

WHERE ART HAPPENS SESSION 2

GETTING OUT THERE: ART IN THE COMMUNITY

Saturday 20th June 2009. **Moderator: Eva McGovern**, Managing Editor, ARTERI

Through the month of June 2009 RogueArt held a series of three talks on the theme “Where Art Happens”. The aim of the talks was to introduce questions and open discussions of how art is presented to and supported by the larger community. Museum and gallery directors, corporate sponsors, art managers, art patrons, and artists, both in Malaysia and within the Southeast Asian region, came together to share their experiences and ideas. The project was made possible with the support of Yayasan Sime Darby. Our media partner was Off The Edge Magazine.

ABOUT THE PROJECT SPONSOR

Yayasan Sime Darby endeavours to support and promote the development of arts and culture in Malaysia. Its aim is to encourage creativity and foster talent amongst Malaysia's multicultural peoples, regardless of age. It will sponsor initiatives to strengthen arts institutions, develop cultural knowledge and resources, and encourage contributions from artists to enhance the quality of life in a multi-cultural society. The desired result of such initiatives is the instilling of awareness and appreciation for the richness of Malaysia's unique cultural heritage and legacy.

General

Where Session 1 of WAH surveyed the current situation of local and regional art, Session 2 explored specific art projects and strategies in engaging communities, looking at the impact and legacy of such projects, the role of artist as educator, facilitator, collaborator, researcher. We were lucky to have a fantastic, inspiring panel of speakers from Vietnam, Shanghai, Indonesia and Malaysia, each of whom has been a major influence in the art and cultural communities they come from.

MORNING SESSION

Amanda Heng, Singaporean artist and educator, began the session with a useful overview of art audience development in Singapore. Following the principle that art is important for a knowledge economy, the Singaporean government has taken a number of steps from the 80s onwards to develop audiences for art, including substantial funding to support tertiary arts education and the Public Service scholarship (PSC) which has yearly sent batches of students abroad to study art, trained on condition that they come back and teach in secondary schools, and outreach programmes such as Museums in School. In the late 80s and early 90s Singapore artists began to work as a community through artist-run spaces such as Artists Village and 5th Passage, providing different avenues to engage audiences outside of museums. Today, many art groups are coming up, such as P-10, Art Instinct, Women In The Arts (WITAS), Platique Kinetic Worms, Art Without Limits etc. organising projects, events, workshops, talks, and public forums. Artists have begun to create projects specifically to cater to prisons or hospitals, shopping malls, the street. Cross-disciplinary projects, and multi-media events engage with filmmakers, architects, sociology and history students, groups concerned with ecology, tapping audiences in their areas and sharing resources.

Amanda then spoke about three projects by a former PSC scholar, Felicia Low, whose role has been to mediate arts to places where art does not exist, to help give voice to individuals and communities that are not heard, exploring the uneasy relations between teachers, parents and

students in education through various installations (*Deviant*); trying art experience as education with 30 schoolchildren (*School by the Sea*); engaging with prison school inmates, encouraging them to express their prison experience through drama and visual art forms (*The Visitors*, an Art Without Limits project).

Amanda only had time to speak on two of her many inspiring projects. She talked about the emotional experience of *Memories of Senses* (1994), a 2-week workshop in culminating in a 3-nights multi-disciplinary performance organised by Very Special Art, engaging with people with different kinds of disabilities, many of whom had never come into contact with people with other disabilities, or had been discouraged from social interaction, finding new channels of self-expression through the workshops in theatre, making props, installations, and the performance itself. The *HouseWORK* project brought up the issue of housework, responding to the maids abuse cases appearing in the news in 2003, in which Amanda and 2 other artists set up a Home Service Agency, offering cleaning services and discussion to clients. Amanda did not have time to talk about the mini-carnival 'Raised', but read more at raisedproject.blogspot.com.

