



PRACTICAL APPROACHES

ON PARTICIPATORY ARTS
WORKSHOP



MY THOUGHTS

ABOUT PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO PARTICIPATORY ARTS WORKSHOP

by Hazel Huang

Participatory art goes under a variety of names: socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, literal art, interventionist art, collaborative art, contextual art and social practice¹. On 10 October 2015, I attended a 1-day workshop **Practical Approaches to Participatory Arts**. It was facilitated by **Participate In Design (PID)** and organised by the **National Arts Council, Singapore**.

Prior to attending the workshop, I read up more about the non-profit organisation PID and found that it is spearheaded by two ladies Jan and Mizah. I was also curious about what spurs the architecture graduates to serve in various communities.

Shouldn't they be more interested in designing award-winning buildings or erecting iconic landmarks? Apologies for my shallow perceptions.

The most frequently cited reason for the emergent of participatory art by French film-maker and writer Guy Debord is *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) is that "it rehumanises a rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production" (Bishop, 2012, p. 11). Thus, I was wondering if the vision of PID is similar to Deboard's.

During the registration process, we had to submit our particulars and answer some questions online. I think these data would help the facilitators cater to our needs and expectations. In addition, the submission of our Curriculum Vitae would perhaps aid the team to strategize their resources such as the deployment of volunteers. I thought it was a coincidence that I was seated among a group of educators but I think it was planned to ensure that we had a common topic of interest.

The highlight of this workshop is the field work. It was evident through the amount of scaffolding done to lead us to the finale

– man-on-the-street interview. We were introduced to some theories first and we took turns to interview invited enthusiastic individuals. Therefore, these people definitely knew the purpose of the interview and they are most probably individuals who are active volunteers. In our group, we had Ms Lina Chong, chairman of the Pasir Ris Elias Community Club Youth Executive Committee as our interviewee. It was a pity she had to leave early as she was involved in a community performance. Nevertheless, as Lina knew the purpose of her coming, she shared a lot about her work and dishes out many advices. As a volunteer, her level of commitment and dedication towards community work has definitely surpassed those honourable mentions or credits.



I also appreciate that the facilitators prepare hand-outs in advanced so that I can refer to them after the workshop. I have learnt to think about the relationship of people and space more deeply. For example, when I refer to my notes under Space Assessment, it contains many variables such as visibility (connections and identity) and flexibility (formal and informal space) just to name a few. These seem like common sense separately but I would never have imagined them cluster as an entity.

As the title of the workshop suggests, one of the methods of practical approaches recommended interview with the man-on-the-street. As my project is done in Pulau Ubin, I conducted interviews on the island while surveying for a suitable location. House #1 at Chek Jawa is selected as the location of my interview as it serves mainly as a destination rather than a transitional space. People are more likely to be spending more time relaxing there as they are not in a rush. As there is a shelter, I do not have to worry about getting caught in the rain too. I try to talk to a good mix of people, for example, couples, families, young people, foreigners/ locals, visitors engaging in different activities etc. My weekend visits may not be an appropriate

time to talk to the residents/shop owners so I started with the visitors first. It's not difficult to approach strangers as long as you are clear about your purpose and seek permission. I never feel comfortable using the word "interview" as it appears too formal and intimidating. Instead, I would ask visitors if I can ask them some questions. The questions asked come naturally as long as you are an active listener by paying attention to what is being said rather than think of what to ask next. It should sound like a conversation to a third party rather than an interrogation. This was quite an exhausting feat both mentally and physically because I needed to engage in a conversation, process what is being said, jot down notes, photography, sometimes give directions and of course cycle around the island.



“I LEFT THE WORKSHOP FEELING HUNGRY. NOT A PHYSICAL RESPONSE BUT AN URGE TO CONSOLIDATE MY NEWFOUND KNOWLEDGE TO DO MORE RESEARCH AND APPLY THEM IN THE REAL-WORLD CONTEXT.”

Although interviewing is a time consuming and laborious task, it is a platform for strangers to share their deepest thoughts without fear (maybe it helps a little if you look harmless and curious). The interviews also allows me a sneak peek of the Ubin visitor's needs and wants. Their responses definitely encourage me to listen closely and think critically and not depend on assumptions.

I left the workshop feeling hungry. Not a physical response but an urge to consolidate my newfound knowledge to do more research and apply them in the real-world context. The facilitators shared many different methods of practical approaches and I think they are just tip of the icebergs. The interviewing or questioning method is perhaps the most relevant due to the varied forms of participatory arts. As they become more diverse, so will conversations. Therefore, effective communication must be the foundation to convey the greater good and prevent misunderstanding. After gaining the much needed insights from this workshop, I hope the refined ideas for my project will result in better engagement within the community.

