

Collectivity



Rethinking Collectivity: Re-/De-Collectivizing Art in Action

by Hyperimage Group

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Abstract

Rethinking “collectivity” aims at carving a methodology and standpoint to deconstruct the rigid forms of collectivity and to build different possibilities of reconnection. The term “to de/re-collectivize” is coined by Hyperimage Group to interpret contemporary artistic practices that intervene in social realities. This essay focuses on three representative artists from Hyperimage’s exhibition project “Why Collectivity?” for the Guangzhou Image Triennial 2021: Kidlat Tahimik (the Philippines), Koki Tanaka (Japan), and Daniel G. Andújar (Spain). Their practices respond to the core concern “re-/de-collectivize art in action,” which seeks to examine the changing modes of collective memory and visual heritage as they are confronted by the ongoing expansion of global capitalist markets and competing (geo-) politics, as well as the ways in which the imagination of a utopic social order becomes communal (artistic) practices of ad-hoc assemblies and temporary collectivities.



Why do we decide to rethink collectivity, especially given its heavy historic imprint in socialist experiment, a collective memory from where we write as a collective? Our rethinking of “collectivity” does not start with a categorical definition of “collectivity” but aims at carving a methodology and standpoint to deconstruct the rigid forms of collectivity and to build different possibilities of reconnection. We coin the term “to de/re-collectivize” to read and interpret contemporary artistic practices. The term in verbal form rather than a conceptual noun-ification emphasizes the *action* of collectivity’s “deconstruction” and/or “reconstruction.” The space in between is where artists and their projects find a way to negotiate the productive tension, which could be expressed in Daoist philosophy as a co-existence that is interdependent while mutually restraining, “xiang sheng xiang ke” (相生相克).

Background: Facing Reality

Against the background of a supremely complex “post-image” world, art is caught amongst multiple challenges, pressures, and even threats: the exigence of political correctness and consumerism from both art institutions and the market itself, as well as complex problems that have surfaced from accelerated technological over-development, felt at both the level of the local community and of the nation-state, the imminent threat of global warfare. Since 2020, the

Covid-19 pandemic has further manifested an extreme scenario of ongoing ecological devastation and social crisis. The infinite mixture and superposition of images have given rise to a “post-image” era in which the traditional hierarchies of disciplines and boundaries between different forms of image-making, between author-subject and work-object, have disappeared.

Now everyone can produce images and the field of art is infinitely open. Contemporary art has moved far away from “representation” in the classical sense. What is/are the direction(s) art could/should move towards? Many artists have given us answers through practices that negotiate and interrupt the boundaries between artistic sensibility and social reality. The connection between and collectivity of cultural practitioners has become ever more crucial. Art museums/institutions and exhibitions have also moved beyond their traditional role of research and knowledge production within and between given disciplines. They have taken up the function of a public space for political action where the interchanging of human actors and events effectively take place to address ever-expanding social issues. All have pointed to a new reality in which collectivities are formed and dissolved following new temporalities of existence and new lines of alliances rather than traditional political and religious communities.

In this essay, we will discuss some representative artworks by three artists who participated in Hyperimage’s exhibition project “Why Collectivity” for the Guangzhou Image Triennial 2021.¹ Their practices respond to the core concern

¹ Guangzhou Image Triennial chose Hyperimage’s “Rethinking Collectivity” as its 2021 main theme. However, the organizer of the triennial was told to change the theme two weeks before the inauguration of the exhibition without explanation. Shortly after the announcement of “Rethinking Collectivity” in 2020, we happily learnt that collectivity had not been of interest solely to our curatorial collective. Many art institutions and events across the world also shared this concern through their discussions around precisely the questions of “collectivity.” (For example, the 2021 Turner Prize selected a shortlist consisting entirely of artist collectives; the theme of La Biennale Architettura of Venice 2021 has adopted: “How Will We Live Together?”, not to mention the new edition of documenta that will be curated by the artist collective *ruangrupa*.) Thus, rethinking collectivity is not a cliché, but a collective concern (that is, a collective rethinking) formed by cultural practitioners and thinkers at the current moment of global emergency. Shall we take this as a sign of the formation of a new “collectivity” in some sense? Together with 17 artists (including one collective) from three continents and 11 countries, “Why Collectivity” tried to explore the visual experiences from different histories through three angles: ecology, art of the common, and collective memory.

“re-/de-collectivize art in action” which aims at examining the changing modes of collective memory and visual heritage as they are confronted by the ongoing expansion of global capitalist markets and competing (geo-) politics as well as the ways in which the imagination of a utopic social order becomes communal (artistic) practices of ad-hoc assemblies and temporary collectivities.

