

## **PUBLIC AND LOCAL ENGAGED PROJECTS**

### **Artists in Multi-faceted Practice, Responding to the Local**

Chu Yuan and Jay Koh began their collaboration from 2000. Adopting forms of engagements that are responsive to and inclusive of peoples, cultural behaviors and societal structures, they often place themselves for substantial periods of time within a specific community, and devise site-specific responses to particular communities, whether in form of carrying out public art projects and/or interactive performances; creating social organisational and relational structures; organising activities and/ or informal learning programmes, with the aim of promoting interpersonal engagement, self-organisation and facilitating broader initiatives of those communities. Their work involves the interaction and exchange of ideas and knowledge between cultures and knowledge systems - particularly between art knowledge with those of social systems, local practices and organisational networks.

As artists, they feel that they have to take on multi-faceted roles to be able to affect and negotiate with the complex structures and relations in each context that they work. These activities that they carry out include art-making, research, curating, writing, teaching, consulting, and dialogue-making. These roles and activities form the foundation of their approach in integrating art and cultural processes with wider social processes. They also carry out shorter term projects, especially when requested by art institutions, museums, festivals and other art events. The following are some examples of past projects from their individual as well as collaborative practices. (For more information on Chu Yuan and Jay Koh's work, please visit IFIMA's website at <http://www.ifima.net/IFIMA/IFIMA2k.htm>)

## Participative Art Projects

### ***Portraying Ourselves: Rauma Residents on Rauma***

**A public art project in Rauma, Finland 2005. Artist residency project by Jay Koh and Chu Yuan, carried out during a 2 month residency hosted by RAUMARS and Lonnstrom Museum, Rauma.**

The "Portraying Ourselves" project invited Rauma residents to relate accounts of their lives in Rauma. It aimed to involve Rauma residents to participate in jointly creating social portraits that can reflect the social fabric of Rauma and to identify what are the important places, activities, events and objects for Rauma. It aimed to showcase a people's connection with a place (physical) and their sense of their own place (social/ individual, roles/ identity) in this time and space.

The basic idea for the residency project was to jointly bring residents through a journey where they can become excited about representing some aspects of their lives through visualizations and a process of collective creative negotiation and dialogue.



Interactions with in the residents in the Rauma public library, with interactive tools for conversation, for period of 14 days

### **Brief background and process:**

Rauma is a historic town declared as an UNESCO world heritage site. It is a tourist town in summer; otherwise sleepy rest of year. People here have acquired a deeply local and historic sense of identity. Raumans are not easily open to outsiders and strangers are not easily or immediately accepted.

In order to better understand the conditions on site and to develop interactions with residents, we undertook a few activities that were sustained over the duration of the residency, for example, we

- Located ourselves in public library daily for 2 weeks, with interactive tools for conversation
- Talked to and interviewed and made joint activities with many different persons from different sectors e.g. harbour authorities and workers (the harbour provides work for generations in this town), city planners, museum managers, novelist, researchers, residents, boat owners (boat owning culture is very strong), youth, children, foreign migrants etc
- Planted ourselves in public spaces e.g. market square and boatyard, and some restaurants and cafes.



Interviewing harbour employees. The harbour has been a safe haven of employment for generations of Raumans.

Eventually the 2-month interactions with Rauma residents during the project produced:

1. An exhibition of objects with special meanings/ stories for and by residents of Rauma
2. Performances for photography by residents of Rauma, expressing people's sentiments and social interactions and relations with places in Rauma

The project produced 300 over images, numerous collective performances, interviews on video, covering many aspects of people's identification with activities and spaces, and visualization of people's feelings, bonds, hopes, anxieties and issues about living in Rauma. Selected images were printed as a collection of 6 postcards, with the intention of sending back these visual representations into public visibility and attention, in order to initiate a new stage of post-project dialogue possibilities.