Hanoi-based artist **Tran Luong** described Vietnam as a 'totally opposite environment' to Singapore, a society still struggling for a basic understanding of what art is, a place 'now beautiful on the surface but underneath living under pressure of censorship and mind-control', where long-term goals include shifting peoples' perceptions on art as a basis for self-recognition and empowerment, looking at historical moments, current political situations, opening challenges, provoking questions.

He spoke of his transition from a successful contemporary painter in a growing free market surrounded by peers 'reproducing their own work living a convenient life' to his work now. 'By the mid 1990s I felt everything was wrong, it wasn't working for my life and my community, so I destroyed my own work to learn to do different things'- 'doing art in the community became very important to us because people were dumb and blind, had no chance to speak and losing the ability to honestly show their true selves in public' – 'a psychological sickness' from which they had to 'try to explore ways to release our own problematic.'

Much of Luong's projects, performances and interactive works try to bring art to public places - 'in Vietnam, the long historical gap in education especially for art [has left] so little audience who can reach any kind of high art - it made me think about how to fill that gap'. He also tries to address the Vietnamese in the context of regional experience and art, and in 2006 organised a group of Vietnamese artists to create projects in Phnom Penh, Chiangmai, Kunming, Rangoon. In Phnom Penh, they brought toothbrushes to the crowded edge of the Tonle Sap. For four hours, the artists brushed their teeth and were joined by nearly 300 people. 'We need to have more open and friendly about our memories. That can start from this interactive project'.

Luong also participates in development projects, bringing art to isolated communities. In 2005, he and two young artists worked for over 5 months with children on an isolated string of islands in the centre of Vietnam, forgotten by the government, getting the kids to tell their story by camera or painting, and starting a program to clean up the polluted and over-fished seafront (initially amused and impatient parents eventually joined in), bringing the children into a nearby city for an exhibition of their works. Another recent 3-year project with minority peoples in Cimakai on Vietnam's border with China tried to bring successful people – celebrities, intellectuals, to do workshops, make speeches, reach out to the children – to the community as an inspiration, to bridge the distance between the rich and the poor. TV coverage and involvement has turned it into a national project, raising money to build schools etc.

Journalist and theatre worker **Hari Azizan** spoke about four programs initiated by Mark Teh, and conducted under purview of Five Arts, as part of a loose collective of artists from different disciplines.

The Taman Medan Community Arts Project from 2002-2005 worked with youths aged 8-17 from around Taman Medan – a deprived suburban area on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, with a recent history of racial trouble. When the initial ideal to ‘use art to get different communities in the area to talk about and work out their problems together’ failed, the group worked instead with art as a platform for the young people to express their own issues, introducing them to theatre, movement, visual arts, and film practice. The project culminated in 8 short films, written, directed and shot by the children and youths on truancy, sexual abuse, family relationships, and friendship. *Ada Apa?* used similar strategies to see what other young people around country thought about themselves, through short workshops with groups of teenagers in 6 Malaysian cities, working closely with local NGOs, schools and local resources.

‘We came in with the ideal notion that art could save the world if only it could help us all understand each other, and of course it did not turn out like that’. For participants in the project, the program was just another activity. ‘We thought about the issues raised, our pre-conceived idea of the area and community we were going into. We learnt the hard way that we needed to be open to what they thought of themselves. Who is the educator, who is the educatee? Are we artists or are we activists? Once we’d dealt with insecurities, this opened up our interest to learn more about how to work in a community.’

Asian Youth Artsmall (started 2004) brought together young artists who work with communities in a 10-day exchange workshop in KL involving 70 groups from India, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore. ‘we wanted to share experiences, examine different methodologies, and create a platform for collaborative regional exchange and cross-pollination.’ Another objective was to establish an e-community network and start an archive of youth in the arts projects. ‘What came out was a sense of what a community is – you have communities that you want to go into, and then there is this community of artists who make up the collective we are.’

