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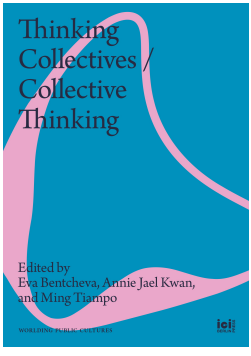

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GUDSKUL: COLLECTIVE STUDY AND CONTEMPORARY ART ECOSYSTEM
MAI LING
NHÀ SÀN COLLECTIVE
PROJEK RABAK
REPUBLIC OF THE OTHER
TOMORROW GIRLS TROOP

Questionnaire on Collective Practices

December 2022–March 2023

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ABSTRACT: Six Asian collectives — Gudskul, Mai Ling, Nhà Sàn, Projek Rabak, Republic of the Other, and Tomorrow Girls Troop — reflect on why and how they work together. Through shared insights on care, conflict, authorship, hierarchy, and burnout, the questionnaire reveals collectivism as friendship, survival, and mutual learning that sustains creative ecosystems beyond institutional models.

KEYWORDS: collective practices; collaboration; friendship; radical honesty; kinship

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GUDSKUL: COLLECTIVE STUDY AND CONTEMPORARY ART ECOSYSTEM, MAI LING, NHÀ SÀN COLLECTIVE, PROJEK RABAK, REPUBLIC OF THE OTHER, AND TOMORROW GIRLS TROOP

WHY DO YOU WORK AS A COLLECTIVE?

Mai Ling: The founding of Mai Ling began with an eagerness to connect Asian diasporas and migrants living in Vienna, particularly those in the arts. We found that as artists,

curators, and researchers of Asian descent, spaces to share and exchange our experiences were scarce. At the beginning, we didn't envisage becoming an artist collective, but we quickly realized the necessity of fostering our own community by regularly gathering, sharing, and bringing issues of intersectional discrimination into public discourse. We therefore founded Mai Ling as an anonymous artist collective and association with a focus on FLINTA* (German acronym for women, lesbian, intersex, non-binary, transgender, and agender).

The name 'Mai Ling' refers to Gerhard Polt's satirical 1979 video sketch of the same name, in which Polt pretends to present his new wife, Mai Ling, whom he has recently purchased. Holding up a mirror to German-speaking societies, Mai Ling represents hybridized racial stereotypes and prejudices against Asian wom*n in the occidental world. She was a mail-order bride bought in Bangkok, wears a kimono, and cooks Chinese food, all while remaining completely silent and docile beside her white husband. We decided to appropriate 'Mai Ling' because she symbolizes the reductive image of 'Asian femininity' produced by the white, patriarchal, heteronormative gaze, and in solidarity, we work anonymously within the collective, symbolically reclaiming Mai Ling's fictional and hybrid embodiment of different cultural identities to assert our multiple narratives. We all knew from experience that the voice of one person is easily forgotten and alienated as 'other'. For us, working as a collective is a survival tool.

Projek Rabak: Our greatest source of inspiration comes from the art of *lepak,* a Malay term for care-free and stress-free relaxation, 'hanging out', celebrating life and friendship. From the beginning of its existence, Projek Rabak took this concept as its work ethos, way of life, and philosophy. *Lepak* is similar to the concept of *nongkrong* in Indonesian, and in English, 'chilling' or 'hanging out'. We do not divide people into artists and non-artists; it is a relaxed, non-judgmental space. Through the act of bringing people together in a convivial setting where everyone practises art in their own way, ideas are sparked, debates, discussions, and schemes are born, or there is simply an exchange of casual chat. The most central element of this practice is friendship, which paves the way into naturally functioning as a collective.

WHAT STRATEGIES DO YOU HAVE FOR COLLABORATION?

Myeongsoon Kim, Tomorrow Girls Troop: I try to keep my collaborators at a healthy distance. Above all, I think one must acknowledge collaborators as individuals with different perspectives and not place too many expectations on them. I see a lot of collectives fail (especially feminist collectives!) when people start projecting their ideals onto each other. It is almost like the breakup of a romantic relationship. You are better off being consistent and warm, rather than burning with passion. Also, I think it is import-

ant to show respect for others' labour and take the initiative as much as possible.

Nhà Sàn Collective: Similar to that of ants: each tends to its own fate. At points where strands of fate intersect, collaborations ensue.

