Input : Output
Exploring Participatory Art Practice from Within

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the theory, practice and ongoing outcomes of two projects in relational/dialogical/participative art, narrated from two subjective perspectives: that of a participant, and that of artist. The two projects explored are FX Harsono's *"In Memory of a Name Curatorium"* and my own resulting project *"Nee (Born As)."* This paper positions contemporary participatory art practice as a medium, through which differing cultural perspectives can be explored. In this model, methodology is a kind of a neutral construction -uncultured- to which artists and participants apply their own experiences of culture and context, extracting raw data from which creative responses emerges. Input: output.

Keywords: Participatory, art, cultural exchange, research, practice

INTRODUCTION

What name were you given when you were born?

What name do you use now?

What name will you be remembered by when you are gone?

What's in a name? This is one of many questions I came across in the path towards the paper I present to you today. What is in a name, and how can conversation be art?

I'll be exploring the theory, practice and ongoing outcomes of two projects in relational/ dialogical/ participatory art. The first is FX Harsono's *In Memory of a Name* project in 2011-2012, part of the four year '*Edge of Elsewhere* project in community art practices at 4A Contemporary Asian Art Space and Campbelltown Arts Centre. As a participant of *In Memory of a Name* I developed the second project, *Neé (Born as)* which I have implemented in various social and institutional settings over the past eighteen months, and will continue to do so in the future. I approach both of these projects from different subjective perspectives: that of a participant, and that of artist. In this process, I am both of these, and in integrating the two perspectives as a researcher, it might be possible to suggest a third persona; the artist as ethnographer.

For the artist, the practice of ethnographic field research provides a framework which requires both an immersive, "emic" approach, and a distanced, etic phase. From an emic position, a conciously analytical response to the material is replaced with a reflexive, intuitive approach: I participate in the projects, converse informally with

participants and work alongside them. Questions, where they arise, are unstructured, formulated in response to the situation at hand. This is a contingent approach, dependent on the involvement of the participant rather than the artist, with the intention of understanding the participant's position and facilitating their contribution to the project.

The etic position provides a counterpoint, and requires periods of concentration on the reading and writing of theory. In my methodolgy, field notes are a part of this analytical period, and are written soon after, but not during field activities. Writing requires a self-distancing from (art) activity, and this provides space for reflecting on the experience of being within the project. Reading provides context from social and art histories, theories, and discourses. It provides viewpoints for resistance and for admission.

Figure 1. The first *In Memory of a Name* curatorium workshop at 4A Centre from Contemporary Asian Art, June 2011. (Image courtesy 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art)

1. INPUT

1.1. Master:

Led by Indonesian artist FX Harsono, 'In Memory of a Name' formed what Kwon would call a 'temporary invented community'(Kwon, 2004). We consisted of a curatorium of artists, poets, emerging theorists, curators, social researchers and historians; Harsono introduced us to his own familial background. He described how an exploration of his personal experience grew outwards to become broader research into social and institutional discrimination against Chinese Indonesians, and then returned to a subjective standpoint in in his creative practice.

Figure 2. FX Harsono presenting his recent research to the *In Memory of a Name* curatorium. (Image courtesy 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art)

The familial background Harsono detailed for us was that of a Chinese Indonesian, with strong Javanese influences from grandparents and a formal Catholic education. In accordance with Chinese tradition, Harsono was given the name Oh Hong Bun at birth, a name drawn from his family's Hokkien lineage. In 1966, when Harsono was 18, a Cabinet decree "recommended" all Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent adopt an indigenous name. A set of historical, political and social factors – too complex to explore in depth here – influenced this decision, which in effect obliterated signifiers of otherness from Indonesian society (Dieleman.,Koning & Post, 2010). Harsono chose to use Franciscus Xavier, his baptismal names, and Harsono, a name he chose in consultation with an acquaintance.