The last project, the Emergency Festival was a 12-day celebration of the 1st Malayan emergency, bring together different artist and non-artist communities – musicians, academics, social activists as well as Communist Party members, veterans, survivors, targeting young people, engaging them to try to talk about history.

DIALOGUE:

Eva McGovern asked the panel: How do you navigate between being artists, activists, educators, theatre workers, and being artists? Curator *Simon Soon* also queried the difference between artistic and social agency, asking if an ethical vs aesthetic framework was useful in judging/understanding community art practices. Singaporean curator *June Yap* asked about the problematic role of the artist as educator.

Hari spoke about belief in process versus the desire for a ‘product’ expressed by sponsors, parents, the community. Amanda stressed the importance of bringing community projects into institutions, benefiting two groups of audiences, and raising questions about the criteria for valuing art that refers to engagement and communication. For Luong ‘the process of work can be a dialogue involving one hundred or a thousand other people. The white cube box is just for the final production’. He saw the artist as communicator rather than educator - together with Hari and Amanda, he felt that they learned more as much from such projects as the participants.

Poet and editor *Han* asked how do you fund community art?

Luong noted the best way to convince funders was through showing previous work. His projects received funding from the marine ministry, the UN - 'Now every kind of social development program realises that the language of art and culture is really useful as a form of engagement'.

AFTERNOON PANEL

Artist **Lim Kok Yoong (aka Wing)** presented 'Beyond White Cube Towards the Public', focusing on the experience of curating and directing Let Arts Move You (LAMU), perhaps KL's first major public art intervention carried out in 2007.

He spoke on the public arena vs the white cube (generic museum/gallery spaces), as a space that belongs to people, that does not exclude anyone, 'an ideal arena for cultural exchange and the development of hybrid art forms'; about the gap between the art scene and the public, and of resolving that gap.

'The characteristics of public culture – openness, togetherness, interactivity. Public culture should be presented without walls/barriers, in spaces where public events take place. When bringing art to the public, as practitioners, curators, we have to be fully conscious of infiltrating, intervening in public space. There should be no power play, no claims on the space. The audience in public art projects should be looked at as a community. The fundamental message is that we're just going out to show to people that this is one way of life – this is the way life should be. This is the spirit underpinning public culture intervention.'

LAMU was a public art project bringing together artists, public transport and commuters at Kuala Lumpur train station and KTM trains, organised by Kolectiv Pembangunan Seni (KPS) and co-ordinated by Rumah Air Panas (RAP), and supported by the Artists Network Asia Fund, KEKWA, Krishen Jit-ASTRO, Matahati Art Fund, RAP, Kakiseni and Angkasa Hotel.

Dissolving barriers between art and the public, LAMU was conceived as a pilot project, testing parameters, and the response of public and corporate institutions, and an audience development initiative, focusing on commuters and their experience.

LAMU brought together 11 artists from SEA. Curators Wing, Yap Sau Bin and Guest Curator Roopesh Sitharan wanted to explore the mobility of the commuter train – connectivity, transformation, as a model of sociability, getting artists to take advantage of its unique time and space dynamic. They had to work and negotiate in the language of the community and supporters – 'no artsy fartsy jargon, no cultural speculations and no politics'. Performance-based works included reading literature to commuters (Lau Mun Leng), exchanging love stories (Donna Miranda), and creative karaoke (Goh Lee Kuang), while many other artists created more conceptual/visual works.

Hari and Han brought up the question of censorship and restrictions on content – was it imposed, how was it dealt with? Sau Bin and Wing answered that the strategy was to stay broad in their presentation, the main impetus was to get things done. June Yap commented that 'for governing bodies and institutions, arbitrariness is their strategy, so ambiguity is the corresponding strategy.'

A second major 'interventive' initiative, *Contemporary Art in Schools (CAIS)* was presented by artist and co-organiser **Yap Sau Bin**.