Gudskul, ruangrupa: Our collaborations stem from an evolving process of groups merging together. In the early 2000s, after the fall of the authoritarian era in Indonesia, various initiatives emerged. Like mushrooms in the rainy season, everyone wanted to voice something about democracy; freedom of speech and expression, which had previously been silenced, flourished. We all celebrated it. At that time, ruangrupa built a space for critical experimentation for anyone who wanted to express themselves visually. This physical space enabled interdisciplinary and intergenerational dialogue, friendships, and new relationships. Out of this contagious desire to share knowledge and create new spaces, the collective Serrum was first founded in 2006. At that time almost all its members were art students, and its activities often intersected with those initiated by ruangrupa. We were good friends, connected, sharing opportunities. In 2012 another idea was created on campus, Grafis Huru-Hara, which was formed after a graphic art exhibition to encourage the continued exploration of graphic arts, as well as its exploration by other media. In 2015, by co-organizing the Jakarta Biennale, we discovered Gudang Sarinah, a space that had the potential to develop support for collective-space practices in order to find their relevance in society. Through Gudang Sarinah,

we understood that we are indeed an ecosystem. Learning from these experiences, we finally initiated Gudskul in 2018, to become a larger space open for anyone to engage in critical dialogue based on collective practices and their relationships with contemporary art ecosystems.

Republic of the Other: Our collective grew out of friendship. We hold open discussions, remaining completely honest about our opinions, revealing our vulnerabilities, and feeling safe when questioning each other's assumptions and biases. Out of those discussions, we make works that would not otherwise have emerged in our own practices. In other words, thanks to the power that comes from working in a group, everyone can take a stance that feels unsafe to take as an individual. As we share skills and ideas, we build a sense of belonging. We embrace flexibility in our collective to maintain sustainability.

Mai Ling: We are always trying to be extremely honest to ourselves and each other, which we call 'radical honesty'. We think that working together as a collective not only means professional relationships but is also very much related to our everyday life experiences, with shared moments of joy, healing, or ugly feelings. Radical honesty is a way of creating an alternative kinship with mutual care and trust to continue the collective in a healthy and sustainable manner while embracing vulnerabilities within. This is probably the difference between collectivism and mere collaboration.

Projek Rabak: We don't dare say that anything we do is innovative; in most of our approaches we focus on

the simple act of friendship before any art-ing or crafting takes place. It is a sort of placing ourselves back in the playground. This seeks to welcome people from all walks of life and backgrounds, to understand and practise art in their own way, without distinction between artists and non-artists. A lot of unexpected outcomes and continued processes provide insights to us and our everyday collaborators on the relationship and integration of art within the community. Introducing art as a method of living and practice in all of our daily lives where we meet to play with one another enriches everyone's mental health, creativity, collaboration and personal capacities.

HOW IS YOUR GROUP ORGANIZED, AND WHAT IS ITS RELATIONSHIP TO HIERARCHY? HOW ARE DECISIONS MADE?

Mai Ling: Our decision-making comes from discussions and never from one position. However, we are still finding ways to work collectively and to speak with a collective voice. Since most of us practise independently as artists and curators, we have different ways of working. We sometimes have conflicts, which is very painful, but figuring out what it means to work collectively and acknowledging our differences is necessarily a long journey. At some point, we also have to unlearn and let go of our own individual artistic egos within the collective. We try to listen to each other and discuss ideas to produce positive dynamics and a sense of shared responsibility in the collective. In order

to foster true collectivism, we resist hierarchy-formation of any kind.

Projek Rabak: 'Membership' in Projek Rabak is non-exclusive, based on active engagement and sharing; everyone is welcome to sit at the table. We have members who are pillars in practice, but there isn't one sole person who dictates or decides the direction. We negotiate our respective interests to put a shared value or method into practice. It is collaborative, and can move within multiple directions simultaneously, although we do regroup every now and then to share our experiences about specific projects, or just to kick back and hang out.

Our practice also encompasses nurturing our personal development and holistic growth as different individuals. We build our collective interests by tapping into building something that is shared between each of us, and that isn't owned. There's always something to pursue or to be inspired by in our *lepak* (hangout) sessions. Since our flow of progress is quite organic and dependent on engagement, our main challenge is to maintain a sense of structure or consistency in the changing dynamic. It becomes complicated when personal responsibilities, commitments and questions of economic means are added into the mix.

HOW HAVE YOU SOLVED PROBLEMS?

Myeongsoon Kim, Tomorrow Girls Troop: When there is tension, I try to communicate with people before it gets too late, since small tensions often build up and become ser-

ious problems later. In many cases of Asian upbringing, we are taught to be patient and hold uncomfortable feelings to ourselves. But I don't think this helps when collaborating. One shouldn't feel one is sacrificing oneself while working within the collective. I think the real wisdom is in finding the right words and attitudes for such communications. It requires constant effort.