Figure 3. Voice Without Voice/Sign, 1993 – 4, Silkscreen on canvas (9 panels), wooden stools and stamps, 143.5 x 95.5 cm each panel, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum collection. (Image courtesy the artist)

Since the late 1970s, Harsono has been amongst a cohort of Indonesian artists who have explored and exposed political and social repression in Indonesia. During more than three decades of his New Order regime, President Suharto oversaw unprecedented

economic growth through exploitation of natural and human resources, and consequently created an enormous majority of poverty-stricken citizens underneath small business elite. Harsono and his fellow artists stood up to expose what was known as KKN, or corruption, collusion and nepotism. Within Indonesia their work was often subtle enough to fly under the radar of officials, who at times prevented exhibitions that were deemed excessively political. Whilst artist Moelyono's exhibition to commemorate 100 days since the murder of labour rights activist Marsinah was banned, Harsono recalls an official visit to his *Voice Without Voice/Sign* (figure 3) installation. "I know a government spy came to the gallery to see the work, asking questions about the meaning, but I wasn't there, so I got lucky. The person in the gallery lied and told him he didn't know the meaning of the work" (Koleshikov-Jessop, 2010). After the fall of the New Order in 1998, many artists hit a creative vacuum.

Figure 4. Preserving Life, Terminating Life #2, 2009, Diptych, acrylic and oil on canvas, thread, 200 x 350 cm, Artist's collection. The painting draws on images from Harsono's family photo album and his father's documentary photography. (Image courtesy the artist)

Harsono turned to his family history to explore the personal intricacies and individual costs of the abuse of human rights during Indonesia's history. Through detailed social research and documentation, including films and photography, Harsono explores the experiences of Chinese Indonesians. In 2009, in a poetic embodiment of his research and his own experience, Harsono created the performance video 'Re-writing the Erased'. In the performance, Harsono is seated on a wooden chair at a marble-top table. On top of the table is a pile of paper, a brush and an inkwell. Painstakingly Harsono repeatedly renders the characters of his original Hokkien name, like a child learning to write for the first time. Each time he completes a page he rises from the table and places it within a grid that slowly fills the viewer's field of vision.

Figure 5. Rewriting the Erased, 2009 Video documentation of performance, ink on paper, furniture. (Image courtesy the artist)

This is a highly personal response to Harsono's experience of name change, but it is informed by the larger research he has conducted, collecting primary data through interviews and site visits, documentation and reflection. Some of the documentation is eventually exhibited in fairly conventional documentary style, but it is the studio works in response to the research that signifies the result: where a conventional social historian might have analysed statistics and cross-checked individual statements with empirical data to produce a representation of political and social circumstances around name change, Harsono has interpreted his data through aesthetic form. The experience of loss becomes palpable through the repetition of line, which also serves to point to the enormous numbers of people who have experienced the same thing. The viewer is encouraged to sense, rather than to count these multitudes. We are to feel the loss, rather than to know of it.

The background to Harsono's practice, and in particular this work, formed the jumping off point for our curatorium to explore the context of naming, name change, discrimination and power in the Australian context. After the contextual introductions, we began by talking about our own names. Where are our names from; what do they mean; how have they changed and why? What broader issues about name change can we identify from our own experiences?

Figure 6. *Writing in the Rain* (2011), video performance exhibited in conjunction with works by the *In Memory of a Name* consortium, 4A Centre for Contemporart Asian Art

A key aspect of Harsono's methodology in his recent practice is 'social research', reaching for and listening to other people's stories. We were set the task of delivering our own 'case studies.' With the creative flexibility of the term emphasised we documented our findings in film, narrative prose, spread sheets, dot-points and poetry. Some explored the spiritual dimension of naming, beliefs in the pre-destination of the 'right' name. Others talked to migrants and refugees, searching local history records to find tales of alias and mis-spelling, discrimination and even deception. The topic of naming was surprisingly controversial; many subjects refused permission to have their stories retold, even with anonymity. To change one's name is sometimes to save one's life – to reveal how and why might cause death.

1.2. Apprentice:

My own research into maiden-names swung me from ambivalent, to stridently adversarial, to a state where my personal position was the only clear thing I could lay my hands on.

