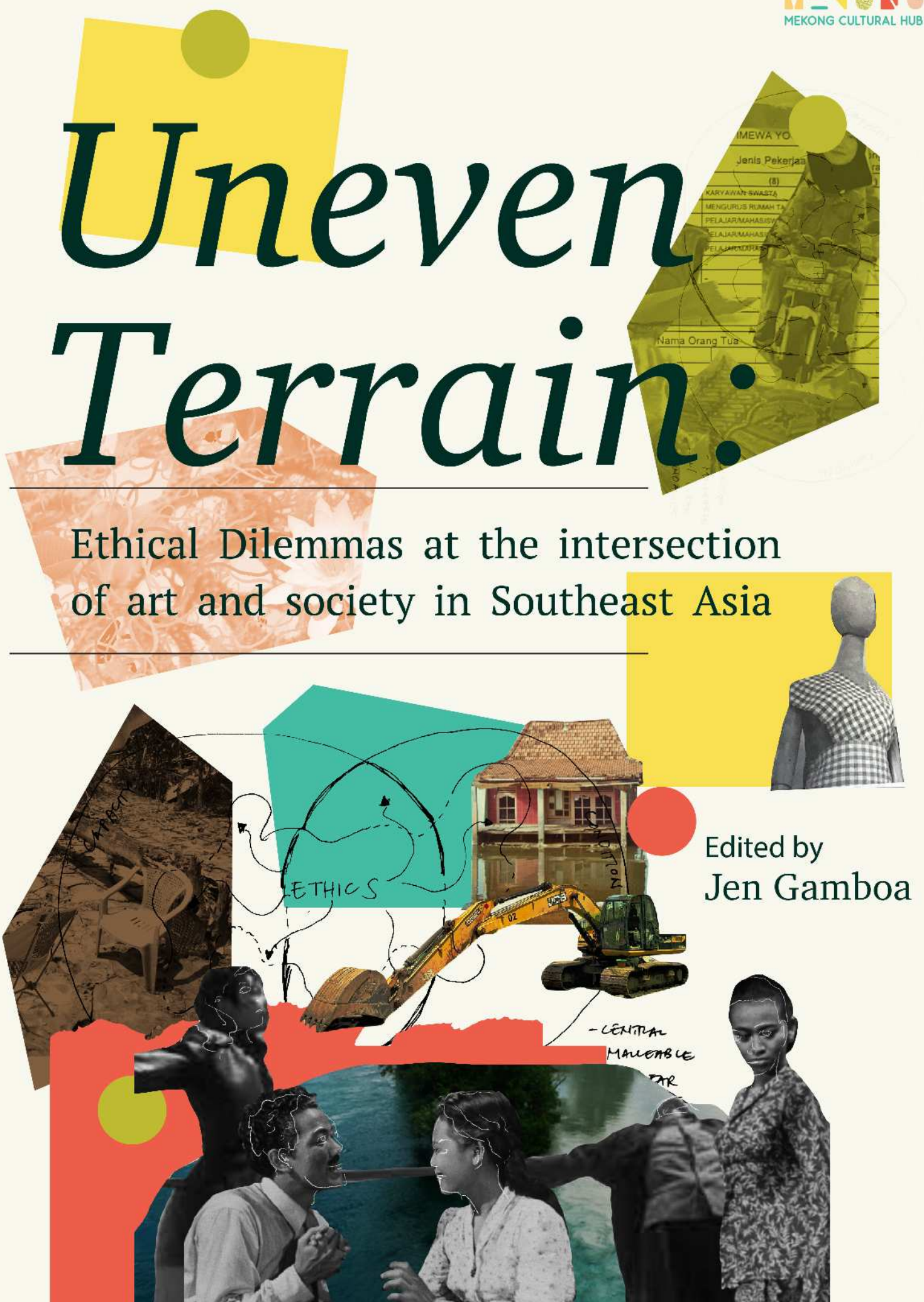
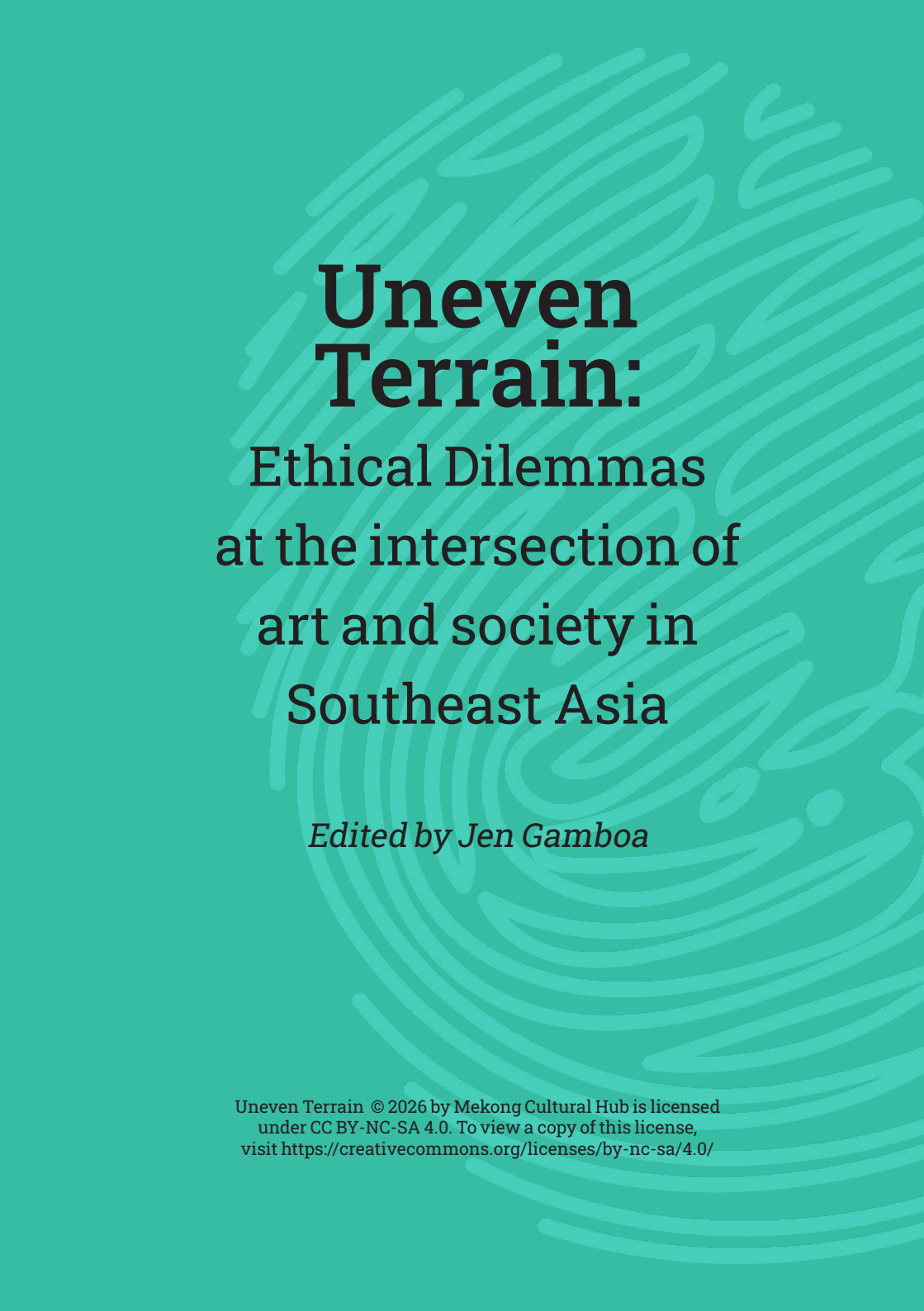


