

Society, Politics and the Performative Presentation

I would like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional owners of this land. I also welcome and thank all concerned for allowing me to participate in this event.

In order to become an established artist, one has to stabilize their sensitivities, normalise their idiosyncrasies, generalise their integrity and neutralise their intensities.

In other words, one has to realise realities.

Next is to observe these realities. Self-censorship is the most common consequence of this observation. One learns to sniff trouble (in the case of the place we live and in the threat against the regular flow of mortgage payments) developing, in time, a skill for bypassing unwanted ideas, as if they never even existed, a habit for beheading undesirable elements of imagination and a knack to lock up thoughts that threaten the security of the self and the nation. To be an established artist means to become a member of First World practice, to belong to the official art of the state, to be recognised as a master. An established artist is certainly established but most certainly not an artist.

Art-making is the aesthetic resistance against the way things are. A constant movement towards pushing limits.

To create is to instigate insurgencies against already established territories; not in order to establish new ones but to continuously draw attention to forbidden possibilities. Creating is a political activity because it doesn't cooperate, it disobeys, surpassing the personal and understands it as collective.

Some critics say statement art is pathetic, but I think at this point of time, art has a duty in Arabic a *waajib* to make a statement and to be responsible, this *waajib* extends to the engaged artist who can't just ignore people's situations.

Originally I wanted to present in Arabic, reason why, is to simulate the complexities of cultural and social engagements and its challenges. Off course I would have struggled, with my Arabic, having lived in Australia for almost three quarters of my life, but this is the absurdity of living in a language that we feel is not truly ours.

For over 17 years I have conceptually and practically developed ideas and provided training utilising multimedia within a Community Cultural framework.

I began working in the late 80's and have always utilized art making as a principal component for community engagement. I have worked in detention centres, schools, prisons, refugee camps, hospitals and youth centres.

Much of my early inspiration was directly influenced by the early Hip-hop movement, as an effective form and tool to communicate with people, using a familiar language and culture. This form provided an entry point to deal with community issues in a so called "positive" manner for social change.

From 1994 to 1999 in my role as a Youth Arts worker, I collaborated on developing the holistic youth health arts model in relation to harm minimization.

After 1999, I began work in South West Sydney and developed the 2168 Multimedia Van Project. 2168 area encompasses 8 suburbs that share the same post-code and were generally considered as isolated, disadvantaged areas with low income, English language proficiency, public housing issues and so forth.

By developing the 2168 Multimedia Van project, the intention was to bring exposure to area through the arts. At the time the only available media training facilities were institutionalised or so called alternative, located within inner Sydney and not easily accessible for communities living in South West Sydney fringes. Once the Van was equipped, it was publicised and promoted to communities as affordable media training and local artists run initiative.

The objectives of the Media Van included:

- To provided pathways for local artists into professional employment and self-development.
- To be modelled as a pilot program for other services to utilize and further lobbying for community media access and infrastructure.
- To achieve sustainability within communities through the transference of skills, culturally appropriate methods, trainers and mentors.
- And to provide an accessible resource that is user friendly and affordable.

In 2001 I received an Arts Fellowship from the Australia Council for the Arts and began travelling and working in the Arab world. After several years and many visits in and out of the region I was inspired by a frustrated but honest cab driver, who added an extra sentence to the usual cabby questions you receive, like, "Where are you from"? And "Do you like it better here or there"? He added, "If you like it here so much, why don't you try working here and then come back and tell me if you still like it here".

His statement at the time made me confused and angry, confused, because of the reality that I was just another tourist with a passport and a return ticket, high on childhood memories. Angry, because of the hardships people face screaming "survival of the fittest".

So I came back to Australia in 2004 and along with two other friends and colleagues, decided to pursue the media studio building and training idea further beyond the shores of Australia.

The idea was to adopt past models and methods and to develop project links directly with people in Lebanon. After an initial and unsuccessful funding application made to the Australia Council for the Arts, the collective decided to go abroad and seek other possibilities that may exist.

Contact with a Beirut based NGO, ALJANA, Arab Resource Centre for Popular Arts was made and this is where funding possibilities were examined and secured from Oxfam Québec in 2005. The plan was to promote the project in Palestinian refugee camps, those that are not familiar with Lebanon it has a population of 4 million people with about a million of those being Palestine refugees. The aim was to recruit interested young adults, from across the different regions to represent their communities and to bring them to central Beirut, where they can be skilled up in media studio technologies.

Participants were involved from the start, meaning that they themselves would build the studio together; this included sound insulation techniques and methods, building of shelving and the installation of IT equipment, hardware and software. This process was an important part of the project as the knowledge and skills attained could be taken back and utilized by their community. Out of the 120 likely candidates, only twelve were chosen for the intensive 4 month, eight hours a day, seven days a week process. This project remains ongoing today even after the recent crisis that happened in Lebanon in 2006. Currently I am working on a 3 year project with young people from Indigenous and Arabic backgrounds, aged between 12 and 15 years and living in the South West of Sydney. The project titled *Refill*, aims to assist in the development of career and further education opportunities for these young people through a mentoring program.

I see my role as using the arts and its creative approaches to collaborate with communities of people. In my case they have been usually people that are labelled as "NESB" Non English Speaking or of "CALD" Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds.

For me these are titles, put on our backs like the cloths we wear.

Much of the time I don't make any distinction between personal conceptual approach and community arts practice.

I work in situations where most of the project funding comes from government sources, via different conditions.

Over the 17 years I have managed to manoeuvre through these spaces and agendas, trying to remain functional, while sticking to personal principles and objectives.

Being critical of an Arts / Welfare approach, of fixing or normalizing people.

I have experienced this as pacifying.

I work with the so-called isolated, marginalised or at risk.

The negative image?

If negative is where you start – the engagement and project is already doomed. I do not aim to fix the groups I collaborate with. Engagement with an interesting and dynamic project will create its own format for change and inspire new journeys in people's lives. Arts and community activism as a form, as a movement, as a way of doing, should never be out to please the majority. Because their interaction with the world is ultimately about preserving themselves and stopping reality. This isn't about bringing in experts to fix a community – this is about people's knowledge and wisdom fighting for their survival. Critical of my own role as a state sanctioned expert and professional. This means the first thing I do when I collaborate with people is to listen. At the same time I allow myself space and room to ask questions to position the project according to peoples' needs.

You can't empower through these Art projects – you can only attempt to create spaces, tools and backup, meeting with people where you can to establish working collaborations. In today's world, an artist has no choice but to remain useful? By adopting a mobile art making approach. Meaning the artistic ability to create, disappear and reappear where it is not expected. Thus creating relevant expression and resistance in a temporary free zone.

The question of culture relevance, a must, to be addressed in all situations. Therefore the artist must have the ability to absorb the environment their in, in order to be relevant and useful.

When meeting with people I create an open space by which we are all contributors with ideas that together shape a piece of artwork. There may be some technical skills to share but conceptually I work towards making artwork that finds a language with which it speaks. This language or form must at all times belong and remain relevant to the people, time and place.

Too many times projects are used to put people and their cultures on display in accordance with current threats and responses. This can be avoided, by simply passing the self proclaimed community leaders and representative and by linking directly at the grassroots level with local and culturally specific artists and their communities, only then the produced art work will become and remain in true dialogue with the concerns and issues of the day. There is no formula to community engagement. Each new project created will create a new formula for that specific time and place. This rational is important if each project is to live its own life.

I thank you for your time.