Nhà Sàn Collective: Initially, as rocks; later, like water.

Gudskul: Everyone wants to speak, everyone wants to be heard.

Do we need voting to decide something? Or to get something done?

Voting glorifies the majority-minority. We don't want that, do we? Maybe at some point we'll use it, but we try to get around that first. Voting is like simplifying everything, but we know that we are not simple. We are complex. Simplifying something complex runs the risk of eliminating many things: new possibilities, imaginations or different points of view. We feel we have to make room for it. The majority vote could be wrong.

Republic of the Other: We openly discuss issues at hand and try to focus on finding solutions. We found that trust and openness go far in trying to find solutions as a collective. We analyse the situation, divide problems into smaller pieces and then designate roles to tackle the problem.

HOW DO YOU SHARE WORK AND RESOURCES?

Myeongsoon Kim, Tomorrow Girls Troop: This question is difficult to answer myself. TGT members often work for free or get paid only when there is enough budget from grants. One unique and interesting example of shared resources would be the pink bunny masks that we wear to preserve our anonymity. Since we have members spread around the globe and a limited number of masks, we ship the masks from one location to another and we put effort into keeping track of them.

Nhà Sàn Collective: In the same manner that we host meals, tea gatherings, and a place of refuge at the home of Mother Lương and Uncle Đức — at Nhà Sàn. We make do with what is available at hand; should more people show up, each will bring along their own share and we will seek ways to gather more. The simplest approach would be to allocate resources equally. Occasionally, we offer carte blanche to the person leading a given project. All decisions regarding resources and their distribution must be approved by each and every board member.

Gudskul: One of our motivations for living and working collectively is to collect everything and share it, including problems and sadness! Hahahaha! For us, deciding to work collectively means opening ourselves up and sharing with the collective. It can be anything: time, ideas, opportunities, knowledge, experience, or even wealth. We will usually find mechanisms for distribution in a fair and proportional manner, if we look for shared values and sensitiv-

ities. Gudskul implements the values of *lumbung* (literally a communal barn, symbolically the locus of sharing and communing) as a centre where everyone can contribute and access all kinds of resources.

Republic of the Other: We rely on each other's skills and expertise. Usually, one member leads a project or an aspect of a project. Elements such as geography and language proficiency also play a role in dividing roles. We share all expenses and revenues equally.

Mai Ling: We are diverse in terms of artistic methods, and each one of us has different skills and abilities. Therefore, we naturally play certain roles and functions within the collective and bring in various perspectives when we work. Sometimes, we have to bear in mind that each of us has other activities than the Mai Ling collective that affect commitment.

Projek Rabak: According to interests and respective strengths, it is a continuous learning process and experience for most of us since we're very fluid with our approaches and often change team dynamics according to projects that lean into different fields of practice. In terms of resources, we take a multilayered approach, as different individuals at differing capacities correlating to the wider community, out into bigger bodies of networks and back to connecting and sharing with the community within our reach. Specific roles are rather intangible in our sphere of practice since we follow a can-do attitude, collaboratively exploring according to real-time situations of being an independent collective, but this helps us tap into ways of

innovating our practice according to the changes of dynamics between people, across generations, and responding to needs within our time as friends.

HOW DO YOU APPROACH DEALING WITH BURNOUT, COLLECTIVE RAGE AND/OR GRIEF?

Mai Ling: We cannot be healed if alone. As Mai Ling began as a platform where we could share our experiences and feelings, creating a safer space to process those experiences and emotions together is necessary when we confront systematic discrimination and violence. Yet, creating a safer space is challenging, as each member has different needs and processes to deal with individual and collective rage and exhaustion. Therefore, we are trying to practise gestures of radical honesty, mutual care, and respect within the collective.

In many ways, we are expanding our collectiveness through our practices by trying to find out how we could be a platform for our community in a bigger sense. We believe that the voices of Mai Ling should not be limited to our members. This is also why we work anonymously, as our collective voices do not belong to only certain bodies. At the same time, we are also facing many difficulties in working as an anonymous collective and we're constantly challenging how Mai Ling can create a space where we can talk about our experiences, feelings, and a sense of solidarity with each other. We cannot assume that everyone has an active and strong voice, and we must find ways to

embrace and amplify voices that are silenced or cannot be fully expressed eloquently.