#### **Places, Sentiments and Issues affecting people's lives:**

*Main places identified as important to Rauma residents who participated in Portraying Ourselves project:*

- (1) Meri – sea (2) Koti – home (3) Kirjasto – Library (4) Vanha Rauma - Old Rauma  
(5) Maaumala & uimahalli - Outdoor swimming pool & indoors swimming hall (6) Otanlati - Harbor  
(6) Petajas (7) Petajas boatyard (8) Syvarauma boat harbor (9) Tori - Market Square  
(10) Komppi (11) Kirkko – church (12) Ranta – canal (13) Rannat - beaches

*Some 'social' activities documented in the project:*

- (1) Retired post office workers once monthly meetings at Rosmariini restaurant; (2) Boating and sailing – repair, renovating, maintaining boats and sailing with family and friends; (3) Men's daily gossip circles in town's main market square; (4) Diverse school activities to nurture children's appreciation of Rauma's natural environment; (5) Creating and seeking out time and space to be alone; (6) Rauman Poikakuoro – Rauma Boys' Choir

*Some issues of concern voiced by Rauma residents:*

- (1) Rauma should be friendlier and offer brighter future for young people – youth have to move to other cities for education and job opportunities; (2) Few job choices and opportunities for Rauma residents; (3) Hostility and alienation of modernised harbor & port operation; (4) Environmental and noise pollution from heavy vehicles traffic, industries and nuclear plant; (5) Preservation of environmental heritage and home environment from being taken over by industrialization, shipyard and port activities – e.g. Ruuhiluoto, Petajas and Komppi; (6) Residents sometimes feel need for own space, for anonymity in public spaces, in a town which feels very small and where everyone seems to all about each other; (7) Preservation of architectural heritage, not limited to only the old wooden houses of Old Rauma; (8) Rauma should have more night life; street life and cultural activities and should not just be a summer town.



Home – the most important place expressed by most residents

The interactive opportunities offered and actions accomplished by the project:

- It created visualisations of people's connection with a place (physical) and their sense of their own place (social/ individual, roles/ identity) in time. It uncovered a multiplicity of Rauma's stories, from events that have touched and affected people's lives personally, to people's individual circles, relations with one another and people's private spaces.
- It provided an opportunity for people to become more open and public about their thoughts, attachments, sentiments (people are very reserved)
- It provided an opportunity for individuals to interact and relate with strangers (in the form of ourselves)
- It created one possibility for social interaction and opportunity for collective reflection/ discussion – in context where people live so individual and isolated lives
- It located these activities in public visibility & accessibility
- It provided an opportunity for people to express what they are facing in their everyday realities
- It provided artistic tools to assist in visualising these stories or experiences
- It publicised and circulated these sentiments and stories – so that they can generate some public/ private reflection and discussions about whether this is 'what we are about'

Critical questions surrounding the project are many, one of which is what would be the value of the above collective activities to the local residents. Further research and follow up actions with the residents will be productive in answering some of these questions. This project also served as an investigation of collaboration between institution, artist and community. The timeframe was too short to allow for following up from the early stages of creative engagements and collective activities with residents.



Objects accompanied by written stories which tell of people's attachment to Rauma



Resident's need: Seeking out time and place to be alone in this town where everyone knows your business even ahead of yourself.



Residents' pride: Old Rauma with its 200 over year old houses, a UNESCO world heritage site.



Residents' anxiety: Rauma is not a town for young people. Youth indicating the cities they have to head for in pursuit of higher education. Many do not return.



Residents' struggle: how to preserve the old outdoor swimming pool from disuse and possible destruction by city authorities



Performance "Swimming in Air", by Rauma residents who grew up hanging around this pool

## ***Conversation Pieces***

**An interactive and engaged public art project by Jay Koh in collaboration with Chu Yuan, Seri Kembangan, Malaysia, 2008**

This work employs a process of art making that considers sustainable engagement with residents of Seri Kembangan. From Fri 15 Aug to Wed 20 Aug, 9 am to 1 pm, Jay Koh and collaborators stationed themselves in the Maxi Tasty coffee shop in Seri Kembangan, within an installation of art objects. Seri Kembangan residents were invited for a drink, and to have a chat with the artist about contemporary art and their life in Seri Kembangan; after which, Jay gave them each an art object or kitsch item of their choice as a present.



