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The Lotus and the Koru : Seeds for a Dialogical Art

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Abstract

For over twenty years, I created intercultural collaborative Butoh performances, videos and multimedia installations that are the artistic expression of contemporary issues refracted through the lens of personal experience and consciousness. Schechner's definition of interculturalists expresses the dynamic process that underlies my art practice: Interculturalists explore misunderstandings, broken messages and failed translations. These are not seen as disasters but as fertile riffs for creative possibilities (Schechner, 1991, 2002). In the globalised, colonised world that we presently live in – and have lived in for the past 500 years – the dominion of the Euro-American scientific, capitalist paradigm has controlled how we conceive of our selves and our relationship to the external world - the defining act for human beings, individually and collectively, determining how we exist in the world. With this in mind, I ask the question: How can I - as a woman, a Buddhist, and a Euro-American - interrupt the hegemony of this dominant discourse through an intercultural collaborative art practice? My research seeks to answer this question through a collaborative art project with Māori artists.

For over twenty years, I have been an artist, creating intercultural collaborative work that fuses Butoh performance, multimedia installation art and political science into an artistic expression of contemporary issues refracted through the lens of personal experiences and consciousness. Because of its unfamiliarity to many, I will take a moment to briefly discuss Butoh and my connection to it.

Butoh is a dance form that grew out of post-World War II Japan. The originators of Butoh asked the universal question of 'how do we survive in a world of sorrow, grief, and misery' and found the answer in acceptance of all memories and conditions and offering them out to the world through the body (Diego Piñón, personal communication), Butoh does not belong to the Japanese, but to the body dancing it. While have I studied Butoh with various teachers of different lineages, Diego Piñón is my greatest influence. Diego, an indigenous person from Mexico who has studied Butoh with Natsu Nakajima, Kazuo Ohno, Yoshito Ohno, Min Tanaka, Hisako Horikawa and Mitsuyo Uesugi, has developed Butoh Ritual Mexicano Dance, "an evolving distillation of Diego's extensive research in body-based energetic traditions around the world" (Diego Piñón website). While discussing Butoh in an intensive workshop in Los Angeles on 24 July 2004, Diego said, "Initially, the Butoh message was a political message: no more war, no more violence – I am here. This is my last cry. I have a right to survive and deserve happiness." For these reasons, Butoh resonated deeply with my practice of art since my work has addressed such topics as capital punishment (Image 1), the war in Iraq (Image 2), factory farming (Image 3), child sexual abuse (Image 4), miscegenation (Image 5) and deaths of undocumented migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border (Image 6).

My art practice is rooted in my daily life as a socially engaged Buddhist, as a member of Soka Gakkai International or SGI. SGI is a worldwide association, based on the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism. Its core philosophy can be summed up by the concept of 'human revolution'. This is the idea that the inner transformation of a single individual through his/her Buddhist practice positively affects the larger web of life and results in the rejuvenation of human society. The content of my

work, whether it is a multimedia installation or a Butoh dance, is a rigorous examination of issues of social justice. However, my starting point is always the human situation. To quote Buddhist philosopher and SGI President, Daisaku Ikeda:

Global society today faces myriad, interlocking crises. ... It is my view, however, that the root of all the problems is our collective failure to make the human being, human happiness, the consistent focus and goal in all fields of endeavor. The human being is the point to which we must return and from which we must depart anew (Ikeda, 1996, 2).

The Buddhist principles of dialogue and compassion underpin of my art practice. Buddhism sees the universe as an embodiment of compassion — the interdependent web of life, giving rise to and nurturing life in all its manifestations (Soka Gakkai International, 2003). When working on an art project, I use this compassion to find a way to tell that human story in the most compelling way I can. I strive to draw out the compassion that innately exists in each person in the audience and move them to feel the heart of the situation.

The power of dialogue arises out of its dual role as a heartfelt exchange between individuals and as a means of discourse. According to Ikeda, courageous dialogue has the power to expand sympathy and understanding and to change the world (Ikeda, 1996). According to Foucault (1981), discourse can be both an instrument and effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Loots, artistic director of Flatfoot Dance Company and a lecturer at University of Kwazulu-Natal, in her essay *Voicing the Unspoken*, further refines this idea: To articulate the unspoken thus carries within it the power to fracture dominant thinking and offer mobile points of resistance to dominant knowledges (Loots, 2005).

