



F.X. Harsono, *Writing In The Rain*, 2011, video still; image courtesy the artist

In Memory of a Name: an opportunity for professional development

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In a quiet corner of an art gallery a young man stitched a name, explaining why he no longer used this name; a Chinese woman stitched the name of a recently deceased relative. In the next room a tall woman stood, hand outstretched, attempting to gauge the strength of a name by its vibration. A man patiently taught the pronunciation of Indonesian names.

These events took place at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art on the final day of a nine-month project, *In Memory of a Name*, as part of the ambitious three-year *Edge of Elsewhere* project (2010-2012) conducted by 4A and Campbelltown Arts Centre. Answering a participant callout, thirteen emerging artists, curators, arts administrators and writers joined the 'In Memory' curatorium, billed as a professional development opportunity; I was fortunate to be one of them. The curatorium aimed to undertake social research inspired by the example of internationally renowned Indonesian artist F.X. Harsono. As facilitator, 4A conducted three workshops and assisted with participants' creative outcomes.

At the initial workshop in June 2011, Indonesian art specialist Sue Ingham set the cultural context, gallery director John Kirkman described his use of community cultural development strategies to develop exhibitions, and anthropologist John von Sturmer challenged conventional beliefs about naming and language. F.X. Harsono discussed the work he produced during President Suharto's New Order (1967-1998), a regime that suppressed political criticism, including in the arts. New Order favoured traditional, decorative art, particularly Javanese art that could project an image of a

uniform culture. Harsono and other artists of the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (New Art Movement, 1975-1979) tackled social issues, novel subject matter then for Indonesian artists. To evade punishment, artists set up temporary exhibitions they could quickly dismantle, and expressed themselves through symbols, believing that 'untrained eyes' would be unable to decode the subversive messages of their art.

Harsono was a keen nationalist, fighting oppression and supporting equal rights for Indonesians of all ethnicities, but after the anti-Chinese riots of 1998, he turned the focus of his art inwards, to examine his identity as an Indonesian of Chinese background. During Suharto's rule, people of Chinese heritage could not express their culture publicly and were pressured to adopt Indonesian names. Even Chinese with Indonesian names, whose families had lived in Indonesia for five generations (like Harsono's), found themselves subject to discrimination. In *Rewriting the Erased* (2009), in which Harsono repeatedly writes his Chinese name, he mourns its loss and the lost opportunity to connect with his Chinese heritage.

4A asked the curatorium to collect case studies of people who had changed their names. There may have been an early expectation that the curatorium would conduct interviews with one or more communities but once we started our research it became clear that for many people, name changing is a personal, highly charged matter, only to be discussed, if at all, with someone trusted. Most of our case studies were gathered from published accounts, and from our families and friends. Several interviewees made their stories available to the curatorium but explicitly requested that they not be made public.



F.X. Harsono, *Writing In The Rain*, 2011, video still; image courtesy the artist

We encountered the ethical and practical constraints of social research: the need to modify our interviewing behaviour to suit interviewees, some of whom found the subject upsetting; and the need to respect interviewees' requirement for confidentiality. We also had to avoid exploitation, which is an ever-present danger in projects that invite community engagement; interviewees could not be treated just as sources of information to be mined. Given the sensitivity of the topic, it would have been difficult to involve an external community group, without the promise of a specific outcome – artwork, publication, performance or exhibition or, say, inclusion in a university thesis.

What should we do with the fascinating research material we uncovered, much of which could not be quoted? After visiting the 2011 Venice Biennale, Scott Wark recommended that we use as a model the Dutch pavilion in which creatives from various disciplines worked collaboratively. Macushla Robinson developed this suggestion, writing a proposal for a loose network structure under the unifying theme of the archive that would enable curatorium members to work on smaller projects as varied as a radio program, artworks, and publications. 4A Director Aaron Seeto later said he considered that the project's biggest challenge was for the group of volunteers to work together over a nine-month period to produce creative outcomes. In fact, the group worked quite harmoniously. There were two keys to success: genuine mutual respect and the fact that many members consciously devised projects that invited the participation of all, such as that by Wark and Robinson. 4A asked us to submit proposals for works to present as outcomes of our research.

At the third workshop held in October 2011, FX Harsono presented his new video work, *Writing in the Rain* (2011), in which he writes his name repeatedly on a glass wall before the names are washed away. Then curatorium members presented their proposals to the group. Aaron Seeto and Summar Hipworth, 4A's Program Manager, spent much time patiently discussing each proposal,

teasing out possibilities and problems, some of which were due to the limitations of the resources – space, funds, time – that *Edge of Elsewhere* could offer rather than inherent weaknesses of the proposals.¹ Of the intensive workshopping process Elly Kent says:

Feedback and criticism is so essential to creating solid work for me ... It's hard and not pleasant, and it's not something I look forward to, but putting your ideas and experiments out there before they're resolved can really push your thinking and clarify your ideas.

