

## ***From Rocks to Social Networks – A story about media and cultural development in the regional neighbourhood, Suai Media Arts Project, East Timor***

**Presentation at Artists Talk: Cultural Development Network, December 2009**

### **Jen Hughes, documentary-maker**

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### **Introduction**

The Suai Media Arts Project began in December 1999 after I moved to Melbourne from Adelaide. I was asked to speak about my experiences in the international setting and to share some of the lessons from that project. I chose two stories, one about language and another about access. The first highlighted one of the early difficulties of working together at such distance, for communities in the regional neighbourhood. The other was about mourning, justice and the ethics of access and documentation in exceptional circumstances. For the sake of brevity in this written version I will focus on the second story.

In 2000 made a ten year commitment to the Suai Media Arts Project. Remember that in 1999 *digital technologies* were not advanced to the stage they are now. Historically: There was no 9/11, no Tampa, no Balibo feature film, a different world.

### **The Project Background**

The project is located in Suai, East Timor and Port Phillip where I live and on-line – [www.suaimediaspace.org](http://www.suaimediaspace.org). Suai is a remote village in the southwest coast of East Timor. 200kms but a day's drive from the capital Dili because of mountainous winding narrow roads and broken bridges. Port Phillip is a mainly wealthy community near Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

I'm going to jump right into what the project is now in 2009, and then go back to 1999-2001 to how it came about. 2000-2002 was the Emergency Phase for East

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Timor in recovery. These facts profoundly influenced the early work, how I imagined early communication and connection between the two communities and what the project is now.

## 2009: Outcomes and the project now

The direct and indirect outcomes of the project now are:

- A [Youth Media Organisation](#) in Suai [with broadband](#) (2009)
- A media house with a full-time co-ordinator position and trained journalists
- [five short documentaries](#) made by me
- Many [short documentaries](#), stories and photographs made by youth of Suai in workshops with me and others
- In Progress: An archive project documenting Suai history, particularly in 2000
- [www.crimsonthreads.org](http://www.crimsonthreads.org) an artistic website with VUT Students 2003
- Social Network [www.suaimediaspace.ning](http://www.suaimediaspace.ning.com) [YouTube](#) [Muxes](#)
- [Web 2.0 website](#) for the following purposes:
  - a social media project for communication between Suai, Port Phillip and the rest of the world.
  - a platform for stories art and culture from Suai
  - a platform for documentaries
  - a place for a brief international history of the countries and solidarity
  - a place for News about Friends of Suai Projects, relevant social Timor news and links

## 1999: How the project came about

1999 was the year East Timor had its vote for independence on August 30<sup>th</sup> and erupted into violence. During that violence one of the worst massacres took place in Suai – the massacre known as the Suai Church Massacre

Drawings of massacre by youth of Suai: These drawings by local youth graphically depict the way the three priests in that massacre died. They were on display in a school room on the first anniversary

<http://www.suaimediaspace.org/category/art/murder-of-3-priests/>

I was struck by the level of feeling in my new community in Port Phillip, not knowing how close so many people felt to the Timorese already through [solidarity work](#) with them in Melbourne. But nothing else might have happened if in 1999 Port Phillip Council hadn't called a meeting to ask the Port Phillip

community what we could do to help East Timor's recovery. I noticed a tiny ad in the local paper and immediately was intrigued. So, I attended as a documentary-maker.

It was at this meeting Timorese [Abel Guterres](#) – long time solidarity activist, Melbourne bus driver, and later Timorese Consul-General to Australia, suggested Suai as the focus for the Port Phillip community for a 'friendship' to assist in Suai's recovery.

### **2000: Council's first community-based act of friendship**

The [Friends of Suai](#) was launched in March 2000 and there are now more than fifty such groups in Victoria. With that began the '*Truckloads for East Timor Campaign*' in which 200 bicycles, pedal sewing machines, and musical instruments, as well as lots of clothing and other stuff were donated to Suai.