I had set out to change my surname to my husband's, and experiment in the bureaucracy of name-change, for art's sake. I looked up the statistics on name change and was shocked that according to one website 85% of new brides in Australia take their partner's surname. My resolve wavered – perhaps there was more to my name than just a name?

Outside of the conventions of academic research in place, I was able to interview my mother and sisters and discover stories I never knew. How my mother had kept her maiden name until bowing to the pressure of her family, who insisted on writing cheques she couldn't cash until she was Mrs Kent. How a close family member's fiance was shocked to discover she did not intend to take his name when they married.

I wrote to my grandmother to ask about her maternal line and their maiden names; her reply was fulsome on the paternal line, but she could tell me little after her mother's mother.

I spoke to a close friend, who readily took her husband's name when she married; she gave up her estranged father's name, a name she no longer shared with any of her family members, from a chapter of her past she was happy to leave behind.

I decided not to change my name, but remain conflicted about my children having my husband's name. And my political compass was thrown out by the pragmatism of my friend's name-change. Perhaps there is no clear answer? Perhaps there doesn't need to be?
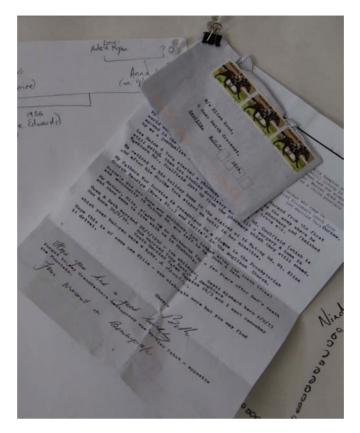
Figure 7. Reply letter from Grandma Beth. Beth started the letter on email, then gave up, printed it out and finished it on the typewriter with a hand-written post-script.

2. OUTPUT

Figure 8. The curatorium discussing proposed projects with 4A staff.

Together and separately, curatorium members developed proposals for creative work. Responses included bus tours of significant sites, an experiment in creating Indonesian names for participants, a symposium, a radio podcast, a book to activate smartphone apps filled with stories of lost names. With the help of 4A staff and Harsono, proposals were reviewed and discussed, and with great difficulty some were ruled out.

Of those which were realised (you can read more about these on the In Memory of a Name blog) several centred on bringing the experience of the curatorium, and the insight gained through the case studies, into a public space.

I too wanted respond by creating a space to generate more of these conversations. I wanted make room for the ambiguity I had experienced as part of my journey through the process of 'social research' that Harsono had initiated.

Figure 9. My husband's surname on fabric from the wedding dress I didn't wear.

2.1 Premise

Figure 10. My daughter with her first ever attempt with needle and thread, during the first *Née (born as),* 26th January 2012

And, so I began *Nee (Born as);* an invitation to sit, and stitch, and share the stories of names. Starting off from my original case studies I chose to invoke the women's work of embroidery. But to open up the contingency of the project, to broaden the potential for the unplanned, I moved away from the feminist perspective and asked participants simple to reflect on their own experience of lost or found names. Each participant chose a name to memorialise on a brick sized rectangle of fabric. Each soft rectangle of malleable fabric became part of an unstable, movable memorial wall.

Quilted memorials, embroidery as subversion, stitching as contemporary art: none of these are new ideas. Tracey Emin stitched the 'names of everyone she ever slept with' into a tent, but long before this, jailed suffragettes stitched their names as messages of hope for their comrades outside. The AIDS memorial quilt began in the mid 1980s and its 48,000 plus panels are now being digitally archived – and of course, the tradition of stitching, quilting and weaving as a communal activity is a long and varied one. We can only imagine the cultural shifts and resistance that has been generated over thread and fabric, needle and loom.

Figure 11. American Alexandra Chambers deliberately left behind her nickname Sasha when she emigrated to Australia

It is this sense of contingency that I wanted to emphasise in this project; the unpredictable and transformative potential of the conversation. Initially I saw the stitching and the fabric as a means to an end; a way to slow participants down long enough to talk and listen; a point of shared experience for participants, who were sometimes acquainted, sometimes strangers. Making was an ice-breaker; what fabric will you use, what colour thread, whose name will you stitch? At first, the inherent value of the project was in these conversations that followed. But the object began to take on a life of its own.

