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Woranooch Chuenrudeemol, Siddharta Perez, Hendri Yulius Wijaya,
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Numbenchapol, Pinaree Sanpitak, Phaptawan Suwannakudt, Moses Tan,
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Roundtable on Collective Work

BRIAN CURTIN, JUTHAMAS TANGSANTIKUL, et al.

Abstract

For this roundtable, contributors were invited to reflect on their experience of collective work. This is not collective work in the sense of expanded art practices, but in terms of relationships between a variety of actors: artists, curators, gallerists, technical staff, critics/media, etc. An aim is to highlight the networked position of these actors and begin to push against often singularly valorized positions ('curator', 'artist'). This may also reveal gendered and classed aspects of labour while offering a means to think through how 'contemporary art' can gain cultural value by seemingly hiding certain relationships and such aspects. In this respect, contributors may reflect on the comparability of 'contemporary art' to other practices that are more readily understood as intrinsically collective (e.g. design). Posed as a question, the issue is "How would you describe the role and value of the variety of your collaborators when executing a project?"

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Introduction

Brian Curtin and Juthamas Tangsantikul

In an email exchange with one of the respondents for this roundtable, it was remarked that our current moment is appropriate for reflecting on questions of collectivity in view of the fact that, for the first time, the shortlist for the Turner Prize 2021 is all artist collectives. This validation by an eminent institution of artistic methods that have been evolving since Nicholas Bourriaud's famous formulation of 'relational aesthetics' in the 1990s suggests the arrival of a once radical or exceptional practice in the mainstream and an official acknowledgment of how the traditional work of artists is undergoing serious change. The press release from the Tate describes the shortlist as: "All the nominees work closely and continuously with communities across the breadth of the UK to inspire social change through art."¹

Our respondent isn't alone. The critic J.J. Charlesworth argued that the shortlist consolidates a particular view of the artist collective. That is, it is not representative of collective artistic work generally and, further, alleged radicalism is hardly supported by the endorsement of a mega-institution like the Tate.² One of the shortlisted, Black Obsidian Sound System, clearly articulated these concerns in a public statement that (albeit ironically) critiqued their inclusion. They wrote, "Arts institutions, while enamoured by collective and social practices, are not properly equipped or resourced to deal with the realities that shape our lives and work," and scolded "[...] the industry's in-built reverence for individual inspiration over the diffusion, complexity and opacity of collaboration".³

Collaboration, as Carlos Quijón Jr. perceptively remarks in his contribution below, is not an aspiration but shapes what is possible. The aim of this roundtable is to excavate the multiple relationships, and experience of them, that shape the projects of artists and cultural workers in Southeast Asia. Here we

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can quickly note, and via the above, that discourses and practices of collaboration are major aspects of questions of contemporary art in places outside traditional economic and cultural centres, such as our region. As Liam Gillick and Maria Lind have highlighted, this stems from a lack of substantial infrastructures, manifold political pressures (including censorship) and the urgency of challenging ethnocentric understandings of art from the so-called periphery.⁴ Given the increased international attention afforded to art from the region, and increased local organization (biennales, art fairs, galleries etc.), we can inquire into the legacy of this fact for the current moment here: what has changed, what stays the same? Or, how can collaboration be productively analysed now?

Collective Work pushes beyond the most visible, and typically credited, relationships, while moving outwards from accounts of specific projects. This concern builds on interests raised at the symposium “Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories and Visual Cultures: Art, Design and Canon-making?” at Chulalongkorn University (CU) in Bangkok in April 2019. Organized in collaboration with the forthcoming MFA Communication Design (CommMA) for CU and the Power Institute at the University of Sydney, it was one of a number of ongoing projects that explore gender and related themes for thinking art history anew, supported by the latter and different collaborators.

Many of the insights at the symposium led us to a broad consideration of collaboration and collectivity, resulting from the core critique of how canons are hierarchical and exclusionary and often reflect structural discrimination at large. Patrick Flores’s presentation, for example, asked if personal practice and collective work is a binary. And May Adadol Ingawanij questioned the authenticity of routine positions (‘curator’, ‘artist’ et al.). With the implications of this in view, the question for the roundtable—“How would you describe the role and value of the variety of your collaborators when executing a project?”—points to a need to unpack the necessity of that variety.

None of the respondents offers an understanding of how egalitarianism could consistently exist in or for our professional lives but, rather, map how different working contexts affect the types and qualities of their relationships. These contexts range from state institutions (Gary Carsley), independent spaces (Unchalee Anantawat, Zoe Butt, Green Papaya Art Projects), independent work per se (Qinyi Lim, Carlos Quijon Jr., Henry Tan), corporate sponsorship (Suzann Victor, Anuthin Wongsunkakon), educational projects (Nanthana Boonla-or and Woranooch Chuenrudeemol, Siddharta Perez) and publishing (Hendri Yulius Wijaya). A number of artists and other practitioners give detailed accounts of their experiences of production and public display (Piyaluk Benjadol and Kanoknuch Sillapawisawakul, Nontawat Numbenchapol, Pinaree Sanpitak, Phaptawan Suwannakudt, Moses Tan).

The dialogue created between the respondents provides critical insights into specific contexts. Unchalee, for example, comments on how independent spaces can solicit public appreciation of the manual labour involved in the very creation of these often unusual sites, unlikely for major galleries. The precariousness of roles, for a variety of reasons, and the changing nature of professional relationships is a consistent theme. Suzann writes of the legal controversy that followed her art space's staging of an infamous performance in the early 1990s in Singapore and the range of practical and moral support that came from her colleagues in the face of this crisis. Nanthana and Woranooch discuss how entrenched cultural hierarchies among collaborators have been negotiated, and Siddharta notes that agonism, stalemates and fatigue can produce an identity crisis whereby facilitators becomes learners. Many of the positive aspects of collaboration in this respect are elaborated by the respondents, but darker aspects are also explored. Henry, Moses, Green Papaya and Hendri discuss the experience and potential of exploitation when, in the words of Moses, "roles [...] are associated with a certain level of privilege."

Collective Work can, at the very least, function as a resource that allows us to identify certain tropes in considerations of collaboration for our current time—and the politics of those tropes. These include recognition, trust, humility and care; and more, of course, can be extrapolated. And, while, again, the respondents do not offer models for general use—as Zoe and Moses make clear, the management of collaboration is complex—the roundtable nevertheless does offer some theoretical understandings. Gary discusses the queer, conspiratorial quality of 'collusion' as a means of working against institutional and other professional norms, while subverting the relationships of exchange that late capitalism has fostered on us. And Roger Nelson and Araya Rasdjarm-rearnsook offer ways of understanding how our work, the contexts we move through, and indeed the self itself are always and already the consequence of collaboration.

BIOGRAPHIES

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NOTES

We would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge the passing of Assistant Professor Dr. Piyaluk Benjadol in September 2021. As the former Head of Visual Arts and Dean of the Faculty of Applied Art at Bangkok University, Piyaluk made exceptional contributions to the fields of education, academia and art and design in Thailand. Piyaluk was active as an artist since 1998 and “*Fragility*”, discussed below, was her first and, sadly, last solo exhibition.

- ¹ “Turner Prize 2021”, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/herbert-art-gallery-and-museum/exhibition/turner-prize-2021> [accessed 1 June 2021].
- ² J.J. Charlesworth, “The Turner Prize’s Radical Chic”, *Art Review* (14 May 2021), <https://artreview.com/the-turner-prize-radical-chic/> [accessed 3 June 2021].
- ³ “Turner Prize-nominated collective hits out at Tate: ‘We are being instrumentalised’”, <https://artreview.com/turner-prize-nominated-collective-hits-out-at-tate-we-are-being-instrumentalised/> [accessed 3 June 2021].
- ⁴ Liam Gillick and Maria Lind, “Participation”, in *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, 2013, ed. Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell), pp. 204–13, 208.

I see collaboration as a necessary condition of working in the art world. I think of this not in the sense of “working together” or doing things together, but more so in terms of what I think is the untenability of any form of self-sufficiency in thinking and doing. We usually frame collaboration as an aspiration for any creative project, but for me, particularly in the contexts of production that I find myself in, collaboration shapes what is materially possible or even imaginable.

I am drawn to imaginations of practice as always social or ecological even. Social in the sense that all the work I do exists in relation to others, in conversation with prolific agencies, desires, anxieties of other actors, and also set within networks of abilities and capacities; and ecological in the sense that these agencies are shaped by their own conceptualizations of their “roles”. To think about the sociality of practice involves the recognition that logics of doing and thinking are always situated in relationalities. In this sense, I find tropes of “autonomy” or “independence” quite counterproductive in thinking about my practice as an editor or curator, maybe more so because I have been a coordinator for the most part of my career to date. As a curator, I work with artists, designers, venues, vendors and institutions of all sorts of scale and sensibilities, and in this sense conversations and negotiations are vital. As an editor, I work with writers and designers. In both positions, thinking alongside people is not an option but a requisite. Since I am thinking about my practice with the idea of the untenability of self-sufficiency, I feel that questions of collaboration would always lead to considerations of generativity and generosity. Here my authorial agency exists in conversation with other considerations (always simultaneously involving pragmatic or institutional concerns as well as critical, interventive, and poetic aspirations)

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and is always motivated by the desire for plural specializations and experiences to inform one another.

In this sense, collaborations for me are ways in which points of view are refracted and vantage points are allowed to be shifted and transformed by other considerations and contexts. My most recent collaboration with Singaporean art historian and curator Kathleen Ditzig is very instructive of the possibilities that collaboration brings in thinking and doing. Working on the exhibition titled *In Our Best Interests*, we had different imaginations of how Southeast Asian regionalism took shape in the 1960s. At the scale and breadth of what we are thinking about and how we are creating artworks, discourses, knowledges, the recognition that we are limited by our historical and material contexts is paramount. The collaboration allowed us both to revisit what we know about this milieu and also challenged us to think about it in more sensitive ways.

I find a different but nonetheless congruent consideration at work when working with institutions where this affordance takes on the logic of navigation—whether through difficulties of the bureaucratic or political kind. I find the trope of navigation fruitful in this case since it entertains dynamic thought processes relating to contingencies, accommodations, opportunities and, all the more so, limits and boundaries. I owe this thinking to Gabriel Rockhill’s articulation of the “social politicity of practice”, in which instead of thinking about practice as having inherent political claims, practice is seen as “examin[ing] and participat[ing] in the complex social negotiations within and between various aesthetic activities and assorted political agendas. It breaks with the fundamental assumption that works of art have an inherent politiccity and that we can determine, once and for all, the political value of an artistic project as an isolated event.” I feel that the condition of the global contemporary demands this kind of sensitivity, particularly with how the scales and vectors of rethinking what we know about the world and about one another is simultaneously enabled and constrained by institutional frameworks, and almost always traffics in institutional currents and currencies. In summary, I think collaboration is a necessary exposure of one’s practice and agency to the prolific dispositions and motivations of the contemporary art world.

ALLUDING TO COLLUDING (Labouring the Point)

Gary Carsley

As vocations, art and architecture increasingly depend on a transactional nomenclature borrowed from neoliberal economics to articulate and give purpose to their common generative act. I am wary—not only of the implications of this tendency, but of the consequences—when corporatised taxonomies of production are applied as primary criteria in validating creative processes. We need to more vigorously question this shift and the implications for us as a community, as over time, these constructs have become more consistently applied as the indexes by which merit and significance in art and architecture are determined.

Collaboration, like many of the constructs we use to delineate categories of authorship, is characterised by associations that can problematise the topography within which artistic practices are realised. Similarly, expressions like *collective* and *networked* are sanitised by the legacies of their established narratives and the way they effortlessly replicate the priorities of capital. They begin and end in financial models that produce and sustain hermetic hierarchies that, by maintaining the status quo, preclude greater inclusion and we need to rectify this.

From a queer perspective, I propose “collusion” as strategy for cooperation that more readily supports progressive practices, particularly those that seek to transcend the generalisations into which capital routinely sorts us (all). I will reflect on this momentarily with regard to a work undertaken by me for a major museum in Southeast Asia after further detailing my reluctance to embrace a lexicon for art-making that borrows too heavily from the dialogues of neo-liberal mercantilism.

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Collusion provides a non-sanctioned, underexplored framework for agreements to be reached between multiple participants enabling them to achieve their objectives by acting in unison or concert with each other. As a mode of cooperation, it attracts suspicion and unsettles many, for its long association with the conspiratorial and attempts to overthrow entrenched authority. To invoke collusion as a paradigm for shared authorship then is to concurrently

evoke the negative agency of the clandestine, the secret and the covert. In my opinion, all excellent reasons to embrace rather than recoil from this proposition.