### **1975 – 1999: Solidarity provides foundation for friendship**

There is not time to do any more than mention the importance of the Victorian and Australian [solidarity movement](#) in making this friendship and all the others possible. There are ten people who are residents in Port Phillip who had worked for East Timor's independence for up to 29 years now, for many, that is nearly 40 years.

### **1999 – 2009: Creating opportunities for cultural exchange and communication between communities**

I began as a documentary-maker with a broader perspective. I imagined the concept of an on-line documentary made in collaboration with the youth of Suai – artists in particular – to tell the story of the friendship. Now the project reflects a process that combines documentary-making with media and cultural development. This came about in partnership with a local government, international community development group: the Friends of Suai in Port Phillip and Cova Lima Suai and the Cova Lima Youth Centre in Suai East Timor.

The project evolved over time, in response to what was happening in Suai and requests from them, changes in technology and funding availability. These circumstances led to me taking steps to assist communication between the two communities by bringing history and cultural identities into the friendship.

### **2000: Circle of Stones - the connecting symbol of loss**

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I went to Suai in July 2000, ten months after the Suai Church Massacre. In front of the Suai Church I found a symbol to use for a film about justice which became a useful for connecting the two communities of Port Phillip and Suai around the foundational issues of human rights, justice and loss.

The symbol I found was a [circle of stones](#) in front of the Suai Church around the place where the bodies of those who died were burned. This place became simply and powerfully sacred. (*The hyperlink can take you to the [video](#) I made and a short story about the event we held in St Kilda on the occasion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary of the Massacre.*)

### **Stories and Lessons of Experience**

I want to get into one of the ethical struggles I had and take you to Suai where the massacre took place because this is at the heart of why the friendship began. The ethical struggle I refer to is the way I came to have the intimate footage of grief you can see in that video. I felt privileged by what happened, and I felt I held a strong, even a sacred trust and responsibility, to publish it as widely as possible to the world. I have reasoned I was given this privilege because of the fact I was in a particular place with my camera at a particular time, in Suai's history.

### **Timing and Knowing the History**

Timor was in the Emergency Phase of recovery. The wounds of trauma and injustice were still fresh. I was there because of that injustice, in part, the responsibility of my government. Timorese attitudes to journalists (and to me), in 2000, came from the story of Max Stahl and the Santa Cruz Massacre and the fact they had been more or less cut off from the world for 30 years. Suai was more cut off than Dili.

[This hyperlink will take you to video of a re-enactment of the [Santa Cruz Massacre](#) made by a fledgling Timorese theatre company for the commemoration of the massacre, in November 2000. In the video re-enactment you will see youth reading out poetry and leaping from the fence and gate of the Santa Cruz Cemetery in a re-enactment of the massacre that took place there in November 1991.]

The image of this gate has been made famous by the footage shot by Max Stahl during the actual massacre; footage that led to a change in the world's attitude to East Timor and contributed mightily to their eventual success in getting the opportunity for a vote for independence. Max Stahl is a national hero in East

Timor.

When I was in Suai in July, August and September 2000 I was the only person there with a camera except for during the actual First Anniversary Commemoration when there were dozens of international journalists who flew in for the day. When they were there, I documented them. The fact that I was there so soon after the violence created a context that had an influence on what I could do, on what happened to me, on what I did and what sort of outcomes there are.

People hauled me into situations to tape I would never have gone into otherwise; they sang Falantil songs for me when they saw me. They regarded me as a Journalist rather than a documentary-maker, and nothing I could say could change their view of me despite my protests. Journalists were to be exploited. The Timorese knew their stories – filmmakers and journalists were the ciphers to the outside world. They had no way of knowing if peace and independence would last.

Ten years later, things are very different. Those that can afford it are moving freely in and out of the country – many have their own video cameras. Media houses are being set up in five districts, including Suai, so they can shoot local stories for international distribution via <http://www.timortoday.com> or <http://www.suaimediaspace.org>.

Stories on [Suai Media Space](http://www.suaimediaspace.org) upset clichéd concepts of poverty stricken, hungry Timorese lacking capacity. Timorese are working and studying all over the world, taking advantage of every opportunity available to them. The story of the Timorese is one of David overcoming Goliath and they continue to impress everybody who knows them with their intelligence and resilience.

