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ART + THOUGHT

CA+T Interview with Johanna Poethig,
Interview via Telephone
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Johanna Poethig, Artist
Rachel Ishikawa, CA+T Interviewer

Rachel Ishikawa: When did art begin with you?

Johanna Poethig: As a child I became involved with art. Both of my parents weren't artists but were creative, and there was a lot of activity. [At] the schools that I went to in the Philippines—elementary school—[art] was just really integrated into classroom activity. So, I think in a sense a lot of the creative work that I did as a kid was very seamless. I had music, I had art. But then, I was particularly drawn to visual art at a young age. I was looking at my parents' art books and then starting to draw in class and getting attention for it. So, probably around third grade I started to be one of those kids who draws in class and was noticed for those drawings.

RI: So it just took off from there?

JP: Exactly. Every four years my family would come back to the United States for a few months to have furloughs in the US, and once I found myself in a classroom here drawing became more important for me or art became more important for me partly as an escape, as well as a way to make friends. I started doing portraits of people right around the age of thirteen, and I was actually able to make some money for it. Even the performance part of things, I started to dress up in my mom's old clothes and red lipstick and [the] kind of things that were not fashionable at all. Plus, I was so much bigger than all of my classmates, and I have this clownish disposition. Instead of taking it as an insult I sort of rose to the occasion. They thought of me as a sort of cartoon character because I was sort of a giant. I started to perform, just silly stuff. I had violin lessons, and I sang as a child. Especially when you're in church, there is a lot of music in churches. When you grow up in a church environment, you're singing and reading music and performing at a young age.

RI: Going off of the many ways that you express yourself through art, I am curious about how you see intersectionality function within your art.

JP: How do you see the word intersectionality?

RI: I see it as cross-disciplinary, or also how everything is connected one way or another through history or how our societies function.

JP: There is not a simple answer. Our actions, and our lives, and our creative lives, and our political lives, and our social lives are increasingly complex. In my case, I think that I had a very complex set of influences and experiences that affected my creative work from a young [age]. Because [of those complex experiences], I have a strong social and political point of view in my work. It really does come from the experience of coloniality that I had at a young age, and it was a complicated one. Being both in and out of these colonized or colonial groups at the same time made me really conscious at a young age. I haven't figured it out yet.

I think that intersectionality is a good way of thinking about art because there are all of these seemingly disparate intersections in many people's lives. But for me, I would say that it has to do with growing up in the Philippines and having that cultural experience. Being an American in that situation—well, my parents were also Americans—but everyone else was Filipino—my family friends. So growing up being a minority in a school of seven hundred [people], and you and your sister are the only white kids. And then coming back to the States and seeing that Americans had no consciousness of their role in the world being colonizers. I grew up in a place that was very anti-American. During high school people would go out and protest the United States in Vietnam at the same time there was all of this colonial stuff.

At the same time, the feminist thing is really important because my mom's a feminist. My mom comes from a long line of women who really became educated and were feminists. In the Philippines, the whole role of women there [was to preserve] the pre-colonial, which was embodied in the complexity of that society. So that was very influential to me. And then there is the feminism that I encountered in the 1970s. That all ties together in my desire as an artist to self-express across both my personal experience and my experience in a society in these political situations that I was a player in, in a very complicated way.

Probably it just starts with personality. Some people are comedians and like to perform—that was me. That really strongly combined with my feminism, [and] the performance really became a place for me to express my outrage and to satirize the position of women in society that I thought was ridiculous. I just thought, "This is so fucking ridiculous." And having a strong background—with my mother and my political activist father—I didn't have a family life that squelched that at all. Also the experience of Filipino women and where they were coming from in society and then coming to the US during a particular time when there was strong feminism. My performance really is much the place where I express that.

The visual art side, where I had my studio practice or where I started to do public art or community art, really came out of a whole different side, where I had grown up in a situation in which my parents were really community oriented. None of my art teachers encouraged muralism. I saw public art and murals happening in Chicago, and I encountered the grandfather of murals, [William Walker](#), and he showed me all of these murals on the South Side. Actually my encounter with the African American community when I came to the United States was very influential to me because we moved to Chicago and I was "FOB" [fresh off the boat]. We moved to Hyde Park and I had a waitressing job and I had a lot of colleagues who were from the South Side [a historically black neighborhood]—so it was a whole new community for me. I did not have that in the Philippines. I found it so interesting.

Another really strong influence for me was experimental music. I encountered the [Art Ensemble of Chicago](#), which is a really out-there free jazz experimental group. A lot of my friends are from that experimental music tradition in the [San Francisco] Bay area, so I've been actually working and performing with people. My husband's a composer, so it was a social group that I met. So I started performing in my 20s, doing weird shit, and liked it. But that was really different from what I was doing on the streets, because I was going to schools [and] working with refugee children.