Collusion is more web than network, relying upon invisibility for its effectiveness. As a queer person whose foundational identity was by necessity surreptitious, I know first-hand the benefits of stealth and the fulfilment it made possible. For me, the additional opprobrium of illegality linked to collusion is

diluted by the obvious injustices of the current law-based order. This often serves to legitimise Colonial-era seizures of Indigenous lands while guarantying the accelerating intergenerational transmission of inequality and continuing degradation of the environment.

Anecdotally, some of my most exquisite and elevating experiences were the result of being complicit with others, albeit one at a time. So, if I am to choose one of life's abiding lessons and apply it to art, it would be the value of collusion and the intimate interdependence it requires. There is no substantive distinction between how arbitrarily power works to perpetuate privilege equally in the worlds of art and life, and I think we need to be nervous of propagating archetypes that operate simultaneously across their intertwined discourses.

The Regency Made Me Blind was commissioned for *OUTBOUND*, a series of site-specific installations overseen by senior curator Adele Tan for the National Gallery Singapore. Developed and installed between 2017 and 2018, it is composed of more than 6,000 overlapping individual A4 photocopies on variously tinted 80gsm papers. These were all printed on the Gallery's office copier by staff designer T. Shahrum T. Onn, who processed the files in small batches over several weeks. Shahrum's oblique contribution, made by interrupting his scheduled tasks as a member of staff working across multiple concurrent projects expressed his being in cahoots with the aims of the project. His mode of cooperation was unorthodox and destabilising of the

pyramidal structures within which institutional priorities usually operates. It would diminish the singularity of his contribution to have it constrained by the conventionalities of collaboration. Improvisation instead lubricated the time-tabling and production of this vast work, which in part transformed the offices occupied by curatorial and production staff into an urgent site. Collective working yes, but much more. The relationship between us was too chaotic, intuitive and overwhelmingly shaped by the contingencies of cultural production, not administration.

Collusion is essentially an agreement to share vulnerabilities and insecurities whereas collaboration is more often framed as a commitment to share resources and benefits. Collusion speaks more to the real-world condition of artists and acknowledges our precarity and the often-fraught relationship we have with institutional players. In this context, Jeremy Chu who is internationally active as an artist working with volunteerism—often for temples where he has developed a poetic capacity at gold leafing—was able to bring this life experience to the meticulous installation of thousands of A4 sheets on the staircase between levels 4 and 5 of the National Gallery. Jeremy was in reality, my *co-conspirator*; *collaborator* in no way evokes the risks he took or describes the extent of his emotional and spiritual exposure to *The Regency Made Me Blind*'s formal and conceptual implications. Emotionality and spirituality are not easily networked; they are intimate, often cloaked in the way that they amplify cultural worth. It was Jeremy's background as a temple artist that enabled our analogy of labour as meditative, trans-substantive and sacred to be authentically applied to a secular image. By colluding, we could make the unfeigned claim that the stairwell had been anointed instead of being (merely) aestheticized, positioning its primary discourse as a critique of the collapse of the value of labour relative to capital.

Similarly, opening access to *The Regency Made Me Blind*'s digital files to the participation of others, empowers them to generate their own artworks. Jeremy's use of these to realise a series of Tibetan Buddhist mantras within the existing image is an example of this and was more about sharing than collectivisation. Though somewhat of an oversimplification, the collective is habitually located in the violent discourses of the left, to an equivalent degree that collaboration historically coinhabits with some of the worst aspects of the right. Both, however, collude to achieve their objectives. I am inferring that sharing is a neutral, unregulated way of facilitating access to visibility and its resources. The politics of sharing operate outside the commerce-based pedigrees of collective and collaborative authorship and the processes of recolonisation for which they are sometimes surrogates.

The architect Renjie Teoh's choice of sublimation in opposition to imposition to craft his unobtrusive pavilion within *The Regency Made Me Blind* (2017) evidences this assertion. Passivity erodes rather than assaults heroicised categories such as artist; like rust, it slowly, irreversibly corrodes the rigidities of power. Frontality, directness and transparency as typically embodied by collaboration have a predictability that delimits the efficacy of progressive aspirations. Their lineage is within approved modes of authorship and their purposefulness too closely aligned with the priorities of the prevailing economic order. It is the indirectness of collusion and the unique way it builds close-knit communities that renders it more appealing to persons interested in contesting authority than anaesthetising it.

The sensation of being 'in league' with Adele, Shahrum, Huang Shuyun, Teo Yensy and others at the National Gallery, whose preparedness to operate outside the parameters that customarily define the professional roles of curator or manager, allowed us to enact labour as a cognitive, democratic critique of capital in queer contrast to the conventional representation of resistance to it through images of struggle. This distinction is important. How practice is orientated is as consequent as its outcomes, though institutions and collectors are paradoxically blind to this in art but not their other investments. I have chosen to engage with labour as an object and not as just a subject in my practice, and have found colluding with others a process that best supports this aspiration.

The widespread reluctance within art galleries and museums to move beyond their principal function as cryogenic chambers for the preservation of materially valuable artefacts restricts their audiences to the economically and culturally elevated. To a degree, this is the legacy of their institutional origins in the Global North and the intimacy of their dialogue with capital. In truth, our region's attempts to separate the material whiteness of their walls from

the cultural whiteness transmitted by them by the models they have adopted are more likely to be successful through acknowledging and incorporating the distinctive historical experiences of the Global South and a closer scrutiny of a lexicon for articulating practice that is interchangeable with that of neoliberal capitalism.

Independent Spaces as Community

Unchalee Anantawat

‘Tight-Knit’ is the term that comes to my mind when thinking about the roles and values of those who work in the art industry. The picture I have of the industry from my experience is that of an expanding horizon rather than a stratifying verticality.

I decided to learn about the art scene by opening an independent space of my own with no formal knowledge or a relevant degree in visual art. My only motivation was to have someplace where I would feel comfortable to see art and discuss it without needing to worry about whether the discussion generated is intellectual or not. And because of this clumsy and innocent reason, it was quite clear from the get-go that I would need a lot of help and advice from other artist friends. I started to learn about the whole process of setting up an exhibition by just doing it. At that time in 2012, there were only a few independent spaces in Bangkok and none around the Charoenkrung district, which soon after became a hip area for art and culture. Here, Thomas Menard and I founded Speedy Grandma Art Gallery. Neither of us had any experience in running such a space. We were doing all the jobs from painting the wall, cleaning the bathroom, reaching out to artists, to installing and selling artworks to collectors.

I found out, of course, that there are many similar roles in the running of an independent space and a traditional institution. Often for independent art spaces, a few people take on all these responsibilities, as opposed to institutions where people work in specialized departments. I realized in retrospect that most of my collaborators who filled these roles were already my friends. For example, Helena Pitko, who offered to help out when I was running the space alone, was a colleague at the university where I teach. She helped paint the walls, sell beer at the bar and clean up the after-party mess. There were

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almost no strangers working with me. To some extent, this was no doubt a budgetary reason. And only in retrospect did I realize that the works were not sufficiently valued; in the moment they felt like things that needed to be done given the limited resources at hand.

My initial understanding was that artists and curators were the stars of exhibitions. However, I found from organizing exhibitions at my independent space that this was not the case. Most notably, the kind of relationship that emerges from and sustains this supposedly professional space, which is part and parcel of Bangkok's small art community, tends toward the personal—to the point where work conflicts end up blurring the line between work and personal life. Independent spaces, generally running on very low budgets or close to none at all, necessitate a hands-on distribution of work that connects each role at least at the level of inclusion in the consensus of what, when, and how the exhibition in which they are involved should be. In my case, while setting up an exhibition, I felt like I relied on people who helped me more than I could pay them. And since I did not have enough to hire someone to plan an installation, I usually planned with them and listened to their valuable suggestions, even though it was not part of their jobs. I felt that, with the absence of 'paid' positions, no voice was confined to their area of expertise, and that perhaps, if I were an established curator, I would only relay my vision down a chain of command, so to speak, that would keep me from the people actually doing the work and their opinions.

In contrast, there seems to be a more pronounced vertical disconnect in larger art institutions between artists, the curator, the guy who put up the lighting, the gal who set up the cameras, people who scrubbed the exhibition floor and cleaned the visitors' bathrooms, and so on. This is not to say that the size of the budget is everything, but it constitutes an obvious contradiction in the relationship between workers in such moneyed spaces: with bigger budgets comes the valorization and stratification of different types of labour. With stratification comes the 'spotlight' that may or may not exist, or is not understood in the same sense, for independent exhibitions. For example, visitors to an independent exhibition may appreciate the time and effort required to evenly paint a simple gray wall while the same wall may elicit no appreciation in an institutional venue.

Similarly, the spotlight exists in other scenes and industries. When you talk about a film, most people remember the lead actors and the director. And unless you are an art director, you probably wouldn't remember who designed the film's settings. The same goes for the design industry and even academia. In the latter, we might recognize the names of the authors of a paper but have no particular interest in finding out who the people in the acknowledgement

section are. Even as I write this reflection, the process seems to take the spotlight away from me. Like working on an independent exhibition, I asked a few friends and colleagues their thoughts on the topic of this submission. One said that my perspective is focused only on the production aspect of the art scene and doesn't extend to art criticism. Art critics seem to me to exist only as a footnote to artists and curators. Another added that it is the case because I am looking at the art criticism scene from the outside. It goes without saying that people working in the same industry recognize each other's efforts while outsiders or consumers don't. Does this mean that everyone has to always assume and identify with their position on the outside of an industry when commenting on how it assigns value? Then what? Maybe the reason behind the spotlight is, as some would say, that it is in human nature to have limited interest, to have time to focus only on what really attracts us. But, moving forward along this line of inquiry, I think we are capable of posing more interesting questions than psychological or positional ones: From which subjectivity are we regarding the notion of recognition itself? What translates to recognition, and what does it translate to in turn? What is the qualitative difference between an insider's and an outsider's act of recognition? And so on.

I am currently the Artistic Director of The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre in Ho Chi Minh City. I am also an independent curator and writer. In both of these capacities, the role of my ‘collaborators’ is integral to the realization of my projects. There is no project without them. Not only do my collaborators provide inspiration for content, they also often offer an alternate means of production/display/interpretation—one that is conducive and responsive to the local landscape in which I work. Therefore, my collaborators are also often innovators.

As a curator, for example, in choosing to curate an exhibition by a lacquer artist interested in the conceptual and physical impact of light, working with lighting experts offers new possibilities for thinking that artwork’s display and design. Or in choosing to develop a long-term research art project interrogating the impact of our spiritual beliefs on the natural world, it is critical to collaborate with interdisciplinary expertise in the historical, political, economic and social cause and effect of that belief and its circumstances so that the artist and curator are appropriately informed. Or in the deep-research projects of artists who spend years collating data and objects in the interrogation of particular event or phenomena, such collaborators (for I think it crucial to understand that collaborators are not only conscious beings, but also the ‘testimonial’ materiality that is left in the wake of violence and human forgetfulness), it is important a curator considers how such data came to be, from whence it came, and how to communicate such memory belongs to a particular public.

As the leader of an arts organization, collaborators are also those who strategically and financially support and advocate for our work: as sponsors, grant bodies, collectors, influencers, advisors or in-kind supporters. In the context of Vietnam, this particular community is nascent and thus in need of

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nurturing. It is therefore critical that such collaborators are encouraged to feel that they are active participants in building broader communities that matter to differing audiences. How this is done can vary. In Vietnam, strategic collaborators can often become public advocates of artistic enquiry—valuing the stories told within an artistic practice as worthy of social attention and scrutiny; or they give added value to promoting the business sector as a productive partner of mutual interest. On both counts, such collaborators become crucial to increasing the chances of institutional sustainability for that organization.

The division of labour between all such actors should be given more visibility. I struggle with this. In the global institutionalization of art, there are gross assumptions of artistic and curatorial practice as a consequence of fixed ideas of display and interpretation (for example, the standard white box of the Art Fair; or the museum publications department that strictly limits the word count of an acknowledgements page; or the artist/curator who fails to give appropriate credit to the artisans/fabricators regardless of whether they contributed ‘authorship’ or not). I often think of the system of the film world in this regard. Their end credits are endless. Why? Because it is more commercialized and structured according to stakeholders? How can the art world be similarly transparent? I am not suggesting that the art world mimic the film industry, for the outputs in the visual arts are so much more varied, but I do wonder how acknowledgement of the various collaborators in the realization of artistic projects can be more ethically recorded, catalogued, displayed and interpreted.