The pieces of artwork are pieces of a puzzle that form the map of Seri Kembangan village

These art objects were created especially for Seri Kembangan residents. Through the artwork, the artist would like to open up conversations with residents, and to understand their daily life, and their views on art, which can hopefully lead to further interactions. Through such interactions, he hopes to create a broader understanding of art and its connection to people in their daily lives.



The conversations, installation, actions of the artist and collaborators, and the intervened ambience of the coffee shop all carry the performance value of creating an atmosphere for exchange, casual rapport and awareness of this form of contemporary art activity. The work spans over a longer timeframe to allow unorchestrated development of relationships with participants, initiated through the art work, installation and performance, but further built up through conversations and interactions that follow. All these relational activities are intended to create an inter-subjective foundation for shaping experiences and mindsets.



**Conversation Pieces** was part of Entry Points, run by 1948 Projects, organized by Chu Yuan to engage with residents and organize collective efforts to visualize and activate their everyday concerns and needs, through entry points with expanded visual art practices, in the village where they live in Malaysia.



Conversation Pieces, exhibition of project documentation in 1948 Artspace, Seri Kembangan, Malaysia

**Ni Hao – Dia Duit by Jay Koh,  
Commissioned project by City Arts, Dublin, Ireland, 2006 – 07**



Jay Koh was commissioned by CityArts Dublin to scope out a project focusing on the relationship between the Parnell St Chinese community and young Dubliners from the surrounding area. The context for the research is an area of Dublin which traditionally suffered neglect and in the last 3 years has become a social space for the immigrant and student communities originating mostly from China.

It uses art creatively as a tool to facilitate integration as a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation, employing dialogical and participative art activities to create channels between the Irish communities and the students and migrants from north eastern China. After a period of research and relationship building, the project proposed a set of cultural activities to alleviate cross community and/or workplace issues through mutual consultation, common activities and platforms. Activities that have been organized include visits, interviews and private conversations; Chinese and Irish artist informal evenings (twice a month); cultural exploration workshops in Chester Beatty Library; organizing the Chinese Singing and Song writing event; the organizing of a Chinese Social BBQ event and the creation of the Ireland Chinese Cultural and Sports Association. Further events are being planned for 2009.



Activities organized under the Ireland Chinese Cultural and Sports Association

**Voicing the City (VOIC), part of City Transformers project, 2002, organised by Lasnia Centre for Contemporary Art, Danzig, Poland.**

Collaborative project by Chu Yuan Chu and Amanda Heng, involving Polish collaborators Agata Miloch, Agnieszka Buzinska, Anna Szywnelska, and Dominika Gwarus.

Voicing the City - VOIC was a mobile public forum and live installation work responding to Danzig's city transformations. A roundtable, symbolised by a yellow circle, was employed as a symbol for public dialogue. Each participant would wear a section of the roundtable, and would need to stand in certain position in order form the full circle; symbolic of the affirmative action (stepping into position and willingness to listen and interact) that needs to be taken and positions that need to be negotiated in order to connect with and dialogue with others.

The main idea for the City Transformers project, as articulated by curators Agnieszka Wolodzko and Gregorz Klamans is that: The city of Danzig/ Gdansk in Poland has gone through a period of rapid transformation by the year 2002. New deliberations has arised, such as the possibilities of extending the city centre and including to it new areas, e.g. a huge territory previously belonging to Gdansk Shipyard, the seat of the Solidarity Movement. City Transformers aimed to broaden the discussions around architectural and town planning issues into the public sphere. City Transformers invited artists from Poland and abroad to produce projects in the city area, in making their contributions to solving problems connected with spatial alterations in the city as well as existing social conflicts. The concept of interaction and participation with the public was a very important component of this project.



Mobile forums in action in parts of the city



Top right: Billboard poster announcing dates, places and times of the mobile forum in the city, inviting participation from city residents. The poster asks: Where are you going? Gdansk is changing. What would you like to preserve and what to change?