Combining Foucault's definition of power as something that works from the bottom-up as much as it works from the top-down and applying Butler's (1990) argument about the ways in which repetition is a necessary component to the performance of gender to national identity, Westlake explains how small, local efforts can change national discourse (Westlake, 2005). Using Westlake's theoretical foundation, the same holds true for international discourse. Returning to Loots and her examination of post-apartheid dance in South Africa, she explains how, because of its ephemerality, dance – and by extension, any temporal art – is uniquely positioned to challenge the dominant discourse:

However, within a poststructural framework, its very temporality, its fleeting presence, locates it as a privileged site for the exploration of, as Brown (1983) put it 'fractured and fragmented identities.' (p.212) The moment a (dance) discourse or text offers a sense of dispersed experiences that cannot be located in tradition or a fixed sense of racial or gendered (or cultural) identity, then the work becomes a site of physical and ideological resistance that works against hegemonic impositions of fixed identity (Loots, 2005, 40).

Thus, by manifesting my Buddha nature - that is, my compassion – in and through my art, I can generate dialogue that can change the world I live in.

My belief in the transformative power of art comes not only from my Buddhist practice, but from my personal experience of Border Art in San Diego in the 1980s. The preeminent creator of Border Art was the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF). In 1984, David Avalos, the curator and artist-in-residence at the Centro Cultural de La Raza, brought together six other artists – the most well-known being Guillermo Gomez-Pena - to reconceptualize social relations through the application of extraordinary art practices. (Avalos, 1993) For Avalos and the Centro, the border was not viewed as a Chicano or Mexican issue alone; therefore membership was not limited by citizenship, nationality, or ethnicity (Avalos, 1993). However, they all were socially committed artists.

...all viewed art practice and political engagement as a seamless continuum. According to their model, the artist is a social interventionist, a binational diplomat, a broker between communities and cultures, a border-crosser; at best a visionary capable of transforming a

space of restriction into one of radical openness, at the least a myth-maker capable of changing the stories told of contested spaces (Berelowitz, 1997, 159).

My association with the BAW/TAF came through David Avalos. David had been a long-time family friend of my husband, Willie. Willie's brother and David had worked together as welders in the shipyards. Since Willie and I were just starting out on our artistic journey, David became a mentor as well as a good friend. Willie's and my first video project was interviewing and documenting the work of the various Chicano artists at the Centro; this included the members of the BAW/TAF.

To understand what this meant to me, you have to know what preceded this time in my life. I had moved from Bethlehem (Image 7), a small steel town in Pennsylvania, nestled in the sleepy Lehigh Valley, in the heart of Northeastern United States, to San Diego, the crossroads between the United States and Mexico. I moved there in 1981, the day after I graduated from university with a double major of French and Political Science. I was already a feminist, anti-imperialist, anti-racism radical, who had come of age reading the likes of Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Simone de Beauvoir - Sartre, Camus, Edward Said, Marx, and Chomsky – Eldridge Cleaver, James Baldwin, and Malcom X.

I was already questioning what we know and how we know it through the phenomenology of Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. I had argued politics with my father since I was a child. I grew up watching the Vietnam War on television. I remember the assassinations of John and Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Malcom X.

Still, I wasn't prepared for the Border (Image 8), where the third world pressed its brown nose against the glass, staring directly into the white consumptive faces of the first world, who whispered into their hungry ears promises of sweet nothings and candy hearts. Living in San Ysidro, the last stop before Mexico, I'd sit on my stoop in the warm night air, smoking cigarettes and drinking beer, listening and watching the helicopters patrolling the border - Hueys, the same helicopters used in Vietnam. A war zone. An occupation.

And then, I met my husband, and it all became personal. His family became my family. His community became my community.

In that state, to encounter the artists of the BAW/TAF, to see their art - art that was raw, powerful, and expressive; art that was personal and political; art that was imbued with the belief in the transformative power of art – was a life-changing experience, and I carry its legacy in my work today.

During my early years in San Diego, I supplemented my experiential learning with reading literature from Chicana writers like Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua; black writers like Audre Loudre and Pat Parker; feminist writers, like Susan Brownmiller and Andrea Dworkin. All this give rise to a personal reading of the colonised/coloniser paradigm, including sexism as the oldest form of colonisation. I also came to understand the breadth and depth of the internal colonisation that exists within the United States. Mario Barrera , in *Race and Class in the Southwest*, best defined it as a form of colonialism in which the dominant and subordinate populations are intermingled, so that there is no geographically distinct 'metropolis', separate from the 'colony' (Barrera, 1979).