Green Papaya Art Projects has taken many forms and permutations throughout the 21 years it has been operating. Crucial to these forms and permutations are the many collaborators, volunteers, interns and cultural workers whose lives have intersected with Papaya's and whose efforts have helped Papaya reach where it is today.

Founded by Norberto "Peewee" Roldan and Donna Miranda, Papaya's first exhibition opened on 4 May 2000. It soon branched out to accommodate a range of practices, especially in the realm of contemporary dance. During this time, dancers and choreographers were dependent on institutional spaces or corporate funding in order to produce performances, pushing dancers and choreographers to look into alternative spaces in order to experiment and develop their practice. Donna Miranda, as a practising choreographer and dancer, greatly influenced Papaya's early endeavours in contemporary dance.

From 2000 to 2007, Papaya was mostly sustained through Peewee's freelance graphic design work for the French Spring in Manila (FSiM) arts festival. When the FSiM account ended, Papaya was short on funds and was set to close in 2008. However, Papaya's community insisted that it stay open; Papaya was able to raise funds by selling artworks donated by friends, much to the dismay of the galleries representing the artists at the time.

Around this time, Papaya moved from Maginhawa Street near the University of the Philippines Diliman to Teodoro Gener Street in Kamuning, Quezon City. After several years, Papaya discontinued its regular exhibition programming at the space and opted instead to share the house with Catch272 (a bar run and frequented by members of the LGBTQIA+ community since 2015), which became a known safe space for activists and cultural workers. Peewee's home, a few blocks away, also served as an extension space, with many Papaya events, meetings and operations occurring there.

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Throughout this time, Papaya's structure was more amorphous. Papaya mostly consisted of a core team of around two to five people assisted by a wide, shuffling network of volunteers and collaborators per event or project. As many of these volunteers and collaborators are personal friends, the work relationships were not rigidly professional.

2020, however, urged us to reconsider these work dynamics. We initially created group chats to facilitate ongoing projects and subdivided further into "committees" (e.g. text and design, archiving matters) as a response to the strict community quarantine. After a fire on 3 June 2020 destroyed our Kamuning space, these group chats were also used to send photos of the archive and to look for emergency funding sources and projects.

One of these group chats, which continues to operate as our central channel, includes people who have since been identified as the "official members" of Papaya—people like Lesley-Anne Cao, Yuji de Torres, Jel Suarez, Touki Roldan, Dominic Zinampan, Kiko Nuñez and Iris Ferrer—who had all been helping Papaya in various capacities prior to the lockdown in March.

If we were to trace the origins of the idea of recalibrating Papaya into a more "collective" format, we speculate that this central channel was among the earliest steps that somehow imparted to us that Papaya was a larger group beyond the core team.

Although this specific chat thread was designated for work matters, it was also initially a platform for us to share various COVID-19-related articles, experience and tips with each other. It helped create deeper bonds between the members as each of us was struggling to adapt to the "new normal". In retrospect, the transparency and bond created through these group chats eventually laid the foundation for us to collectively deal with later crises—the 3 June fire and an organizational crisis that began sometime around September 2020.

Prior to the pandemic, there was no urgent need on the part of Papaya to specify who its actual "members" were. Peewee and Mervin Espina, who was Papaya's Programme Manager from 2013 to 2020, decided which projects and events Papaya would pursue. This working method allowed volunteers and collaborators to shift per project. However, with the community quarantine and the loss of space, Papaya looked to its regular volunteers to become "members" to continue its operations.

Later in the year, Papaya also created IDs which gave each member an official title. This was done in response to a Quezon City quarantine guideline requiring residents to present either a quarantine pass or a company ID when entering any establishment. This legitimized each member's tasks, a notable step away from Papaya's more amorphous set-up in the years prior.

Another key moment that indicated Papaya's gradual transformation into a more horizontal organization was when we were invited to contribute a text for the ninth issue of *NANG Magazine*. At this point, the aforementioned organizational crisis was already beginning to affect our internal dynamic. To help defuse the situation, Yuji, Jel and Dominic co-wrote the contribution. The three—who were younger and newer members of Papaya—narrated their personal experiences and thoughts on Papaya, archiving and the 3 June fire. Having the three of them collectively represent Papaya for this contribution partly enabled us to reconsider Papaya's organizational structure.

It was only after the organizational crisis that we began to explicitly consider reconfiguring Papaya's organizational structure. As the crisis was unfolding, the team began acting collectively to help Peewee resolve the issues Papaya was facing at the time. These issues concern the lack of transparency of one person and his misuse of Papaya's meager resources. This displayed to us how an informal working relationship that heavily relies on friendship is prone to exploitation and abuse. Considering how we had been operating primarily on trust, this severely shook Papaya's foundations. After thoroughly evaluating the circumstances and available documents, we collectively decided to finally disassociate ourselves from him.

Prior to employing volunteers for our live gigs starting sometime in 2017, Papaya has always employed professionals, like technical directors or executive producers, and paid them according to industry standards. In rectifying the errors of the former member, Papaya aspires to return to more equitable ways of working, making sure that all labour involved is recognized and properly compensated from available funds.

Another outcome of our recalibration into a "collective" is how, in some ways, the ownership of Papaya has also become more diffused as multiple viewpoints can now represent the organization. Following our contribution to *NANG Magazine*, Peewee has been eager to have the younger members' voices represent Papaya or have them take charge of different Papaya-initiated projects. We discuss who can best represent Papaya based on invitations to public platforms such as this.

However, we have also realized that such an egalitarian set-up can be impractical at times—most of the time, it is Peewee who is in the best position to represent Papaya. The entire team has voted to keep the "hierarchy" wherein Peewee acts as Papaya's "leader". This is worth mentioning as it complicates the idea that Papaya is a "collective" or a "horizontal" organization. It is also worth articulating how this leadership is hardly totalitarian; rather the set-up is somewhat more akin to democratic centralism: although we still focus on our specific tasks and de facto "committees", any member can join

discussions on matters that affect all Papaya members and can participate in the decision-making process.

As many of Papaya's members are currently focusing on other commitments and their individual practices, Papaya is looking to shift once again from a more "fixed" collective unit to a flexible project-based structure. We see little change with this reorientation—a more nuanced perspective on collective work will be retained and the practice of capitalizing on the image that "collaboration" projects for the organization (but fails to compensate volunteers fairly) continues to be strictly prohibited.

<https://greenpapaya.art/>

Curating, to a certain extent, is a lonely and isolated endeavour to undertake. Contrary to the rhetoric of professionalisation of the curatorial, I have always regarded curating as a calling. This has allowed me to negotiate my practice not as an occupation or duty to any formalised institutions but as one that is conditioned by a broader spectrum of knowledge that is less anchored in the anxiety of art historical canonisation—my personal values. More importantly, it is also imperative that I take into account my position as a Chinese Singaporean in Southeast Asia and the vulnerabilities of being a female in a patriarchal system of knowledge production.

Understanding one's vulnerabilities does come with a healthy dose of acknowledging the limits of one's knowledge, inhabiting a position of humility and a spirit of curiosity. The latter two are the key factors in most, if not all, of my collaborative projects. The roles of my collaborators range from project to project. In extended projects such as *Uncommon Pursuits*, a temporary curatorial programme that I initiated in 2018 for San Art¹ in response to field-work that was done earlier, my collaborators were actors, provocateurs and agents in the larger scale of the narrative of exploring the ambiguities of the curatorial in Vietnam and the various methodologies deployed by different curators from the Global South. With singular collaborations such as the collective *The Black Swan*, which consisted of the participants of the de Appel curatorial programme 2010/2011,² we were comrades in sharing the duties of running an exhibition³ and a reading group.⁴ One of the key takeaways from the de Appel curatorial programme that has shaped my attitude towards collaborations come from a workshop on Arthur Mindell's Deep Democracy paradigm.⁵ Here, consensus building—an imperative in all collaborations—is a process of permissive subjugation of differences between individuals to form a whole through negotiation of positionalities. It is up to the collaborators and facilitator to

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decide which of these differences are integrated or discarded in order to move forward with the project at hand.

Being cognizant of this, the value of the variety that my collaborators bring to the project becomes key—not so much as differences to be subjugated but as differences in tonality and vocabularies that complement me and also form part of the broader picture of the project. This project becomes less singular, more inclusive and pluralistic, but more reflective of the uneven lived realities that we are in. In the process of my collaborations, I become a student of theirs as much as my part in our conversations provoke a response from them. In any of these collaborations, I get to know their practice better and my curiosity grows with theirs. My collaborative projects seldom are the end of these conversations, but rather, are opportunities to catch up with each other and their new developments—personal, artistic, intellectual and more.

NOTES

- ¹ *Uncommon Pursuits* ran over four sessions of week-long workshops with practitioners concentrating on different topics such as “Curating in the Contemporary World” (Gerardo Moquera); “Education, Writing Editing” (Clare Butcher); “Research Practices” (Nigel Power, Simon Soon, Brian Curtin) and lastly, “Thinking through Curating” (Nuraini Juliastuti and Zoe Butt). More information can be found here: <https://san-art.org/programs/uncommon-pursuits/>.
- ² The Black Swan members consisted of Antonia Alampi, Ekaterina Krupennikova, Qinyi Lim, Sanne Orthuizen, Alec Steadman and Ivana Vaseva.
- ³ The Black Swan’s exhibition project *Three Artists Walk into a Bar* consisted of a month-long festival dedicated to manifesting interventions in public spaces across the Netherlands in an open collaboration and in solidarity with artists affiliated with Dutch higher education institutions. This was in response to the cut in the arts budget in the Netherlands that year, as well as the prevalent right-wing sentiment articulated by Dutch politician Geert Wilders that art was for the elite. The project was documented online: <http://threeartistswalkintoabar.com/>.
- ⁴ The reading group *Why Stay If You Can Go?*, was co-organised by Stedelijk Museum and de Appel arts centre. The reading group centred around questions of use and value of contemporary art in Dutch society through explorations of speculative strategies adopted by artists and art practitioners in other contexts. Inherently, the title also alludes to mobility in a time of socio-political upheaval. Materials for the reading group were developed in collaboration with Center for Cultural Decontamination (Belgrade, Serbia), Xenia Kalpaktsoglou & Poka-Yio (XYZ Projects, Athens, Greece) and Townhouse Gallery (Cairo, Egypt). For more information: <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/events/stedelijk-a-de-appel-arts-centre-reading-group-why-stay-if-you-can-go>.
- ⁵ For more information, see <http://www.aamindell.net/worldwork>.

InterNet of People

Henry Tan

In 2014 I was invited to create a project at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) that responded to the topic of ‘space’. Titled *Autopilot*, I turned 500 square meters of BACC’s galleries into a residency platform where 10 artist groups participated further to an open call. I became a facilitator, mediator, supporter, curator, technician and spectator. Authorship blurred. And this form of collaboration was a rough road.

From 2016 to 2018 I held a number of residencies in China. There are more women involved in the art industry than men; perhaps this is the same around the world. A matriarchal network ensures a great attention to care, details and interpersonal skills in the management of knowledge production and people. But female curators and coordinators are typically temporary workers and often unpaid in China. I noticed, through my collaborative projects, that female workers can be well-educated but lack professional experience and offer free labour in order to work with international artists at local museums. Most, however, choose not to stay and work in the art industry.

During my residency at Times Museum in Guangzhou, I transformed the front of the museum into a Liang Free Repair Shop, offering free repair services in exchange for stories behind these broken belongings. It took me merely 10 minutes to cycle from the high-end Rose Garden Community, where the museum is located, to City Village, a low-income district. Many museums and art institutions aim to create community engagement projects while presenting themselves as ambitious in generating dialogue and breaking down hierarchies. But questions of exploitation, relationship-building and the reciprocity in the creative process shouldn’t be neglected and we need a careful, sincere approach. A friend said, “It is so close yet distant”, a phrase that pinpoints the relationship between the museum and the community. Our five-month repair

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shop temporarily bridged “locals” with the museum, people who live nearby but usually never visit such institutions.

In 2017 I joined a project at Tua Tiu Tien Art Festival in Taipei organized by Thinker Theatre and also a residency at the Asia Discover Asia Meeting for Performance Art (ADAM) in the Taipei Art Festival. Both programmes were directed by gay men and supported by female workers. As Taiwanese society is relatively open to LGBT, it was my first time hearing the term “Lesbocrazy”, which describes tensions between female and male workers inside art institutions. ADAM invested in and encouraged artists to initiate new collaborations. Participants do not always get to choose their collaborators and the hard job of handling conflicts between artists and executing any project with time frames falls on the facilitator and team.