### **The concept:**

We wanted to create a process that is open-ended and responsive to further transformations. Firstly we worked with Polish collaborators to make direct, interactive engagement with the people of Gdansk, in a media that allows interactive mobility. We believe that the residents should be consulted as joint stakeholders in a city's transformation, and that the residents' psychological dimension (memories, opinions, attitudes, values etc.) is an integral part of the city's landscape. Secondly we hoped to stir and harness imaginative possibilities for further actions, through discussions and visual and audio public displays of responses and material gathered from the actions; and thirdly, to facilitate frameworks for further collective action by interested participants.

Some suggestions for further projects following the forums, gathered from collaborators and participants, included ideas to produce an unofficial guide of Gdansk incorporating landmarks from residents' memories that are unrecorded in official history; to make a multimedia mapping of the types of activities (shopping, touring, clubbing, street performances, etc.) found in the inner city, and to initiate more activities for local residents as many felt the city activities are geared too much for tourism; to identify projects started from independent creative expressions by residents in their lived environments.

Documentations of the forums were exhibited and a copy of citizens' feedback was presented to the city council office.

## **ET – Exchanging Thoughts by Jay Koh, ChiangMai, Thailand, 1995-96**

E.T. was an interactive public art project in various markets conceived for the Chiang Mai Social Installation (3rd Art & Cultural Festival, 19th Nov. 1995 - 19th Feb. 1996), which aimed to establish communication with the people of Chiang Mai through public interactive installations and public performances.

In E.T., objects and works made by artists living outside Southeast Asia were offered to be exchanged with objects and things brought in by the people of Chiang Mai, on a one-to-one basis. The exchange crossed cultural and professional differences on a basis of respect and equality in a process where spectators become participants. These actions were carried out at various market places where daily pilgrimages are made to satisfy personal needs. Markets were chosen as site of exchange as they are places with a long history of carrying out bartering, negotiations, and holding social gatherings.



Various markets at which the exchanges took place



The process of the exchange – woman exchanging fish scaling tool for a drawing.



Various objects for exchange – dried fish, rickshaw hat, carved wooden 'whiskey bottle', glass bottle plastered with newspaper

While the process of exchange was going on in various wet markets, a showroom in the city exhibited the works of the artists besides the objects/works brought in for the exchange. In this project Jay was looking into the value of exchange between cultures and within the capital system. The process of exchange also incorporated the perceptions of a community that have very little previous knowledge of modern art or objects of art. It questioned the logic of 'equal value' measured by units of currency within the conventional capital system and set this logic out of line in a one to one exchange. Art and Capital are used here as metaphorical symbols and as social and political critique.

## Performances and Photography Series

Jay Koh and Chu Yuan have been working for more than a decade on developing interventions in Myanmar. From 2003, they established NICA – Networking and Initiatives for Culture and the Arts, an independent not-for-profit resource development centre for arts and culture, which began as a response to the needs of the communities Jay Koh came into contact with when he first went into Myanmar. NICA was intended as a platform for sustained engagement between the Myanmar people and counterparts from outside. It later grew into an intervention of the systems that were controlling artists' mobility, circulation of knowledge, positions of privilege and access to opportunities, to support the needs of a growing number of artists and cultural workers cut off from sources of sustenance, knowledge, inspiration and possibility for practice. At the same time, NICA's programmes also offered training for young people, to intervene the poor state of higher education for young adults in Myanmar, where many young people are only attending university 10 days per year due to distant education arrangements. (For further information on NICA, please visit <http://www.hirvikatu10.net/artstreammyanmar/index.php?page=nica>)

The following series of photographs visualised various aspects of people's lives and experiences in Myanmar

### ***Let a Thousand Ideas Bloom (Stupa of Mind series) by Chu Yuan*** **Interactive performance, Yangon, Myanmar, 2005**

The idea for this work finds its source from the common practice of Myanmar people, no matter how poor, in order to gain merit for one's next life. This is the practice of making offerings of gold to temples, usually by purchasing gold leaves, which are pasted onto stupas in pagodas. *Let a Thousand Ideas Bloom (Stupa of Mind)* expresses a wish for the cultivation and circulation of ideas and knowledge in Myanmar, as contrasted with the cultivation of merits through donation of gold to the pagodas.

