ART PRODUCTION AND SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE: RELATIONSHIP TO DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATIONS

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This paper discusses the identity of “artist” as a collaborator in building social knowledge, rather than just as an independent producer of a physical piece of artwork. As such, the mutual process of problem-solving and communication will be valued above the production of the aesthetic object. The idea is about difference and voice: bringing differences in culture, ethnicities, and survival concerns to the forefront of an exchange. Such engagement acknowledges those who are marginalised by mainstream systems, yet it also engenders mutual understanding, which counters all sides’ constructed biases. Can a non-hierarchal relationship to knowledge exist? The paper concludes with how to make these ideas launching points for collaborative art production that will catalyse social service approaches and communication.

“Certain aspects of “Social Art” make it a strong tool for development aims. If the artist’s work is geared to promote transformation in a specific area, the work could have strong results. Brooke Alfaro’s work with the rival gangs is a very good example of artwork constructed to lead to the possibility of transformation of a present narrative. With a focused goal, artists may have a greater impact and be able to problem-solve. Alongside the need to focus on goals such as communication and education, the work also needs to have an element of openness so that it can evolve and expose itself in natural directions. The artwork is an intervention, the artist a facilitator - and the community will need time to take the work in its own direction. In short, the artist’s role is to facilitate and create lines of connection, but not to dictate outcomes.”
What is Collaboration?

Collaboration as an artistic practice is a redefinition of artistic labour. The identity of the artist shifts from Art-Star Producer to that of a mutual participant and/or member of a collective. Collaboration is an exchange, an agreement between two or more people to solve a problem or reach a goal together. The engagement needs to admit difference and operate as a working relationship. Control over the outcome must be relinquished to the commitment to the collaboration. Charles Green (2001) states that, artistic collaboration is a special and obvious case of the manipulation of the figure of the artist, for at the very least collaboration involves deliberately chosen alteration of artistic identity from the individual to composite subjectivity.

Artistic production of dance, theater, and music are thought of as collaborative, while mediums such as literature, painting, and sculpture conjure up the notion of the lone artist waiting for the light bulb of inspiration to ignite a heroic creative act. Susan Sollins and Nina Castelli Sundell (1990) write, The concept of the isolated genius emerged in the Renaissance along with Capitalism and, while most writing or music composition seems indeed to be a solitary endeavour, every mode or style of visual art can be made collaboratively.

Modernism’s orthodox description of collectives and collaborative processes confers on these a social quality, with properties of a conversational exchange. Historians have recognised diverse artistic movements such as Russian constructionists and Cubism. Such movements involve artists coming together with a similar purpose or agreed-upon canon, with the assumption that the collective output will lead to new innovation. Irit Rogoff discusses collaborative practices in a distinctive essay, “Production Lines.” Rogoff looks at collaborative practices as expansive, yet she is critical of how the participants bring to bear established cultural understandings typical of the historically defined “movements” in the West. “It assumes a coming together of talents and skills which cross-fertilize one another through simple processes, neither challenged by issues of difference nor by issues of resistance (1990).” Historians designate
a dominant artist within the group to signify the formal attributes that represent the whole. There is collaboration, but the identity of the artist as the heroic art star is still upheld, usually through a male dominant artist.

**Context of Collaborative Practices**

The societal struggles of the late sixties and seventies, including the rally call of feminist theories, ignited a break from the inter-relationship of the heroic artist, object-viewer, art-market/gallery system. Collective and collaborative enterprises evolved into a variety of practices that interfaced elements in new ways. A search was undertaken for new methods of production that tested limits and offered new models of artistic identity, materials, artistic spaces, and audience participation. Collectives such as “Guerilla Girls,” a changing group of women with long-term members who wear gorilla masks, interfaced with the public anonymously. Guerilla Girls’ members are female, but men can support their endeavours. The group works to bring attention to issues of gender and racial inequality in the art world. Their exhibitions and staged events are educational and foster awareness.

What impact does the merging of Western models of art production with vernacular traditions of “community” and collaboration have on Southeast Asian art production? How does practice outside the confines of the art gallery system affect intention, methodology, and meaning? T.K. Sabapathy identifies four remarkable artists and locations, each engaged in rethinking Western models’ designation of painting and the “artist hero” as predominant (2012). These movements are not aware of one another, but they mark the birth of contemporary Southeast Asian art. Sabapathy demonstrates this theory in the exhibition and written text of “Intersecting Histories: Thoughts on the Contemporary and History in Southeast Asian Art.” (He states, “They were not merely mimicking voices, postures and positions originating from Euro-American centers. They were not manqué artists (2012).” Sabapathy identifies Cheo Chai-Hiang in Singapore, Piyadasa and SulaimanEsa in Malaysia, Indonesia collective Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (New Art Movement GSRB), and Kaisahan Group in
the Philippines as artists in specific local circumstances who creatively came to similar conclusions. These they shared in seminal texts that enabled other artists to redraw the boundaries of art’s relationship to the public.

