

Cultural Precarities: Reading Independent Art Collectives and Cultural Networks in Asia

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Above: film still from *The Smoke Rides on the Wind*, a film made for the ISGS by Erin Wilkerson. Looking from the west coast of Singapore, to the refineries on Jurong Pulau.

‘Cultural Precarities 2021’ was an In Situ Graduate School (ISGS) exploring art collectives and cultural networks in Asia. Originally conceived as a weeklong on-site study in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in 2020, it had to pivot to an online programme spread over ten months. This piece reflects on the issues and the pivot in these pandemic times.

Cultural Precarities: Reading Independent Art Collectives and Cultural Networks in Asia was an In Situ Graduate School (ISGS) held online in 2021. Organised by the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS, Leiden), LASALLE College of the Arts (Singapore), and KUNCI: Forum & Collective (Yogyakarta), this ISGS aimed to study the increasingly vibrant cultural networks and artist collectives in Asia, which are becoming vital nodal points for cultural, social, creative, and political intersections in contemporary societies.

This particular ISGS invited artists, scholars, researchers, and PhD candidates interested in collective practices and emerging trends in Asia to deliberate on the various intersections of artistic practice and networks and foster dialogue on the emergence of independent cultural networks in Asia. It convened a team from Asia to consider emerging practices of collectives. The convenors were Dr Venka Purushothaman, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore (art writer and educator); Dr Dev Nath Pathak, South Asian University, India (cultural sociologist); Chen Yun, West Harvests, China (curator and researcher); and KUNCI, a Yogyakarta-based collective and its member Syafiatudina (writer and curator).

The convenors, in turn, curated a team of international speakers comprising artists, researchers, and collective members representing a poly-dimension of disciplines and sectorial practices to inject new approaches to study and unpack core questions around art collectives and networks. They include Chun-Fung Lee, a Hong Kong-based artist and co-founder of Woofers Ten; Jagath Weerasinghe, Sri Lanka-based artist-archaeologist and member of Theertha Artists Collective; Sadya Mizan, an independent curator/researcher and founder of URONTO Artists Community in Bangladesh; and Urich Lau, a Singapore-based media artist and member of The Artist Village (Singapore).

Seventeen participants from around the world were shortlisted through an open call. They represented 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 interweaved interdisciplinary interests within their own countries. This became an essential feature of this ISGS, as the participants brought concerns around migration, diaspora, trafficking, artistic expressions, networked geographies, and more to the topic.

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 (Taipei); 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 Taring Padi (Indonesia), URONTO (Dhaka), Vertical Submarine (Singapore) and Jiandyin (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.

Growth in collectives and networks in Asia has been rapid. Imbuing an improvisational antic in addressing localised concerns, they have become critical spaces for mobilising contemporary and emerging ideas. In this regard, a set of questions informed the ISGS. These questions, outlined in the IIAS call for participation, invited a critical appreciation of the ‘flow’ between and within collectives and networks, their short-lived, ‘precarious’ character, and above all, their situatedness within communities and what this meant to their immediate lived experiences.

In Situ

The ISGS was programmed around three pillars in Yogyakarta, Indonesia – a centre of Indonesian arts and culture.

The first pillar was an incisive study of KUNCI: Forum and Collective, based in Yogyakarta. Founded in 1999, KUNCI seeks to transverse boundaries in institutionalised systems and practices and re-articulate them through forums, studies, publications and projects. More than an organisation, it is built around organic social practices such as friendship and fellowship, allowing it to eschew hierarchical decision making to celebrate ground-up agenda-setting exercises. At KUNCI, one would find precarity in its lived form as a method of organisation: it empowers members to opt in and out of its system and propose issues to be deliberated, piloted and simply stood down. The ISGS programme called for participants to experience collectivism, improvised around informal social, conversational and walking practices.