CAIS was a 9-month project at Stella Maris High School in KL beginning end 2007, partly a response or follow-up to the LAMU project, exploring a contemporary art project in an institution vs a public space.

Project objectives were to 1) provide educational platform for contemporary art, 2) cultivate appreciation of contemporary art through its role in society, 3) create an audience-participatory

space, for a community including not just students but also staff, and church goers (the school is next to a church) - the project was therefore open to the public on the weekends.

The curatorial team identified possible sites in school, with a survey, for new site specific works in various media. There was also a recontextualisation of certain works eg. Wong Hoy Cheong's video *Sulukule* from Istanbul Biennale, Ahmad Fuad Osman's *Recollections of Long Lost Memories* in the school museums. There were curatorial interventions, with Vincent Leong's *Run Malaysia Run* played in the locker room – students had to use their lockers with the rotating video playing in the dark.

Workshops taught techniques or created/developed works with the students and staff (eg Chuah Chong Yong's mural workshop and Amanda Heng's project). Negotiation (with school, students, artists) was an important element of the project. Art students were also engaged to take part as helpers.

'How could we make it happen? In this case we had a very understanding principal, open to the work we do. We were lucky to get funds and support. For a place where systems and policies lacking, meeting the right people helps.'

For more on CAIS, visit caisproject.blogspot.com, where you can also order the DVD catalogue - 'Bring it to the public, the institutions, look at issues that can be covered, the possibilities'. Proceeds from donations for the DVD will go towards fundraising for CAIS 2.0.

Eva: I think [a project like this is] is not about statistics but about communities claiming, absorbing what the project is trying to do. How have you felt that has worked in CAIS – do you think they have taken full ownership of it?

SB: The workshops would have hit them at different degrees . For 'ownership', it depends on each individual micro-project. An adult art audience may read something cynical in Vincent's work, but the kids just see a bunch of Malaysians running around in costumes. With Fuad's work, they were curious about his technique vs usual presentations of history in museums. So ownership is not just about participation but also the negotiation of meaning, interpretation.

Jakarta-based **Reza Afisina (Asung)**, Programme Co-ordinator, ruangrupa, an artist-run initiative and space in Jakarta, and **Ardi Yunanto**, Editor in Chief, www.karbonjournal.org/ Curator, Battle Zone, Jakarta Biennale 2009 presented three recent projects.

The ruangrupa Art Laboratory runs projects, discussions, research, multi-disciplinary collaborations and residencies, looking at 'broader correspondences' and developing new modes of presentation beyond gallery spaces. Since 2008, they have been working around the big theme of mobility, focusing on 6 projects.

In *Musafir* ('the traveller' in Arabic) artists developed projects around the theme of desire and the vehicle, recreating car sales brochures with taglines using quranic quotations like 'Show Us the Straight Way', creating car ads featuring attractive and barely clad male instead of female models, as well as a calendar, quiz, merchandise and prizes. The 6-month *Design in the City* workshop looked at what moves people in a city which is constantly changing physically. 15 artists worked with researchers, architects, economists, urban planners, looking at daily life situations, 'what's going on' using basic tools like digital printing, cellphones, digital cameras, presenting their work as a book and a magazine, distributed for free through ruangrupa's local media and international network. The next project looks at the topography of markets – the development of the market and its mobilities, since the arrival of imperialism.

32 degrees invites university students from all majors every year to participate in an exhibition, creating a unique opportunity for students to exhibit and connect outside of the campus. The project involves a workshop that invites students to create work in public spaces. In 2006, they did a workshop around the new 'dysfunctional' bus stops in Taman Sudirman where they introduced small interventions – a VIP mat for the limited number of seats, a swing to make up for the lack of seats, a mirror, a punching bag while you're kept waiting for the bus that's always late, installed in the middle of the night without official permission. Students were pre-warned that their works might not stay in place beyond one or two weeks!