[When] I came to the Bay area, I thought, "Wow, there are all of these great murals, but there is nothing about the Filipino community, and it was like forty percent Filipino." I was like, "What's wrong with this picture?" I started to organize that, working on the streets and working collaboratively. It was also a way to make a living. I think when you're a young woman artist, the percentages are still really bad for women succeeding in the art world market place. Was I going to make a living selling my paintings? I was, like, "I don't think so!" What were other ways that I could be an artist that I thought would be valuable work, and the way I wanted to live my life was a part of [the decision]. Having grown up in a really cross-cultural, sort of transnational experience, I was always searching for that in my life. That's what I am familiar with, that's where I have a good time or is interesting to me. I moved to the Bay area for a reason—because it is near the Pacific, because I was more interested in being in this city where there is a strong Asian American population, especially Filipino. It was not an accident.

I started doing the murals in the early '80s and worked with different community groups. So that led me to work with a lot of different community groups, everything from a program for senior citizens, at a half-way house, with a jail. I am very interested in culture. I am very interested in being able to understand the different lives that people live that I am not in. But art was an access point to that. ... All during my work I have a class analysis of how we are living as artists and as Americans and as different groups—being aware of all of those inequities. So doing collaborative art was a very good access to that and in creating public work.

And actually, I think it's really tied to my performance because what I really loved about performance—the performance that I was encountering in Chicago and in the experimental music world and improvised jazz—was this concept of "improvisation." It was exactly what I was doing in the visual art process that I was doing with communities. At that point I am talking about kids up to seniors; I'm talking about everybody. It becomes a skill of conducting and improvising with different groups [and] that everybody is bringing different skills to the table, or they're bringing their experience. So you're learning as an artist or you're developing the skill to lead these improvisations, basically. The great part is that even though there are different parts in improvising in music, ultimately it is about listening and responding. That's what I like about these collaborative pieces.

There are a lot of things that drag down the idea of community arts. Any other field has got its really strong areas and weaker areas. But the thing that I always felt was that the kind of work that could come out of this situation was every bit as strong at certain moments or at certain pieces as any other individually created work. It's just that the market place can't

deal with [community art]. It's just like you can have this romantic music and this really wild music, and the market will easily sell this individual composer. It takes longer to embrace this idea of improvised music. So that's how I feel about this kind of collaborative improvisation that I've taken to other areas of my life, too. The public art thing was a way for me to do that.

But at the same time, in my studio and as an individual artist, that's a whole other area—that is the core of it, that's your self, that's your body, that's who you are everyday when you get up and that is where you are doing your work and putting all of these things together from your own life that. Of course, I have a whole body of work that I have done in paint, ceramic, creating props and costumes, and actually curating events and performances. And all of that is my own: being in my studio and enjoying being by myself doing my thing, and having shows of my work. So it's all of those things, but for me they are all connected. That's the intersection. For me the intersection is in the self and in the world. It's all connected, but I think that it's a difficult road as an artist in a very saturated environment where people like to say you do this thing. Sometimes I feel like I am the good little community arts girl, and then I am the bad performance feminist girl. On one hand, I am terrible out-there stuff, and on the other hand I am working hard to be able cross over boundaries of different cultures in a very gentle and conscious way that doesn't frighten people. That's the range of personality that I have.

RI: You touched on a lot already, but in terms of how your work can kind of be appealing to different groups of people, how does accessibility function within your work?

JP: Well, I think that the great thing about doing my own work and having my own practice and my own performance thing is that I can do what I want, and I want that artistic freedom, that non-censored area of life. And that's key to mental health and also to political and social and feminist [action]—I mean I am an artist's feminist, so I think that women need to speak up and be nasty, in a nice way, and be funny. I mean I am a satirist—I like satire. So that's what I do and I enjoy a lot.

But you know what? That's not something that I had a lot of ambition for. As silly as I am, I am not really a night person, and I never wanted to be a performer on the road doing one gig after the other. That is just not appealing to me. We are who we are, and I am much more of a morning, day-time person. I don't want to be nervous performing all of the time. Over the years, I have just performed in a really selective way at the time that I wanted to—more when I was younger, but I am still doing it. I am going to perform with [Barbara Golden](#) on Sunday at Berkeley Arts. We published a song book of twenty-two of our songs. We have just written a new song. She's seventy-four now, and I am almost sixty. We are really stupid and trashy, and it is fun. Making videos and being silly and never wanting fame or fortune out of this.

[Fame and fortune] was never the intent because that can hang heavy on an artist. I would say that my public art is heavy duty business. Man, that is hard work. Through that I can make a living, but once you can start making a living from something it becomes difficult. Because it's hard, it's business. So I just can't have that. Then the other part—installation, painting—is a sort of middle ground.

In the community arts, the accessibility part of it—when I go into a public site—you have the question there about ability, about [“Celebrate Ability.”](#) So I go into a rec[reation] center, and I am going to do a public art piece. So as a public artist I go into a space, and [the work] has to be accessible for people, right? There are a lot of artists who really can’t do this work because they can’t compromise their own individual vision and they feel that if they do then it’s not good art. And I disagree with that in every way. There is the problem that art can definitely be so squeezed by the community process that it becomes very weak, but I am also saying that art gets very squeezed by the market place: individual people strategize how they are going to make money within that market place, and that makes a lot of weak work. And the market place is very derivative or very copied. So, to me it’s equal. Every time you’re dealing with these different communities, be it the art world or whatever communities, [compromise is] definitely something to contend with.

