

From Longing to Belonging - the changing local in a globalised world.
Curatorial Essay by Charmaine Toh

Two million polypropylene loop pins, twisted and threaded together, form strange amorphous shapes that seem to grow over all the furniture in a classroom of Fukuda Elementary School on Shodoshima in Japan. Part of Fukutake House's latest project, Asian Art Platform, for the 2nd Setouchi Triennale, Grace Tan's new installation, *In the Stillness*, is an alien garden within the dis-used building.

The Setouchi Triennale takes place on a group of islands surrounding the Seto Inland Sea in southwest Japan, and its core purpose is to revitalise the area. As with many parts of rural Japan, and even much of the developed world, the islands of the Setouchi area have seen a mass exodus of young people moving to the cities to work and live. Many schools, including Fukuda Elementary School, where the artwork is located, have had to close down due to a lack of students and local industries are also declining because there is simply not enough of a labour force. For the Asian Art Platform, the organizers have asked the artists, who come from different parts of Australasia, to respond to the homogenising effects of globalisation.

Globalisation is a fact of today's world. In relation to culture, there have been differing views, from the fear that it will lead to a sort of transnational domination (typically of American capitalist ideology) and cultural uniformity to a more optimistic hope that globalization can offer a new freedom, whether political, economic or otherwise, from geographical borders and the development of new hybrid cultures. Regardless of which end of the spectrum you fall in, I think we can agree that globalisation has forced a refocus on the local and the regional, whether it is the loss or the retention of histories and cultures, of the collective or the individual.

In Singapore, a country that has embraced globalisation with open arms, the impact has been somewhat different from Shodoshima. Instead of a declining population, we have had an explosion of new immigrants that has caused a certain level of discomfort among the existing locals. At the same time, Singaporeans seemed to have woken up to the impact of rapid progress in the form of a gradual loss of culture. Old buildings have been torn down to build newer, taller ones; a historical cemetery will be removed to build a highway, and so on. A wave of nostalgia has swept Singapore and so we are now rushing to record and retain as much of our history and culture as we can. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia as an intense longing for not just a better *time*, but also a better *place*.¹ Furthermore, we do not need to have experienced that time or place to long for it. To this end, we reach for a panacea of nostalgia ready-mades – we use apps that 'age' a photo with the click of a button, we dress up in historical costumes to have our portraits taken in recreated sets, and buy reproductions of vintage furniture to furnish our homes. However, our recreation is never perfect; it cannot be! Our longing is always based on a fantasy, a history or place that is mediated by memory, or ideology, or the media. Thus, this longing can never be truly fulfilled – we seek a utopia that does not exist.

In this globalised world, perhaps the local is no longer a physical place, but a specific social context. Instead of fantasizing about the past, can we address the effects of globalisation with different strategies? How do we move from longing to belonging? From utopia to heterotopia?

For *In the Stillness*, Grace Tan engaged both Singaporean and the local Shodoshima communities to create the work. With the Fukutake House's support, Tan conducted a workshop with local volunteers on Shodoshima to teach them how to thread and form the required shapes from the plastic strips. Comprising a very diverse cross-section of the island's population, including retirees, kindergarten children, nursing home residents and civil servants, the volunteers subsequently met regularly, often in the local community centre, to make the work. By all accounts, this became a series of highly anticipated community events where the participants could chat and catch-up with each other whilst twisting half a million plastic strips together! The sections created by the Japanese volunteers were subsequently combined with the sections created in Singapore to form the final installation. The community project gave residents a sense of ownership in the exhibition at Fukuda Elementary School and the larger Triennale and is as much a part of the final artwork as the actual installation in the space. The process of making the work was a crucial, albeit invisible aspect of the work, and facilitated the creation of a new community around its existence.

The choice to create a garden within the classroom is a very significant one for the artist, who recognizes the garden as one of the oldest examples of a heterotopia, a term first used by Foucault to describe several non-compatible spaces juxtaposed in a single site.² If utopia is a site with no real place, a perfected form of unreal space, then heterotopia is a counter-site, a place that is represented, contested and inverted. It exists in reality, but simultaneously, it exists as a symbolic space, resulting in a mixed or joint experience. Schools and gardens are both heterotopias. A school is a place for learning, but it is also a rite of passage, a setting for coming-of-age rituals. Foucault suggests that the garden is one of the oldest examples of a heterotopia. Traditionally, the garden is both a symbolic and a physical space, with different meanings in different cultures. As an example, Foucault describes the Persian garden, which was "a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world, with a space still more sacred than the others that were like an umbilicus, the navel of the world at its center (the basin and water fountain were there); and all the vegetation of the garden was supposed to come together in this space, in this sort of microcosm."³ In Japan too, gardens are culturally significant and often use abstract symbolism to represent ideals of harmony in nature.

Taking up Foucault's ideas of heterotopias, Tan has layered three spaces in *In the Stillness*. The first space is the physical or real space of the classroom in a school that has been closed down due to the decreasing population in one of the most visible effects of globalisation on the local community. The second space is the symbolic space of the garden made of the polypropylene loop pins (plastic strips that are commonly used to attach price tags onto clothes and other products) that references the global consumerist culture we are all engaged in. The ubiquitous and easily discarded material is converted to a beautiful sculpture when combined together in great numbers and suggests a more complex understanding of globalization beyond the usual simple criticisms. This garden grows over the desks and chairs of the classroom, almost as if it was taking over the discarded classroom, and literally overlaying that physical space. The third and final space is a specific kind of symbolic space that I want to call the social space, emerging from the social context of the work, that is, the process of making the work with the Singaporean and Japanese communities. This invisible space is also potentially where we can site a new kind of local community and act as the nexus for building new networks in this globalised world.

In creating the garden, Tan also considered the external space of the mountains and forests surrounding the school. Her garden mirrors and inverts that natural environment and acts as a counter-site. She highlights this by arranging the classroom desks and chairs facing the windows, looking out rather than facing the blackboard. Viewers who sit to view the work thus see it against the backdrop of the surrounding natural landscape through the windows of the classroom, in direct contrast to the artificial landscape in the room. The porosity of the 'flowers' adds to the movement between the physical and non-physical spaces and internal and external spaces, creating different possibilities of global and local.

Coming back to the idea of belonging and globalisation, *In the Stillness* suggests different levels of 'local'. We are part of the world and part of Asia. The Japanese residents are part of Japan and part of Fukuda; they are also part of a community of people who share their day-to-day living experiences. The people who helped to make the artwork are all part of a new, albeit temporary community who came together in a specific process and shared a specific experience. In this day and age, as geographical and physical borders become less and less important, how can we activate meaningful communities that can still provide a sense of belonging? If the local is something that is both physical and social, then perhaps we can create and accept new kinds of 'local', to establish new types of communities or networks as counterweights to the effects of globalisation.

¹ Boym, Svetlana, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books, New York, 2001.

² Foucault, Michel, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias" in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuite*, vol 5, 1984.

³ *ibid.*