Finally, Ardi spoke about the *Battle Zone* and *Specific Sites* public art workshop he directed at Jakarta Biennale 2008, involving 70 artists over 2 months. Works included a 200m mural facing a mall across a busy road with the graffiti text "Be patient I will come" for the employees waiting to get home. A college group put up '... paku' (beware of nails) signs in the middle of the night along roads where tire-repair operators were known to lay traps for Jakarta's motorcyclists. Daniel Kampua celebrated the tourist portrait photographers at Monas by making a 1-month onsite exhibition of their work. Another group of artists re-furnished and decorated a famous illegal chess-playing spot under a flyover, making new chairs for the players to play more comfortably. For tired commuters on the train ride home, Enrico Halim engaged regular train buskers to ask people to draw to express their stress and anger while they sang in the carriages, and made an exhibition of selected drawings in one of the stations. The commuters proved responsive, even sometimes exchanging conversations and shaking hands. At the exhibition, the best drawing was mounted as a banner, the buskers sang at the opening, and one of the participating commuters even contributed a poem. 'We could create a new space there from this drawing.'

To end an already very full day, Shanghai-based **Defne Ayas** spoke about her work as Curator of Performa and Director of Arthub, two separate and very big projects in different parts of the world.

The biennale event Performa, founded by RosaLee Goldberg, first took place in New York 2005, positioning performance as central to the visual arts rather than as a 'side dish' or community outreach effort. 'Performa works with 100 artists every year from around the world, and especially with visual artists who work primarily in other media, encouraging them to have audiences engage with their ideas more immediately through performance.'

Defne introduced selected projects from Performa 2007, which covered 40 venues over 3 weeks, from the high temples of art like the Guggenheim and MOMA to smaller alternative spaces, building a bridge between competing venues. In some cases artists engaged with the community. A 30 minute hula hoop event was set off across 35 rooftops in New York's Chinatown by Christian Jankowski, led by a hula-hooping (Malaysian Chinese) local spa manicurist, bringing up the issue of gentrification, with Chinatown as 'the last mile' in a New York artists cannot afford to live in anymore. In another work, Chinatown high school students (12-15) were taught the how to cut hair and set to work in 4 rented barber shops, during which they would tell their stories, creating a space for community dialogue.

The Long March came to New York, creating a 10 member dragon-dance team in camouflage, a thunderstorm heading through Chinatown to uptown. At the Harlem Museum, African American and Chinese artists and critics came together for forums to discuss shared issues. 'Avant-garde' workshop participants and bystanders walked backwards in a line for three hours from the China institute to MOMA, going through its lobby and ending up at the police station in Times Square.

One of the great successes of Performa was in reaching out to the Chinatown press, important in communicating and thus validating the project to the local community.

Defne then spoke about ArtHub and Bizart, from which ArtHub was born, a 'think-tank incubator and facilitator space for art in China and rest of Asia'. BizArt's work (since 1998) has been 'a very internal playground for artists – embracing ambiguities, complexity, internal experimentation, not about outreach'. Many activists who chose to become contemporary artists realised that reaching out was easier through the contemporary art pipeline than the activist pipeline and often chose video art or performance to talk about activism.

Davide Quadrio then founded ArtHub with an interest in a more pan-Asian network - an Asia-specific initiative, based on 'collaborative intelligence' where Asian writers, artists, thinkers can claim their ground, also building links between the contemporary art world and the world of cultural development. Since 2007, ArtHub has run perhaps 100 different productions, sometimes travelling them.

Short on time, she touched on just one enormous project in 2008 where ArtHub worked for the first time with the government, as part of Shanghai E-art Festival. 'The authorities really wanted to look at art and new media to create a new modernity for Shanghai. Once you work with the city you have access to the thousands we're trying to reach, not just the floating world of art, but also dancers, the elderly, students. We got urban screens where we showed artists talking profiles. There was some really political content – some glitch allowed us to show whatever we wanted. We staged performances with lots of nudity and didn't get censored. There were a thousand people every night we worked and nobody came from the art world.'