I think that the art of doing this kind of work is going in with this idea of improvisation, to say, “I am going in here as an improviser to think about this site, and we are going to make a piece that I feel really good about but that people who use this site will really respond to and feel a part of and get into a dialogue with the site, architectural and not just social.” If you are in your studio, you’re choosing your sizes or whatever you are doing. If you are working in a public space, you are dealing with architecture and landscape, so that is a big element in the whole thing. You do try to make it accessible in all those ways, and it’s a challenge. That ability piece was a really fun thing. I got into conversations with the people who work at that rec center, and they really just wanted to appeal to the seniors and the kids and everyone there. I really do a lot of text image in my work, so I wanted to do something with text image, and I wanted to do something that had to do with native species. So when we brought [the idea] to the table, we really came up with something as a group and started playing with the idea of “adapt-ability” and “enjoy-ability”—having the hyphenated piece. And it really was a great process because a lot depends on the community that you’re working with. If you get a group of people, then you’re good. If you get anybody in there who is oppositional, it will be difficult. So, that piece everybody was really happy about. I was really happy about it.

RI: In terms of some of your more politically charged work, I am curious about your research process before creating a piece.

JP: It takes a lot of research. The Manila town piece and [Placesetting](#) was ... there is a rich, rich history there. When I went into that situation, I didn’t expect to be selected. I am, on one hand, a good choice because I have done a lot of the work and have that experience; on the other hand, people might want to choose someone who is not white. So when they did select me, I was very honored. I am always very honored when I am chosen to represent a certain ethnic community that is not mine because it’s great. It’s been one of the pleasures of my life that I’ve been able to do that. And so I try to go into those situations with even more research and more investigation into the work of the community and what they’ve done. Nancy Holme was a great support on that project, and she was really terrific and she really helped.

A lot of people helped—people who offered their photographs because the Kearny Street workshop has such a rich store. And then I worked with the poets, the work of [Al Robles](#).

And then we went through the long process of them approving what I was going to do and getting the permissions and just doing it in the correct way so that I wasn't just going in there doing a free-for-all but really reaching out to the community. Especially in *Placesetting*, [where I was] using poems from poets of the community, I felt that I was doing my piece, but I wanted to represent the people who have been part of this community for a long time. That included the mural where I used Al's poem, and in *Placesetting* it was way deeper into more poems, more photographs, more history. The newspaper articles were from Mrs. Lee, who I think must be in her 80s, a senior from the community. We also are getting these works from unexpected places. Not just from artists and poets but from activists and elderly folk who were still in the community, who would save these things from all these years. I loved that part of the project. And once again that's kind of an improvisation, or kind of a research, or collection—that's more research. There was a lot of process that I did with people checking off on what I was doing so that I could best represent that really profound history.

RI: I just have one more question for you, what are you currently working on?

JP: Right now, I am covering all areas of my work. So for public art, I have two current projects. One is a huge monstrous project for AC Transit [Alameda Contra Costa Transit]. It's a rapid transit project, and I am working with a team of Mildred Howard and Joyce Chu and Peter Richard. I am the lead of that team, and [the project] is to design and implement artwork for thirty-four stations, almost seventy sites. That is a monster project, and it is so hard. Talk about you better be a business person if you want to do public art! I've been building up to a project like this over the decades, but it's so complicated. Nevertheless, we are doing it and it is very exciting. As part of the project I did youth focus groups with Mildred, and [we're] using all of that collaborative work too.

The other is a mosaic called *Storycloud* that I am doing for the Bernal Library in San Francisco. I've worked mostly with a community group that has a long complicated history with art at that library. I am doing this piece which I am very excited about because it is very connected to my studio work. I love it when I get to bring my stronger ideas into public space.

And then I am curating for FilmArts in January a show called the "Glamourgeddon, the Spectacle." It's part of my whole performance and curating: these pieces and groups of people [are going] to perform around these political ideas. I have done the "[Glamour Summit](#)" and the "[Post-Glamour Summit](#)" and "[Empire Ultra](#)" and the "[Extreme Insecurity Forces](#)" and now the "Glamourgeddon." And it's around the idea of consumer capitalist excess, and it's a satire. There're about eight visual artists and a lot of performance artists, and I am coordinating the whole thing. It'll be in January and it is going to be great. It's going to have a lot of great people in it exploring that situation that we live in now, from that point of view of crazy excess and the end of the world, armageddon.

Then I am working on a piece with Chris, my husband, who is also my collaborator. We do video and sound pieces together. And we are going to do this in the Philippines actually. It's called "[Music of the Lost Cities](#)." It's a piece we've been working on the last seven years and now we are finishing up the last chapter, and it's going to be part of an art event called

[Project Glocal](#) that's being curated by our friend Dayang Yraola in Manila. It's also this project of hers that has almost only been Southeast Asian artists in Taiwan and Japan, the Philippines. She is doing three residencies and we're guest artists. We'll be presenting and performing this video in November. I think that's it.

RI: That's a lot!

JP: I know! I'm tired.