Tang Da Wu and his contemporary Cheo Chai-Hiang are thought of as the fathers of contemporary art practice in Singapore. Both returned to Singapore after completing higher education and living in the West, although Chai-Hiang returned in 2003 - much later than Da Wu.

Da Wu worked within Singapore through a very influential artist collective. From abroad, with writing and the vantage point of looking at Singapore from the outside, Cheo kept strong ties with Singapore artists and was just as influential. In 1973, he wrote a response to the Eighth Modern Art Exhibition in Singapore. His piece was not a review of the show, but a call to artists, to wake up out of complacency.

The influence of the Western model on the relationship of the individual artist-hero, the art object, and the gallery system was at odds with vernacular practices of making and community. Vernacular practice in Asia did not distinguish between “art,” “craft,” and “high art.” The search for a new model of artistic practice, a new relationship between artist and public, brought Southeast Asian artists to draw upon vernacular community practices. These practices employ a hybridity that is very comfortable to cultures of Southeast Asia.

A generation of performance artists emerged from the conceptual ideas introduced by Cheo, Da Wu, and Artist Village. Artists such as Lee Wen, Amanda Heng, Vincent Leow, ZaiKuning, and KohNguang were very active. Amanda Heng is known for performance pieces such as “Lets Chat” that looked to audience participation in the “event” as the art.

In 1975, several Indonesian artists founded Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru, or New Art Movement. FX Harsono, born in Java and of Chinese descent, describes the collective:

We felt Indonesian art was too much influenced by the West in terms of subject matter and medium. We decided that if we wanted to talk about Indonesia, we had to talk about the people and their condition, their sufferings because of government; and we thought
we should use objects that we found in our daily lives as a metaphor for the social and political problems (Kolesnikov-Jessop 2010).

1997 and 1998 saw two art collectives emerging in Yogyakarta: ApotikKomik, meaning “Comic Pharmacy,” and TaringPadi, meaning “Fangs of the Rice.” In these, artists lived and made work together. TaringPadi was a politically focused collective making wood cut prints into posters that provided commentary about, and educated people on, their rights and such issues as wage hikes and land rights. The posters were placed around town and in exhibitions. Sale proceeds sustained the collective and benefitted the people they were trying to support. ApotikKomik held public events in the street as well as in galleries, and it organised artists to create street art. This street art took the form of large, cardboard cutouts of comic, creature-like humans with painted facial and bodily expressions. The cutouts might be hung all the way down JalanMaliobor, the main shopping district, with the intention of letting the public walk away with them. The work stood as commentary on society, though not with direct intervention in a specific situation, as with TaringPadi. “Through art, they lent their voices and provided a peaceful counter to the frustrations to the Suharto era (Hori 2011).” Public space in the Suharto era was full of government campaigns of didactic behavioural directions and corporate billboards. The murals of ApotikKomik were seen as a relief for the urban dweller. Public participation and the predominance of collaborative practice are rooted in the re-birth of the contemporary in Southeast Asia.

Malay artists RedzaPiyadasa and SulaimanEsa collaborated on an early exhibition in 1974 that was accompanied by a text titled: “Towards a Mystical Reality: a Document of Jointly Initiated Experiences.” The exhibition consisted of found everyday objects suspended from the ceiling, walls, and floor. As a referendum on Malaysian art as it stood in the early seventies, this text was similar to Cheo’s call to awareness. “Piyadasa and Sulaiman begin by examining the conditions in which the modern in Malaysian Art is represented and consider them colonial in character, estranged from traditions, debilitated and vacuous (Sabapathy 2012).” It is Piyadasa and Sulaiman’s intention to “sow
the seeds of a thinking process which might someday liberate Malaysian artists from their dependence on Western influence (Sabapathy 2012).” Reflecting the disturbing turmoil in Malaysia in 1969, primarily between Malays and Chinese ethnic groups, Piyadasa created a work titled *May 13, 1969*. The work is a wooden container measuring over two meters high, shaped as a coffin, with the Malaysian flag painted across it. The “coffin” stands upright on a large square mirror, which rests on the floor under it. As a body, the Malay nation is interred, yet the “buried” body rests on the mirror. Southeast Asian art critic Iola Lenzi identifies this (Lenzi, 2012) as an early example of a work that invited the audience to become part of the piece. As one approached the piece, one’s own figure was reflected, thus bringing the audience into involvement. Did the audience take responsibility for the coffin and the nation it bore? This was one of the first Southeast Asian pieces of “installation art.”