Curatorslab spanned three years and aimed to nurture and connect young curators from Southeast Asia to develop dialogues that address regional concerns. Participating curators joined workshops and field trips across Indonesia and Germany and were guided by senior curators and experts. While mutually learning occurred, the long time frame dissolved participants’ enthusiasm and sense of integrity. Logistical complications resulting from the large-scale execution of a project at National Gallery Indonesia drastically discouraged 11 of the 14 participants from continuing. I was left struggling with Indonesian curators to realize the exhibition. The spirit of “cura” was difficult to practice.

In 2018, a project titled *Pearl of Lunar* involved me working with scientists and experts from several universities in Thailand and the MIT Media Lab in the US. The project of sending a synthetic pearl to the International Space Station required communication skills that would allow the whole team to understand the aspirations and expectations of each party. Each member shared knowledge and expertise so all could enumerate technological limitations while exchanging personal views. This was an ideal of interdisciplinary reciprocity between scientists, engineers and hackers.

As a member of *Freaklab Thailand* and *metaPhorest Japan*, there was no single solution to solve all the problems of working with people from different backgrounds and with different training. As a professional artist, practising art while obtaining new knowledge made me realize how little knowledge I had. Open-mindedness, working smart, fairness, empathy and perseverance are the keys to mutual learning and working with others.

Performing Collectivity

Suzann Victor

Like habits of subjectivity, museums, galleries, Artist-in-Residence (AIRs) and the more recent global phenomenon of art fairs, operate spaces that can be characterised as self-perpetuating voids, where aesthetic encounters of visual feasts and provocations, orchestrations of uncluttered stillness to the media-saturated omnipresent glow of technology, performance, sound environments, kinetic works, live activities such as talks, symposiums, conferences etc., feature as part of the institutional/ised performance of filling up and emptying out. How such spaces as framing devices are conceived—be they purpose-built or adapted, used, supported, future-proofed or shaped—in turn shapes how the art presented within is perceived, empowered, empowering, engaged, transmitted or translated. But long before being recognised as art, prior to entering the realm of the public, it is the micro-ecologies of collective labour, at times obvious, other times unseen or ephemeral, that render the art (or the art that makes the space) possible in the first place.

One of my early experiences of collective labour, significantly feminine, feminised and elided, had its genesis in a void, because of such a void—a utilitarian, slate-walled passageway mundanely assigned to direct office workers from the car park via a glass atrium to its adjoining corporate office tower on the fifth-floor lift lobby of Parkway Parade, then superstar of retail complexes in Singapore's East Coast. My negotiations with the owners led to a two-year rent-free lease that began an exciting yet unpredictable journey of 'sculpting' social and artistic space, initially with fellow artists Han Ling and Catherine Tan, and later, Susie Lingham, Iris Tan, Daniel Wong and Henry Tang, transforming the under-used access route into 5th Passage, Singapore's first corporate-sponsored, artists-run gallery and performance venue. Our vision and division of labour were invested in re-contextualizing the presentation of then current

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art practices by vicariously sharing that spectacle Singaporeans most identify with—the shopping centre—also the nation's de facto community space (except that it is one of spending), to intercept the one-way flow of audiences being directed into museums and galleries by re-routing art (and artists) to flow into places of commerce where people readily and already converge, thus setting a precedent to engender new Asian art publics from two resources at hand: the ready-made public within the ready-made public space.

In its short-lived history, 5th Passage presented and co-hosted more than 40 inter-disciplinary exhibitions and events at Parkway Parade (1991–94), Pacific Plaza (1994–96) and numerous other locations, supported by, and in turn, supporting a plethora of visual, performance and performing artists/designers to enhance their visibility, whilst generating sources of income for them through pop-up art stalls and activities in multiple venues in the city (unheard of at the time) and schools, besides the public engagement campaigns through art for government and the corporate sector. My final project as 5th Passage's Artistic Director, *XX Personae II*, in 1996, presented works by women artists that I curated to be sited within the confines of Singapore's oldest women's medical facility, Kandang Kerbau Maternity Hospital, so that art would occur, and did occur side by side with the lived performed reality of women birthing new life (in some cases, termination). Again, the artworks staked claims in the most unlikely of places—passageways or corridors, the staircase landing or the incidental corner—a continuation of re-purposing utilitarian spaces into zones of art. But this was also the year that forced my departure to Australia, a move that brought into relief how imagined idealised collective labour can also develop into a less even one where artist Susie Wong, to whom I remain grateful, generously took up the reins to bring this exhibition to completion onsite. The preceding two years were seared with the psychosocial trauma in the aftermath of the media-incited AGA-5th Passage controversy that triggered an abrupt eviction from Parkway Parade, harsh rejection and distancing by the National Arts Council (NAC), ensuing court proceedings in legal defence of artist Josef Ng and our gallery manager Iris Tan, the public shaming I sustained (alongside others) in the media, being specifically named (with Susie Lingham) and barred from the premises of an educational institution (NIE), followed by the ten-year de facto ban on performance art (all of which now share present-day features of discriminatory reporting, trolling, public shaming, ostracization). But the performance of collective morality in its aftermath was also uplifting because of the rare show of courage from unusual quarters. In the face of taboo, public condemnation and our potentially criminal status then, the Australian manager of DNC, the public relations marketing agency that Lingham worked for, unflinchingly offered

5th Passage a one-year rent-free lease of five empty shop lots at Pacific Plaza, a new high-end retail complex in Orchard Road, prime real estate in Singapore. With incredulity and appreciation, we took up this even more visible ‘home’ immediately, continuing to share it with artists by presenting several shows, including *Personae*, the precursor to *XX Personae II* mentioned above. During this period of shame imposed upon those persecuted and their families, lawyer Philip Jeyaratnam and intellectuals Ray Langenbach, Sharaad Kuttan and Lee Weng Choy offered unwavering practical, moral, professional and personal support inside and outside the court room. In reflection, Robert Smithson’s insight that “visiting the museum is a matter of going from void to void” rings of privilege, liberty and power when considering 5th Passage’s journey—beginning as a void, filled with forms, only to be expelled, returning to a void.

As the performance of situated subjectivity morph and change with the shifting nature of lived reality, the trajectory of my practice evolved with ideas that grew in impetus, complexity, momentum and scale in response to new work stemming from institutional and corporate commissions. From a primary producer of abstract oil paintings in art school at Lasalle to the collective production of social space as an artist-collective mentioned earlier, this was followed by a discourse of trauma that somehow led to engendering making-ecologies: curating art teams to realise projects whose different needs necessitated commensurate models of production and creative arrangements, for example: sub-contracting individuals with specific skills, expertise, services, resources or supplies such as engineers, fabricators, specialist technicians, 3D animators and even a project management consultancy. These artistic spheres are also spaces of learning, growing and sharing. Not only for the artist at which the buck stops so to speak, but for those individuals who are engaged, these projects represent paid opportunities to research and attain industry benchmarks of innovation. Early forms of ‘green’ technology such as the mechanisms with magnetic coils that drive the kinetic movements of the *Contours* series in 2006 and *Wings of a Rich Manoeuvre* 2016 (Swarovski & National Museum of Singapore), along with the electrical work in Singapore’s first Solar Charging Benches stationed along Stamford Road in the city centre, where members of the public can top up their smart devices (in conjunction with Rainbow Circle for the Singapore Biennale) were the original creative work of my electrical engineer David Marsh. The bespoke highly integrated miniaturised LED lighting design and control interface, a kiosk available every evening at 7pm for the public to play with the artwork’s interactive programme of motion patterns and lighting palette, was developed by designer Richard Candy for *Wings of a Rich Manoeuvre*. Equally important, Jules Gull, my highly experienced lead technician who oversaw the realization of the public artwork

Skin to Skin 2005 (World Square, Sydney), performed beyond her role to support me in a male-dominant work place.

The contours of collective labour are multi-dimensional, accruing in meaning and profundity as and when it involves communities that are usually unassociated with artmaking, even as their contribution or participation is instrumental in the making of the work. *Bloodline of Peace 2015*, a 40-metre long lens quilt was commissioned by the Singapore Art Museum to reflect upon on the value of peace, a state that is often defined by absence—the absence of war and bloodshed. Yet, the laying down of one's life is the ultimate sacrifice to gaining peace (and safety), whilst blood, freely given, can save the lives of absolute strangers. Symbolised by one of the five stars depicted in the national flag to be celebrated on the momentous occasion of Singapore's 50th year of independence, the crowd sourcing of blood as material for art from the deep recesses of bodies became a community performance of gifting this precious corporeal fluid for incorporation into the artwork. Representatives of key communities voluntarily subjected themselves to a stringent protocol of blood tests, and its extraction for integrating and sealing within 11,520 lens units was carried out by a team of trained technicians led by Ambrose Emmanuel Victor, who perfected the methodology closely supervised by Dr John Chia. Life-giving because it is in fact alive (for a window of time), this living matter teeming with cellular material and DNA at the point of extraction and collection thus qualifies *Bloodline of Peace* as a momentary living artwork, and as the blood turns from fresh red to an expired red-brown, the work crosses the threshold to become a bio-relic.

On the other hand, *Strike 2021* taps into a different source for collaborative work. Shifting from the ocular to the auditory, with the curation of Marc Gloede, *Strike 2021* transforms STPI's main gallery into an acoustic playground for its audience—dynamic with chance and mobilised by randomness. The privileging of sight here gives way to the acting/activating of sound by the audience as much as the nuance of listening to it within the space. Commissioned for the internationally-linked Galleries-Curate RHE project, the installation presents an arena where the audience's performance is integral to the making of the work live onsite and alive with and as sound. The Latin roots of the word 'audience' refers to 'the act of hearing', but in this context, the very same audience-performer is engaged in a feedback loop as both the player actuating the sounds as well as the listener, positioned in and amongst a transparent archipelagic installation of 250 glass receptacles, proliferating across the floor in an expansive organic spread.

Here, looking becomes inadequate. The 250 glass vessels that make up *Strike 2021* ask for participation and interaction from the audience, cajoling

and inviting authorship with the artist and the artwork by inclusion into its physical domain, a plethora of upright geometric and voluminous forms rising as far as the hips, some filled with water to control tone and pitch. The in-between spaces amongst them present as a community of voids—physical gaps pregnant with sonic potential—just wide enough for specially fabricated acrylic ‘strikers’ to be tugged and released at a velocity that gains traction for unchoreographed swing-hits against glass, unleashing a cacophony of gamelan-like sounds that resonate throughout the space. Instigating at every single activation of the work a unique acoustic event, it also reveals the origins of its acoustic phenomena, but more than that, it asks the audience to become both the transmitter and receiver of their own activation, not only for its energetic transference, but also to watch its sonic presence in motion.

Skin to Skin 2005, World Square, Sydney.

Public Artwork: stainless steel, fibre carbon, silicon. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Bloodline of Peace 2015, 5 Stars SGS0 Exhibition, Singapore Art Museum. Installation: human blood, Fresnel lenses, stainless pins.
Collection of Singapore Art Museum.
Photo: Courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

Strike 2021, Of Waters Exhibition, STPI.
Audience-activated acoustic installation: glass receptacles and water.
Photo: Courtesy of STPI.

The Team is Bigger than the Individual

Anuthin Wongsunkakon

It is common sense that choosing the right people to work with has everything to do with the outcome of the task you aim to carry out. You need to pick people with the necessary knowledge and skills to help you shape the outcome. And you know that, at times, you may have to pass on people with high proficiencies only to settle for people with less skill but who possess the right attitude to meet the requirements of the job.

You always have the bigger picture in mind.

But it's not always possible to form a team that promises frictionless performance; you may need to rely upon misfits whose rarefied talents are pivotal to the project. Regardless of the constituents of your team, the mark of a good team leader is how he or she manages to objectively steer the project past disruptions and towards its successful outcome.

With the creative arts, the viewing public generally see the team leader as the “owner” of a published work, be it a movie, pop song or even a typeface: the person to receive credit and criticism for the work. But does the “owner” have the absolute right to choose each and every member of his team? In the real world, that's not always the case.

We often hear a managerial type spouting the ideal that all members in a team are of equal importance. In reality, there's hierarchy in any workplace, which means that workers are not considered of equal importance. Nonetheless, each member has an indispensable function to perform; otherwise, there would be no team.

Teamwork is essential although it is not always apparent. It might seem that an individual designer is able to produce something solely on his/her own, but in fact, he or she may rely on external support such as online tutorials or

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specialized cloud software etc. Can we regard this kind of connectedness as virtual teamwork? Real teamwork is evident in human endeavours such as sending spaceships to the moon, or fighting a global pandemic.