Mai Nguyen-Long, who had experienced the process when creating work for the Casula Powerhouse, said,

I found this process very stimulating ... questioning amongst others what a practice is doing; unearthing key issues triggered by 'naming' and trying to locate where the meaning is; using it to discuss how art is being read, and various effective ways to explore an idea.

For those working on creative outcomes, discussions about their work continued after the workshop with 4A staff on a one-on-one basis. Some also continued conversations about their work with curatorium members by phone and email.

Seeto and Hipworth were taken by Keiji Suzuki's proposal for a radio program to be broadcast from 4A. This idea later morphed into a public program and mini-symposium conducted in the shopfront gallery of 4A, recorded, with podcasts available from the *Edge of Elsewhere* blog. Aaron Seeto had envisaged no particular outcome for the 'In memory' project, though given the background of curatorium members he did expect written works and artworks to be created. Curatorium members were not given any budget or specific parameters within which to work. For Seeto, the discussion within the group was the primary outcome. Curatorium members, on the other hand, expected tangible results of their work. We were then invited to submit proposals for the public program.

There were several creative outcomes, including articles written for the *Edge of Elsewhere* blog and publications. Four artworks were completed or begun and a public program was presented. The most substantial

work was *Celebrate, Obliterate, Recreate: an invisible ritual of shared sacrifice* (2012) devised by artist Mai Nguyen-Long, who invited all curatorium members to participate. Seven members and F.X. Harsono each provided a photograph of a cherished object and an account of the object's history. The objects were then 'sacrificed' by their owners and randomly reassigned to another curatorium member, who adopted it as their own and wrote a credible but fictitious history for it. There was unexpected pain and upset when their histories were overwritten – strong emotions that are invisible in the tranquil, realised work. The false histories also contain much truth, though not about the object to which they are attached.

Elly Kent began *Nee (born as)*, an ongoing project that invites people to stitch lost names onto fabric. The stitched names will be joined to form a fabric wall, a memorial to lost names. While this work will produce an aesthetic, physical outcome, for Kent, the essence of this project lies in the ephemeral conversations that participants engage in about lost names as they sit, stitching together.

Nasim Nasr produced a short film *Lion and Line* (2011) about the memories Iranians carry of the old name of their country, Persia, although this name no longer exists officially. Arts broadcaster and poet Angela Stretch is working on an 'augmented' book of video poems based on her name.

The 'In Memory' project concluded with a mini-symposium on 18 February, 2012 at 4A. Two sessions were devoted to discussing the project. Andreas Pratama found Indonesian names for three volunteers after discussing what they wanted their new names to signify. Kimberly Tan was given the name Anila Taman-ashi Canda which includes the concepts of wind, an open field or meadow, mercy and friendly conversation. Angela Stretch interviewed a race-horse owner about the difficulties he experienced as he sought to name his horse 'Five Dollars'. I interviewed Ysaiah Ross, a lawyer and pranic (Sanskrit for 'vital life') healer, who had changed his first name from Stanley to Ysaiah. Ross spoke about the power of names, as revealed in the Jewish Kabbalah and pranic healing. Then a pranic healer scanned the names of two volunteers, telling them of the relative strengths of different names. In an adjoining space, visitors stitched lost names and told the stories behind the names.



Installation view of Mai Nguyen-Long's *Celebrate, Obliterate, Recreate: an invisible ritual of shared sacrifice* (2011); image courtesy the artist; photo: Zan Wimberley

For the curatorium, deepening our knowledge of contemporary Indonesian art and working with F.X. Harsono were highlights of the project. We researched a compelling topic – naming – and experienced a productive collaborative process. Visiting each other's exhibitions, talking, and reading each other's texts, we expanded our knowledge of artistic and curatorial practices. We made new friends and professional contacts. For some, the opportunity to

explore personal identity was significant. Those who are used to working alone were challenged to work with others. Some produced new work. We became aware of the busy, peripatetic lives of emerging artists as they prepared for several exhibitions in one year, some overseas, or moved from residency to residency. We glimpsed the demanding work of running a gallery as we saw 4A staff meeting a hectic schedule of exhibitions, public events, a film showing, a fundraiser, in addition to working with 'In Memory' participants.

We did some social research and tentatively explored the complex issues of community and community engagement. Of the latter we took away more questions than answers. After writing to me at length about community engagement and directing me to an article by Grant Kester, *Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework for Littoral Art*, artist, curator and PhD student Elly Kent said:

In my own work, the community is not the crux of participation. I want to open up spaces for new conversations, ways to imagine new ways of living. This might enact itself through communities, but I don't want to dictate who comes into a participatory project, or what they will take from it.

The conversation about community engagement continues.

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