Uneven Terrain:

Ethical Dilemmas at the intersection of art and society in Southeast Asia

Edited by
Jen Gamboa





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FOREWORD

Jen Gamboa



This publication begins with a recognition that is simple to state, but difficult to sustain in practice: that ethical dilemmas in arts practice are not anomalies to be resolved, but conditions to be inhabited—examined, returned to, and lived through without guarantee of closure.

To work in the arts today is to move across uneven terrain. Artists and cultural workers find themselves entangled with communities, institutions, and systems that exceed the boundaries of artistic production. These engagements are often driven by care, responsibility, and a desire to contribute meaningfully to social life. Yet, as many of the writings in this collection reveal, good intentions alone are not enough. Without careful attention to how we work, we risk reproducing the very harms we seek to address.

The texts gathered here emerge from a series of guided, conversational workshops on ethical dilemmas in arts practice facilitated by Mekong Cultural Hub. These workshops created space for participants to bring forward their own experiences—often unresolved, uncomfortable, and personal—and to examine them collectively. In doing so, ethics was approached as something grounded in lived experience, shaped by relationships, power dynamics, and context.

This publication brings together two reflective essays and a series of case studies written by practitioners across Southeast Asia and neighboring contexts. The opening reflections provide a foundation, inviting readers to consider ethics as a dynamic practice informed by histories, belief systems, and ways of being in the world. From there, the case studies move across different scales of practice—tracing how ethical questions take form within systems, relationships, representation, and personal experience.