Trust is paramount to the success of any team. You don't want team members suspicious of each other, and wasting time worrying about trifling issues unrelated to the outcome. You want each and every member to trust and have confidence in one another, and for all to work as a tight unit.

It is to be expected that your team contains a diversity of personalities—conformists, non-conformists, extroverts, introverts, loud and quiet types—with an array of differentiating skills to help broaden the team's expertise. This creates a synergy that makes the team greater than the sum of its parts.

But while it's natural for humankind to work as a team, it's also natural for people to have feelings of personal antipathy towards their fellow workers. Such negativity can lead to team issues that may threaten to disrupt or completely derail a project. When such undesirable group dynamics arises, the team leader is expected to employ his/her people skills to resolve workplace conflicts and ensure the successful completion of the task in hand.

Crafting Community Crafts

Nanthana Boonla-or and Woranooch Chuenrudeemol

As university lecturers in Thailand, we have been responsible for several courses including collaborative, community-related design courses. The titles of these include “Thai Cultural Products”, “Community-based Collaborative Product Development”, “Crafts Product Design” and “Textile Design”. Most collaborators are in rural areas outside Bangkok, therefore study trips and hands-on intensive workshops are arranged to bring students into the village and follow-ups are carried out via telecommunications. Prior to the trips, we organize preparatory sessions in which students learn technical know-how from external experts.

What these courses have in common is that they require students to work closely with community members, especially artisans and craftspeople—learning by working with them in order to understand the know-how, to hone skills, and to gain first-hand inspiration as well as insights into community contexts. After the process of design ideation, students often go back to the artisans to prototype their designs. In general, the outcomes are diverse sets of commercial crafts. Some have modified existing local crafts while some are new designs that would be unfamiliar to the local community. The new designs usually have good potential for new markets, which the local craft producers or the crafts entrepreneurs wish to explore.

Craftspeople and Designers

In examining these practices as a process to create craft products, we note the different players that push projects forward. Synergy between new design ideas and the capacity to materialize them as objects of quality proves that the

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craftspeople and the designers are the keys to achievement. However, relationships between them can be both in harmony and in conflict. Thai cultural characteristics of respecting seniority and paying kindness to juniors often drives the collaboration, especially knowledge and skill transfer from senior artisans to the young designers, in order for the collaboration to run smoothly. However, new designs can be discouraged when conventional artisans are not convinced by the new aesthetics or do not support the new crafting possibilities proposed by young designers. But it cannot be denied that design success in craft products comes from the artisans' effort and courage in experimenting with new techniques. For community craft production, which commonly reflects a production line, craftspeople of diverse expertise are required. For example, silk, ikat hand-woven fabrics needs at least four experts for yarn threading, pattern tying and colouring, warp threading, and weaving.

Prototype Makers/Detail Masters

Other actors include prototype makers/detail masters, specialists who master the unique details of certain crafts. These specialists usually possess remarkable experience in refined craft production as well as understanding of customer needs and market segmentation. They know how to provide elaborate details for high-end markets and also how to keep details simple for achieving the standard quality of the mainstream craft market. From what we have observed, in many cases, these masters understand the aesthetics of folk craft details, but also hold a strong collective sense of modern aesthetics. They can build on folk craft details and advise on more refined and sophisticated details to attract urban customers. While most village craftspeople practise with only one material such as bamboo, detail masters practise with various combinations of materials and become experts in the fabrication process while understanding the manifold qualities of different materials. In short, these masters can manipulate craft details, estimate the cost, optimize and plan for the production line.

The Curator

The role of a curator involves developing a brief; guiding young designers; and working with mediators, craft makers and detail masters. In many cases, young students experience uncertainty during the design process. This is where the curator steps in. Young designers with fresh ideas are given the responsibility of proposing a new design, guided and encouraged by the curator. The craftspeople and prototype makers or detail masters are then invited into the loop

to make sure the young designers' designs are refined, well-articulated, and can contribute to the market. An important point here is that not every crafts-person or prototype maker or detail master is willing to support risky (in their eyes) craft products, or are willing to try and understand the new designs. Here curators need to carefully create connections, build trust in the relationships, and fine-tune the design details with these masters. In our case, we play the role of the curator.

The Mediator

Because the host communities are usually located outside Bangkok, when young designers reach out to find a craftspeople, they usually need a mediator. Similar to the role of the curator, a mediator helps find the right craftspeople or artisans and assist in establishing gestures and manners during the first meeting of the collaboration. These mediators can be a community leader, a craft group leader, a local government member or a village volunteer. They usually help with local language translation and the explanation of terminology. After the on-site workshop, the mediator also supports the follow-up between the craftspeople and young designers, updating each party.

Tension between Actors

The hierarchical nature of Thailand's social structure between elders and youngsters sometimes creates tension in the collaboration. While young designers try to maintain their original craft concepts, some craftspeople or even the curators, with good intention, may pull them off-track and adjust the design differently. To make the process fair for young students, several discussions and recommendations with all the experts are organized before production, in order to advise as well as to explore different versions of the new designs.

Beyond this hierarchy, conflict also arises from the urban-rural divide and occupation biases between craftspeople and designers, especially when the finished design is delivered to the village for reproduction. Craftspeople typically do the best they can and are proud of the results. But often urban designers see their craft as unrefined and unsuitable for the urban market. Here the mediator can play another important role in convincing the craftspeople to try new tools and unfamiliar techniques, while negotiating with designers for them to comprehend the circumstances of production and other concerns.

Learning Without a Curriculum: A Case for Stalemate and Denying the Archival

Siddharta Perez

*"We have to keep reminding ourselves... that homogeneity is not what we should aspire to."*¹

By the end of the second day of the art camp, the facilitators had reached a stalemate. Pleasantries were breaking down and we were over-articulating our intelligence. We wanted to go with the flow, but what does that look like on an occasion of agonism? I found it a highly charged moment when fatigue and urgency to wrap up the camp were exposing the individual approaches that the six facilitators were inclined to: outcome-based, emotionally-centred, reconciliation-focused, polemical. In the three months leading up to the three-day art camp, there was an ease of being together. A proposal for methods began where a workshop theme ended. We were cohabitating ideas well until we were rendered as discrete systems of practice trying to hold up the bridge that had initially been fashioned in a flurry of camaraderie.

New Curriculum for Old Questions is an expression of emerging from another stalemate. There was a ton of ephemera to go through, and communicating through instant messaging with my original curatorial partner was not working. These documents, spiral-bound or scanned into pdfs, belonged to the 1990s across the Pacific. They contained transcribed discussions, fading scribbles, programming diagrams frayed by repeated folds, with citable authors on the fringe of publishing and now household names in political thought making appearances. A limb from the corpus of a cultural bearer² and the ligaments to its originary stewardship³ were overstretched by the weight of

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context. Worlds could not address each other, much less collide.⁴ The curatorial service towards citation and genealogy had to give way to the capillaries of art and pedagogy in practice and in absence.

More a gamble than a curatorial approach, I wondered loudly to Hsu Fang-Tze, Phoebe Pua, Tan Li-Jen, Nurul Huda Rashid and Nadia Wagner if we could read them together and find expression to our thinking about understanding curricula, parallel to institutional terms. We related to one another mostly as friends, but this was my response to the distance I felt with the archives and the stewards of cultural consciousness these documents were rooted in. Proximity was necessary to weave the tapestry of civic undertaking in the worlds of *Worlds in Collision*, and proximity was necessary to unravel and intimate a cultural bearer's lifework in pieces. Our coterie of readers is made up to some degree of academics with practices beyond their institutional affiliation. For collision, different worlds needed to cross orbits and atmospheric spheres.

There was also a question of multiplication. One reader couldn't unravel the worlds in collision. The proposal here was to garner intimacy with these documents not just through depth but in breadth. Six could be a lucky number to subject the facilitation horizontally. Our individual expertise were guarded, but our interests were recommended. Along the way, our initial group of facilitators aggregated to more facilitators. Inevitably, a fractal way of working emerged—the pattern on a small scale is replicated in building up to working on a larger scale. These roles collapsed by their multiplying iterative nature that spilled over to the participants' approaches in facilitating the order of their group work.

One of the experiments in facilitating collective work was enacted through "working boards". Conceptually these were sites where collaborative goals are shaped throughout the camp. These boards were also the means to reckon with what we mean by documentation: questioning the anxiety of posterity that is often embedded in the nature of events and happenings. Questioning the curricula meant finding out the ways to measure a learner's experience. Documentation at that point seemed to serve as a recording of the quantity of information transmitted, but we needed to understand the diagrammatic legibility of learning. Process appeared to supersede form when learning had to "pass through" in time. Throughout the camp, these working boards were loosely called "Glossaries", "Questions" and "Mind-map". During the three intensive days, these boards morphed into nebulous questions on how terms—as in "vocabularies" and "conditions"—get warped by over-articulation. At the end of it, we wondered if aspirations towards legibility were something we needed at all.

In an attempt to draw conceptual bridges between our respective interests and practices to what we can read off from the *Worlds In Collision* archives, *New Curriculum for Old Questions*⁵ was initially compelled to address perpetuating terminologies. How are we asking questions of identity, education and practice in our specific contexts? What does it mean to do “multiculturalism” amidst the realities and fallacies of minorities, race, gender, sexuality? These broad sweeps coagulate, disperse and circuit back according to the vocabularies we held as institutional and civic workers in Singapore and as student bodies—students in practice and students from worlds of difference. It was an experiment of co-regulation, as we dabbled in our individual subjectivities to double as both learner and facilitator.

In the end, I accumulated more residue than I had started with. In our refusal of documentation, we carried back a container of our dissonance. The stalemate seemed necessary as a way to return to the diachronic nature of learning.

NOTES

- ¹ Carlos Villa in response to Reagan Louie as they shifted the conversation on multiculturalism in the arts to art's pedagogic function and the artist as a seeker, nurtured by their own communities. This conversation was transcribed in the book collating the dialogues from the *World in Collision* symposia: *Worlds in Collision: Dialogues on Multicultural Art Issues*, ed. Reagan Louie and Carlos Villa (San Francisco: San Francisco Art Institute and International Scholars Publications, 1994), <http://carlos-villa.com/worlds-in-collision.html>.
- ² Guide Father of Bay Area artists, teachers and activists, Carlos Villa's work spanned five decades of influence in the San Francisco Art Institute, community organising and art practices at the interstices of cultural expression in societies.
- ³ Lian Ladia, a curator based in San Francisco, originally perused these documents for many years and had hoped that the archives could come through with equal curatorial weight alongside Carlos Villa's artwork inclusion in the Singapore Biennale 2019.
- ⁴ *Worlds In Collision* was a series of symposia addressing the multicultural landscape of the Bay Area Villa from the 1970s. It later transmuted into curricula in the San Francisco Art Institute.
- ⁵ The three-day art camp was held in NUS Museum from 24–26 February 2020, bringing together young and emerging practitioners alongside students. Each day consisted of surrealist dinner party games, workshops on criticism and society, encryption and address and organisational models. Above all, the three days were spent crystallising incoherence and dissonance in texts and images that populate our everyday subjectivities.

A few years ago, after publishing an op-ed arguing a need to translate the term LGBT¹ into local vernacular in a Jakarta-based English-language newspaper, I received some criticisms from Indonesian queer activists. While such critique was indeed valid and productive to incite further discussions, one of them posted on Facebook seemed, based on my understanding, to problematise my position as an author who has become an *international* author and is therefore disengaged from quotidian reality. Here, the term ‘international’ suggests a classed structure of and division of labour in social activism and writing, which embodies the opposition between elite activism/keyboard warrior activism (international) and grassroots politics (local and grounded). In other words, an essay published in an English newspaper with a broad audience might carry different values and attract significant attention (and more benefits to the author’s personal brand), compared to other activist labour remaining unpublished in the attention and hypervisibility economy regime. Such a critique fortuitously helps to illuminate how values are produced and/or emerge through networked relations.

As I unpack below, network relations producing cultural values do not necessarily require collaborative spirits between the actors involved. Instead, positioning my work amidst the globalisation of LGBT rights discourses, both the anti-queer oppositional forces and the inclusion of queer issues in the publishing landscape and market economy together influence the attachment of values to arts and activism, and equally, the meaning of ‘queer’ itself. To demonstrate this argument, I will first examine my position in the broader ecosystem of queer arts and activism in Indonesia, followed by an unpacking of how networked relations between anti-LGBT forces and the media economy generate particular value for my work, while remaining attentive to specific actors and their roles in making my writing possible for publication.