The soft sculptural form is worn on the head, symbolically creating a 'stupa of the mind'. The profusion of blooms on this symbolic mental structure symbolises the blossoming of 'mind' and mental activities. This visual representation grew from my own desire and work in Myanmar to encourage and propagate the development and blossoming of knowledge and ideas.



The initial 'carriers' of the Stupas of the Mind has to engage another person in conversation about the idea of the stupa and the stupa is passed on and carried by the other person only if she/he sympathizes with and shares in the desire to pass these ideas on. The stupa was passed on from person to person for duration of 3 hours in the performance festival Performance Site: Myanmar, Borders Within Without, Yangon, 2005.

## Offerings of Mind series

Performance and performed photography by Chu Yuan and collaborators, Yangon, Myanmar 2005 – 06

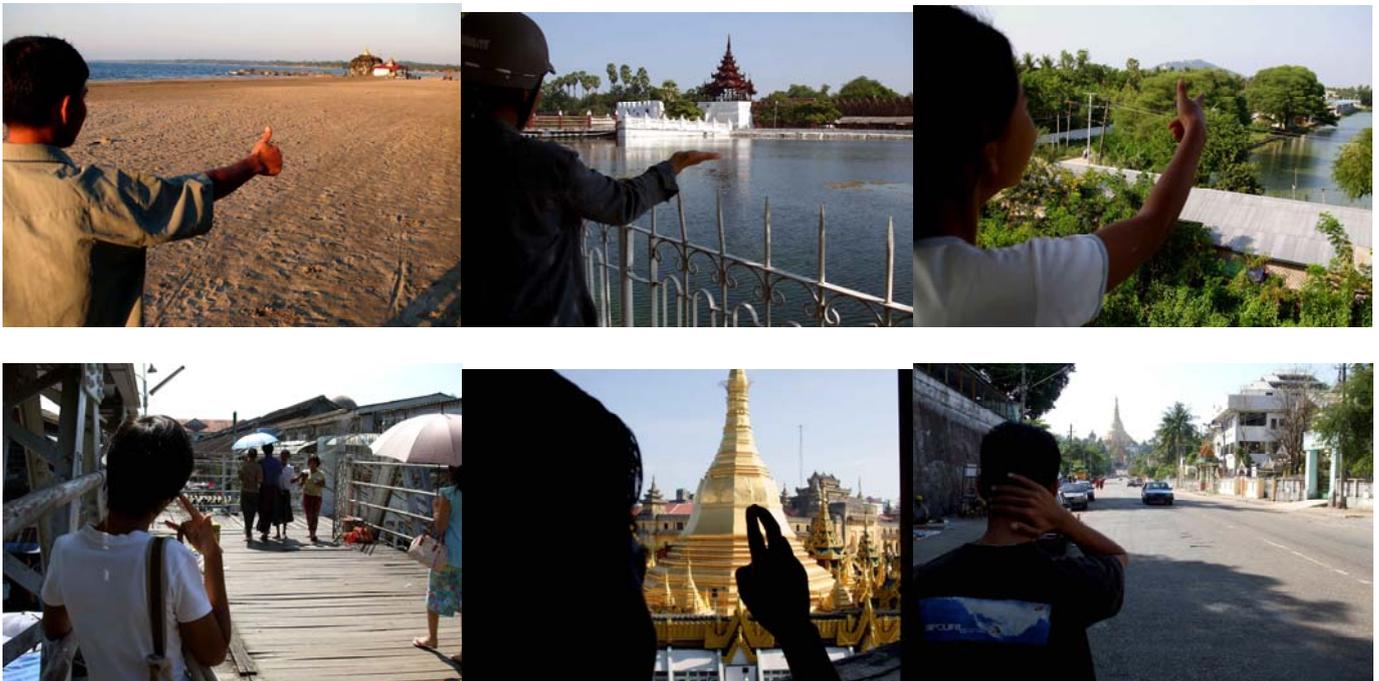


Top row: Offering of mind: young aspiring entrepreneur;  
Bottom, left to right: Offerings of mind: housewife, student, artist, vendor