Hazel Huang is embarking on her first community arts project with support from the National Arts Council of Singapore. Her interest lies in marrying art, nature and education. She graduated from National Institute of Education, Singapore.

PONDERING PARTICIPATION

Reflections on Workshop with PiD

by Faye Lim

I started out the day with a misinterpretation: it was a sign.

The about-turn sign had me at the nearby Pasir Ris Elias Mall, looking lost among its mom-and-pop shops. Repeated calls to the organisers fell through because there was no phone and 3G coverage. When I finally found my way to my classroom for the day – a bomb shelter which was under the grounds of the Pasir Ris Elias Community Centre – I wondered if the state of participatory arts in Singapore is reflected in my experience getting to the workshop: organisers are well-meaning, but directions for participation are obscure and disconnected.

The facilitators of the workshop were Mizah Rahman and Jan Lim from Participate in Design (PiD), a not-for-profit organisation which has gained much attention for problem-solving that draw on communal experience and creativity.

I first encountered PiD's work through their Upcycle Project in Macpherson, where residents and designers teamed up to re-fashion discarded furniture into functional pieces for their homes. What struck me as remarkable when I attended an exhibition of the Upcycle Project was the connection and level of trust that PiD had established with resident families who opened up their homes and dedicated time to the project. Some of these same families were at the launch of the exhibition with young children in tow.

When I came to know of this bomb shelter opportunity to join in on a workshop with PiD on approaches for participatory arts, I jumped at it. I had been wondering about what I consider as "participatory" in my dance practice. I could use this time and space to indulge in the pondering.

It turned out that a rather diverse group of people were keen to workshop as well – from practitioners and educators to

programming managers and therapists. We were told that the session would focus on how to understand the neighbourhood communities we wanted to work with through ways such as research and gathering intel, rather than on the nuts and bolts of running a project.

WORKSHOP: WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY ARTS?

PiD acknowledged the slew of terms and labels out there in arts land to describe practices where people who don't identify as artists are involved with art-making, such as terms like community arts, socially-engaged arts, etc. PiD views participatory arts as "an approach to art-making that involves people in the creative process – whether it is in the conceptual realisation, the physical realisation, or the reception of the artwork."

At our allocated group tables, PiD prepared maps of the Pasir Ris Elias neighbourhood, which was our base for the day, and sour candy to keep any heavy eyelids at bay.

The workshop had three parts: basic theory, practical approaches and synthesizing the information gathered.



BASIC THEORY

We kicked off with a review of local and international case studies to get the folk thinking about the diverse forms of participation available in any given project. This was a good introduction, though without adequate time to get into in-depth debate and questioning. I would have enjoyed taking apart each of the case studies to consider not only the forms of participation, but also the assumptions made about these forms and their aesthetic implications for the works.

PRACTICAL APPROACHES

I was eager to start on these. One tool that PiD introduced is quite straightforward – talking. PiD people talk a lot: They talk to the folk who organise others for various intents in the community and spontaneously chat up the "man-on-the-street" to get his

views on what he loves best about the neighbourhood or what he deems lacking. From the volunteer at the community centre who thinks up programmes for the neighbourhood to the mother-of-two who voluntarily leads the Bubbly Beauties – a group of young aspiring dancers – in rehearsals and performances.

From the sounds of it, Mizah and Jan collect a large amount of data and anecdotes from talking, and I was concerned with how that quantity of information could be distilled for constructive use.

Though I feel comfortable speaking with strangers in public spaces, there was something about the task at hand that made me extra self-aware. When we finally hit the pavement for our “man-on-the-street” interviews, I found that a “local tourist” persona got me through.

My partner and I were directed very quickly to a playground, early generation HDB design complete with sand and rubber tyres which our informant described as unhygienic. “It’s a white elephant and parents don’t like taking their children there.” Here was our first case: under-used feature problem makes good fodder for creative participatory problem solving.

I found the interviewing process very similar to how I approach structured improvisation systems I use for dance – the questions are there to provide the arc of intention but the conversation is allowed to flow spontaneously. There were other approaches around the room – some were much more systematic and one group provided what seemed to be unsolicited advice to the person they were interviewing. The skeptic in me tried my darndest to withhold judgement. I feel PiD did a good job setting up a safe space for trying and learning.

Though there may have been some inertia when we first started on “man-on-the-street” interviews, the anecdotes we collected were revealing and, for the most part, verifiable. For example, the restaurant workers taking a smoke break next to the “white elephant” playground corroborated our informant’s story about its disuse. A little girl bypassing the playground volunteered that she would prefer to play elsewhere. She did not like the sand.