During martial law in the Philippines of the 1970s, socially engaged artists came together to produce work that addressed issues of identity, living, and cultural conditions. Kaisahan Group was [JK: OK? or is it still around?] an early collective that issued a manifesto in 1976 calling for an awakening in which artists and the public would question Western aesthetics. The collective acknowledged a need to redefine the artist’s relationship to society and production, and the need to push certain content in art to the foreground. Kaisahan was questioning the relevance of abstract or non-objective art. Society was in ferment and artists banded together, rethinking constructs of nation and identity. Painting played a large role in this, reflecting a social realism and a re-identification with folk art and local materials.

*The Interrelation between Collaborative/Social Art Practices and Human Development Communication*

What are some of the common aims of development communication and social art practices? The field of Human Development has a code of ethics that is discussed and debated by policy makers and international aid donors. Ethical principals relevant to cultural traditions and societal change are analysed and
assessed to resolve moral quandaries raised by development organisations’ work. The aim of the Human Development Report, first drafted in 1990, was to put people back in the center of development initiatives, as opposed to having markets and production at the center. Amartya Sen describes a human development approach as an “approach where one concentrates on human life, its richness, the well being, the freedom, and how they are developing, how they are changing (2005).” Mahbub Ul Haq states, “We should tell the story of development in terms of how people are feeling not just how production is going (2005).” Artists have not constructed a formal code of ethics for collaborating with individuals in complex societies and circumstances, but a social code is debated by artists, critics, and curators in on-line forums, texts, essays. Similarities in vision can be immediately discerned between social/collaborative art and the type of communications employed by development organisations. Historically, modes of social art practice are directed at working for social justice and political freedom, inequality and exclusion. Both human development and social art have common values such as:

Sharing knowledge for positive change
Striving for a higher quality of life
Voluntary involvement
Full knowledge of purpose by all participants
Growth of the individual and the community

In the last decade, innovative and more complex relationships between the public, the environment, and artists have taken place. These practices are collaborative, community-based, and concerned with the construction of social knowledge through engagement/encounter. Hau Hanru, an independent curator from China, describes the exhibition spaces of the 2002 Gwanju Biennale as:

. . . a platform for initiating new ideas and developing critical social relations. By inviting artists and artist-run alternative spaces to create their own spaces within the framework of the biennale, they proposed to shift the focus of an international biennale from the display of artworks that were selected on purely aesthetic
terms, to the facilitation of the making of pertinent works that address issues that arise from the specific cultural realities in their own everyday life (Papastergiadis, 2008).

The theme of the Gwanju Biennale was listed as P_A_U_S_E, meaning to take pause and reflect, both of which are rooted in the Eastern concept of meditation (4th Gwangju Biennale 2002). The idea was to promote a withdrawal for modern narratives, in preparation for new challenges in a new relation to contemporary society. In addition, there was a relinquishing of the artistic control of the curator. Small collectives of non-profit and experimental groups from around the world came together for the first time, leaving open the possibility of unexpected experiences. Artists are coming together to define a future and envision new narratives based on collective activity.

The vision of the South Korean 2012 First Ecorea Jeonbuk Biennale by Director RyuIlseon was founded on “mutual engagement with community.” (Ilseon, 2012) Innovative circumstances were set up for artists to engage with the community in a non-hierarchical environment through production processes, local culture, food production, and social and discursive engagement. The artists, who were meeting each other for the first time, formed collectives and worked on installations inside Mongolian yurts that were erected on a mountainside workshop space. They made work individually on this mountainside as well, using such local materials as wood, junk metals, and paint. The work made on the mountain traversed the local school systems via mobile galleries.