As a continuation from the Stupa Of the Mind series, in which the sculptural form worn on the head symbolizes a mental stupa, in the Offering of Mind series, participants were requested to write their most powerful thought or hope on pieces of paper and place them into the mental stupa as 'offerings of mind'. In this second work, the stupa-like form also symbolises a cage, with the wishes and thoughts trapped within unable to find realisation as yet. This series of performance for photography have been staged with participation by colleagues, friends and members of the community whom I work with. The photographs are a visual representation of the ironical state that the people are located in - trapped between the propaganda of offering and submission of self that promises escape from the suffering of this life, and the very real inability to escape from the political environment that produces more bodies of desires and longings that are prevented from realisation.

## ***Signals from Burma***

Performed photography by Jay Koh and collaborators, ongoing from 2007



*Signals from Burma* is a series of performed photographs, in which ordinary Burmese are invited to express themselves and/or their situation through a sign to the world outside. This project motivates participants inside Burma to be proactive in exercising individual expression and to allow these expressions to be visualised as independent indicators. These visuals in form of digital photography provide a convenient creative means to circumvent control by the dominant authority. These digital photographs can portray acts of individuality, resistance and hopes and be readily transported without being discovered. It allows the possibility of putting these works into cyber space to engage and motivate further actions. These activities of creating self expressions hope to awaken the imagination of the participants to visualise possibilities that can empower and bring them towards other constructive processes.

## Resource-building, Education and Networking projects

### ***Bureau for Cultural Interactivity – BCI, IFIMA (International Forum for InterMedia Art), various sites, 2005 – 2006***

The Bureau for Cultural Interconnectivity is a platform initiated by Chu Yuan and Jay Koh that encourages discussions and active re-imagining of appropriate models of cultural production responsive to localised needs and conditions of various cultures. It acts as a mechanism for cultural interconnectivity by assisting in deepening the understanding of different cultural contexts, social structures and values, systems of thought and practices; and to encourage intercultural (intra and inter locality) collaborations. This is achieved through active communication and partnerships between various agencies involved in cultural production.



BCI sessions:

Top left: At Galeri Verkligheten, Umea, Sweden, 2005

Top right: At the Bildmuseet (Picture Museum), Umea, Sweden, 2005

Bottom left and right: Bureau for Cultural Interactivity: Myanmar- Korea; “Public Moment”, Artist Forum International festival, Seoul, Korea, 2006.

## **The OPEN ACADEMY programmes, Myanmar, Vietnam, Mongolia 2003 to present**

The Open Academy programme was conceived by Jay Koh and Chu Yuan, to provide a learner-determined learning process that responds to the learner's context and needs. OA is organised especially to supplement under-developed areas of education, due to lack of resources, inflexible infrastructures or inaccessibility of knowledge. OA corresponds to Koh and Chu's philosophy of creating projects that are responsive to different cultural and contextual needs and conditions, and mobilising resources through establishing networks to improve cultural responsiveness and connectivity. (Visit [www.ifima.net](http://www.ifima.net) for more details)

OA offers focused training in the development of arts and cultural practices to encourages understanding and analysis of self positions and one's own cultural perspectives. It encourages self-organisation and self-determination. It encourages problem identification and solving, context-specific applications of research, strategies and processes. After a basic and broad-based exposure to various aspects of contemporary art practices and management strategies in the first main semester, participants will decide on the content, direction and approaches of the following semesters.

### **Open Academy Myanmar**

Open Academy Myanmar was conceived as a response to the Burmese situation of isolation, poor education, and inaccessibility of outside information, knowledge and opportunities. It was an open platform to encourage and organize for foreign artists/ art groups/ curators, theatre practitioners, researchers etc. to go into Myanmar to share their knowledge, resources and to develop collaborations with local counterparts. Subjects responded to Burmese participants' interest in being updated with current contemporary arts practices and arts management.