2.2 Practice

Figure 12. More neighbours, friends , family and colleagues conversing and stitching during *Née (born as)* in Canberra.

I conducted the first iteration of *Nee* in my garage/studio. Already participants began to affect the object and concept. They brought fabric a little too large or small, for my imagined bricks. Small children who couldn't write stitched abstract compositions. By the second iteration, at 4A Gallery one Saturday in February, I was learning how integral to the concept the flexibility of fabric was. I was reminded that not all script travels horizontally.

Figure 13. This participant used horizontal Korean script, challenging my aesthetic skills.

But oh, what conversations we had, sitting, stitching!

What sadness, to hear that this is a ritual of grief, of grief for her father, recording his name in clear black Korean script, on the auspicious 49th day after his death.

How curiously unlike his English name his Greek name sounds.

How wonderful that she stitches the comedic name she was given in-utero, whilst her own unborn child rolls inside her belly.

How proudly she shapes her new name, adopted on her wedding day.

How defiantly he stitches the name he rejected, when as a 5yr old he told his teacher his name was Pedro, NOT Peter!

Name change may seem banal, but through the prism of names we expose a wide range of challenging discourses. Through our conversations about names we traced discrimination, power relations, gender stereotypes, domestic and social violence, the negotiation of identity, familial interaction and assimilation of the other.

Figure 14. Née (born as) at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, during the In Memory of a Name symposium, 18 February 2012.

Claire Bishop has criticised participatory art practices that take an ameliorative stance, rather than an antagonistic one, warning of the danger artists face as neo-liberal governments seek to outsource social cohesion (Bishop, 2012: 194). But in this project our conversations revealed rather than concealing our traumas and experience of social homogenity, state repression, and familial discord. In this project, my goal as an artist was not heal but to create a platform to share new understandings of different experiences. I sought not to antagonise participants, but to disseminate recognition of the multifarious ways in which our society and governments repress pluralism

and difference, and the equally manifold ways in which we resist and reject these (sometimes) invisible strictures on our lives. These conversations revealed things about each other that could be shared by looking at each other's stitching: the experiences of humanity, passion and ambivalence, suffering and empowerment.

Figure 15. *Née (born as)* at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, during the *In Memory of a Name* symposium, 18 February 2012.

In my studio practice, I try to create works that open up liminal space – juxtaposing imagery from the mundane elements of life into images and patterns of implied exotica. It's a way to emphasise the transformative potential of being in-between one state and another. The work of *Neé,* the work of conversation, placed me in that liminal space, over and over: the space in between idea and object, between personal and political, between narrative and document. It was not a space of exhortation, or a place to negotiate a consensual representation. It was a space to step out into, to listen, and to see what happened next.

It may seem naïve of me, but I had not expected the physical object that resulted from these conversations to become so precious. The value of the fabric wall is created by the time and emotional commitment that participants invest in its creation. It was no longer a point of conversation, but a tangible record of memory and story, relationships and loss.

At Casula Powerhouse near Liverpool, artist Ray Beattie brought a tiny white singlet with several small flowers already machine stitched on to it. Over the course of the evening, Ray added letters spelling out Boitran, the name of his beloved wife who had died only months before. He shared their life, love and art stories. With us were three young university students, cousins recalling childhood nicknames on old pyjama fabric; we giggled and grieved in turn.

Figure 14. Late night participants on the final night of the *Nee (born as)* residency at Casula Powerhouse.