Some of the mountainside projects involved South Korean and Chinese artists laying a ream of rice paper up the mountain. Using brushes big as brooms, they painted calligraphy all the way up the length of rice paper. The artists engaged with locals at a food festival where they were taught and experienced local production and how to consume the dishes. The artists also met with Buddhist monks at a local healing retreat and held discussions about the meaning of Buddhism with the retreat’s abbot. In a local Korean sauna, showering, and sharing massage and sleeping spaces with local Koreans took place. The artists had no previous idea of what
circumstances they would be encountering from one moment to the next. The engagement of the Biennale was spontaneous. Artist participant Sarah Schuster noted:

The people from the region want to share what they know and how their way of life potentiates change. They are proud of their country and are aware that the ancient wisdom will be lost if they don’t reach across ‘party’ lines and work together. Participating in the Biennale made me aware of the parallels between religion and art. Both can become institutionalised, allowing the doctrine and rhetoric that articulated the lived experience to become more important than the lived experience that inspired it. When this happens to religion or art they lose touch with the world and slowly become obsolete. The art world today shows many of the signs of over-institutionalized religion. Aware of this, Ryu took a risk and committed to a new model for art making and exhibiting (Schuster, 2012).

Collaboration with community reallocates knowledge. Its direction is not from the artist to the community. The relationship is non-hierarchical, a mutual exchange. Knowledge is acquired through social encounters.

Liminal Spaces is a project where artists were asked to address the physical and mental borders of Route 60, the historic highway that connects Jerusalem and Ramallah, and all of its known and discussed checkpoints, laws, and barriers that restrict the mobility of Palestinians. Collaborative teams of artists were asked to research new methodologies that question the perception of the frontiers and challenge their accessibility, permeability and potential to serve as contact and communication zones (Israeli Center for Digital Art).” “The curators claimed that their aim was not to offer a model for peaceful co-existence, but to provide a platform of resistance (Papastergiadis 2008).” The artists are not prescribing a solution but opening up communication lines and connections.

**Is it Possible to Engage in a Non-hierarchical Relationship?**

In 2003, a project in Panama by artist Brooke Alfaro involved spending almost a year befriending two rival gangs from Panama City who had continuous street fights in which both their members
died. Alfaro engaged each gang in making and starring in a music video of a song by El Roockie, a popular rap artist. For the finale, Alfaro screened the two videos side by side at the same time, with both gangs on site to watch. The crowd screamed “more” at the end of the screening. This intervention was set up to allow the potential of problem-solving. It was a temporal community experience, with an intention of promoting communication and moving away from the historic narrative of the communities involved. Alfaro was a conduit. He constructed the encounter—an intervention into present narratives—and brought the gang members and members of each community together in an open-ended setting to stimulate possibilities for change and transformation. In this case, as with others described in this paper, the artist does not prescribe a solution.

Nikos Papastergiadis’s (2008) eloquent essay, “The Global Need for Collaboration,” relates how making art in collaboration with community entails some of the same ethical issues encountered by anthropologists. The transformation of global artistic strategies away from the glorification of the individual artist to the emergence of new artistic collectives in which the artist is mutual producer, shares many intentions with anthropological models. Papastergiadis connects this shift to George Marcusa’s account of the adaptation in anthropological discourse from, originally, documenting the form of traditional societies, to a new function he defines as “mediation of the new,” which he describes as:

. . . recognising the insider’s agency in the critical knowledge making process . . . elevating the function of collaboration from being a mere step in establishing a rapport for the purpose of a primary data gathering task to a more complex feedback process in which both insiders and outsiders are tethered as epistemic partners (2008).

Papastergiadis concludes, The critical link between the process of mediation and evaluation of difference in contemporary culture is that it seeks to go beyond the mere inventory and display of differences and seeks to develop new strategies for co-existence
that are based on mutual understandings (2008).

Understanding the value of all parties in a non-hierarchical relationship is very important in moving forward and finding mutual ground for artists to work together for social Development purposes.

**Hierarchy, Art Production, Development, Subalterns**

Joan Marie Kelly, the author of this paper, is an artist who has lived in Southeast Asia since 2005. She has built a relationship with members of Singapore society through art production. Before moving there, Kelly was no stranger to Southeast Asia. While living in New York City in her early twenties and catering at the National Arts Club at night, illegal Indonesians were creating the cuisine for the American-European clients in the dining room. The Indonesian culture was so enchanting to Kelly that she could not resist an offer to go to Indonesia and deliver photographs, money, and stories to the families of the worker sons in New York. This thread continues today in Kelly’s engagement with foreign workers and sex workers as a social art practice.

