



HIROMI TANGO

Japanese/Australian Hiromi Tango's installation/performance projects are well known for their playful interactive qualities; qualities that often involve both adults and children in immersive worlds where they are able to experiment with a range of ways of working with each other that might not otherwise be possible. However, the playful aspect of these works belie the artists' serious commitment to making changes in the ways we relate to each other, to ourselves and to the environments we share. For *The Partnership Project*, Hiromi has chosen to experiment with those edges where the more private and public aspects of living as an artist rub against each other.

I was born in Imabari City in Ehime Prefecture on Shikoku Island in Japan. My brother is three years, eight months younger than me. Our mother was a housewife and our father created an insurance real estate company that served the local community. Since those early beginnings, my brother later developed that company to a major organization for the island – one that employs a couple of hundred employees.

Imabari is a little fishing town surrounded by an inland sea. I grew up in a beautiful natural environment. As a child I would spend a great deal of time outdoors – we'd go fishing regularly, or hiking in the local mountains. We'd climb trees and pick fruits and food from the area surround the town and then we'd cook that food and eat it – it was a very satisfying experience.

When I think back on my childhood I remember my mother as silent. She didn't have a voice – in the regional areas of women are expected to not have a voice. My father, on the other hand, was an outgoing, gregarious, charming person – he was locally renowned for his hospitality and was a very popular member of the local community. Lots of drinking was an essential part of that hospitality, and I too was trained by him to drink sake by the age of three; my father was very particular about making sure his children were socially as well as physically resilient. He was also very keen to teach me the social skills and behavior necessary to be a subservient Japanese female, even though this wasn't appealing to me at all. He tried to chastise me and to ground me, but I wouldn't listen to him. I have memories of myself as little Hiromi – a two-year-old carrying hot cups of Japanese tea to my father. My

father was very particular about the temperature of the tea and I can remember my mother's terrified but silent response as she watched me taking this tea to him; so worried about her little girl burning myself. In this sense, I remember my home as being a not particularly safe place to grow up in.

I don't remember much about my primary school years, but I have a fond memory of working as the caretaker of the school community garden during the summer holidays. I volunteered for the position, and I did it for six years. My parents were unhappy at the fact that I had to water the garden early in the morning and late in the evening over each of the forty days of the summer school holidays. My parents thought I was crazy giving that precious school holiday time to nurturing that garden. But it made total sense to me – we grew chrysanthemums from cuttings, cucumbers, watermelons, tomatoes, sunflowers from seeds and cuttings. I was fascinated with the process of tending and watering and watching things respond – you got almost immediate results and I was awarded for my dedication – my stubborn dedication – to devoting that time.

Years 7, 8 and 9 in Japan are spent in Junior High School – I went to a local public school – everyone does in regional Japan. I had been a member of Rotary since I was twelve, involved in volunteering time twice a month and on weekends working with people with disabilities, picking up rubbish – lots of community-assistance activities. I have fond memories of the leadership those kinds of activities demanded; I learned a lot about the processes required to take care of local community during these times, and lots of those lessons have stayed with me. I dedicated six years of my work to Rotary; in a way I guess I was searching for a way to come into contact with humanity and for ways of connecting with other parts of the community and connections beyond my immediate family. I can clearly remember Miss Tange, an English teacher in Junior High, who was always speaking to children in her classes in English, which was unusual at the time. I really liked the way she linked the world through overseas pen-pals who corresponded to her students. It gave me a sense of the spread of the world beyond my home-town.

Rotary selected one student a year who demonstrates compassion and service to represent the school in a particular activity; they nominated me to the Japanese Kendo Club and I began to undertake the strict training regimes. My father was a judo athlete, and he was keen for me to become accomplished at that form of martial arts, but I really didn't like it. He thought it would help me but I wasn't interested in it at all, so he regretfully agreed that other forms of martial arts might also be good for my self-discipline. He thought I was a

marshmallow, weeping all the time. He wanted me to toughen up.

Training for kendo was tough. In summer-time we'd do two hours training a day. For three years of junior High School I was looking at the calendar to see when it would be all over. I hated it. But in Japan you can't be a quitter. It was all too stressful for me, and it HURT, but in the end, through default, I became quite good at it.

Between the ages of eight and nineteen, I was also practicing Japanese Calligraphy (shodo); that was my grandmother's wish. I had to also practice the arts of tea ceremony and floral arrangement. I was under the mentorship of one of the best shodo artists of the island – I knew I was fortunate to learn under him, and I also was awarded a scholarship at the age of eighteen to be sent to Shodo University. But I felt like a machine – not an artist – it was all about copying the work of the masters.

I guess you could say that in a way my only formal training in art is with shodo – I trained every day for about three hours a week for about three years. My sensei wanted me to be the best artist of the region. Looking back, I can't see how I managed it all – the stressful ongoing practice of shodo and the archery practice was incredibly demanding.