The following story is the first example of how they directed me to one of their stories to be told.

### **Family Context: The Story: Bones of Antonio Mendonca**

This story about Antonio Mendonca's family began in Melbourne in early 2000. As part of my research I joined the mailing list of the East Timor Human Rights Centre. In early 2000 they advised me by email they were compiling a list of dead and missing people. In the same email they told the story of how women were finding bones, wrapping them in tais and hiding them: waiting for a suitable time for a burial. These were such emotional times I found myself weeping as I read this and writing a poem.

I had been in Suai on and off for more than two months. It was September 4,

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2000 - two days before the First Anniversary of the Massacre while I was staying with Adriano do Nascimento and his family.

I was having a wash, in a small rusted shed built for the purpose, out the back of the house when I heard a pig squealing as it died. When I had dressed, which took about five minutes because it's so humid and hot, I dashed out there with my camera to see what was happening. When I arrived I saw two men with a dead pig. I was hardly there a minute when they signaled for me to follow them back to their home a few metres away.

Before I knew what was happening I was being ushered into a small rusted tin shed similar to an Australian outdoor toilet in dimensions and being directed to video-tape what was there. Inside that little shed, there were just small pinholes of light, and some flickering candles being hastily lit by an older woman who I realized later was Senora Mendonca. As she lit the candles I could make out through the camera lens that this was an altar.

The altar was covered in tais, the traditional Timorese cloth. Upon it at the back was a small box that was being unwrapped. Around it on the altar and the walls were small candles and Catholic icons. Senora Mendonca unwrapped the box, which contained more tais. As she tenderly opened the tais for the camera to see inside, I realized what it was. I was filled with embarrassment because I couldn't see a thing through the darkness, and I felt I was being dishonest. I was trying to tell everybody but it seemed a difficult thing to make clear with my limited local language, the fact that it was too dark for the camera.

But somebody did understand me because they rushed to get more candles – still not enough to provide the necessary light. But what was clear, was the strongly held desire to record this story. I could hear voices repeating Antonio Mendonca, Antonio Mendonca. As I video-taped in the dark, unable to see what it was that had been uncovered I realized, I could be filming the bones of Antonio Mendonca. I checked – “who is this?” I asked – back came the reply – “Antonio Mendonca”. “Furak,” I breathed, “beautiful”.

When I emerged the family assembled around me with a testimonial that had already been written and indicated they wanted to read it for the camera. So we recorded the short testimonial to the life of Antonio Mendonca; a leader, who sacrificed his life for independence in September 1999. Adriano told me, that when people returned from the mountains, bones were scattered everywhere. Nobody could tell who was who. So people collected up bones to ‘represent’ their loved ones for the purposes of mourning. Then it was necessary to wait, to hold a burial that everybody agreed collectively, would satisfy their need to mourn their loved ones. That moment had arrived on the First Anniversary of the massacre

and I was with the Mendonca family the night before the community Anniversary began. When I returned to Adriano's, later, I was invited to film the Mendonca family memorial vigil and prayers for Antonio that night.

This story is not told to shock, but to demonstrate the depth of feeling that was in the community: for the world to know, the sacrifice their loved ones made for independence. Privacy was much less important – massacres tend not to be private matters – the circumstance of Mendonca's death, the burning of his body in a public space along with many others, all these things made a difference to them. Also he died a martyr to the cause of independence and the family wanted this recorded.

### **Community Context**

What happened on this occasion influenced what happened next.

[You will see in the [video](#) the [circle of stones](#). In that there is some intimate footage of women mourning at night, inside the circle of stones. I had been filming this circle regularly for over two months. As the rocks grew in number and sophistication.]

It was late at night near midnight. There was a Mass taking place in the Church and I was participating in the all-night vigil around the circle of stones. I had been filming from a distance intermittently throughout the day. I was standing with my camera off, at the back of a circle of people six or more deep around the Circle of Stones, when I felt hands hauling me into the centre. When I found myself at the inner edge of the circle I knelt on the asphalt to record the women, doing the work of recalling history, invoking remembrance of what had happened, in this communal and public act of mourning.

