

# RESTLESS RESEARCH: CONFESSIONS OF A CONFUSED COMMUNITY ART SCHOLAR

*by Eugène van Erven*

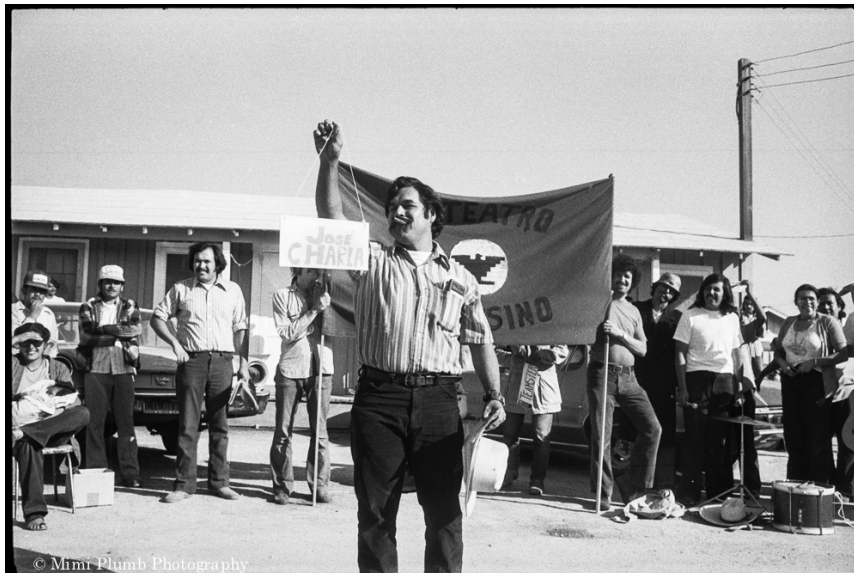
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There are at least three ways in which you may choose to consume the words I have written below:

- as the penultimate verbal expressions of a dinosaur from the old school of community art while the new school is knocking very loud on his door;
- as a deconstruction of the different levels of meaning that over the past 35 years have contributed to the construction of my being, my perspectives and my words;
- as an intellectual or moral striptease.

## **Beginnings**

I entered the world of community art 35 years ago in 1983, without knowing that I did or even that people in Britain called it that way. At the time I was doing research on people's theatre, *teatro popular*, for my PhD dissertation at a university in the USA. What I did know, instinctively, was the absolute necessity to gather information on the ground, away from libraries and unbiased by abstract, disembodied theory, in the real-life presence of the artists who were creating fascinating and meaningful art collectively for – and sometimes with – working class people and folks with diverse cultural backgrounds. They presented the results of their creative work in the very places where their collaborators lived and worked, far away from fancy theatre venues in the downtown areas of major cities.



1966: Luis Valdez and Teatro Campesino

So in 1983, at the age of 28-29, I found myself, up close and personal, in the presence of theatre collectives like Teatro Campesino (<http://elteatrocampesino.com>) ['farmworkers theatre'] in California, trying to find out what made them tick. By the time I met them,

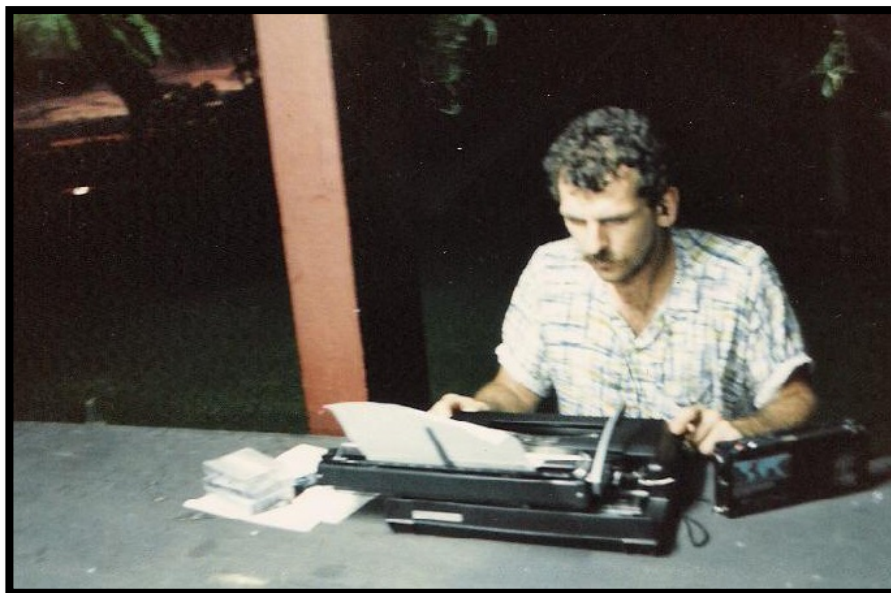
Campesino had already moved on from satirical, boisterous, very low tech agit-prop *actos* which they performed on the back of flatbed trucks to convince Mexican-American farm laborers to join the workers union of César Chávez.