Kapwa: The Art of Community

The seemingly isolated, dispersed, and regional disasters all stemming from worldwide ecological devastation, one must argue, are the direct product of and continuously exacerbated by Western capitalist colonization (and its accompanying structural violence in the forms of financial capitalism and militarization) over the past 500 years. Global capitalism in the post-colonial era wears other outfits and continues its colonial legacy of exploitation, the Hollywood film industry one of them, according to Filipino filmmaker and artist Kidlat Tahimik. Artists join forces with eco-criticism to address the multifarious inequalities passed down through history and intensified in today’s “cultural clashes.” They also take action to imagine a livable common world, or, to put it another way, to establish a relationship between human and non-human worlds. That could be understood as a form of “collectivity” or “community” between human society and natural environment.

Tahimik has provided us, through his cinematic narratives full of playful ironies, a complex model to rethink these serious questions of historical and ecological survival. He himself often plays the role of an indigenous character from a colonized country, who is at once both “naïve” and economically cunning in his adventures through capitalist modernity. One might argue that his cinematic world captures a reality of the third world through a globalized gaze. One salient example is his ongoing mega film project *Balikbayan #1: Memory of an Overdevelopment, 1979 –*, which has gone through continuous shooting, editing, and reediting, combining a kaleidoscope of home videos, documentary, karaoke MTVs, mixed with fictional scenes from the 1980s through the 2000s, staged primarily by Tahimik’s family members and neighboring villagers. *Balikbayan #1* invokes

the hitherto ignored historical figure Enrique de Malacca, the enslaved Filipino servant of Magellan. The project is imbued with an outstanding personal style and meaningful activism. Tahimik’s work has been filed under “third cinema,” namely a film of decolonization emerging from third-world countries, an act of resistance against the “first cinema” of Hollywood and “second cinema” of European art film. However, Tahimik builds his discussion of politics and cinemas on the principles of communitarianism, self-reliance, and self-determination.²

Balikbayan #1 can be seen as Tahimik’s life-long reflection on colonial history and the defense of local culture and memory. One puzzling scene towards the end of the film is worth pondering. The director falls asleep on the editing machine and a scene from Werner Herzog’s 1974 film *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle* emerges from the screen in front, in which the young Tahimik plays the role of an Amerindian “Hombrecito” (in Spanish: little man — its colonial undertone cannot be more explicit) required by the director to “speak your own language.” This scene conjures up two intertwined histories: that of Ferdinand Magellan’s arrival and the history of enslavement of the Philippines; and that of contemporary Filipino encounters with the West. These two historic moments are entangled by an ironic communality that, we argue, sets Tahimik’s “The Third World is People Power”³ apart from the decolonial endeavor that seeks to get rid of or “delink from” colonial influences.⁴ The communality Tahimik establishes is an honest look at the colonial legacy in the very formation of the (postcolonial) Filipino identity, the *kapwa* — “the unity of the ‘self’ and ‘others’ [...] a recognition of shared identity.”⁵ The irony is that, without Magellan, Enrique would not have travelled

2 Christopher Pavsek, *The Utopia of Film: Cinema and Its Futures in Godard, Kluge, and Tahimik* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 38.

3 In Tahimik’s 1994 film *Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow*, his son asked him what the third world is, for which he answered, “third world is people power.” (around 5’13”–6’56”)

4 Pavsek, *The Utopia of Film*, 171–172.

5 Virgilio G. Enriquez, “Kapwa: A Core Concept in Filipino Social Psychology,” in *Philippine World-View*, ed. Virgilio G. Enriquez (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 1986), 11; see also Katrin De Guia, *Kapwa: The Self in the Other, Worldviews and Lifestyles of Filipino Culture-Bearers* (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 2005); and Hsu Fang-Tze, “The Voice of the Third World in the Asian Cold War: Kidlat Tahimik,” *Renjian Thought Review*, no. 10 (2019): 172–185.

the world and became the first person to circumvent the earth — a marker that is not only a trophy for the “First Man” but, more importantly, as Tahimik shows in the film, is a reminder of the crucial role (or “essential work”) that the “slave” of Magellan played in the navigation endeavor: Enrique was the interpreter, the boat-maker, the expert of navigation, the accountant besides being the hairdresser, the cleaner, and the cook ... that is to say, he was exactly the embodiment of the “People Power of the Third World.” How to understand the entanglement of multiple identities in the director’s films? Is it a “Perfumed Nightmare”⁶ of the sort that reminds one of colonial brutality and its continuous devastation of the planet? We might find the answer with yet another mutually dependent yet restraining collectivity that often accompanies *Balikbayan #1*’s showing, a group of wood sculptures Tahimik names (with variations) “Battles between Two Goddesses of Wind: The Protracted Kulturwar.” The Kulturwar, a “WWIII,” stages the wind goddess *Inhabian* of Ifugao blowing up Marilyn Monroe’s skirt (itself an iconic collective memory), while a camera made of bamboo records this battle.