Now I realized, I had the responsibility, the sacred trust of more people to take their story to the world, to let them know, what happened on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of September 1999.

### **The role of the documentary work locally and internationally**

As a result of these events I made an 11 minute film called *The Circle of Stones*. *The Circle of Stones* is a call for justice. The film shows a re-enactment of the massacre (that was part of a play put on for the local and international community), inter-cut with the ceremony around and in, the circle of stones on the First Anniversary. Including the very intimate mourning scene at the centre of the circle of stones. The film has been screened and distributed in Suai where I

have received very positive feedback.

Filomena dos Reis, the Timorese writer and director of the play that is in the film, took it with her on a tour of many universities in the U.S. She also told me she screened it for the U.S. Senate in 2003 where Hilary Clinton and Condoleeza Rice were in the audience.

This little film also led to an event in St Kilda that 200-300 people attended, called '*The Circle of Stones*' on the second Anniversary of the Massacre. We screened the film and invited the community to bring a rock with a message to the people of Suai on it. Some did, some didn't. The rocks that were brought with messages, have provided an enduring symbol of why there is a friendship, between the two communities and they are displayed on important anniversaries. The film has been screened in Timorese festivals, commemorations, anniversaries and local television.

The Timorese continue to search for justice and the film was screened on a wall in Dili 2 months ago on the tenth anniversary of the massacre.

The work with [Antonio's story](#) is not finished. I included it in the first website I made it and may make it into in a longer film. It will be included the Suai Media Space website. The family vigil will also go into the Archive project.

### **My lessons from the experience: Judgements**

The sensitivities we have around doing certain things in our own culture may not apply in other countries or cultures in certain circumstances. We are always called upon to make judgements about trust with our subjects and communities we work with.

#### *Assessing the invitation*

The mourning at the circle of stones was communal and taking place in a public place. It was loud and open – a performance of loss and grief for all to see and hear. The invitation to film came from more than one person who steered me into the centre in the circle of stones. More than one family member was involved from Antonio Mendoca's family in bringing me into record their testimony and commemoration. It was apparent from body language others were taking their lead. The follow up invitation to film the vigil that night showed a pattern of interest in documentation being undertaken.

#### *The Gift of Trust*

Allowing the subjects or community members to choose topics, people and

circumstance and acknowledging their role in what gets seen and heard is a gift of trust that has to be honoured.

### *Community Permission*

It is usual for documentary-makers to seek permission from the subjects of their films. In this case I asked Filomena dos Reis. Filomena wrote the play in the film. I had a signed permission from the priest who told the story, and Adriano who was my formal connection in Suai.

### *Ethics and Community Connections,*

Be aware of who is helping you. I look back at how lucky I was – I was so well cared for by so many people. I was introduced to Adriano by the Port Phillip Council staff. Adriano had been chosen by the Timorese leadership to fulfill this role as our guide in Suai. Adriano was fluent in English so I didn't worry about whether I was mis-understanding what was being asked of me. It was he who invited me to the memorial and he who reassured me repeatedly the family of Antonio wanted me to film.

The first time I arrived in Suai in a Timor Aid car, with Veronica Pereira, a respected elder from the area who was living in Darwin. I stayed at Timor Aid with her the first time. A member of the solidarity network had recommended her to me in Melbourne. A member of the Darwin Solidarity Network introduced Veronica to me. I knew she had been involved in previous community cultural development projects in Melbourne and Sydney. She was well known in the local community as she was from a leading family.

On my second trip I arrived in Suai with Lee Kirk from the Asia Pacific Support collective in Diil. Lee had been working in Suai since the voter education campaign in July August 1999. I was documenting stories with both of these people and both of them were known and trusted in the community in Suai and I think I benefited from that trust.

### *Timing*

I had been in Suai already for two months and video-taping in public places and interviewing members of the community where I could be seen. I had visited people at home, I had visited NGOs, the UN, and the Church. It's possible the length of time I had been in the community may have impacted on the trust put in me.