By 1984 they were based in a relatively well-equipped community cultural center in San Juan Bautista, a small town about 150 kilometers south of San Francisco. Its operations were financed by Campesino founder Luís Valdez. He was beginning to make a name for himself – and earn some serious money - with commercially successful musicals like *Zoot Suit* (about anti-Mexican race riots during World War II) and feature films like *La Bamba* (about the life and death of Mexican-American singer Ritchie Valens, born Ricardo Valenzuela). After its radical, activist beginnings, Teatro Campesino was now creating productions about Mexican-American cultural history with which they tried to bridge the gap with a progressive white American audience and an emerging Mexican-American middle-class. Today we might call this ‘mainstreaming’ and – certainly after seeing how BigHART in Australia are executing this delicate and tricky strategy with spectacular results - I would be inclined to look upon it much more generously. But back then, with my naive, romantic, pseudo-Marxist, moralistic perspective that, of all places, I had developed with a full scholarship at an elite US-American institution of higher learning, I regarded it as ‘selling out’. Only much later did I learn that powerful community art also has an important role to play beyond the immediate neighborhood where it is born, but that to take it out of context brings along many challenges of an ethical and intercultural kind as well – as we have been finding out the hard way over and over again at our International Community Arts Festival in Rotterdam since 2001.

But the reverse is equally true.

### **Insider or Outsider? Researching Asia**

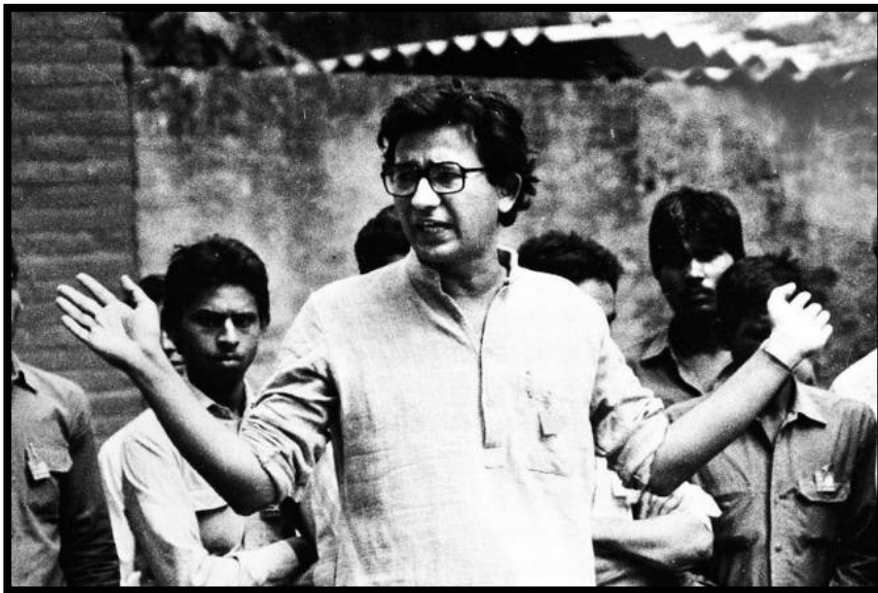
Entering a local context as an outsider – no matter how inter-culturally sensitive and linguistically skilled you may be – is always problematic. As is not entering at all.



1987: Working on *The Playful Revolution* at PETA House, Quezon City, Philippines

Between 1985 and 1988 I documented the grassroots work of anti-dictatorial performing arts collectives in six Asian countries. Many of the artists I interviewed during this period firmly believed in the humane, non-ballistic but undeniable power of collectively created art

to overthrow fascist regimes. Some, like my good friend Safdar Hashmi from India, paid the ultimate price for this conviction: he was killed in action by the private security forces of a factory owner while performing in a street play to support striking workers (<https://bargad.org/2012/01/01/the-people-gave-us-so-much-energy-safdar-hashmi/> see also: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/1145964?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1145964?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)) Similarly, I also witnessed the social and political potential – and danger - of community art first-hand in the Yellow Power Revolution against Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines in February and March 1986.