2.3 Theory

In 1995 Hal Foster argued persuasively against the artist as ethnographer, identifying a tendency among artists working with ethnic and culturally sited communities to make assumptions about the political tranformativity and alterity of the their subjects. This alterity, as a key aspect of anthropology, is what Foster contends draws artists to the 'quasi-ethnographic' turn, fulfilling a desire to 'self-otherise'. In Foster's reading there are three main assumptions that drive ethnographic art projects; that artistic transformation creates political transformation and from elsewhere; that the other is always outside and also the site of subversion; lastly that *"if the invoked artist is not perceived as socially and/or culturally other, he or she has but limited access to this transformative alterity, and, more, that if he or she is perceived as other, he or she has automatic access to it"* (Foster, 1995: 302-309).

Another important issue raised in Foster's text is the problem of representation on behalf of whom; which institutions, formal or otherwise may lay behind the artists work and thus influence the representational forms that emerge. This is indeed an important point, made later in an art historical context by Bishop (Bishop, 2012), who identifies the parralel interest of neo-liberal government and the socially engaged artist; the former's interests lie towards handing over all social responsibilities of government to the community, the latter's (sometimes) intentions to ameliorate social discord fulfilling this abrogation.

Both of these problems are linked through a central issue; what or who is the 'community' in any given art work, and how does the artists' position relate to a specific community? Miwon Kwon has addressed these complications comprehensively, suggesting that the term "collective art praxis" might be a more useful term than "community art", with projective rather descriptive aims (Kwon, 2004: 100-155).

These theoretical positions are all pertinent to, and, I will argue, undermined by processes implemented in the projects I describe above.

In the first example, *In Memory of a Name,* Harsono's position is neither other nor from outside, and yet the success of his body work investigating Chinese-Indonesian experiences of discrimination (exhibited widely internationally and locally) indicates that the art-world regards his non-alterity as a form of authority. Harsono, is inside of the ethnically sited community that forms his subject matter, furthermore, the work Harsono undertakes does not assume political transformative alterity, but in fact responds to and amplifies transformations that are already underway, in particular the slow shift back to visible displays of Chinese heritage (Dielman., Koning & Post, 2010).

In the second example, my project *Neé* (Born As), the co-option of ameliorative art practices by the state is also an implied risk. The premise of the project also lies in revealing the personal impacts of institutionalised discrimination, through personal interactions. Does this kind of activity merely distract from the real work of breaking down such discrimination, providing a quiet voice for minor narratives while the meta-narrative goes unchallenged? Recently Australia's government commisioned a review into the national curriculum's history component, which reported that the curriculum "uncritically promoted diversity" and undervaluing western civilisation and "the significance of Judeo-Christian values to our institutions and way of life" (Taylor, 2013). This is the theory promulgated by Australia's current conservative federal government, but in practice it is at odds with both the statistical and aesthetic experiences of most Australians. Of Australia's 23 million population, around a quarter were born elsewhere and over 3 million people speak a language other than English at home. Over half of these speak Arabic, Cantonese or Mandarin (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012). So being in Australia involves regular encounters between different people from different ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds. But how often do these encounters include exchanging personal narratives? In *Neé (Born as)* encounters between personal narratives are inherent in the structure; countering a neo-conservative attempts to whitewash diversity in a small act of resistance.

Nee (Born As) cannot achieve large-scale policy change on a state level. But it can act to set the conditions for individual political changes, that is changes in the way participants view each other, and connections that may never have occurred otherwise. During the project's residency at Casula Powerhouse, flyers were distributed in nearby Liverpool shops. One morning I returned to a shop to find the attendants deep in conversation. The flyer had sparked a conversation between the two women about their personal experiences of cultural and gender-based name change that they had never broached before. In the right conditions, these small-scale impacts might be the catalyst for larger shifts. The impossibility of knowing this for sure, the contingency on participants acting on their own experience, is part of what makes this an art work and not social work. Perhaps it is operating in what Bourriaud calls 'social interstices,' after Marx's alternative economic systems (Kwon, 2004: 154).

Both projects approach community and paticipation from different perspectives, but both ask participants to reveal past experiences to the artist or fellow participants.

Kwon's projective ideal does not account for community through shared historical trauma. In the case of Harsono's social research and subsequent individual performance works, description is in fact the goal; to re-describe lost identities, and to testify to the discrimination and abuses of power that lead to these long suppressed experiences. Additionally, the collective art praxis model does not offer flexibility for the kind of community participation that is conducted as part of the process but not directly documented in the outcome.