Idiorrhythmic: The Art of Living Together

Roland Barthes’ quest, begun toward the end of his career, for “how to live together” becomes ever more pertinent for reflections on an age of increasing global mobility and migration, an age when traditional categories of affiliation (such as religion) are no longer capable of holding people together. Japanese artist Koki Tanaka amasses many “collective moments” to respond to how we rebuild collaborative networks after catastrophes (such as the 2011 earthquake at Tōhoku or the so-called European “refugee crisis”), in and beyond the artistic milieu. His project “How to Live Together and Sharing the Unknown” for the Skulptur Projekte Münster 2017 invited eight people with different backgrounds and identities to a nine-day workshop to try to live together through a series of planned group activities. To transcend the common concerns of “relational aesthetics” or

⁶ “Perfumed Nightmare” is the name of Tahimik’s first film made in 1977.

“community art,” Tanaka’s project aims to critically assess the actual efficacy of artistic practices to foster social reality, however temporary that community might be. His work also asks: how to keep the *idiorrythmie* — that “each subject lives according to his own rhythm”⁷ — within collective action? How to connect history to actuality through practices that are rooted in concrete problematics of the social fabric? He sets up multiple cameras to document participants, especially details of their unconscious gestures, emphasizing the process rather than the “meaning” of this participatory art project.⁸

Tanaka’s recent work continues this reflection on art’s (possible) intervention into the social. Focusing on Zainichi Koreans (immigrant workers from Korea during the Japanese colonial rule of the Korean peninsula and their descents), the project named *Vulnerable Histories (A Road Movie)* consists of six topics exhibited through several screens and accompanied by photographic images that form comprehensive narrative relations with each other. The main format and focus of this “cinema of exhibition” project are that of the conversation, for example, between a half-Swiss, half-Japanese-American man and a Japan-born Zainichi Korean woman that move from quotidian life to the histories of their respective identities in a global context. The artist himself initiates this conversation with different protagonists in the film. These conversations provide some possibility of transgressing rigid national cultural boundaries by “speaking and listening to each other rather than speaking exclusively about the self and the other.”⁹ The film project has raised awareness of these social issues, including racist attacks, antagonism, and hatred that marginalized groups like the Zainichi Koreans, like many across the world, experience. However, can art really have an impact on real-world society? Tanaka suggests, in response to Sociologist Tong-hyon Han’s

7 Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 6.

8 Koki Tanaka, *How to Live Together: Production Notes* (Münster: Skulptur Projekte, 2017), 16.

9 Koichi Iwabuchi, “Complicit exoticism: Japan and Its Other,” *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media and Culture* 8, no. 2 (1994): 49–82.

question in their conversation in the film, that the project intends to carve a “room” in which different histories, protagonists, ideas, and demands could meet, mingle, and result in something. Just as Heike Munder writes in the exhibition catalogue, “The Idea is to turn the museum into a site of active discursive involvement — a space that accommodates doubts and dissent so as to counteract the general tendency toward radicalism and polemics.”¹⁰

Occupatio: The Art of Autonomy

What else could art do today beside provoking reflection and raising awareness? Is there anything art itself is able to do to become a more radical driving force that directly attacks antiquated systems and even brings a new revolution? With a deepened social crisis, regional conflicts, and ever more rigid separations across the globe, what can art do to take up public responsibility? The Spanish artist Daniel G. Andújar gives an answer: “A tremendously complex world like the one we face that is at the same time profoundly interconnected requires complex procedures of collaboration and education in the collective concept. We need a change, and that change must begin with a redefinition of the artist’s role in society, and even within his or her specific circumstances.”¹¹

Downloading high resolution images from the national museums of Prado, Reina Sofía, Louvre, the Hermitage, among others, and printing and framing them the same size as the originals, Andújar’s *Master Pieces. Hack the Museum — The People’s Museum, 2018–2020*, launches a thorough deconstruction of traditional art history and contemporary vulgarization-commercialization of classical iconography. Masterpieces like Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* or Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* appeared piled up on top of each other inside the Guangdong Museum of Art (where the Guangzhou Image Triennial 2021 took

10 Heike Munder, *Koki Tanaka: Vulnerable Histories (An Archive)* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2018), 11.