While sitting in a cafe in Geylang, a red-light district in Singapore, Kelly was surprised at how readily strangers from surrounding tables began speaking to her. Spontaneous interactions are not commonplace in Singapore; people speak when formally introduced. This unusual engagement with the local community inspired Kelly to bring a French easel and paint to the same location the following Friday night. She had no idea what she would do or take on as her subject, but the interaction had sparked a motivation to see what would happen. She had disregarded a statement by one of the men when he told her he was a “pimp.”

The following Friday night, she set up an easel and canvas and this same man declared that artists must paint something “beautiful.” Following this, he began to introduce Kelly to the sex workers in the vicinity, urging she takes them on as subjects. Kelly offered to pay the women and men the sum of 30.00SGD per hour to sit as a model. One man’s idea of beauty triggered the beginning of the project.
From 2006 to 2008, Kelly went to the same place most Friday nights. The local people began to look forward to her being there every week. As they watched, they became familiar with her process and began to comment, offering their opinions. In this way, a discourse on art between the most unlikely people was begun. Many community art projects have temporal limitations. Kelly’s was different in that the funding was solely from the artist. There were limitations but no restrictions. As time went on, one of the sex workers who showed interest, Zen Leng, visited openings at the Singapore Art Museum on nights that Kelly would also be there. In a recent interview with Zen, who went on to pose many times for Kelly in Kelly’s studio, she discussed the “confidence” that the act of being a model for an artist gave her.

The street became a theatrical stage. Kelly brought other artists and her students to make art, and join in any way they wanted. Although these students were native Singaporeans in a tiny city-state, they had never spent time in the neighbourhood and were curious to have Kelly, the outsider, introduce them.

**How is the Painting, or the Artifact from this Encounter Viewed?**

Kelly agrees with the statement, although it does not tell the complete story. While there is an object, or a product outcome, the object created is not market driven. There is little interest in the purchase of what would be random heads. The paintings are a recording of the temporal experience. Historically, Kelly has been a practicing artist. As a result, she cannot break away from viewing the resultant painting as a work of art.

Artist/curator/academic professor Sarah Schuster describes the work:

If I were to speak of Joan Kelly’s work as performance, then how or why would I speak of the sensitivity and compassion that I see in her best work? The spectacular drawings and paintings on canvas of the brothel women in Kolkata, or the paintings of the women on the streets of Geylang, the portraits titled, “Diaspora” and “Kumari” are just some of her works where I find myself engaged in relationship with a person I have never actually met. A world, different than the one I live in, with an unfamiliar tempera-
ture and light seem to surround me. For a moment I do not feel isolated. I am moved beyond myself by the painter’s attention to her subject and her discovery of something other than herself. This is the painter’s gift to me. I am released from my own self-containment through the painter’s release from hers. It adds to my experience to know that she painted some paintings in India, or China or Thailand or that the man or woman in the painting is considered of no value in the place he or she lives, and that she is an American citizen. These details enrich the art but this is because the painting embodies the idea and not because the ideas surround it. These distinctions are important to understanding Joan Kelly’s work because her paintings’ real significance is that she is using one of the oldest forms in western art, and she has made it brand new (2012).

**The Significance of the Face**

Mukhopadhyay elaborates on the significance of the face:

The face is what represents the person. To be human is to have a face. To be a person, to be acknowledged as a person, means to be acknowledged through one’s face. It is not possible to contemplate a relationship of love, hatred or friendship with a faceless person. Human beings without faces are not quite humans. And yet, social marginality - professional sex-work and the kind of affective labour it entails - is precisely a way of rendering the sex-worker faceless. To concentrate on the face of a sex-worker is thus to redeem his/her humanity on the face of a ‘reality’ which seeks to reduce him/her to mere flesh. . . . To emface the faceless through artistic encounter is thus to restore the human in the dispossessed other (2009).

**Working in Kolkata**

Joan Kelly moved her work to the brothels of Rabindra Sarini in Kolkata, India, and practiced for three consecutive winters, from 2007 to 2009. She did not do so by going through the local NGOs. She had a contact who acted as an interpreter and took her into the
brothel to meet with one of the women. This woman was Shikah Das, a sex worker who was born in the brothel. Shikah decided to lead the project by organising the women to pose, cooking lunch, making tea breaks, and dealing with any disturbances, be it a mother-in-law demanding part of the payment to the “models” posing, or the NGO trying to shut down the whole operation. For posing for an hour, the women were paid a 500 Rupee note - about fifteen US dollars. Shikah set the price. She also set a price for her organisational duties; 1000INR, which increased to 1500 INR as Kelly saw the complexity of the work grow. It was important for the women to set the price. The work began with the women having a stake in the autonomy of the project.