But perhaps the collective artistic praxis paradigm invoked by Kwon has more relevance to *Neé (Born As)*. As a project, it has been implemented in diverse sites, rarely with the involvement of a specific community. Instead, participants usually come to the project unexpectedly; their commonality with those they converse with is often, but not always, merely that of being in the same space and time. The work itself moves through communication, but is in no way the sum of its disparate parts. It is "to suggest the impossibility of total consolidation, wholeness and unity - in an individual, a collective social body like the "community"... (Bourriaud, 2010: 113); it is a clamour of voices and stories that testify to the diversity of human experience and the urgency of tolerance.

I propose what Kester has described as 'dialogical aesthetics', as a theoretical paradigm which counters the essentialisation of participation and community orientation by invoking pragmatic, dialectical rhetoric as a basis for these kind of art projects. "…a dialogical aesthetic requires that we strive to acknowledge the specific identity of our interlocutors and concieve of them not simply as subjects on whose behalf we might act but as co-participants in the transformation of both self and society" (Kester, 1999: 19). Kester sees the dialogical aesthetic as a potential alternative to more traditional object-oriented aesthetics frameworks, but he too warns of the dangers of discourse becoming merely an aesthetic compensation rather than a mechanism for change. To this I would argue that change, at least on an individual level, is an inevitable consequence of encountering the experiences of other people's lives. The purpose of an art-work based in dialogue, is precisely to ensure that we do directly encounter, feel, see, sense, percieve – as in the original definition of the word aesthetic – their experiences.

In his 1992 essay *Conversational Art*, Homi Bhabha identifies an anti-epistemological stance in which conversation acts as a dialogue between culture and community, 'shrinking the distance between the object and the subject and shattering the silence around art objects'. Bhabha writes:

This results in an aesthetic strategy that articulates hitherto unconnected moments between memory and history, revises the traditional divisions between private and public and, rearticulates the past and the present and through the performance of the artwork, fosters unexplored relationships between historical or biographical events, artistic innovations and an enlarged sense of cultural community... contextual contingency liberates us from a binary and polarised view that opposes reason to passion, the present to the past, it also commits us to living our lives and making our art from experiences that ambivalent, contradictory and unresolved (Bhabha, 1998: 42).

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CONCLUSION

Figure 15. *Nee (Born As)* at the Scullin Shops Party, Canberra, March 2013

The last iteration of *Nee (Born as)* to date was at street party held in my neighbourhood to celebrate our city's 100th birthday. I was surrounded by my communities; mothers from my children's school sat down and told me the stories of the names they inherited from their ancestors, and the ones that were discarded in the rush to assimilate to their new home; my dear friends played songs about our town and its histories in the background; the local hairdresser dyed kids hair for free and I got to know the people of my place that little bit better. It is the freedom in this project that is its greatest asset, by which I mean that the project itself is free from me, and any of the other restrictions and negotiations that have limited other participatory projects I have worked on. It is a real conversation, both in its physical and meta-physical presence; it can happen anywhere, anytime; it can be formal and structured, part of the agenda of a larger institution; it can be loose and responsive, just as likely to turn to tragedy as to love.

Clifford Geertz has said that, through long acquaintances with extremely small matters, the anthropologist "confronts the same grand realities that others - historians, economists, political scientists, sociologists - confront in more fateful settings: Power, Change, Faith, Oppression, Work, Passion, Authority, Beauty, Violence, Love, Prestige; but he confronts them in contexts obscure enough...to take the capital letters off them. These are all too human constancies…..But that is exactly the advantage. There are enough profundities in the world already."[15] Perhaps this says something for artists too.

So it will go. Stories about love, politics, oppression, acceptance, rejection, migration, loss, identity, family; a wall that holds but does not contain them. I have learned a little of what is in a name.

Figure 16. Stiching together the differents traces of stories about names; building a soft memorial to the lost and found

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