11 Daniel G. Andújar, “Ways of Working,” *The Unavowable Community* (the Catalan Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennial (Barcelona, 2009), 264.

place). The historic and thematic (religious, political, stylistic) specificities of these iconic paintings have assumed new meanings in the site-specific composition, forming temporary collectivities with the audience who gain indiscriminate access to these classics. The contemporary artist is no longer a creator of images, but rather a collector, editor, and even facilitator of images. Through global mobility and localized copying strategies, this work pushes museums and art historical research to face and reflect on the reality of their disciplinary conservatism and institutional rigidity. As Boris Groys argues, “The museum is first and foremost a place where we are reminded of the egalitarian projects of the past and where we can learn to resist the dictatorship of contemporary taste.”¹²

Questioning the authoritative image system and the credibility of the archive in collective memory and historiography is a consistent concern of Andújar’s work. From the project *Technologies to the People, TTTP*, as early as 1996, that explores the possibilities and absurdities digital media would/could mean for social justice and democracy, to that of the closely related *Postcapital Archive: 1989–2001*, Andújar has closely followed technological development and its impact on society. The project *Postcapital Archive: 1989–2001* consists of an archive of 250,000 files downloaded from the internet, including a large number of images and sounds extracted from journals, videos, and museums. This copious archive records with clarity the world’s stunning changes between the end of the Cold War and 9/11. Ready-made images from different media and mass communication are put side by side as an ironic commentary on the out-of-control-madness stemming from ideological sea change, but they also show the multilayered relations between, for example, war and economy, culture and politics. This way of juxtaposing images might suggest a return to Heinrich Wölfflin’s *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, yet it also challenges classic studies of iconography. Almost a response to the social predicaments of today, echoing Aby Warburg’s *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* of the 1920s, the visual relations established by Andújar are, however, no longer a result of *Pathosformel*, but of a collective trauma facing contemporary reality.

12 Boris Groys, “The Logic of Equal Aesthetic Rights,” in *Art Power* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008), 21.

Andújar's image archive is not static, but completely open for user consultation, downloading, copying, even editing: "It will be the presence of all citizens that will give art its deepest meaning."¹³ The artist explains the ambition behind his idea: "My intention thereby was to create a system of complex relationships with the audience, a dialogue that allowed the viewer to establish an interactive relationship with the project itself, constructing contradictory, even antagonistic relations requiring that all the visual grammar on display be called into doubt."¹⁴ Andújar's work, decentering the author and emphasizing freedom of exchange, calls for a collective action rooted in critical thinking and an insistence on experimentation, a process between de-collectivizing and re-collectivizing. Each time, an occupation is made in a similar vein to what art historian W.J.T. Mitchell calls "occupatio," "the seizure of the antagonists' position and the staging of an emptiness to be filled in later." And he concludes, "Occupatio generally stressed the refusal to speak of something, or the confession of an inability to describe or define."¹⁵

Conclusion: Freiheitsdrang

Facing a world of increasingly intensified conflicts, we have little expectation of politicians or thinkers to come up with workable solutions to our problems. Meanwhile, artists and their "networks of action" seem to be more efficient, thanks to their intervention in the social life of different registers, cutting through the rigid social categorizations of class, gender, culture, politics, religion, and even ideology. These actions provide lively and dynamic alternatives. The de-/re-collectivizing artistic interventions are not slogans or petitions oriented at achieving concrete political goals, but rather a "Freiheitsdrang" (urge of freedom) aiming to explore alternative ways of assembly and solidarity, essential

13 Manuel Robles, "Daniel García Andújar exhibition at Iberia Center for Contemporary Art of Beijing," *Catalogue of Postcapital Archive (1989–2001)* (Beijing: Iberia Center for Contemporary Art of Beijing, 2009), 1.

14 Andújar, "Ways of Working," 297.

15 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture and Media Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 161.

components of collective survival. In this sense, the specificity of the artistic form is of no particular importance and neither is the exhibition as a platform for artistic display. This great transformation of the artistic milieu means that artists no longer work with the end goal of being exhibited in the art museum but to engage with social experimentation in a larger field. Filipino filmmaker and artist Kidlat Tahimik, Japanese filmmaker and artist Koki Tanaka, and Spanish artist and activist Daniel G. Andújar all tackle these complexities in unique ways, through ecologically minded anti-colonial storytelling, situation-specific documentary style exhibition-films, or a revolutionary re-vision of art history and museum's cherished masterpieces through contemporary digital technologies.

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