*May 1988: Safdar Hashmi introducing a street play in Delhi, India (photo: Eugene van Erven)*

If I hadn't entered and reported about it internationally, very few people outside Asia would have known about it. But try for a minute, if you will, to imagine the many layers that existed between my blurred outside perspective and a more or less objective truth.

In Manila, I was embedded with – and therefore ideologically and psychologically influenced by - a progressive theatre company, some of whose members had above and underground identities. My perspective was undoubtedly also affected by the fact that people were literally being killed around us. Speaking only a few words of Tagalog I was, furthermore, reliant on biased interpreters. But even if I had been fluent in the local language and culturally familiar with the context after having resided for many years in this foreign country (which I had not), then I would still have made the mistake of taking anecdotal evidence as concrete, undisputed truth. Here too, only many years later – benefiting from feminist and intercultural studies theory – did I learn that the literal words from interviewees always need to be very closely read and carefully interpreted. This is equally true – but much more challenging - in today's social media dominated world. But also back then, the words from artists and participants that I accepted as self-evident, authentic truth were inflected by complex social and political processes and discourses that had influenced their evolution as human, speaking subjects – and therefore the words they uttered to me. Of course, the same applies to me and the words I am writing down here.

So, yes, theory can be helpful and for this particular insight I am grateful to Rustom Bharucha (*Terror and Performance*, London: Routledge 2014: 117-119.) and he, in turn, to feminist historian Joan Scott, because we are all shameless scavengers when it comes to developing ideas ([https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343743?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343743?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).)

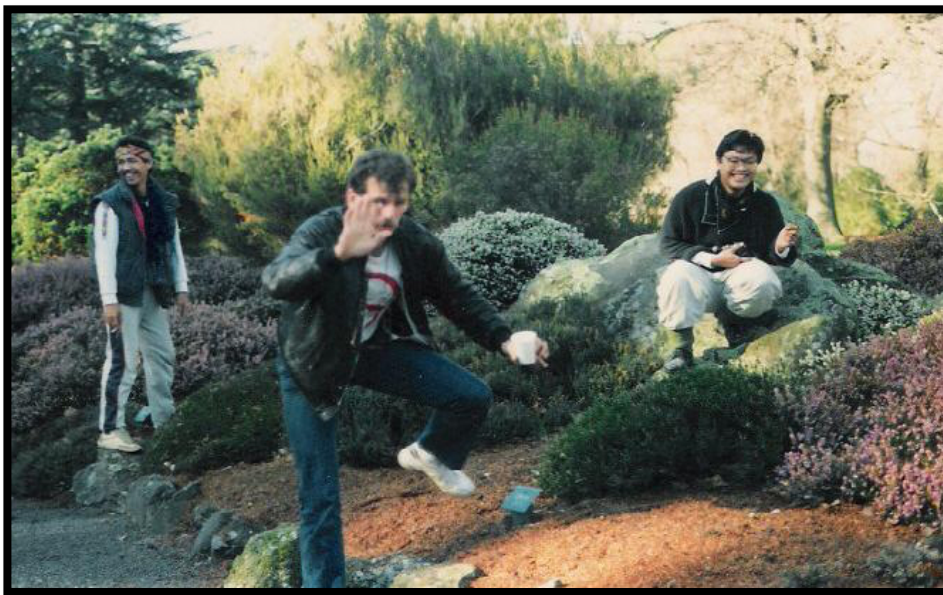


And in the same breath that I acknowledge the usefulness of theory I also warn against its abuse. I believe it should always be directed towards sharpening our insights into practice and never become the sole, ultimate purpose of purely inward-looking academic humanities and social science scholarship, which all too often is the case.

### **Insider or Outsider in Aotearoa**

With the above in mind allow me to pursue the theme of outsiders, egos, and anecdotal evidence just a bit further.

In Asia, I was a cultural, social and ethnic outsider, but so were – and are - many of the progressive, higher educated middle-class local artists working in the grassroots, in Asia and elsewhere. A big difference between them and me – particularly in terms of commitment - was that I (with a return airline ticket in my money belt) could always go back home to my relatively safe and economically stable country in Northern Europe, which I did around 1990 when I ran out of money. But a few years before I returned to the Netherlands I discovered the advantage of the outsider position in New Zealand. Hearing me lecture about my experiences in Asia, a Maori poet named Roma Potiki had asked me to help her raise funds and produce a tour with Filipino actors around indigenous communities. The simple fact was that no white New Zealander – or *Pakeha*, as the Maori called them - could have done my job, because they were regarded as indelibly tainted with the sin of colonialism. As a visitor from Europe my Maori partner considered me neutral (or more pliable and innocent, perhaps).



