Collectivism in Asia

Cultural networks and artist collectives symbiotically meet and inform each other. Networks in Asia, in particular, are a composite of artist collectives, local/national institutional/inter-governmental agencies and foreign agency-led initiatives. Networks such as the Mekong Cultural Hub (Taïpeï); Asia-Pacific Network for Culture, Education and Research (Singapore); KUNCI Study, Forum and Collective (Yogyakarta); Tokyo Performing Arts Meeting (Tokyo), to name a few, develop an inclusive approach between artists and their immediate communities. Moreover, artist collectives such as Tarang Pudi (Indonesia), UKORTO (Okha), Vertical Submarine (Singapore) and Jadunj (Thailand), among others, function as cultural intermediaries. They engage with communities and governments to consider cultural imperatives in economic and social development and foster artist mobility across other networks and collectives.

In situ, the ISGS was programmed around three pillars in Yogyakarta, Indonesia – a core research center, the ISGS, and RTONTO Artists Community in Bangladesh; and Urich Lau, a Singapore-based media artist and member of The Artists (Ex situ).

Seventeen participants from around the world were shortlisted through an open call. They represent a broad range of artistic (film, theatre, music, writing, media) and academic disciplines, cultures and nationalities, and scholarly and creative interests. Importantly, participants’ interests traversed national boundaries, and many were located outside of their homes while others intervened interdisciplinarily interests within their own countries. This became an essential feature of the ISGS, as the participants brought concerns around migration, diaspora, trafficking, artistic expressions, networks, geographies, and more to the topic.

Lau, provided insights about how cultural networks and artist collectives continue to negotiate cultural and historical preservation in tandem with contemporary aspirations. Rapid digitalisation, in particular, has enabled highly localised engagement, which is global in perspective yet rooted in real daily concerns such as sustainability of livelihood, complex inter-agency negotiations, and providing a voice to disenfranchised peoples and ideas. Furthermore, the emergence of a young demographic (averaging ages between 25-35 years in many parts of Asia) into the arts and cultural space has resulted in an inclusionary, and increasingly inseparable, agenda, spanning across art, aesthetic, environmental concerns, and social and political issues. This points to a larger question of whether emerging networks contribute to cultural labour’s precariousness or reflect an aspiration to unmoor from neoliberalist and often authoritarian social contexts. The ISGS participants worked in groups to think through some of these concerns through their own artistic and research practices. This informs the third pillar of this ISGS – participatory engagement. Participants were organised into three groups mentored by one convenor to study a specific question: one that emerged from the first two pillars. Each group was organised to include multiple disciplines and nationalities, encompassing a multi-disciplinary approach to constructing their responses. Participants were requested to be self-directed and develop a range of outcomes and self-selected questions. In a manner, the groups loosely mirrored an imaginary first meeting to the convenors – developing their purpose, formulating core questions, identifying shared values, outlining principles of engagement, and creating points of view.

Ex situ, the ISGS found itself in a different place: space (read context), and time (read form). The group final presentations in December 2021 discussed the collectivisation asssaying into the way the artists and the artists’ organisations’ work to be. The participants presented a new way of envisioning collectivisation through a rich variety of storytelling, podcast conversations, interviews, moving images, and performances. A selection of the presentations available at asiapacificnetworks.org/mastertclasses/cultural-precarities.

Collectivist paradigms for socio-cultural engagement. Artistic and cultural ideas, collectivism embodies care. The well-being of individuals and their ideas and beliefs matters. The ISGS successfully concluded in December. Its pivot during the pandemic, while complex, led to a range of new opportunities for convenors and participants to redefine artist collectives and networks in Asia. Important, the ISGS infused a new way of thinking about collectivism in a post-pandemic world alongside myriad urgent concerns emerging in Asia: rapid urbanisation and digitalisation, shifting geopolitical and economic dynamics, climate change, personal challenges invade the research space. The December session flourished opportunities and new beginnings for understanding the precarious nature of networks and collectives.

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