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I started writing essays on gender, sexuality and LGBT rights in 2008 when I was still an undergraduate student in business administration. Being self-taught in gender and feminist theory without academic credentials in the relevant field made it even more challenging for me to publish my work in the early days. The tide gradually turned in 2010 when I finally found some independent media outlets (primarily online) willing to publish my essays. This coincided with burgeoning social media activism on gender and sexuality in Indonesia. Besides allowing me to connect with the other writer-activists, getting published independently also paved the way for me to enter the mainstream publishing industry, which hardly published non-fiction books on queer issues back then.

The year 2015 was a touchstone moment for my writing career, especially when my collection of essays titled *Coming Out* was published by a mainstream publisher, followed by invitations to deliver public lectures and talks in several universities and activist spaces. Still vivid in my memory are the words from my academic friend when the book was just out, urging me to translate it into English because the translation could potentially “*throw me into global stardom*” (emphasis mine). Unexpectedly, the tide continued turning throughout 2015 and 2016 alongside the rise of Indonesia’s anti-LGBT sentiments in the public sphere. During these years, public figures and government officials openly denounced LGBT individuals and invigorated moral panics, while my essays on LGBT issues were increasingly accepted and published in both national and international media outlets to counter the proliferating stigma against LGBT people in public. Being approached by media outlets to contribute and being recognised as a gay/queer author was something that I did not expect when I started my writing trajectory. This is not only because I was increasingly exposed to an international audience but also because such exposure and recognition is inseparable from the value-creation process through the network relations between both collaborative and oppositional forces.

First, the network relations involved collaborative forces between various actors that, to some extent, were obscured from the spotlight. The publication of *Coming Out* was made possible by the strategic collaboration between the editor and me as the author writing a topic deemed sensitive in the country. During the final manuscript preparation process, the assigned editor (a heterosexual woman) worked with me to carefully edit some parts that could potentially trigger controversies. Furthermore, we identified together provinces deemed too conservative and excluded them from the book’s distribution network. As far as I can recall, we decided *Coming Out* as the title so as to avoid the word ‘gay’, which might have been detrimental to the book’s distribution and its afterlife.

A similar experience took place when I published another book on sexuality with another mainstream publisher in 2019, not too long after the proliferation of anti-LGBT sentiments in Indonesia. Concerned about the potential negative repercussions from the book, the senior editor (a heterosexual man) became the primary actor who championed my manuscript and convinced his office to publish it. To my knowledge, this senior editor was passionate about my manuscript because it aligned with his personal belief in diversity and tolerance. In the end, the editors' efforts which went beyond editing remained unnoticed and therefore uncelebrated. This observation leads me to treat the publishing industry not as a monolithic or singular entity, but rather as a network of actors, ranging from authors, editors, even marketers, enabling or disabling particular works to emerge and circulate.

Second, network relations often engage oppositional forces, since these conflicting vectors might increase and attach particular value. As anti-LGBT sentiments were escalating in the public sphere, my response essays to these developments increasingly appeared in various national and international media. To some extent, some media outlets approached me to contribute to their platforms to show their support by giving a platform to pro-LGBT voices amidst the moral panic. At the same time, however, I remained critical about my positionality. My English proficiency, along with my writing skills (attached to middle-upper class privilege), and the globalisation of LGBT rights (making it somewhat 'cool' and 'modern', as well as part of progressive ideals), was inseparable from the opportunity and value that those media offered me. Since writing is related to visibility, the author cannot simply be disengaged from the hypervisibility and attention economy. Put differently, the visibility of my work (and perhaps, also myself) became easily valued as a resistance voice and symbol, in turn obscuring other writers or activists who were unable to access prominent media outlets due to their English proficiency or because their activism did not necessarily engage the publishing industry, and consequently remained invisible.

In conclusion, I often question how 'queer' as a meaning and value might be shaped by multiple vectors that in turn challenge the notion of 'queer' as simply an anti-normative stance or being outside of the dominant power. As demonstrated above, in the publishing world, anti-normativity and normativity (i.e. commercial publishing trends and mainstream LGBT rights discourses) work side by side, blurring the boundaries that are believed to separate both postures.

NOTE

- ¹ I use the term “LGBT” here to preserve the historical context of my work. I have used this term since the mid-2000s but have increasingly used the term “queer” since 2017, as my engagement with US-based queer theory has increased.

“*Fragility*”: Empowering Us during COVID-19

Piyaluk Benjadol and Kanoknuch Sillapawisawakul

Translated from Thai by Be Takerng Pattanopas

Piyaluk Benjadol's first solo exhibition was titled *Fragility* and curated by Kanoknuch Sillapawisawakul at PRACTICAL School of Design Space, Bangkok, in 2021. The exhibition presented four sets of three-dimensional works, amounting to 69 artworks in total. The artist is a designer, educator and academic, who has continued to create these artworks since the time her cancer was diagnosed in 2018. The artworks represent contemplation of life and experiences related to her own body, ailment, relationships with people around her, society and death. The artworks also reflect her beliefs and artistic ideologies in terms of individuality, gender and patriarchy, roles of women, consumerism, and politics and power. This collaboration between the artist, the curator and the supporting team tells their shared experiences during a difficult mental and physical period for the artist, and reflects the strength of two women supporting each other to continue their lives with a sense of strength. Most importantly, it is hoped that this strength would be passed on to the viewers too.

Symbiosis and Trust between the Artist and Curator

Fragility was organized at a time when the artist was healing physically and mentally, while possibly facing death. The artist and the curator had already been personally connected for some time. Mounting this exhibition was a shared experience for both, who relied on each other with trust, respect and faith in each other's potential. The curator's decision to show the artist's four

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sets of works, instead of showing only the most recent set, as the artist initially intended, reveals the curator's care and goodwill to make the artist happy with her first solo exhibition, which could be her only one. The overall impression of the exhibition is that of a retrospective of the artist's long-term practice. Showing all 69 artworks enables the viewers to see the path of the artist's life, particularly during her second and third rounds of cancer diagnosis. The artworks reveal how her artistic process has continually healed her mind throughout the past three years. The exhibition also reveals connections between her thoughts and beliefs about humanity and society, demonstrating how the artist's academic works, designs and art all connect with her political views.

Managing Exhibition Design

The exhibition space was modified from a small multi-purpose room in the design studio where the curator works. This space had never been used for an exhibition before. The curator collaborated with a professional display designer to adjust the space to enable it to show all 69 pieces by grouping and arranging them along the walls and in the middle of the space. This enabled a chronology of the artworks over the past three years and the curator carefully considered how each set should be viewed. The artworks vary in size, ranging from 10 cubic centimetres to much larger sizes, which had to be displayed on tables. She had white plinths made in the simplest forms, with appropriate material and size/height. The curator also installed shelves made from the thinnest material possible in order to let the artworks shine. This helped create a sense of great beauty in viewing such small and delicately fabricated works. For the works shown on the walls, the curator studied the viewing points of each piece through the artist's photographs, which had been posted on social media. This enabled the exhibition to communicate and create empathy with the viewers. It should be noted that some of the viewing points were unexpected for the artist. For some pieces which were mainly made of human hair, the curator decided to hang them on the wall to allow the material to flow. But the overall design of the exhibition was organized with a sense of the rhythm of the relationships between the artworks.

Different Stories, Collective Emotions

The curator studied the background and concepts behind the artworks through the artist's statement before seeing the actual works. They then had a discussion prior to designing the exhibition. How the artist prepared the photographs and information on the artworks for the curator also helped expand the artist's

views, thoughts and feelings she had for each piece. This helped the curator understand and communicate to viewers. After the exhibition was set up, the curator made an appointment to record an interview with the artist on video, which would be broadcast later. All questions and answers from this interview helped the curator further understand the artist's background, concepts and artistic processes. When the exhibition was opened to the public, this helped the curator to better communicate with the viewers through her curator's note and curator tour. She also wrote her view on each set of works. These will be published on social media for those who could not attend the exhibition and will help them understand the work better than merely seeing the works through photographs. As a feminist, and as she loved many of the artist's works, the curator's reflections in her writings show how she connected with the artist. Points of view and feelings of the viewers were also reflected to her and the artist through messages, articles and interviews on social media, as well as through the exhibition comments book. These revealed power and empathy for the artist and how the artistic process and the curator's determination to put on this exhibition had been transmitted to the viewers.

Thought-Triggering Images

Because the curator's main profession is graphic and communication design (though she sometimes works as an artist too), and since the design studio where she works has experience in designing exhibition catalogues and media for promoting art exhibitions and cultural institutions, the curator and the supporting team could shape process and strategy in designing for this exhibition. The curator was very meticulous in directing the photographer to document all three-dimensional pieces from various angles. These photographs invite the viewers to contemplate all the 69 pieces in great detail. In the catalogue, each artwork was presented through one large and three small photographs. All pages were carefully composed. For the poster, the curator composed it with various top-view photographs. This resulted in a distinctive design, which appeared ambiguous yet invited the viewers to look closer into the details of several objects scattered on a white ground. This was in accordance with the artist's wish to draw attention to the details of her artworks. Furthermore, the curator designed packaging for all pieces to make sure that they could be delivered safely to collectors. This was rather difficult because of the variable sizes and materials of the artworks. The curator and the artist discussed before choosing the best materials for the boxes and included cushions to protect the works. The curator then grouped the artworks and decided to use three box formats, with four main sizes and eight individual sizes. Some boxes

were already available on the market; others needed to be specially made. The curator and the artist chose 2-millimeter-wide shredded white paper for cushioning as it is clean-looking and appropriate for protecting all the pieces. It also went well with the white smooth paper boxes, which did not interfere with the colours of the artwork. On the box were beautifully designed sticker labels, which complimented the photograph of the piece inside, its code, the title of its set and the artworks' titles. Within the boxes were certificates completed with images, detailed information, as well as the artist's signature.

When Two Designers Collaborated as Artist and Curator

This exhibition had a different working process, preparation and problem-solving method from most other art exhibitions. This was because it was organized at a time when the artist had been diagnosed with cancer. Furthermore, there was the COVID-19 pandemic. This affected everyone involved in terms of health and safety. Since both the artist's and the curator's backgrounds were in design, communication, management and planning, they both applied their skills in design at every step and with everyone involved. This was done both online and on-site and included the site-preparation team, installation team, public relations team and archive/documentation team. They all worked in close communication for many months with the artist and the curator to ensure that every step was done properly. This included exhibition preparation, moving the artworks to the site, installing the works, de-installing the exhibition, packing all works, delivering works to collectors, and returning the remaining works to the artist. This good teamwork, including faith and trust in the team, made it possible for the artist to put on the exhibition without having to commute to the site too often. The artist and the curator collaborated on planning for the catalogue, archiving and documentation, both online and on-site. The results were presented through social media platforms. Beside experiences in viewing the actual exhibition, the viewers had access to these online materials from anywhere in the world and at any time.

Conclusion

The exhibition *Fragility* went smoothly and was as successful as the artist and the curator had aimed for. This was possible through the collaboration and connectedness between both of them on professional and personal levels. They communicated closely to mutually decide and solve problems systematically. This resulted from their professional experiences within the fields of art and design. They were both flexible and willing to listen to each other to solve

all problems that occurred during the process. They collaborated with all the supporting teams, which were selected because of their working qualities. The important connection with online media also helped greatly with promoting the exhibition amidst the COVID-19 situation. Planning on how to organize all of the information on the artist, the artworks, the curator's view and publishing the exhibition on online platforms, all contributed to the success of this exhibition, which, ultimately, should communicate energy and goodwill to people amidst the stress and despondence resulting from the pandemic. The exhibition invited them to look inside themselves and support each other.

Nontawat Numbenchapol

Translated from Thai by Be Takerng Pattanopas

For a long time, and up till now, I have been motivated by, have fun with, and love working through the process of recording images and sound.

When I was younger, during the period when my life was in transition from the university to the professional world, my utmost dream was to be able to create works that truly came from my true self, without being briefed by any employers. For this reason, my early works helped me release my true self. These were works that I did not make to earn a living. It was wonderful in the sense that through these works I was able to release the massive pressure and tension within me.

As I grew up, my works began to be exposed to viewers. I had gained trust from others to work in this way. When the scale of my works augmented, they necessitated some procedures that I could not do all by myself, so collaborations with others began in this way. With this shift came the fact that I had to adjust and try to understand my collaborators. I normally choose to work with newcomers who do not have much experience but are full of passion and eagerness. They often see my works as their chance to do what they dream of and aim for.

Of course, there have been problems, and I learned through my own mistakes, especially when I did not have enough trust in my collaborators. When I tried to manage all the minor details to achieve the works that truly represent myself, I made my collaborators feel frustrated and in effect blocked their creative freedom. The way I collaborated with others in my early years turned me into the type of person I used to hate.