Viewed from this vantage point, my quest for dialogue then becomes a quest to germinate, gestate, incubate, maturate, cultivate, and propagate ways to decolonise ourselves. In other words, in this globalised, colonised world that we presently live in – and have lived in for the past 500 years – the dominion of the Euro-American scientific, capitalist paradigm has controlled not only our material world, but how we conceive of our selves and our relationship to the external world. This defining act for human beings, individually and collectively, determines how we exist in the world.

From this vantage point, looking back to Foucault, discourse, and 'mobile points of resistance', I can articulate my research question as this: How can I — a woman, a Buddhist, an anti-capitalist

and an Euro-American — interrupt the hegemony of this dominant discourse through an intercultural collaborative art practice?

Schechner's definition of interculturalists working in a disruptive rather than integrative mode succinctly expresses the dynamic process that underlies my art practice:

Interculturalists refuse utopian schemes, refuse to cloak power arrangements and struggles. Instead, interculturalists probe the confrontations, ambivalences, disruptions, fears, disturbances and difficulties when and where cultures collide, overlap and pull away from each other. Interculturalists explore misunderstandings, broken messages and failed translations – what is not pure and what can not successfully fuse. These are not seen as disasters but as fertile riffs for creative possibilities (Schechner, 1991, 2002).

Until coming to Aotearoa in 2007, I explored the 'fertile riffs' of the border region between Euro-American and Chicano through intercultural collaborative projects. It was through this work, coupled with my personal engagement in my husband's family and the Chicano community that I was able to begin to 'dehegemonize' (Spivak) or 'reposition' (hooks) my self:

By turning to the work of Gayatri Spivak who suggests, 'what we are asking for is that the hegemonic discourse, and the holders of hegemonic discourse, should dehegemonize their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other,' bell [hooks] defines the act of repositioning (Taliaferro, 1998, 95).

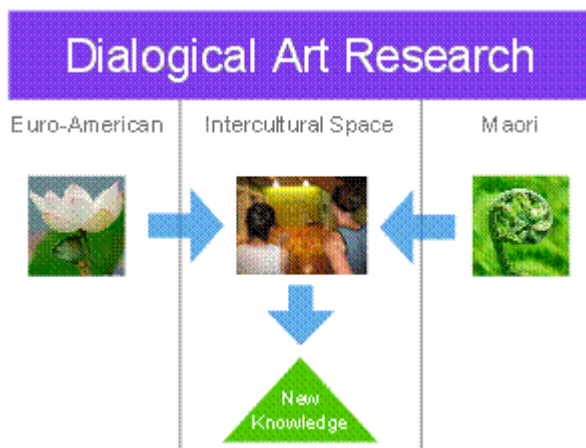
Through my twenty-odd years of lived experience within Willie's family and the Chicano communities in San Diego and Los Angeles, my extensive practical and theoretical knowledge of Chicano and my active use of the Buddhist principles of dialogue and compassion, I was able to initiate the process of destabilising my 'hegemonic' self through repositioning with the Chicano Other. Having once begun that process, I found it easier to reposition myself with regards to different Others. That is not to say that all subalterns are the same, mere replicas of each other, but rather that how the hegemonic discourse functioned inside my psyche followed similar patterns with different Others, so once I made the first new pathway with the Chicano Other, it was easier to construct additional pathways. To clarify, I retained my primary subject position as a white American woman; I merely began to develop what Maxine Green calls 'double-consciousness' (Taliaferro, 1998).

However, this work was all done within the American context with its specific manifestations of colonisation and race relations. How would my repositioned self function in a different colonised setting? This question happily dovetailed with research my husband was going to do in Aotearoa. He had received a Fulbright Fellowship to do a cross-cultural collaboration with Māori artists:

At first glance, it may seem that a Chicano artist living in Los Angeles wouldn't have much in common with a Māori artist living in Wellington; this, however, would be a false impression. By blood, Chicanos and Māori are the descendants of Indigenous people and Europeans. Our separate histories mirror each other in the unhappy confluence of religious conversion, commercial imperialism, political conquest, and cultural encroachment. There is even a convergence in our recent histories: from the progressive political activism of the late 1960's to the politics of identity in the 1990's. Using a cross-cultural comparison of contemporary Chicano and Māori art as a point of departure, I would like to address the following question: How can the artist be a catalyst to overcome the historic inequity and oppression that is part of the foundation and fabric of world society, so that all may share in the basic rights and opportunities of all human beings? (Franco)