#### **Examples of Open Academy Myanmar events:**

- Workshop on Installation Art by Chu Yuan, Nyo Win Maung, Than Htay Maung, Myint Myint Thein.
- Course on Arts Project Management by Jay Koh
- English Language classes for Artists and Young Adults, taught by Myint Aung, Kyaw Win Tun.
- Workshop on Writing Big Books for Children by Suchen Christine Lim, novelist, curriculum developer, Singapore
- Workshop on Museum Practices by Joyce Fan, curator, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
- Workshops on "Writing our Art Histories" by Prof. Abul Mansur, art historian, Bangladesh
- Workshop on "Developing Writing Skills" by Dave Chua, writer & producer, Singapore
- Course on Photo Journalism by Nicholas Leung, professional photographer, Singapore
- Web Design and Sound Art workshops by Fatima Lasay, artist, educator, The Philippines
- Workshop on Creative Research by Ingrid Muan, art historian, cultural worker, USA/ Cambodia.
- Workshop on Video Editing by Pekka Niskanen, film maker & educator, Finland
- Workshop on Career Planning for Youth and Women's Movements in Southeast Asia by Constance Singham, activist, journalist & youth counselor, Singapore.
- Course on Creative Writing in English by Sharaad Kuttan, researcher, writer, Malaysia
- Workshops on Performance Art by Pascale Grau, Switzerland and Ray Langenbach, artists, Malaysia/ USA.
- Workshop on Cultural Management by Pracamkrong Pongpaiboon, curator for the Cultural Management Programme at the College of Innovative Education at Thammasat University, Thailand



Bottom Left: Creating a Tableau Vivant based on Myanmar Buddhist rites with workshop participants, and Right: Another workshop activity, workshop by Swiss artist Pascale Grau, NICA in 2005

## Open Academy Vietnam and Mongolia

In Vietnam, artists with Ryllega artspace showed enthusiastic support for OA and worked together with Jay Koh to develop the proposal. After securing the support of Ford Foundation USA, and the Dongson Foundation Vietnam, OA Vietnam began the first semester in July 2008. The programme was run in 2 cities, Hanoi and Hue. The contents of the first sessions focused on contemporary art theory, arts management skills, development of concepts in writing and critical and analytical thinking, as subjects chosen by arts practitioners of Vietnam. ([http://dongsontoday.org//index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=98&Itemid=106&lang=en](http://dongsontoday.org//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=98&Itemid=106&lang=en))

In Mongolia, OA also managed to garner the interest of local artists and organisations in Ulaanbaatar and the programme was launched in Sept 2008, in collaboration with Blue Sun Art Centre, with support from the Prince Claus Fund of The Netherlands. Jay Koh and Chu Yuan were in Ulaanbaatar from 28 Sept to 13<sup>th</sup> Oct 2008 to kick start the programme. They taught and conducted workshops on Introduction to Contemporary Art Practices, Professional Art Practice and Arts Management, with students and teachers of the Fine Art Institute of the University of Arts and Culture as well as with local artists and cultural workers at the Blue Sun Art Centre.



Open Academy Hanoi taking place at Duc's Stilt House, Hanoi 2008.



Scenes from workshops with artists and art students of the Fine Art Institute in Ulaanbaator in Open Academy Mongolia 2008

## Investigating Public Engaged Art (IPEA): Singapore, Feb 2001 to July 2001, The Substation Artist-in-residency project, Singapore

This research and public interactive project was aimed at involving various segments of society in a discourse on the practice of public engaged art in Singapore, and to find ways to open up the processes of art to engage with its various publics, and to involve various peoples in art activities. The project comprised of activities such as a public survey to investigate people's understanding of and views on works dealing with public/social engagement, and to explore avenues for participation; interviews with artists, arts audiences, art administrators, policy makers, art educators, academics/intellectuals, critics, writers, public figures etc. to critically reevaluate and explore further developments of public engaged art forms and presenting research material to audiences for discussion, critique, and debate. IPEA culminated with an International Symposium on Public Engaged Art in 2002 at The Substation, Singapore, organized by Jay Koh and myself, with participation of public engaged artists from Finland, Malaysia, Austria, Denmark, UK, USA and Singapore, presenting case studies and discussing many issues around public engagement as well as civil society initiatives.



Top left : Interviewing a participant. Right: interaction in Tampines public library  
Bottom: One of the panels in the International Symposium on Public Engaged Art