When I tried adjusting my way of project management in terms of space, structure and mechanism by choosing the right persons, who have what I lacked and letting them do their jobs more freely, my projects ran more

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smoothly and more happily. The outcomes were more unexpected and more exciting.

At present, I have fun collaborating with my team members, who have different backgrounds and professions. They include academics, anthropologists, medical doctors, as well as foreign workers. Integrating their different views into my works results in amazing outcomes. I am excited by the new dimensions that enable me to learn about new worlds. It also excites me that viewers will see the world from different perspectives, just as I have. This will not be possible if my working process lacks freedom, trust and collaborative pleasure.

There are so many aspects in collaborating.

Collaborators for me are people who have helped in the making of my works in a specific way, both in tangible and intangible manners. I would not have been able to finish the projects without them. Collaborators for me are also writers I have personally invited to contribute texts for projects or exhibitions, turning visuals into words. I have to make sure they are properly credited or acknowledged in one way or another, and, importantly, by way of proper payment, although I have bartered works on occasions.

Some worked behind the scenes and were not credited. They would usually follow my particular instructions, for example, assistants, including my mother, helped cut paper and folded the 'flying cube' origami for the installation *Anything Can Break* (2011). The composers, sound system designer, structure designer, lighting designer, glassmaker were credited on the wall text or in print. In reality there are many more people who help every time an installation is being put up. Many of them are volunteers. It could run like a film credit for every site.

My very first collaborator was Nee, the seamstress who helped sew all of the mulberry fiber sculptures: *Breast Works/Untitled* (1994) and reconfigured in *Shone and Breasts* (1998), *Confident Bodies* (1996–97), *Womanly Bodies* (1998), *Untitled "offerings"* (1999) and *Offering Vessels* (2001–02). Nee used to work at my grandfather's house after my grandmother passed away in 1975. Then she got married, moved out and learned how to sew. She understood what I wanted to achieve in no time. Once we got the basic structure, I only gave her simple instructions to alter each piece while thinking about the various bodies of her clients.

This space, this flexibility for my collaborators to contribute to the artwork in the making is a very important factor. It enables their expertise to be applied

to the works, especially when I am not the master of the craft, evident in my collaborations with glass masters, print masters and paper masters. I learned to trust. I learned how to connect and convey my thoughts. I learned how to bring out their skills.

A work like *Breast Stupa Cookery* is, at its core, a collaborative project with five main components: the *Breast Stupa Cookery* moulds and tools, the chefs, the food, the diners, the site and on occasion, the filmmaker who makes the video documentation. It has been ongoing since 2005, with over 30 events in 12 countries. None were the same. The project is unpredictable, at times jovial, at times emotional and at times political. It is an ongoing learning experience for me to carry out a project like this, conducting an improvised work.

Then there is the collaboration with the nature of the site, the history of the site, the weather, people and types of material. They all become 'collaborators' in their own ways. Projects on Honjima Island (2019) and the Jim Thompson Farm (2018) are examples of long-term collaborative and live experiences in every detail. The glass hammock had to be tested through the swings of participants, the hot summers and harsh winters before completion could be announced.

At the end you just have to trust your instinct, respect and know when to ask.

Communal Labour of a Project

Phaptawan Suwannakudt

My most recent work is *RE-allegory Real Glory* (2021),¹ a multi-panel work of 10 paintings and 24 works on board, each wrapped with a transparent veil. They are hung separately in front of the wall in five layers some of which are overlapped. The curators, registrar, designer and technician were the team who laboriously provided support for the development and installation of the work through to its public display at the Art Gallery of New South Wales this year. My practice of Thai mural painting had come to an abrupt end when I relocated to Sydney in 1996. The visual form of my cultural perspective has gradually progressed and successively resolved in interdisciplinary forms that included painting, sculpture and installation with sensorial elements. It has been a fulfilling experience to have worked with the curators Matt Cox, who has been engaged with art in Southeast Asia for a long time, and with Erin Vink, who has a background in First Australian culture, both of whom sensitively committed to the exhibition, *The National 2021 New Australian Art*. They tirelessly engaged in dialogue with me, and exchanged ideas through frequent meetings to explore materials during the five months leading to the exhibition. They also supported and liaised with the technicians and installation team.

Six weeks before the installation of the artwork, I sent out a drawing and floor plan of the installation with exact dimensions for where which panel was to be placed, and how far away from the wall each panel was to be hung. To simplify and ensure the smooth installation of this complicated structure, I created five layers of mock-up that identified each panel in code numbers: a,1-10; b,1-6; and so on. Each panel in the group required individual designed fittings. The curators organised a visit with Nick, the chief technician to try the fitting devices with the artwork in my studio. No sooner had I finished briefing the plan when Nick asked the question he needed to ask: “Phaptawan, this is

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complicated, tough and challenging to fit everything to the detail. Can I ask you why do you want it this way and what is it for?”

I instantly felt at that moment that I was working with a good team. The question Nick raised was about how we deliver artwork together to communicate to the audience, and it places the artist and the installers in the same boat. The collaboration began with trust and respect, and we agreed that the work—and not the artist—should dictate the display the artwork needs. With a few more sentences, some drawings and a few images, I convinced Nick to commit to deliver that project with me. On the way out, Nick looked back and said, “It’s going to look great, Phaptawan.”

The work *RE-allegory Real Glory* (2021) was an exploration of personal narratives within the cultural and political histories of Australia and Thailand. The work depicts a series of Thai posters during the Cold War, incorporating a number of symbolic blank whiteboards. They represent the Thai youth resistant movements against the current repressive authority. My studio is on Addison Road in Marrickville, which was once used to conscript young men to fight in the wars. It was also the place where mothers rallied to stop sending their children to fight in Vietnam. I grew up seeing posters depicting communists in neighbouring countries as devils. People (including students) disappeared, and some who were suspected of being involved with communism were massacred. In Sydney, there were rallies against violence and deaths in custody of Indigenous youths, while in Thailand people rallied to demand changes in the current Thai Constitution, notably high school students who held blank sheets of paper in front of their faces to conceal their identities. These parallel incidents in these two places inspired the work I developed in this studio.

The least an artwork can do is to travel across time to communicate across cultures and generations so one can learn and unlearn from another. My children were born in Australia but still connect with their cousins and relatives in Thailand. I communicate with my children in Thai—with all the complexity that comes with it. Rules and customs, however ridiculous they sound in one culture, are considered revered or taboo in another culture. Following the death of my mother, who passed away before the pandemic, I was determined that *RE-allegory Real Glory* be a collective platform of intergenerational conversation. I engaged four young people in the painting process, thanks to my son: Yenlamtarn Suwannakudt Clark, Helen Zhu, Erica Almani D’Ali and my daughter Cantra Chaaysaeng Clark. A decade earlier I met an artist Khaled Sabsabi² through art exhibition events which we were both part of. We were both shy and because of the cultural barrier, we did not talk much at first. However, in our own different ways, we gradually developed a strong interest to learn about each other’s studio practices. In addition to the people acknowledged above,

I am very grateful to Khaled, who quietly and generously listened, read and looked at the work while it was in progress and who gave invaluable feedback.

Pandemic, bushfire, floods and recent extreme climate patterns are reminders that we are all transient beings who rely on each other. Many of the recent works I engaged in generate more questions than answers. Once a work is delivered to the public, it is outside of the control of an artist. My interest lies in engaging people to collaboratively process work.³ I look at the process as engagement of time spent to allow us to acknowledge the process, whose irreversible result belongs to today. I am most grateful for the trust and support of collaborators who engage with the process my project intends to deliver and the outcome for which it is responsible. What took place today is the past of tomorrow.

NOTES

¹ *The National 2021 New Australian Art*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 26 April–5 September 2021, <https://www.the-national.com.au/about/>.

² Khaled Sabsabi migrated with his family to Australia in 1978 following the outbreak of civil war in Lebanon. They settled in Western Sydney, where Sabsabi now lives and works. Since the late 1980s Sabsabi has worked with communities, particularly those in Western Sydney, to create and develop arts projects that explore the complexities of place, displacement, identity and ideological differences associated with migrant experiences and marginalisation.

³ I am currently engaged with six collective projects:
Line Work: River of the Basin, Penrith Regional Gallery, NSW, October–December 2021 a collaborative project with Sue Pedley, studio collaboration since 2019.
Unspoken, a collaborative project with Chen Shuxia as part of Sydney-based artists at *Womanifesto Sydney Gathering 2020*. Preliminary work shown with the Womanifesto Archive from Asia Art Archive at Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts.
Leave It and Break No Hearts, a collaborative project with Samak Kosem and Patrick at 100 Tonson Foundation March–August 2022.
Sleeping Deep Beauty, an installation project at the Jakarta Biennale 2021 ESOK, November 2021.
Travel with the past selves: a circumnavigation around Klong Bangkoknoi 1975, a collaborative project with Helen Grace based on the past selves of Phaptawan and Helen on 5 April 1975 who cross paths at Klong Bangkoknoi. I shopped daily at the wet market by the Klong. Helen was first exposed to Asia after having been taken out of a scheduled outward-bound flight from Bangkok.

ambiguous alignments

Moses Tan

Slumped over leather-bound seats, my quiet snores permeated the hospital waiting room. I was serving the mandatory two-year National Service in the military then, and I had been given time off from camp for my appointment with my psychologist. When I woke up, a nurse came over to tell me that I would be up next. My appointment was scheduled at 2.30 pm but it was already 3. The psychologist had skipped my turn so that I could rest a little more, knowing that the longer my appointment dragged on, the later it would be so that I would not need to head back to camp.

The pandemic brought about various changes in how I orientate and how I think of the idea of function. How we can function outside of labels, outside of understood conventions. A lot of this was born out of sudden limitations, given the need to take on roles outside of one's comfort zone. A project I was facilitating in the early stages of the pandemic came from a desire to support graduating artists, as well as to think about complaints arising from things that are lacking within school systems. The inefficacy of some schools to adapt to the digital world in the pandemic, and their obstinate desire to prioritise protecting their own reputations over making changes and improvements, became points of entry in the project to map out some sort of future. This project, *Dis/content*, took on an alternative art school format and culminated in a public-facing exhibition.

When I was in my 20s, I sought psychiatric help for eating disorders and depression. Having grown up in a household where we were never taught how to set boundaries to protect ourselves, and having previously gone through the harrowing experience of conversion therapy when I once misguidedly thought

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I needed to stop being gay, I had to unlearn and unpack various issues within a period of two years as an inpatient at the psychiatric ward. In that safe, confined space, I recall recounting various experiences, from the past to the then present, and underwent strenuous sessions learning about boundaries. One of the things I took away was to think about the concept of enabling and disabling, and the shift between both.

It was always difficult to take on certain roles, such as artist, curator or facilitator, especially when some of these roles have been tied to various dynamics and are associated with a certain level of privilege. For the *Dis/content* project I facilitated and collaborated with various individuals. A method I had adopted to orientate around such discomforts was to think of the flexibility of the role of each individual while not being tied to baggage that labels could bring on. We orientated around the terms of enabling/disabling as a way to function within the project. As a way to respect the various abilities everyone brought to the table, the terminology was a way to provisionally build a relationship among the various collaborators involved, creating a safe space for each collaborator to experiment without being instructed on what to do, on what is wrong, or what is right. There was also a need to constantly be aware of learnt conventions while being honest about it and at the same time work to unlearn or unpack them. In many of my conversations with various collaborators, I found myself positioned as someone who also wanted to learn. I discovered the value of orientating around the use of such an ambiguous role for a flexibility in working, without being prescriptive or over-exerting. The usage of a spectrum between enabling and disabling also allows for this ambiguity, which allows for one to take on various responsibilities without being tied to specific roles, filling in the gaps more fluidly whenever necessary.

Blue tiles the shade of the sky when the sun was too bright decorated the toilet walls. At the cue of "Action!", I was tasked to gesturally put fingers down my throat and re-enact the motion of purging. A television crew, with lights, camera and a rude director, watched as I 'performed' the role. Stories told to the producers weeks before, stories in which I was vulnerable and spoke about in confidence, were fleshed out in all their lurid details for content.

I have been thinking a lot about the extractive nature of research. Especially those in which subjects go through the emotional labour of articulating stories and histories, and for these to, eventually, potentially become public facing. A question I find difficult to excise from the big picture in these scenarios is: whom does this work benefit? Does the community ultimately, truly benefit, or

does the benefit lie mainly in the recognition, academic or otherwise, gained by the researcher from the emotional labour of others?