I became one of the collaborators on the Chicano side of what became *Nō Naianei/From This Moment*, which I will discuss later in this paper. When we came here, we were planning to be here one year, the length of my husband's Fulbright project and MFA paper at Massey University. However, several months into the project, we realised that we wanted to, needed to stay, that the personal and professional growth from this type of collaboration had so much potential, that it was an important time to be in Aotearoa – historical moments were gestating.

So, I will refine my research question to this: How can I interrupt the hegemony of this dominant discourse through an intercultural collaborative art practice with Māori artists? Such a creative endeavour needs to position itself at the intersection of power, knowledge, culture and economics. Therefore, through a collaborative art project, we will explore this intersection from the multiple vantage points of our various identities. Together we will examine the terrain of intercultural dialogue between individuals of a dominant culture and an indigenous culture. I have intentionally chosen to work with an indigenous group outside of my own country because I believe that not being members of the same coloniser/colonised pairing will generate less tension and allow for greater ease in communication. Additionally, the outcome will be both locally and globally relevant.



The above diagram illustrates how this art research project will generate new knowledge. Art as research is presently a contested idea, growing out of the tension between traditional academic view of what constitutes research and the way artists conduct research through their art. McCleod and Holdridge (2006) find that the findings presented through art are always a posteriori and thus, ill suited to the institution's pursuit of prescribed outcomes. However, Graeme Sullivan, in *Art Practice as Research*, argues that artists' studios, and other such places used for the creation and critique of new knowledge, are theoretically powerful and methodologically robust sites of inquiry (Sullivan, 2005).

In order to give you a sense of what this project might look like, I will now discuss *Nō Naianeī*. However, I will not give a detailed analysis of *Nō Naianeī* here, but rather will discuss key aspects to serve as an illustration of my upcoming research project. Besides Willie and me, the two other primary collaborators were Māori artists, Anahera Gildea (Ngāti Raukawa ki te Tonga), a published writer/poet and theatrical/dance performer, and Eugene Hansen (Ngāti Mahuta, Ngāti Maniapoto), a time-based installation artist with special interest in VJ'ing. While searching for potential collaborators, I met Anahera at an SGI Buddhist meeting in Wellington, and Willie met Eugene at Massey University.

Nō Naianeī was a three part project, consisting of a Butoh Hikoi, Butoh/VJ Performance and a Multimedia Installation. It was funded by the Wellington City Council Public Arts.

On 21 February, at 6:00pm, the Butoh Hikoi (Image 9 & 10) started at the top of Cuba Street and, two hours later, ended at James Smith Corner, site of the performance. The kaupapa of the Hikoi was to make visible what is normally hidden from view, that is, to show how the past continues to exist in the present moment and leads us into the future. During the Hikoi, cards with the whakatauki - "He kapiti hono, he tatai hono/That which is joined together becomes an unbroken line" – and the Chicano saying – "Tu es mi otro yo/You are my other self" – were handed out.

Following the Hikoi was an hour-long Butoh/VJ Performance (Image 11 & 12) in the public space of James Smith Corner. There were five video projectors, projecting on three large screens, the floor, and a wall. The video media was drawn from movies that depict Māori and Chicanos, as well as footage from the Immigrant March in Los Angeles (2006) and the Tuhoe Hikoi in Wellington (2007).

The performance began with a karanga written for the occasion by Kiri O'Connell. The remaining Hikoi performers led the way for the audience members to come inside and then continued to cross in and out of the space throughout the performance. Further blurring the border between participant and observer, the performers moved among the audience and randomly selected members to be "othered and examined" and then placed elsewhere within the performance space. Surprisingly, they stayed where they were placed and allowed the performers to continue to interact with them throughout the performance.