Projek Rabak: Collective interests for us are rooted in shared individual or personal interests. Naturally, people change, which is why our collective is fluid. We seek to never limit each other, and encourage each and everyone's process of discovery of their practice or pursuing their own approaches. We emphasize what it means to be individualistic, but always share in whatever form that may be. Conversation and hanging out solidifies this, and helps in circulating and moving forward while keeping perspectives fresh and challenging in different spaces. Collectivity is more than a unit for us; it means branching out to be multidimensional in terms of individuality, relations, space, and environment.

Myeongsoon Kim, Tomorrow Girls Troop: Mmm… To be honest, I think the best way to deal with burnout is not to be burnt out! Burnout often leaves trauma that is quite toxic to yourself and the community. In TGT, many of us try to communicate our capacity and draw lines if it feels like an overwhelming task. I think this is extremely important to keep a healthy and sustainable collective.

Nhà Sàn Collective: Retreat to a Garden. Attempt to navigate in different modes, like those of a phone: airplane mode, wifi-off mode, etc.

Gudskul: Practising collectively, living together, and even conversing with friends sometimes has a saturation point, when hanging out no longer has meaning, and conversations get cold. Many friends choose to withdraw from

the collective for a moment to reflect on their presence in the group, take up other hobbies outside the collective, spend time with family, take a rest. But often we have reasons to return to the collective, just to say our hellos, ask each other how we are, hang out, engage in imaginative discussions, laugh at each other, and so on. Although not too frequent, there are friends who stop coming back, choosing another life, which is also good. We don't want to get stuck in that collective romance. One thing we realize is that we still have us, a group of people who share stories and ideas, to think about many things together.

Republic of the Other: We stop. Exhaustion usually does arise, since the work of this collective is in addition to our own practices and day jobs. We find knowing our limits as a collective and individuals to be quite important.

HOW DO YOU REPAIR AFTER A CONFLICT?

Mai Ling: We don't have specific strategies for conflicts, but our philosophy is giving space for negotiation so that individual ideas and wishes can exist simultaneously within the collective. We want to understand and embrace both collective and individual feelings, and not make our frictions and conflicts camouflaged with the romanticized idea of a collective. It might take a very long time to overcome conflict, or we just need to live with the conflict, instead of overcoming it. Open communication and transparency are important in the negotiation process.

Projek Rabak: Conflict is part of the process of moving collectively, externally or internally, sowing a sense of understanding within each of us that we have respective lives, priorities, and choices that may not be entirely what we expect of one another. We have hopes that it's a matter of the right people, time, and opportunity when it comes to fully developing Projek Rabak's modus operandi into being a bigger, fully fledged capacity, although that isn't the priority. Rather, it is the spirit of camaraderie and understanding one another at whatever capacity for sustainable growth. We try to see conflict as not always something antagonistic in nature, but rather crucial in uncovering and seeing changes in our shared potential. It is the ups and downs of our process that add the human touch and values that comprise Projek Rabak.

Republic of the Other: We take time and we talk openly. At times when we have an additional member, mediation takes place. We also take time away from our collective work when needed.

Myeongsoon Kim, Tomorrow Girls Troop: We have had conflict in our community too. I tried to have a lot of conversations with the person who was in the conflict. Sometimes the relationship doesn't heal. But it is equally important to note that we cannot be perfect all the time and need to let go of things at times.

Gudskul: We realize that living and working collectively is very rich and dynamic; many things are happening. Conflict is one of the things we often encounter, like a time bomb. It is always stalking us. It beats silently, hiding

behind dark boxes of feelings. Social life always has the potential to create conflict, not only in collective practice. Like the two sides of a coin, it always accompanies the other side. In every collective, conflicts are almost certain to exist, regarding interests, injustice, arbitrariness, domination, and subordination, whether people realize or not. Talking about conflict is something that is often taboo in large forums, and we are aware of that. We need a certain sensitivity that we build collectively, to be able to feel and understand each other and what is happening. Let's be silent, listen out for things that may not be spoken, feel each other's energy.

Nhà Sàn Collective: We can think of conflicts as a kind of mud. Each has its own process, time, and metabolism, contingent on specific forms at particular points in time.

