see' the larger picture of cause and effect and how local specificities, identities, histories and experience construct power relationships and everyday performances.

2 A summary of the methodology can be found here: <http://ifima.net/IFIMA/personal/jkcy%20Collaborative%20Prac.htm>

3 Uncertainty Reduction Theory is expounded by Berger, C.R. And Calabrese, R.J., in Some Exploration in Initial Interaction and Beyond: Toward a Development Theory of Interpersonal Communication, Human Communication Research, 1,, 1975, p 99-112. This theory can give insight to the initial stages of interactions between strangers and argues that interpersonal communications are mainly conversational in nature but also include non verbal expressions and meanings communicated

- through body language to decrease uncertainty level between strangers. This process contributes to the initial constructive steps of building intersubjective meanings by the reduction of uncertainties (cognitive stress, anxiety) and can usually lead to greater predictability of future interactions. These initial stages of interactions conclude when decisions have been made by the persons involved in the interaction as to whether a relationship between one self and others will be developed or be ended.
- 4 These are processes theorised in Sociology as cognition processes that build individual learning capacity to understand and acquire knowledge on social behaviours, meanings and positions of the relationships of the self and others.
- 5 Kant, Immanuel, Critique of Pure Reason. Cambridge University Press. 1999. Kant has in late 1700s written books and chapters on the faculties of reasoning, under headings of understanding (*Der Verstand*), sensibility (*Die Sinnlichkeit*), faculty of cognition (*Die Erkenntnisvermoegen*), judgment (*Das Urteil*) and comprehension (*Die Umfängen*), to name a few of the connecting main topics. One of the points made in these writings is that Kant criticised the tendency of the mind to pre-categorise experiences and use these prior made judgments to assess new experience and knowledge.
- 6 Kester, Grant. Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art. University of California Press. 2004
- 7 Practice-as-research grounds research within 1st hand experience as field work, which acts as a kind of site or situation or arena for the research, while being profoundly influenced by the unfolding research direction. The research constructs critical frameworks (connection to a larger picture, histories, etc.) while project work offers points of experience that test ideas and strategies as well as prompt discussion and analysis. This artistic research approach becomes a form of scrutinising, working out and 'acting out' (performance) our ideas and concepts about participatory and collaborative practice.
- 8 Taylor, Charles, Philosophical Papers: Philosophy and the Human Sciences v. 2. Cambridge University Press.
- 9 Goffman, Erving 1990 reprint. The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Penguin Books. 1985
- 10 Kester, Grant Summer Special Edition, edited by Sean Cubitt. "The Art of Listening (and of Being Heard): Jay Koh's Discursive Networks" in Third Text – Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture, Routledge, 1999
- 11 Chu Yuan, Chu "Between Comfort and Discomfort: Opening up Dialogic Space in Intercultural Encounters of Different Knowledge Systems" presented at *Art and Knowledge* Symposium, Helsinki, 2005
- 12 Schechner, Richard. Performance studies: An Introduction. Routledge, 2002, p 35
- 13 Goffman, Erving reprint. The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Penguin Books, 1990, (Chapter 1: Performances)
- 14 The method "Participant Observation" were first adopted in the field work of social anthropologists, especially Bronisław Malinowski and his students in Britain, the students of Franz Boas in the United States, and in the urban research of the Chicago School of sociology.
- 15 Jacques Lacan's lecture, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience", delivered at the 16th International Congress of Psychoanalysis, Zurich, July 17, 1949.
- 16 Ahmed, Sara. Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality. Routledge. 2000
- 17 Ibid
- 18 I use this term in reference to Paulo Freire's definition of 'praxis' in his book Pedagogy of the Oppressed.
- 19 Bourriard, Nicolas. Relational Aesthetics. Trans. by Pleasance, Simon and Woods, Fronza with the participation of Copeland, Mathieu . Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002
- 20 Ibid pg 82
- 21 The project is portray in this link: <http://readingselfreadingothers.com/>