

ARTIST STATEMENT SO YEON PARK

Currently, my research is focused on the social role of performance and inter-cultural production in public sites. I have been experimenting with the creation of public settings that break cultural boundaries and promote the sharing and understanding of metaphoric journeys of transformation. Another very important goal for me is to create opportunities for empowerment among people from disenfranchised populations. Because my initial training was as a traditional artist and I systematically expanded my practice into installation, performance, and community-based art, I approach each project through both traditional and nontraditional artistic systems.

My motivation in pursuing community-based art also emerged from my background as a Korean artist living in the United States. The experience of shifting cultures suggested hybrid approaches and created a desire to work with communities. I believe community-based performance and the transformation occurring from the act of communal sharing are catalysts for self-awareness.

In the last five years, I have worked with diverse national and international communities-in pursuit of my vision of community-based performance. Each project has been structured to address:

- 1) The use of interdisciplinary and multi-cultural approaches to bring together members of diverse communities and allow them to work collaboratively.
- 2) The opportunity for conversations within disenfranchised communities that can lead to better understanding and community building.
- 3) The potential for healing and empowering of each participant through creative art making.
- 4) The social changes as experienced by members of the community that occur as a result of my creative research.

My interest in social change centers around the idea of creating an environment where people become more aware of their own prejudices and biases connected to racism, classicism, ageism, sexism – all of which can come under the umbrella term of “the other.” By working specifically with communities that are in some way disenfranchised, and normally lacking a voice to enact change, I hope to empower people with some control over their own lives. For instance, I have worked with homeless children to help them envision a new future for themselves.

As each project’s facilitator, the initial objective is to identify resources in order to create an artistic journey for the participants and myself. The first step for any project is to flesh out a particular artistic motivation. After identifying a community that will be well served by the project, I expand the idea further with that group in mind. Working intensively with members of that community helps me to define details of the project. At this point I develop a structure that creates an opportunity for personal transformation. The final phase of any project is to document and edit the results through video so that

physical documentation of the process exists as a way for the public to become conscious of the work.

My most recent project (Performing to Empower Awareness and Re-invent Lives – P.E.A.R.L.) serves as an example of process and outcome. It began with my interest and research into therapeutic monologue workshops. Initially, I envisioned the concept of monologuing in order to move from past negative experiences, through the present, and re-envisioning a positive future, for college students. But a serendipitous meeting provided an opportunity for me to work intensively with female inmates and parolees of the Department of Corrections in Topeka, Kansas. Based on my interest in disenfranchised populations, and the promise of the process, this community was particularly well suited for the project. Working with many other types of professionals as facilitators and with the officials of the DOC, we (myself and my co-director, Carol Bradbury) organized workshops and venues for these women to explore their lives through monologues. This activity culminated several public and private performances of their work. The final monologues were documented through video and edited to create a moving montage of the women's hopes and dreams.

Despite the fact that each project develops with a specific idea and structure, it is in large part the unexpected that makes these projects work. P.E.A.R.L. began as a rather academic exercise geared toward college students but ultimately became a much more dynamic project when applied to the female DOC population. Their unexpected responses to the challenges of monologuing created a unique space of transformation for ALL of the participants, myself included.

Like the art of Christo Javacheff and Jeanne-Claude de Gullebon, each of my projects consists of the whole process, from the inception of the idea until the end of the final iteration. As the artist, and coordinator, it is my job to choreograph much of the working process, but there are always unexpected moments when the participants and audience begin to own the work and my vision is transformed into something wonderfully unexpected.

The overarching outcome of my community-based art practice is intended to enhance the level of understanding and empathy among members of the participating communities and other collaborators. The opportunity to publicly present the work to others provides an opportunity for them to play a part through observation. My intention is that the work will produce a ripple effect over time for the participants and those who experience it, to celebrate "others" whose ethnic, racial, social or cultural backgrounds may be different, but with whom we all share our basic humanity. The positive outcomes of these projects embody my artistic vision.