The women dressed to have their portraits painted, each wearing sari and bindi dot on their foreheads as proper Hindu married women. They posed as they wanted to be seen, often times very differently from how they were seen on the street. The majority of the women told a similar story, of being driven to the brothel, running away from a husband who terrorised them. Their families, immersed in poverty, are unable to take the women back at the risk of having one more mouth to feed.

The work was going very well. How did Kelly gauge this? The spirit of the women was the gauge. Did they want to participate? Was the project responded to with generosity? This is an indicator of positive feelings towards the work. Kelly and the women were laughing and joking while at times more serious trying to accomplish the days tasks. Shikah was strict in looking after the interests of the women and Kelly. She was a strong manager, juggling Kelly’s need for time on the drawings and paintings and maintaining a strict adherence to time to make everything “fair.” While the women were living in such close proximity, equitable actions and decisions were crucial so as to avoid conflicts, because in this situation it could be interpreted as Shikah having preferences. Almost everyone in the brothel took part in some way, either by priming canvases, making food, storing the paintings, and/or taking over duties for each other so everyone could have a chance to pose.
Silent Narratives

How did the work change once in the brothel, once inside the personal rooms of the women as opposed to the “public” space? In the women’s private rooms, Kelly became privy to the silent narratives that spoke to the lives, concerns, and priorities of the community of women. But just as Kelly gained understanding of a very different world than the one she walks through, constructed barriers were broken on both sides. In addition, suspicion, mistrust, and generalisations were in play on both sides. Social constructs towards people in mainstream society might include generalisations about labour and economics: *everything has been handed to them*, or *they never had to work or struggle a day in their lives*. In this case study, Kelly is Caucasian, female, and single. In India, she felt very strongly that because she was single, the women in Kolkata accepted her more readily and that things would have been much different if she had mentioned support from a loving husband, or getting help with paying the bills. Kelly and the sex workers could relate as urban women making decisions and being the sole bearers of responsibility for themselves and their children.

Questions must be asked about what degree race plays in being accepted and welcomed into a new community. She has not studied the race question, but intuition can impart meaning to experiences and Kelly infers that most social encounters are based upon race, gender, and age. Assumptions are made and actions are taken based on these assumptions. But with perseverance and time, stereotypes can be dislodged. A conversation in Shikah’s room between Kelly and the women began with the women asking Kelly how many children her sisters had. (Kelly herself has no children.) Kelly replied that among three sisters there are ten children. Shikah gasped, “Why do they have so many children? Are they illiterate? We have so many children because we are illiterate.” Kelly replied, “No, it’s because they are born-again Christians; therefore they don’t use birth control. They believe that if they become pregnant it is God’s will.” Shikah then said, “Stop making up stories. If you keep making up stories we won’t believe anything you say!” Shikah could not believe that people in the United States of America could
be relying on belief to determine issues of pregnancy and birth.

With time, Kelly began to have a greater understanding of the deeper meanings behind the women’s actions. In India, a female child is brought up with the understanding that her body does not belong to her. One’s body belongs to one’s future husband. The Western cultural construct of private space and personal ownership of one’s body does not enter. The consensus about bodies seemed to be that if one is to be beaten and raped regularly by one’s husband, at least in the brothel, a woman is paid for what she does, whereas the husband doesn’t pay. A woman’s life is being stuck and she is constantly pregnant. Going into the brothel is a lifelong decision. Once in the brothel, one is “unclean.” Kelly came to understand this after immersing herself in the day-to-day lives of these women: that when working in communities very different from one’s own, one must concentrate on washing away all assumptions and try to look as if one is seeing for the first time.

The NGO operating in the same neighbourhoods that Kelly was working in had a stranglehold on the women in the brothel. In other words, the NGO was dictating what the women could do, and where and when they could go. It threatened to have the women evacuated from their rooms if they did not adhere to NGO rules. The women were literally kept as prisoners. While Kelly was working with Shikah, this imprisonment situation and doing the artwork began to clash. The men in the brothel representing the NGO declared that the women are not allowed to make money in any other way besides sex. (Kelly never met any female representatives from the NGO.) The NGO wanted Kelly to pay them, even though the women were the ones working: posing, priming canvases, making food, and storing wet paintings in their rooms. As a result, Shikah relocated the sex workers into neighbouring buildings, siting the project on a different rooftop of a different brothel each day to escape the NGO’s scrutiny. The NGO eventually discovered everyone involved. They tried intimidation methods, such as phoning Shikah to alert her that the Kelly planned to take the painted images to the press and publicly humiliate them and their families. An NGO representative called Shikah at night to report that Kelly had been robbed and beaten up on the way home from doing the work that day, but this had never
happened. Throughout, it was Shikah who bore the burden of negotiating among the different factions. During the last month of work, December 2008 Kelly contacted the president of the NGO to explain what was going on. He responded immediately. He wrote a letter that was known about immediately in support of the directing them to allow Shikah complete autonomy to decide how she wanted to handle the project.