The second pillar, a roundtable, enquired if independent art collectives offer an alternative framework for social, economic, and political engagement and could be considered substitutes or parallel systems to formalised institutional systems such as museums, universities, or corporate-funded programmes, or as complementary partners. The roundtable, comprising Chun-Fung Lee, Jagath Weerasinghe, Sadya Mizan, and Urich

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, aesthetics, environmental concerns, and social and political issues. This points to a larger question of whether emerging networks contribute to cultural labour’s precarity or reflect an aspiration to unmoor from neoliberal 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 set of questions that emerged from the first two pillars. Each group was organised to include multiple disciplines and nationalities, encouraging a multi-disciplinary approach to constructing their responses. Participants were requested to be self-directed and develop a range of outcomes to their self-selected questions. In a manner, the groups loosely mirrored an imaginary first meeting to form a collective – developing their purpose, formulating core questions, identifying engagement, and creating points of view.

Ex Situ

The ISGS, which was to be held in Yogyakarta in March 2020, was postponed to March 2021 due to the emergence of COVID-19 and its impact on travel. By late 2020, it became clear that COVID-19 was unrelenting, and the ISGS had to pivot to online delivery in 2021 as the hope of meeting in an embodied learning environment as a collective of independent artists, researchers, scholars, and cultural workers was fast evaporating. Several discussions between the organisers and convenors led to formulating the in situ experience into ex situ.

The primary intent of the three pillars remained and was transmitted through an online platform (ZOOM) over four half-day sessions (two in March, one in September, and a closing meeting in December) spread over ten months. Participants held their self-organised project meetings in between these sessions with gentle prompts from mentors to come together and deliberate: The home became the in situ site of curating ideas across borders.

If collectivism is defined by a loose gathering ideated by core interests, the participants’ groups became a collective

expression borne out of a crisis (pandemic). All of the sessions were spontaneously prefaced with a communal sharing of existential ‘presence’ – in the absence of in situ – such as emerging social rituals (masking, vaccination, lockdowns), changes in time and travel patterns (quarantines and availability of flights), and duty of care (self/well-being, empathy and care for others, and dealing with loss and separation).

Group sharing revealed several matters. First, the ability to manage oneself. One’s immediate families and communities and research as distinct socio-cultural ambits blurred and began to inform each other as the emotional weight of the global pandemic weighed in. Participants and convenors alike began to deeply reflect (something which may not have been possible in a one-week in situ session) on metaphysical questions related to collectivism and its effectiveness as the Anthropocene loomed larger than anticipated in many Asian countries. The global concern was no longer a domestic concern but a personal concern. The March sessions were about framing and contextualising the enquiry. The September session was a place of metaphors as online fatigue and personal challenges invaded the research space. The December session flourished opportunities and new beginnings for understanding the precarious nature of networks and collectives.

New Beginnings

Ex situ, the ISGS found itself in a different place from where it started. The three groups’ final presentations in December 2021 discussed the collectivism essaying into the personal, the existential, and the world to be. The participants presented a new way of envisioning collectivism through a rich palimpsest of storytelling, podcast conversations, interviews, moving images, and performances. A selection of the presented work is available at www.iias.asia/masterclasses/cultural-precarieties.

Three outcomes were visible. First, collectivism embodies care. The well-being of individuals and their ideas and beliefs matter, and this is integral to understanding why collectives emerge. They care for people. Secondly, collectivism embodies togetherness. The pandemic disembodied the human ability to be social creatures, to be together. In some ways, the disembodiment may have led to the increased lack of tolerance and indifference towards people and their right of expression, as seen through the heightened nationalisms around the world. Thirdly, the ex situ provided numerous new opportunities to participants to improvise outreach amongst and beyond themselves within a short span of time. Participants have planned to continue relating to each other and build new initiatives and projects.

The ISGS successfully concluded in December. Its pivot during the pandemic, while complex and challenging, has led to new opportunities for convenors and participants to redefine artist collectives and networks in Asia. Importantly, 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 geo-political and domestic priorities, climate shifts and changing demographics. Amidst this, the aspirations of artists, cultural workers, and researchers continue to hold vigil to new paradigms for socio-cultural engagement.¹

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Notes

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