Go to: <http://arthubasia.org/>

AFTERNOON DISCUSSION:

Eva commented on how this final session showed us the possibilities for where art can happen and how, and the impact of self organised activities, that can be powerful in situating art in the urban context especially.

June: taking art as a transformative practice, how have you engaged with risk and failure to push boundaries in order for projects to become critical? How do you negotiate the risk of failure – to fulfil the aims of the institution, aims of artist, the public, censorship bodies, policing bodies?

Defne: Failure is part of performance. That's the magic of audience participation and what makes it the most satisfying medium. The beauty is in that it's fragile, not solid, not object-based, fixed.

In the case of interventions, art and life are much closer so predictability factor more 'lively'. For the arts program in Shanghai, we were literally entering like a UFO in the community, in the garden where they dance and tai chi every day, to go into that space, brainwash you with new form of art. It looks like ideological, colonial intervention. So we tried to negotiate, talked to the dancers, danced with them in weeks leading up, asked what they would like to see and if they were open to new ideas. There were rewarding moments –the dancers would go home and dress up to come for our performance and bring cigarettes to bribe us for front seats. They sent beautiful letters at the end. But it's most difficult when you're landing from above.

Sau Bin: in our questionnaire we asked the students which one do you think is art? Kung Yu did a workshop with the students to discuss what they gained from the experience. So, for example,

the work in the science lab was definitely not art yet they liked it. Failure or success here depends on what you want to achieve or address - is it the acceptance of a work as contemporary art? As curators we had to accept a negotiation of meanings, differences in interpretation. I think the risk factor decreases if you find a way to connect with a figure or people, corporation, department or policy sympathetic to it, rather than risking long-term procedures, protocols.

Asung: For the Jakarta Biennale workshops, we didn't talk about art at all in the first month, we talked about the spaces and their problems. I asked participants to see themselves as citizens, on the same level – not artists who just do something and then hope that the works succeed.

Wing: Making projects happen involves an ongoing process of negotiations. It's always better to ask. In LAMU, we asked first for one cabin, and we got whole train, and then more. Also always prepare a Plan B – when we couldn't do our project with the public buses, our plan was to either run our own bus, or turn to the train company, readapting our proposal.

Amanda: 'Negative' – depends on how you use it. In the *Raised* project – the statue of a labourer placed face to face with the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles was knocked down by a van before the event started – we took the opportunity to call the press who gave publicity for project.

Eva brought up the issue of exploitation when artists work in public spaces and with communities, highlighting situations in rural areas, prisons, disabilities, abused children and present their work in galleries later. 'How do we as practitioners to tread that careful line not to be objectifying these very serious things for art entertainment?'

For documentary photographer *Viknesh* "our main concern is what we are photographing – we have a vested interest in getting the story out. As artists we have a huge responsibility. If you don't go into a project with pure intentions then it's difficult to navigate yourself".

Eva and Sau Bin talked about the different contexts of public and gallery space. 'How art or an object operates depends on its context. The onus is also on the criticality of the artist - how do I activate that space, how much do I want to get out of it? How much do you understand the system you are playing with – outside the gallery, public space, or in a gallery, from curatorial to artistic endeavours.' (SB)

Ardi spoke about site-specificity: 'The important thing is the function of the works – if an audience doesn't know if it's art, it's not important for me in terms of public art. If it's specific to a site, it cannot be placed in other sites. If we move it to another space, then it's documentation'.

Defne: There's a disconnect between the inner creation of art and outer consumption of art. Is the definition of art when it is conceived or perceived? Where is the moment of transaction? For some people art is art when white box, sold. For artists, it's that glimpse of awakening, or humour, transient. I don't think any of the projects we saw today were 'instrumentalisation' where some people just do things to provoke. I think they were genuine collaborative, sharing resources, and collaborative intelligence.