A week later, the Multimedia Installation (Image 13) opened in a retail space in James Smith Corner. The space was painted aqua blue, lime green, and white. The centerpiece of the installation was a deconstructed vinyl whakapapa of Te Aro Pa with text. Running from the top of the back wall down the floor to the entrance, this whakapapa, created in the colours of Mexican Pop, included a stylised representation of the 1860 survey map of the Te Aro Pa area. This section also doubled as the US-Mexico Border, with nearby text referring to it. On shelves and hanging on a wall were nine brightly-coloured sugar eels (Image 14), which were created using the Mexican method of sugar casting. Two painted tourist tokotoko rested in lighted wall nooks. In the display window was a handmade yellow plastic kete filled with brightly painted kumara. On the walls were three flat panel monitors, looping video drawn from the performance media, accompanied by a soundtrack of techno-pop mixed with native birdcalls.

During its two-week run, the installation was seen by over 600 people from all around New Zealand, as well as from Australia, United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Mexico, Chile, Brazil, the Netherlands, Sweden, and India. Many of the visitors didn't know what an art installation was, but came in, intrigued by a 'store' that didn't have anything for sale. The average visitor stayed for 10-15 minutes; however, many stayed much longer. The sitting artists engaged them in conversation, answering their questions, talking about the installation and its kaupapa, but often the discussion veered into New Zealand and world politics and culture. The success of *Nō Naianei* in generating dialogue continues to this day – we still run into people who saw the Hikoi or the Performance or the Installation and want to talk about it when they realise it was us who did it. And these conversations almost always talk about Māori and Pākehā relations, the US-Mexico border and immigration, colonisation and the state of the world because the social and political commentary is deeply embedded in the piece.

Nō Naianei was an intercultural dialogue between two indigenous peoples, exploring the similarities and differences of colonisation from their unique vantage points. Within the context of this endeavour, my collaborators extended to me, by virtue of my lived experience within Chicano communities for twenty-some years, my extensive practical and theoretical knowledge of Chicano and my repositioned self, courtesies usually extended between indigenous peoples. It was a direct result of this experience, however, that made me want to investigate what would an intercultural dialogue with a Māori artist look like if my subject position was my white American self. It is exactly this task that I will be undertaking in my doctoral research project.

The organisation of my thesis draws on a symbol from my Buddhist practice: the lotus flower. Shakyamuni's highest teaching was the Lotus Sutra, which revealed that we can attain Buddhahood in our present form. The lotus flower, which flowers and seeds at the same time, represents the simultaneity of cause and effect, that is, the moment we make a cause, the effect is already manifested in the depths of our lives. Further, the lotus flower grows and blooms in a muddy pond, and yet remains pristine and free from any defilement, symbolizing the emergence of Buddhahood from within the life of an ordinary person.

Therefore, my thesis will be divided into three sections. The Muddy Pond will present the context of my research. The Seeds will present the world view and knowledges held by the key collaborators. The Flowers will present the process and outcome of the intercultural collaborative art project. The project will explore the interrelated topics of gender, knowledge, and white privilege. At this point, the topic is deliberately broad. My collaborative process is such that very little is determined at the outset. It grows out of exchanges and discussions with people, both in the search for collaborators and in the determination of the topic and form of the project. I am not the director of the project; I

am merely the facilitator who brings the artists together. Once the collaboration is formed, we are all directors. That said, as the facilitator, I do set the framework for the project.

To conclude, my doctoral research, through an intercultural collaborative art project with Māori artists, will endeavour to interrupt the dominant discourse and generate dialogue that seeks to find ways to reclaim our existential selves from the dominion of the Euro-American scientific, capitalist paradigm has controlled not only our material world, but how we conceive of our selves and our relationship to each other.



Image 1 - For Whom The Bell Tolls, Installation, 2003



Image 2 - Quecholly - or How I Learned to Stop Worrying & Love Weapons of Mass Destruction, Installation, 2002



Image 3 - Happy Meal, Book & Installation, 2004



Image 4 - 7 Generations, Performance, 2006



Image 5 - RAMONA: birth of a mis-ce-ge-NATION, Video, 1991



Image 6 - Performance at the US-Mexico Border (Tijuana, Mexico), 2004



Image 7 - Bethlehem, PA



Image 8 - Performance at the US-Mexico Border (Tijuana, Mexico), 2004



Image 9 & 10 - No Naianej, Butoh Hikoi, 2008



Image 9 & 10 - No Naianei, Butoh Hikoi, 2008



Image 11 & 12 - No Naianei, Butoh/VJ Performance, 2008



Image 11 & 12 - No Naianei, Butoh/VJ Performance, 2008.



Image 13 & 14 - No Naianei, Installation, 2008



Image 13 & 14 - *No Naianei, Installation, 2008*

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