## **Additional pointers about working in a post-conflict situation overseas.**

### *Security - Networks of friends*

I was living with people, talking and filming. Suai is very small – people knew who I was mixing with, where I was staying. Accommodation was very difficult to find. On one occasion I had to leave Adriano's quickly because the CEO and Mayor of Port Phillip had decided at the last minute to bring another guest along.

I had been following Lee Kirk's projects to assist the women of Suai and she introduced me to the family (Lucinda and Fernando) with whom she was staying who welcomed me in, and subsequently we became real friends.

At the time militia were still turning up in Suai. Interfet had a warning system using colour codes. The warnings were communicated to the UN and NGOs. Lee helped me realize the importance of these networks for our safety.

So the lesson from that one is – network, make friends in the community both internationals and locals. You never know who you might need to turn to for help. Locals commented to me that we were 'different' and how it was appreciated we did not separate ourselves from the Timorese community by living in separate housing and I felt proud of that.

### *Language and Access*

Since then I've lived in a variety of different settings depending on circumstances, and of course language fluency, where one lives, and gets about, makes a tremendous difference how much interaction one has with the community. Lee was already fluent in the local language Tetun Terik – which increased her access to the Timorese community exponentially. I was learning it and trying to speak it. This was not the usual practice of internationals who relied on the Timorese to learn English.

### *Foreignness and Cultural politeness.*

Always very important - I asked people about Timorese culture and expectations before I left and along the way, practicing what I was told as well as I could.

### *The Intrepidity*

I was frequently out of my comfort zone, physically and socially. This was an intrepid journey and last year it was still quite difficult. Skin, food, mosquitoes, toilets, bathing, sleeping, heat, lack of transport, lack of refrigeration – everything

is difficult. You have to be as independent as possible, which means being as prepared as humanly possible. The last thing anybody needs in these circumstances is an international visitor who brings problems with them.

## **Summary**

Approaching the friendship project as a documentary-maker but with a broader focus: with a view of the friendship that includes cultural development, has helped created a platform for cultural awareness in the friendship. Apart from being a platform for stories and news, the website is an attempt at bringing values and meaning into the picture by making cultural production, from Suai and Port Phillip, with its attendant meanings and values into the picture.

Broadband arrived very recently, in October 2009. So, while much has been achieved and the opportunities are in place, the computing skills and understanding of the potential to deliver a truly 'community to community relationship' rather than a 'committee to committee relationship' with financial backing, have still to be realized to their full potential.

Most of the content authored by Timorese in Suai has been developed in workshop settings and put on-line by me. The Social Network has enabled an increase in content uploads from Suai, because it is simpler to use than the WordPress blog software I started with. At that point free social networks didn't exist. Its simplicity has enabled people to work it out for themselves.

Significant content from the Suai community authored by them and put on-line by them remains an unattained goal. There are many more steps in the process to achieve this. The same applies to content uploaded from the Port Phillip community. To date most of the content has been recorded and uploaded by me. It continues to be difficult to get the Friends of Suai steering group to use the site for a range of reasons.

To reach the goal of a community to community friendship requires the political will of the stakeholders and confidence in the power of cultural exchange to bring a deeper, and a more broadly sustainable long-term friendship.

## **Funding**

The Suai Media Arts Project has been financially assisted by Friends of Suai, Port Phillip Council, sponsorship, friends and family donations, mates rates and pro bono work.

Funding has been very difficult to find because the broader project didn't fall into

any of the existing categories. There is a need for local funding for regional projects and there is work to be done in educating people working in International Development about the importance of the Fourth Pillar.

### **May 2010 Exhibition – St Kilda Town Hall Gallery**

The Friends of Suai work is drawing out people connected with East Timor from the Port Phillip community. One of these is Liz Milsom. Liz's father George Milsom painted watercolour landscapes in East Timor when he was there during and just after World War 2.

George's paintings will be exhibited alongside photographs taken by Suai youth during a photography workshop this year and an installation work by myself titled *The Unfinished Cathedral: an imagined conversation between two communities*.

I hope to complete a documentary by the end of 2010.

Thank you very much for your time.