The atmosphere in a brothel is very tedious. No plumbing means dragging water up dark, unlit stairways every day, in a building that is nearly falling apart around its inhabitants. There is no opportunity for growth or change. The women are intelligent, imaginative, and thoughtful, and to survive, they have had to learn through their senses and intuition.

Art production for them was a break from the tedium to engage in something new.

**Collaborative Work**

The artwork Kelly pursued with Thai sex workers in Singapore became the most developed level of collaboration on the picture plane. The women were open to taking up a brush and working on paintings of their own image with Kelly. For the Thai sex workers, clients only arrived after 6pm and the women do not venture out of the brothel during the day for fear of being discovered by the Singapore police. In addition, they only have a thirty-day tourist visa and are not supposed to be working. These constraints meant that the women hung out in the brothel all day, quite bored and not earning any money. Kelly gathered with the women in the front room of the brothel. Its walls and floor were adorned with Buddhist shrines. There was a couch, vanity, and mirror where they put on make-up. The brothel’s pimp ran into Kelly on the street. Having seen her painting on the street in Geylang, he asked her if she was interested in working with his women. Kelly offered to pay the women to pose for a painting. All were willing to pose.

Once Kelly perceived the daily dullness inside the brothel, she realised she must give everyone something to do at the same time. And indeed, everyone wanted to participate. Kelly brought sketchbooks, pencils, and pastels with her. Immediately upon
receiving the sketchbooks, the women began to draw. They drew their home villages on the Mekong River and they drew symbolic Buddhist objects. They also began to paint onto their own image on the canvases that Kelly had been working on.

David Cohen elaborates on these Thai brothel paintings that, . . in the Thai paintings, an initial sense of affinity with the primitivism of Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) is dispelled when we learn that the naïve handling is literally the hand of the naïf, the intervention of the subject in her own depiction. Kelly has not, like Gauguin the retired stockbroker, turned east in search of the Other. Rather, a migrant worker herself, she has simply found subjects in her new environment. And she depicts an actuality that incrementally changes by the fact of her painting it (2012).

Cohen further elaborates, She neither projects what she brings from “home” onto the people and situations she encounters, nor merely documents in an imported realist language what she notices, but instead interacts through paint and through the act of painting with individuals who become, via painting, more fully her equals. Difference is neutralised upon the picture plane as surely as geographical and social distances are compressed in cyberspace. Oxymoronically, globalisation flattens(2012).

The collaboration is such that knowledge is reallocated as a mutual exchange between artist and subject. Kelly insists that the art must be pursued from a non-hierarchical position. Respect produces infinite effects on action and it positions people to move towards greater understanding.

The statement “Difference is neutralised on the picture plane . . .” is of great importance to Kelly’s work. Art has the power to communicate experience and facilitate connections in a non-threatening way. The artist acts as a facilitator, a conduit for which connections are made. The artwork gives both the artist and the community something in common, a reason to spend time together. The artist Brooke Alfaro, who befriended two rival gangs from Panama City, spent a year working on the project until its
outcome: the outdoor screening of the two films. Artwork for development purposes takes time -because it takes time to build trust.

Potential of the Work

Certain aspects of “Social Art” make it a strong tool for development aims. If the artist’s work is geared to promote transformation in a specific area, the work could have strong results. Brooke Alfaro’s work with the rival gangs is a very good example of artwork constructed to lead to the possibility of transformation of a present narrative. With a focused goal, artists may have a greater impact and be able to problem-solve. Alongside the need to focus on goals such as communication and education, the work also needs to have an element of openness so that it can evolve and expose itself in natural directions. The artwork is an intervention, the artist a facilitator—and the community will need time to take the work in its own direction. In short, the artist’s role is to facilitate and create lines of connection, but not to dictate outcomes.