HOW MIGHT WE...

Back at the bomb shelter, we unpacked the information gathered from talking and “downloaded” them on the maps. Then, PiD had us synthesise the information into key issues and opportunities with regard to the usage of public spaces in Pasir Ris Elias. They encouraged us to frame the issue with the words “how might we.” The word “might” has a relatively non-judgemental ring to it and seems to casually infer “what would we do if we decided to do something?” After some excited banter, my group settled on “how might we upcycle the abandoned playground through inclusive and creative experiences?”

From there, we did quick three-minute rounds of brainstorming solutions, spitting out ideas in a stream-of-consciousness-like manner. I learnt that brainstorming requires a very short duration to shock the mind into thinking creatively, and is not just a matter of pondering at one’s leisure, which was what I was used to.

This was by far my favourite old-new tool I picked up at the workshop. I could not wait to try this on everything.

With that and a quick de-brief, we wrapped up for the day, having encountered and explored some of PiD’s approaches to understanding neighbourhood communities. PiD’s approaches are processes for getting to know and map the neighbourhood, the systems that exist there and the people who live, work and mingle there. Artists and various arts practitioners have differing methodology for such mapping and groundwork. PiD’s was a very applicable and flexible approach that I hope to try out in my own neighbourhood.

After the workshop, I got back to thinking about what I might consider as “participatory” in my dance and movement practice. I experience aikido training and contact improvisation as dances shared with people from varied life and movement backgrounds. My dances are not complete without their contribution. The people I dance with may/may not experience our interaction as a dance. Ultimately, whether or not my practice is labeled as “participatory arts” is not all that important to me. But I like pondering such a question because it has implications on how a practice can be perceived and how accessible it can/wants to be.

In the general case of participatory arts in Singapore, one might experience it as they do a community centre next to their HDB block – easy to get into, has obvious avenues for participation, and easily replicable. One could also experience the participatory arts like a bomb shelter – away from plain sight, obscure, but very satisfying once you reach it. The questions then are: what if the bomb shelter was in the community centre? Or the other way round? What do you think the participatory arts experience would be like? ■■■

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Faye Lim is a freelance dance practitioner and arts manager, with a focus on community and communal experiences. She was previously with the NAC for over 4 years, where she co-developed evaluation frameworks for community arts programmes and facilitated cross-sector and peer-learning platforms for artists and community organisers. She is the founder and director of Strangeweather Movement Group and is on the organising team for Contact Improvisation (CI) in Singapore. Most recently, she self-published Haikus for Peace Time as a poetic amulet and blessing for her son on the occasion of his first birthday.

BEYOND THE WORKSHOP

by Daniel Chong

I first got to know about the workshop via MatchBox Singapore's Facebook page. Going into it, I honestly did not expect much other than routine lectures and mostly theory based material. But it was relevant to my field and I saw no harm in attending it. I really was surprised when attending the workshop. It was a really enriching experience.

On the theory aspect, the lectures were really much more than your typical sit-and-stare kind of briefings. Instead it was very much more discussion oriented. Ideas were constantly being exchanged across the room and the modules served as an incubator of sorts for ideas, brainstorming and collaborative discourse. The best part was that there were no wrong answers; everyone's view was taken into consideration. It was very liberating.

When we began the practical portion of the workshop in the later half of the day, it was filled with useful techniques and methodologies ranging from interview techniques to data collection and finally reevaluation and consolidation.

For myself personally, the collating of the interviews were the most useful. It was easy to go out there and talk to people, but it sparked a real discussion when we took all of the interviews into consideration. Especially when there were such varied opinions,

there was a need to have a strong sense of understanding how they came about. I found that by interviewing people there was a real consideration to involving the public within the art making-process, but by analysing, it goes one step further to really understand how to people arrive to such opinions and ultimately to incorporate that as the core of the project.



After going through this short, but compact workshop, it really got me thinking about my own project. (I'm due for an artist residency in Linea de Costa, Spain, in March 2016.) I spent a couple of days just re-evaluating my residency goals and the entire process of it. It really made me think about going beyond involving the public to engaging the public. On-site during my residency, the skills I've learnt to engage the public face-to-face in a conscientious manner were extremely helpful as well.

What I really wished from the workshop was more time. One day was way too short for such a meaningful workshop, so much was learnt in under 12 hours, imagine what can be done with more time!

Daniel Chong is an emerging artist who works primarily in the field of experimental art. His work is mainly inspired by human experiences and the universality of such experiences. He is currently enrolled in LASALLE College of the Arts for its Bachelor in Fine Arts Programme (2016 – 2019).

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