BIOGRAPHIES

Gudskul: Collective Study and Contemporary Art Ecosystem is a public learning space formed by three art collectives in Jakarta: ruangrupa, Serrum, and Grafis Huru Hara (GHH). Since the early 2000s, these have been active in contemporary art by exercising collective and collaborative work. In 2015, these collectives formed a joint ecosystem adapting values emerging from the collective process: equity, sharing, solidarity, friendship, and togetherness. The objective of this learning space is to spread the elan of art-cultural work to individuals in order to spark initiative among the public. If we believe art and artists cannot

engage only with themselves, in isolation, then to become a collective and work collaboratively is one of the ways to position oneself within the public, either on a discursive or practical level. Without ever disrespecting the individuals forming the whole, by using this approach, artists organically become producers, mediators, and distributors while developing networks.

Mai Ling was founded in Vienna in 2019 and is an anonymous artist collective and association dedicated to furthering dialogue about the alienating experiences of Asian FLINTA* (women, lesbian, inter, non-binary, transgender, and agender) and the larger Asian descent diaspora and migrants in German-speaking society. Challenging the Western heteropatriarchal gaze and racist fantasies that keep reproducing stereotypes about 'Asia', the collective amplifies multilayered voices to reclaim agency through collective resistance and pleasure. Mai Ling engages in various forms of artistic practice and activism, including videos, audio installations, cooking performances, community gatherings, talk series, public interventions, and protests. Recently, Mai Ling has explored an artistic strategy and discourse with the theme of 'stickiness' as collective resistance and pleasure to foster community, kinship, and healing among Asian FLINTA* and beyond.

Nhà Sàn Collective (NSC) began operating as an independent artist collective in Hanoi in 2013, when a group of friends set up a publicly accessible space. With or without a physical base, NSC has worked with fellow companions and collaborators to organize exhibitions, workshops,

film screenings, talks, and other activities as a support platform for artists in the community. The initiative wants to encourage exchange, expansion, and connection. It is a place that is open to works in progress and the unexpected; a just-do-it attitude that does not always yield answers. The name Nhà Sàn signifies the collective's foundation, which is rooted in the spirit of Nhà Sàn Studio, an artist-run space founded in 1998 in Hanoi. Some of the collective's main projects include Skylines With Flying People, IN:ACT Performance Art Festival, Queer Forever!, and the Emerging Artists Programme. The collective board consists of Trương Quế Chi, Nguyễn Phương Linh, Nguyễn Quốc Thành, Vũ Đức Toàn, and Tuấn Mami.

Projek Rabak began in Ipoh, a small city in northwest Malaysia, in 2011. It was initiated by a group of friends who are artists, cultural producers, and ordinary people. Celebrating youth culture, collectivism, contemporary arts, and literature, as well as visual, installation, and performance art, experimental initiatives, filmmaking, and other artforms, Projek Rabak has been involved in organizing, collaborating in, and curating events and festivals, all of which materialized thanks to acts of love and generosity among friends. The wide range of programmes, festivals, and exhibitions, locally and internationally, that Projek Rabak has participated in include the 59th Venice Biennale (Italy, 2022), documenta fifteen (Germany, 2022), and Seni-Kenduri at the National Art Gallery (Malaysia, 2022). Other programmes include SEAD-Mekong Cultural Hub (Taiwan, United Kingdom, and Switzerland, 2020/2021),

Arus Binti exhibition (Jakarta and Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 2019), Hubs for Good (London, Birmingham, and Manchester, 2018) and Minggu Nusantara Manchester (2014). Projek Rabak is also part of an international artist collective network called Transnational Coalition of the Arts (Transnation), which comprises artists from Japan, Germany, the Philippines, Ghana, Thailand, and elsewhere.

Republic of the Other (RotO) started with Xenia Fink (Saõ Paulo/Berlin) and Jinny Yu (Seoul/Ottawa/Berlin), a few years after their first meeting in New York at the International Studio & Curatorial Program in 2011. RotO took shape through the shared experience of feeling foreign everywhere and reclaiming this as a positive state. Their praxis mirrors their lived experiences, continuously renegotiating the questions of in/exclusion, identity, and sense of (non-)belonging. Often working in text form, their work has been shown at Kunstpunkt Berlin (Berlin, 2017), Union Art Fair (Seoul, 2017), Galerie 101 (Ottawa, 2019), and Hotam Press Gallery (Vancouver, 2021).

Tomorrow Girls Troop (TGT) focuses on gender inequality in East Asia, especially Japan, through art and social projects. Our goal is to educate in order to achieve gender equality for all men, women, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. TGT's work makes use of the mediums of pop culture, magazines, Internet memes, and commercial advertising in a way that is critical but accessible and culturally sensitive. By adopting forms of popular culture, we work in the space between parody, critique, and suggestion.