Approached by an acquaintance in the same period that I was seeking psychiatric help, I was asked to share my experience with eating disorders and depression on a local television programme. Still mostly unfamiliar with boundaries then, I agreed without having discussed it with my psychologist first. For the programme, I recall needing to talk about my own vulnerabilities on a national platform, not knowing I would also be asked to dramatise the act of purging for the camera. A roundtable session with a psychiatrist was also part of the programme. The psychiatrist was not trained in eating disorders, and neither he nor the host approached the discussion with care or sensitivity. The entire experience was distasteful, more exploitative than fruitful. At the end of it, I found myself realising that the focus was on dramatisation, content presented for the audience's viewing pleasure. There was a complete lack of care. What I had tried to share with the producers about my experience in hopes of creating awareness, that was all futile. In conversation with my own psychologist after the whole thing—she had not known about it until then—she mentioned how she would always gatekeep such requests to protect the very people trusted into her care. I learned how to better set boundaries after, and that personal stories of vulnerability should be shared only when the platform and goal were appropriate.

Separate from *Dis/content*, I worked on a project in which I found myself recording oral histories and combing through archives about a certain community. A lot of the work came from attempts to build up a body of research that was then presented in an auditory format. The kindness of various collaborators, from direct members of the community to playwrights, from voice actors to academics, allowed me to build up a provisional amount of resources to work from. Their experiences were priceless and articulations precious. Attempts were made for some kind of reparations to the various people involved in the project, in a bid to not be extractive in the process. Offerings of gifts or help for their time, as well as care, was taken into consideration, as I worked to portray their experiences as sensitively as I could. However, ultimately, I also asked myself, who benefits from this most? My work, while it may have been developed with the community in mind, may not essentially serve the community that I would like to benefit. Were my efforts to not be extractive adequate? And were their contributions and collaboration presented fairly without having been exploitative? I have put the project on hold at the moment until I find a way to better navigate this conundrum.

Translation is Collaboration. Collaboration is Translation?

Roger Nelson

Is the *col-* in *collaborate* the same as the *con-* in *contemporary*?

If the question sounds strange, then it might make more sense when asked in other languages. In English, the words *collaborate* and *contemporary* draw on different Latin terms that both mean something to do with being *together* and *with*. Whereas in Thai, the words for *collaborate* and *contemporary* have grown out of the same linguistic root. In Thai, the *col-* in *collaborate* is the *ruam* in *ruam mue*, and the *con-* in *contemporary* is the *ruam* in *ruam samai*. These words are about liaisons and togetherness: they describe people working in an alliance with other people, or art having a special relationship to the times.

How do I know this? By asking my friend Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol; he is also my *colleague*, which is another *col-* word in English, and also another *ruam* word in Thai. My own Thai is nowhere near good enough to make such proclamations without these verifications; my nascent studies have suffered a setback during the pandemic of Zoom. But I had an inkling of a hunch about these words, because I know that in Khmer, the *col-* in *collaborate* is the *saha* in *sahakar*, just as the *con-* in *contemporary* is the *saha* in *saha samay*.¹

Translation is always and necessarily a collaborative act and process. First, the translator enters into an alliance with the author of the text being translated. Then, usually at some later stage, editors and publishers and other persons are also enlisted in the concatenation of collective labour (although their contributions are rarely given the same prominence). Often, equally important (but usually even less visible) are the contributions of the translator's friends and colleagues.

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What does this word mean? What does that phrase connote? What to do about this untranslatable idiom? When confronting these and related dilemmas and concerns, translators typically turn to their pals and peers. This is especially important when translators are working with one language that is less familiar or innate to them than the other.²

Among the many projects I am currently working on that are partnerships, team efforts, collective endeavours of some sort, one stands out as the most surprisingly collaborative: it is the translation of (*Phom*) *Pen Silapin*, a book by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook. The book's English title will be *I Am An Artist (He Said)*. This collection of essays on art was first published in Thai as occasional columns in the newspaper *Matichon Daily*, and was then published in book form in 2005, by Matichon Books. The book is being translated by Kong Rithdee. The translation is being edited by Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol and myself. The project is a partnership between National Gallery Singapore and Singapore Art Museum. It proceeds with Araya's gracious and generous blessing.

For a long time, I have wanted to read this book. In conversations over the years, friends and colleagues fluent in Thai had described it to me in lavish terms as a book of equal importance for the playfully and provocatively experimental way in which it is written, as for what it has to say about the emergence of a new cohort of artists in Thailand whose work can be called contemporary (rather than or as well as modern), and who circulate in new transnational networks for contemporary art, including biennales and residencies. The book is written as a dialogue between two personae: one masculine (as identified by its use of the masculine pronoun, *phom* in Thai), and the other feminine (identified by its use of the feminine pronoun, *chan*). The book's pridefully declarative title adopts the masculine pronoun. While each guise is clearly gendered, almost nothing else about these personae is certain: both the masculine and feminine voices are erratic, volatile, and at times hard to follow. In these ways, the book refuses a binary understanding of gender, and also makes itself known as the work of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, who as an artist is almost always concerned with questions of sexual difference, and yet never reducible to these concerns; her artwork, while always deeply fascinating and endlessly rewarding, is also usually challenging and unpredictable.

I developed a proposal seeking institutional support and funding for the translation and publication of this book, and this proposal was also necessarily collaborative. I sought input from almost a dozen friends and colleagues who had read the book in Thai and found it valuable; many of these, including May Adadol Ingawanij, Thanavi Chotpradit and Clare Veal, had been among the book's most ardent proponents in those aforementioned conversations we'd

had over the years, while others were scholars unknown to me except through their work, which also revealed them to be admirers of Araya's writing.

The process works something like this. First, Araya wrote. Then, Kong translates. After this, I read and then edit the first draft of his translations, annotating the manuscript with questions to do both with style and with sense. Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol reviews my edits, comparing Kong's translation against the Thai original, something that regrettably I cannot do. We discuss areas of concern, offer further suggestions, and refine our annotations and queries. We return these comments to Kong, who revises the draft in response. And so the process continues.

We anticipate that the book will be published in 2022, and then the next and most important step in its unfolding series of collaborative coalitions will begin: the book will be read. (And, we hope, it will be read widely, not only by students and scholars of contemporary art in Southeast Asia, but also by readers of experimental criticism, followers of translated literature, students and scholars of gender studies and *écriture féminine* and comparative literature and area studies, and so on.)

If every collaboration involves a surrendering of mastery—an acceptance that we cannot predict or control what our colleagues will do—and if every translation, as a collaboration, requires an even greater than usual relinquishing of singular authorial command, then surely it must be that the most profound ceding of authority is the one that happens when a reader picks up a book, and makes of it whatever they wish, without regard for what the author, or translator, or editor might have imagined.

Is the *col-* in *collaborate* the same as the *con-* in *contemporary*? I began this short reflection with this and some related questions. These questions are (as many readers will have discerned) conceived with felicitous reference to another: “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” as famously and polemically asked in an essay published 30 years ago by Kwame Anthony Appiah.³ My concerns are, of course, quite different from Appiah's, and this citational tip of the hat is made with great respect for the continuing importance of the issues he raises, even if also with my own tongue firmly planted in my own cheek.

Questions of the postmodern may have mostly receded from view, but matters of the postcolonial have only grown in prominence and significance. There is now a growing body of scholars who reject the very notion that we live in a time after colonialism, or beyond coloniality. The questions that Appiah

grapples with are of infinitely greater importance and force than my flippant musings on collaboration and contemporaneity. But perhaps they are not entirely unrelated.

If we are to challenge colonial forms of thought and colonial systems of knowledge, including in our studies of the art of Southeast Asia, then surely we will rely on translations. (And shot through this, of course, will also be mistranslations and slippages: gaps which grow between languages and also between authors and translators and readers, and all the other collaborators in the process of passing something from one tongue to another.) If the new generations of thinkers and the emerging institutions of art in this region are to challenge the hegemonic dominance of their counterparts in the West, then surely they will rely on translations. If our accounts of art in this region are to transcend the nation as an epistemological and historiographical horizon, then surely these accounts will rely on translations. If we are to access the thinking of artists and writers in Southeast Asia—a much more modest task than to access “Southeast Asian ways of thinking”, if they exist—then surely we will rely on translations.

And if the contemporary is to make its claim to be global something more than hubris, then surely it will rely on translations. And in this way, too, perhaps the contemporary is a necessarily collaborative fantasy, an alliance with time and with each other.

NOTES

- ¹ See my contribution in: Thanavi Chotpradit, et al., “Terminologies of ‘Modern’ and ‘Contemporary’ ‘Art’ in Southeast Asia’s Vernacular Languages: Indonesian, Javanese, Khmer, Lao, Malay, Myanmar/Burmese, Tagalog/Filipino, Thai and Vietnamese”, *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 2, 2 (2018): 65–195. I am informed that *saha* in Thai appears as *sahakorn*, meaning a labour union or cooperative: *saha* operates as a noun, not a verb. Thanks once again to Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol for this insight.
- ² This was my experience, for example, when translating a novel from Khmer to English. I registered my awareness of this limitation then, too. See: Suon Sorin, *A New Sun Rises Over the Old Land: A Novel of Sihanouk’s Cambodia*, trans. Roger Nelson (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019).
- ³ Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?”, *Critical Inquiry* 17, 2 (1991): 336–57.

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook
Translated from Thai by Kong Rithdee

Hai Ton is a company called upon to unclog the toilet drains; it was right after a septic tank was pumped for the first time in 20 years, since the house's owner has maintained an absolute confidence that no gunk could have accumulated in the drains, which allow an inflow of oxygen to nourish bacteria and start a biochemical process that turns wastewater into good water.

The Hai Ton team arrives with *ngu lhek* (steel python), a declogging instrument that has penetrated countless drains during its illustrious career. They assure me that this python can scrape off encrusted filth from the depth of the pipes, and that it can retrieve everything from plastic bottles to all sorts of wonders hidden in the kingdom of waste. All of this despite the house owner's insistence that this isn't a public sewer but the septic tank of a private home with only one individual, and thus the clogging was definitely caused by "a coming together of all substances in the shithole". The house owner, who lives alone, knows something about this lack of coming together.

The idea of "individual" indicates an indivisible entity. But the self is ripened by a coming together of several parts that become "someone", which, in the end, decomposes and dematerialises into a different state according to the law of physics or certain religious beliefs. The disintegration or the coming together will not result in zero—just like the septic tank, which yields good water.

This natural ripening—an instinct to remain an individual while being a part of a collective—represents a hope that "being someone" is a stepping stone that builds up towards "being a group". The awareness of the self amidst the collective has in the past few years preoccupied the mind of the shithole owner.

The social self is a role that we play, a sweeter and livelier role than the solitude and inhibition that nurture our individual self.

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The social self is a mechanism that alleviates the weariness of our core self, which is constantly tested by our inability to control the forces constructed by society. At the same time, the social self is expected to nurture the blossoming of an individual within a group.

If “individuality” can’t grow by itself but through the role and activity that make up the social self, which is more visible, more manifest, more advertisable, then, paradoxically, it’s a process of ripening that leads to “the real self”, which may have already existed at one time or another under the mode of reduction or repression.

How come our role on stage can shape our consciousness more than the spectacle of what is visible can?

How come the act of playing a role, which begins with the overture and the publicity and the “talk of the town”, reduces the importance, the vitality and the impression felt deep down inside our core self, the beautiful impression that comes after having finished one portion of a work, like when sunlight, a sprinkle of rain, earthly nutrients and the cycle of seasons nourish flowers and strengthen the trunk of a tree?

How can a role crystallise into a realisation and awareness, and not into a dilemma of economic survival, or into the condition of culture, decency, and even the purpose of a project itself? This short text, for instance, has taken the writer out of the role she has for a long time chosen to play naively, instinctively (though still aware of it), a role chosen through the condition of detachment and departure from the coming together of sticky substances, so sticky that they eventually clog up.

She has come to a realisation that the blocked toilet is a nuisance to mental health that gnaws at her more than the need to clean filth from the places where it shouldn’t be, namely the white tiles of the bathroom floor.

Hai Ton gives me a summary of its declogging operation: “No masses of shit have come together in the tank that the owner says has already been pumped. No trash blocking the drains and preventing the toilet to flush either. But the joint that connects the hole of the septic tank to the drain pipe came undone some time ago and the pipe was dislodged and stuck in the ground. This happened in the area that no one pays attention to, except a pack of dogs. They knew exactly what had happened (they knew it by themselves) and so they sniffed and dug a hole around that aromatic patch of earth for quite some time, until they grew bored of it. They did that long before the house owner discovered she couldn’t flush her toilet. And they did everything by instinct, not on purpose.”

Alas! Ngu lhek!