Brooke Alfaro’s work is a good example of how having a goal (opening lines of communication and constructing a space for transformation) must be let go at a specific point. At that point, the artist must allow her or his collaborators, on their own, to make connections and relate to the new communication platforms. Kelly’s work in the brothels of Kolkata could have more focus on educational outcomes or communication links that could sustain some kind of income for the women. In Kelly’s view, some of the elements she would like to develop through artistic processes of collaboration are: self-confidence, alternative opportunities to bring in income, and constant renewal of AIDS awareness, education, and the natural functions of the body. New women enter the brothel endlessly, and at ever-younger ages; their education then, needs to be continuous. Kelly feels the work would come full circle if the art were sold in the gallery systems and each piece’s proceeds could go back to the women and/or be used to train the women to teach each other about birth control and AIDS. Others might object to the women suddenly receiving a large sum of money, but Kelly
disagrees. Some women in the brothel were known as “good sex workers” and others were known to not make nearly as much money. Certain issues are individual. Also, their expenses are quite burdensome. Rents in and around the brothel neighborhoods of Kolkata are very expensive. Most women have to feed not only their children, but extended family, boyfriends, etc. Every day, Shikah must pay someone to carry buckets of water up four flights of steps to her room. She must support her mother and her own two children. Because she doesn’t want the children to stay in the brothel, she pays tuition for school and a fee to keep them in a hostel. If she has a medical emergency, which she did two years ago, her savings must cover her living expenses for the emergency, plus the entire recovery period. The women are capable of making decisions for themselves. Kelly’s work was predicated on all parties having as much autonomy as possible in the circumstances of collaborating.

While Kelly realises that there could be more of a focus in her work as it relates to development, RustomBharucha cautions, Certainly, the arts can suffer if a didactic agenda is imposed. This is happening in a lot of NGO-related theatre work where the funders - more often than not based in First World economies - expect artists in the Third World to script narratives around specific strategies relating to AIDS, or domestic violence, or gender disparity, or whatever. Some of these contrived narratives pass off as 'infotainments'. More often than not, I find them disingenuous and lacking in body and soul (2009).

Kelly feels that the women in Sonagachi could sense that she didn’t have an agenda. They knew the funding was all her own. There needs to be balance and negotiation with local communities. Brooke Alfaro spent a year in the gang communities. Kelly went to Sonagachi for three consecutive years for a month each year. All of this work takes time.

James Elkins states, “Joan's practice . . . is open-ended, socially engaged, and crosses social boundaries (2012).” While this is true, Kelly is interested in the work making a more substantial difference. Did she give the women sex workers a voice? Yes in the sense that the work has raised questions, created empathy, and taken people to a place they have never been. There are the
artifacts from the work but the artwork is not sustainable. The activity that was created is not self-sufficient in creating a continuous system of support and therefore terminates.

What is important right now is that artists and development organisations enter a dialogue that re-envisions methodologies and redefines outcomes. The complexity of development work warrants these goals.

Below is a chart of what has been discussed.

Process Structure:
Artist as conduit.
Constructed encounter: focused yet open.
Non-hierarchical relationships.
Intervention into present narratives.
Open-ended setting for possibilities of change and transformation.

Elements of the Work:
Access to communities. Allowance time. One of the demands of the work is time and tenacity.
Art’s non-hierarchical aspect. Equity in relationships creates an open atmosphere and confidence.
Communication powers. Visual media can express what words cannot.
Educational powers.
Quality of life. Positive feeling: usually the act of creation brings about a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.

Kelly aspires to develop collaborative art methodologies that seek to benefit community, rather than her individual art market aspirations. Rustom Bharucha discusses measuring the development content of art practice:

I think by creating a new synergy around intermediary structures in which the spokespersons of culture and development are obliged to learn from each other. What we need are new imaginaries, instead of predetermined agendas. While I reject the elitism which assumes that imagination is the prerogative of artists alone, I also resist the statistically determined instrumentalism of
the development world. We need languages which can challenge the existing indices of ‘measuring’ the developmental content of art practice. Only when funding agencies can create new evidence-based indices which can show that the arts do make a difference in the social and political world, can the economist priorities of state-driven development be meaningfully countered (2009).

When she deals with funding agencies, Kelly always finds herself up against the challenge of measuring outcomes. This is another reason why she carried out her projects autonomously, and it is a constant challenge.

Development institutes and artists must engage with community in non-hierarchical circumstances and with an attitude of listening to each other, as well as to the community. All persons involved must let the engagement with communities dictate the signals of approach, process, connections and communication lines these process are meant to inspire. Artists, development institutions, and communities must re-imagine possibilities.

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