By Senior High School my father was still quite insistent that I continue to train in some form of Japanese arts; so when I quit Kendo I chose Japanese archery – kyudo. Our team was so good that we qualified to the level of an all-Japan competition. I still have marks on my arm and fingers from the intensity of the training. Our coach was very serious – he was one of the members of the Japanese team. The exceptional results of our team meant that any of us could choose any university we wanted to. I never believed in sport – I was never really interested in it, but in the end, it really worked for me as a result of the success of the team because I was able to enter Japan Women's University – the oldest and largest private university for women in Tokyo.

In the Japanese Women's University I undertook a new course called Humanity of Culture of Arts. I was the second to graduate from the department. It was an incredible experience – we had many international professors from France, China, Germany and other countries. We had to study three languages. The classes were small – only around five students for each class, and for the first time in my life I actually enjoyed my learning. We were offered classes in anthropology, social linguistics, music, architecture and arts, English literature, comparative culture – all general learning – but incredible. I selected ninety-five subjects over that four years, and because I was representing my high school, I was very aware of the need to do well



... especially as I felt that I'd 'cheated' getting in on a sports scholarship! It was here that I learned to speak and write English under an American professor. We also learned about equal rights for women. I studied to be a qualified Japanese language teacher in order to become independent and move overseas. I felt I couldn't fit in to society there; it was almost as if even complaining was forbidden. I guess from early childhood I had always questioned the order of Japanese culture, and that somehow my personality didn't quite fit in.

One particular subject I enjoyed was the study of Noh, where I studied under one of the very rare female exponents of Noh, Professor Kondo. She was so strict. She'd studied in America for many years; her view was dark, pessimistic and angry. But for the first time in my life I came across a female who was actually expressing her anger. I didn't actually like her, but I was empathetic with her situation and could understand and empathise with her anger at her situation. She had experienced profound discrimination as a woman in Japan – she was a kind of inspiration to me.

While I was in university I worked for the Australia Council as volunteer. I met my husband – Craig Walsh - when I was twenty-one while he was on an artist residency in Tokyo. When he returned to Australia, I followed to join him in 1998. We lived in Brisbane for the first few years and during that time Craig was involved in a number of national and international art projects. After the Tokyo residency – which was his first artistic residency, other residencies and exhibitions followed in places like Hanoi, Vietnam, New York, Korea, Germany, the Yokohama Triennale in Japan and a range of other international destinations.

Technically speaking, I've always been an artist. My father was a great father in terms of letting children do whatever they wanted to do, so my brother and I were allowed to draw all over the house. He was always supporting us, buying crayons and paint. Throughout primary school I'd take projects home from the class so that I could continue them at home. I was completely focused on doing things well. I was obsessed with doing well: when I made a mistake on one of the woodcraft projects by cutting through the wood, I hid in the cupboard and cried. I loved art and I was winning painting awards throughout all levels of schooling, but I was also good at science and biology, and when I look back now, it has all become connected through the kind of artworks I'm engaged in now.

I think I've always wanted to contribute back to society, and I've always maintained a passion to have a voice through which I can directly communicate – both of these needs (or desires) are fulfilled through art making. I didn't think I could pursue art through a formal training institution in Japan because it was such a formal process; my cousin was a very good artist but

she'd had to study two full years even just to enter one of Tokyo's best universities for art – that wasn't very attractive to me.

But when I met artists, and especially through working with Craig, other avenues opened. My first exhibition was in 2005 when Craig invited me to be part of his mentorship workshop at the Gold Coast Regional Gallery. I was completely immersed – I loved it. I told Craig I wanted to be an artist and he shook his head and tried to explain how difficult the path was, but I replied that I was very sure about my choice – I guess you could say that this was the beginning of my artist's career.

Between 2010 and 2012 we travelled around Australia creating installations while we stayed in a range of caravan parks. Towards the end of that cycle of travelling and working with communities, after a very long, challenging day, I remember looking out at the water and realising how important proximity to water was to mental equilibrium.

With a new family, it was also important to have family support. We'd lived in Sydney for a while, but we knew that the need to be in a natural environment was important, and also proximity to an airport. Both my Craig and I grew up in regional environments – Craig grew up in Lismore and we both shared a lot of similar experiences and it was a number one priority to the access to nature. We chose to buy a house in Tweed Heads because it offered a great deal of what we value most in terms of the natural environment: we both fell in love with the Tweed river – that and the accessibility of the region to the hinterland, the airport and to Brisbane makes it a special spot. We regularly fish from a little boat, and we see water every day – so much of those experiences were important to us when we were growing up and it was important to be able to hand experiences in the natural environment to our children.

Since moving here I've been involved in a flow of exhibitions; it's almost like the once-voiceless person inside me has exploded. Even though I may have begun my journey with art as an 'artist's wife', the urge to make art myself couldn't be contained, so here I am, and I'm completely immersed in the making.

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