*With Nestor Horfilla (L) and Chris Millado (R) in New Zealand (photo: Eugene van Erven, self-timer)*

But I also had to learn a painful lesson in humility because I had to permit Roma Potiki to take sole credit for many months of very hard work that we had both done. In the Maori communities we visited I was introduced as the driver of the van in which we travelled. At the time, as a 32-year old researcher and practitioner, I regarded that as unfair. Now I look back on it as an incredible privilege and a very rich experience indeed. Later, there were other, even more painful, lessons that I don't have time to go into today. They are related to reverse exploitation by Asian artists taking advantage of feelings of guilt on my part, which had to do with my relative freedom to escape when things would get too hot under my feet (with my airline ticket and Dutch passport) and with building somewhat of a professional

academic reputation for myself in the West by publishing books and articles on my Asian adventures (e.g.: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i247967>).

### **One Place After Another**

Well into the new millennium, another theorist (Miwon Kwon) reminded me that an insider artist with 'home-field advantage' – someone who has grown up as a member of a particular community and still lives and works there – is not necessarily more effective in community art than an outsider. An insider may speak the dialect and be a literal neighbor to participants in her project, but she may also be ideologically biased, allied to certain local factions, or be perceived as such. An outsider can much more easily cut through local tensions and alliances and operate from a more or less neutral position. Or so it seems.

These are just some of the countless assumptions that I have had to adjust or dismiss over the past 35 years. Sometimes this was the result of painful existential realizations after my romanticism or naivety was all too painfully stripped away. At other times the lessons were more gentle or intellectual and I had fellow artists and theorists to thank for it.



*Big hART's Ngapartji Ngapartji in Rotterdam 2011 (Photo: Roy Goderie for ICAF)*

The question of ego and selflessness is another case in point. The romantic, politically correct position might be that professionally trained community artists shouldn't claim personal credit for facilitating collective creative processes and neither should scholars. The reality is that they often rely on their individual reputations to qualify for grants to continue doing their projects and that they therefore need to be able to claim credit for previous work. As an unknown beginner one does not qualify for grants, neither in academia nor in the cultural sector. The other reality is:

- that art academies the world over continue to nourish the individualism – or vanity - of their student artists;
- that the art world continues to cherish the genius as a marketing product;
- and that most art critics continue to be myopically obsessed with individually produced artifacts and tend to dismiss everything that reeks of collective, community-based creativity as failed art.

Which is not to say:

- that everything created collectively with substantial

- input from local communities is always equally good art;
- that mainstreaming with a focus on high quality productions is necessarily unethical or ineffective socially, culturally and politically (again: just look at the spectacular, sophisticated work of BighART in Australia: [www.bighart.org](http://www.bighart.org)); or
- that there are no artists with a mainstream reputation exploiting community participants in exoticizing projects because there is money in it or tremendous public relations capital to be gained for them in the *barrio* or on the frontline of some war-torn country.



*With The Palestinian-Israeli Combatants for Peace in 2016 (photo: Eugene van Erven, self-timer)*

Another partial or possible misconception I have held for many years is that participation in the arts automatically leads to more active citizenship or active participation in politics. This is another insight I gained from Miwon Kwon (*One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational identity*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004). Sometimes it does happen, as it did with a young second-generation Moroccan teenage girl who participated in a community theatre production, saw the light, and went on to be a very outspoken and effective city councilor for the Dutch Labor Party in my hometown Utrecht. And then there are, of course, many community art projects that are specifically intended to bring about reconciliation in places like Northern Ireland, Guatemala, Colombia, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Rwanda, former Yugoslavia, or Israel/Palestine, some of them with remarkable results. Or arts project that bring development to Brazilian favelas, or new prospects for ex-offenders. I continue to be impressed with much of this work, which requires a great deal of tenacity, creativity and ethical sensitivity on the part of the facilitating artists who invariably have to work under very difficult circumstances. But many of them fall into the trap of feeling forced to demonstrate the effectiveness of their projects with quickly collected anecdotal evidence or obligatory surveys with closed questions that yield slick statistics. To me, the real value of this work is captured by nuanced, contradictory, rough, untidy stories, tales in which cultural, social, or political differences are not glossed over, but explored in depth while leaving messiness intact. And for this a much more creative and restless approach to scholarly research must be developed.