

Making Time 2023: Imagining the future: where will creativity take us? - Transcript #5

Persian-Chinese visual artist and graphic recorder Neda Loh

Wendy Martin: We move to Neda Loh now. Neda is a Persian-Chinese visual artist and graphic recorder, based in Broome. She is currently working alongside traditional owner groups and organisations to visually communicate Western research efforts back to the community, to ensure the appropriate return of knowledge. With a background in community development and arts education. Neda has a particular passion for the role of arts in communicating ideas that contribute to social cohesion. Welcome Neda.

Neda Loh: I'm pretty sure... so I'm just gonna... can you all hear me? Is that okay? Sometimes it's like I'm too close to the mic, because I'm so short, or too far away. Anyway.

Good morning all. My full name is Neda Mei Shun Loh, and I am a mother, a visual artist and graphic recorder, and as Wendy mentioned, been living in Broome for the past six years. I'd like to start today by acknowledging the land that we're meeting on, Whadjuk Noongar Boodja. And also give a shout out to Yawuru Country, which is Broome. It's the place that I live. It's the place that I work and it's the place that I get to create. And I'd like to pay respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

So thinking about this question of arts into the future, its potential to respond to challenges, and also the opportunities that it brings, and my work as a remote and regional graphic recorder, something that I kept thinking about was this concept of distances.

Now, it sounds a bit vague, but I'll get into it. So I don't want to present distances as something that's positive or negative, but rather something that's quite relevant to us, living in Australia. We live in a really vast land. And I think the distances between us ideologically or physically, can create barriers to social cohesion, but also for artists and creatives, and those in the CACD sector, it can create opportunities for us to tell stories, and create links between these distances.

So personally, if I think about distances, I think about my mum, who fled Iran in the 1980s, at the age of 16, by herself. I think about my dad who left Malaysia to move to the UK to pursue tertiary education. And I think about the fact that they started their family 1000s of kilometres away from their homeland.

So I think to them, distance was a really big deal. It was probably pretty inconvenient, they couldn't see their family. And for us as children, it left us with a lot of questions about our identity and who we were. Around our dinner table on a Friday night, we didn't really talk about the intercultural space or being second generation migrants or intersectionality, or the diaspora.

But as I've grown older, those concepts have meant a lot to me. And I've only really learned about those through the arts. And I think the way that the arts explores concepts in a nuanced way, and gives you different perspectives, but also leaves the viewer to make up their own mind, it really helped me learn

about my place in the world, and things that I – not was struggling with – but I was challenged by. And it gave me a lot of answers, I think, to questions that I had.

So fast-forward 20 years, we moved to Australia, and now I'm living in the Kimberley. And this concept of distances has a completely different take now. It often has a close companion called isolation, I think, living regionally. And it translates to two and a half thousand kilometres away from our closest capital city, which is Perth. So it's actually the same distance between Broome to Perth than it is between London and Moscow, which I only knew when I Googled it prior to this – oh and I've drawn too fast, I'll speed up – If we think about all of the languages, the countries and things that we can name between London and Moscow (depends how good your geography is), and then we think about our regional spaces, I wonder if we perceive those two things in the same manner.

So travelling as a remote graphic recorder, I've realised that people in remote communities, they perceive the spaces, like they're very acutely aware of what lies in between these spaces. And I think it's that, that we as visual artists or we as artists, that's our opportunity. I think those are the stories that are missing. And those are the stories that I think us in the cities, sometimes we just don't – we're not exposed to them.

So as you can see behind me on the screen – and I'm talking too slow – behind me on the screen is a visual story. And for those of you that haven't seen visual scribing before, or graphic recording, I thought this would be a condensed way to explain what it is. So usually I'd be on the other side of the screen, I'd be on an iPad, and I'd be drawing and responding as the person was speaking. I think it was a bit of a ploy really just so you'd look there not here, and I think it's working [audience laughs].

But I've had the privilege of travelling around the Kimberley, as I said, and going to some of our most remote towns and doing this for community consultations. And I think one thing I've learned is that human reality, and you all know this, saying this, but human existence is so much more than A4 reports and stats. And I know that they get things done, and they get us money for our projects, but they don't capture the spirit of a consultation, and they don't capture community voice.

And I think that visual scribing, or graphic recording is a humble attempt to do that. I've also had the privilege, I suppose, of being able to traverse large physical distances, and enter a community and listen deeply without having to respond, which has been massive, and to hear hopes, questions and concerns of the community. Oh I've really gone too slow [she laughs].

I think it's been an opportunity for me to avoid sinking further into my own thoughts, in my own world, which is what community arts does. And it's allowed me to see people's stories from another perspective. I see graphic recording as an art form, or I hope that graphic recording is an art form that makes distances between us smaller. And I think this is my ultimate goal for graphic recording, but that it elevates disempowered voices in our most remote towns.

And then at a personal level – you've probably guessed, this is my son – at a personal level, I hope that arts into the future is something that will continue exploring all of these questions that he will have. I

married someone that's also from a mixed heritage so I think my son's going to have a lot of questions growing up. But I hope that going into the future arts is a place that he can find answers to those questions. And he can find his place in a world in a way that we perhaps didn't quite discuss properly at our family dinner table. Thank you.