The initial case studies focus on the domain of systems: urban development, cross-sector collaboration, institutional governance—contexts in which ethical decisions are inseparable from policy, funding structures, and the distribution of power. In the succeeding cases, attention shifts toward forms of engagement, where artists and cultural workers enter social worlds shaped by distinct histories, economies, and ways of sustaining life. Here, questions of extractive practice, time, value, and accountability come into view, alongside the material conditions that affect participation and continuity. The discussion then turns to representation, asking what it means to depict others and how visibility, dignity, and circulation produce their own ethical pressures. The final case moves inward, into trauma, safety, and the search for care within artistic processes.

Across these writings, ethical dilemmas appear in situations where there is no clear or comfortable choice. They sit in the tension between different responsibilities, in gaps in knowledge, and in the uneven conditions people are working within. Each case is grounded in its own context. Each one reflects the complexity of the situation it comes from.

Taken together, these texts do not aim to resolve the dilemmas they present. What they offer is a space to think through them more carefully. They invite readers to pay attention, to sit with difficulty, and to consider how ethical practice is shaped through everyday decisions and interactions.

In this way, the publication extends the conditions of the workshop from which it emerged. It becomes a space for reflection, carried into another form—one that asks the reader to consider the dilemmas presented and locate themselves within them.



Engagement with care and criticality: Reflection on managing ethical dilemmas for a SEA project with a migrant community, Foo Wei Meng (Malaysia)

FRAMING



AND



MAKING



REFLECTION AND LEARNING FROM “ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN ARTS PRACTICE, A GUIDED CONVERSATIONAL WORKSHOP”

*Jennifer Lee,
Knowledge Hub Lead,
Mekong Cultural Hub*



In 2021, Living Arts International (including Cambodian Living Arts and Mekong Cultural Hub) invited Deirdre Prins-Solani to support us in navigating a period of growth and change. We wanted to address strategic questions regarding values and ways of working across the organization, particularly given we are based in different countries, with staff and artists from multiple nationalities. Deirdre specializes in cultural heritage and the creative industries, particularly in organizational capacity-building, inclusion, and wellbeing, and she also participates in United Nations committees and capacity-building work on intangible cultural heritage.

During 2021, Deirdre facilitated a series of conversations with staff and Board members, which resulted in us forming a staff working group with whom Deirdre then planned and led six workshops on “Embedding Ethical Practices” during 2022.

I was one of the staff in the working group, and this eight-month-long collective learning gave me and another co-worker from the MCH team the opportunity to engage with colleagues from LAI (the parent organization) and CLA (the sister organization). Due to our different work, backgrounds, skills, and characteristics, we brought varied perspectives and concerns into the workshops, which also revealed each person's values and contexts. Everyone contributed issues they particularly cared about or were familiar with.

Writing this now, I better understand that the processes at the time were not always comfortable or clear. I recall the unfamiliarity with certain vocabularies in a second language (English), the difficulty of grappling with complex concepts, the unease and discomfort triggered by recalling some past experiences, and the alertness toward differing opinions. I felt not smart enough to speak fluently, carrying a mixture of vulnerability and confusion, but I did long for the chance to organize my thoughts and ask questions. During the workshops, the dilemmas may not have been improved or solved, but simply being given the chance to face them, and knowing that it was okay to talk about them, was valuable. Experts like Deirdre and other colleagues did not provide answers; what they offered was a space to confront, attempt to articulate, and discuss difficult ethical issues, and feel safe and held. I felt more courageous in bringing forward my personal embarrassment and awkwardness, as well as doubts about past mistakes and dilemmas as I tried to revisit them and imagine what different ethical decisions and actions I could take in the future.

I am fortunate to have participated in this collective reflection and learning, supported by the organization I work for. The burdens I carried have not disappeared, but I feel they are no longer solely on my mind or shoulders. The processes influenced the working methods within MCH. When you know there is support and structure behind you, you also have a place to discuss, seek advice, or receive support from colleagues and supervisors, you feel braver and more grounded to consider and deal with dilemmas in your work.

How about the people we support at Mekong Cultural Hub? Most of them are independent cultural workers or from very small grassroots organizations. Where are their support systems? Where do they find spaces like the ones that helped me and our organization?

What we understood and gained from the workshops in 2022:

- Exploring and practicing ethics cannot be done through toolkits, but requires time and continuous practice.
- As an organization and as organizational staff, we are all part of power structures, and power is inherently part of ethics, whether consciously recognized or not.
- Creating a space for ethical discussion is necessary and difficult, and must be supported, methodical, and collective.
- Building the space itself also involves ethics. Those who establish and maintain the space must ensure that each participant is supported in being both an independent individual and part of the collective. Safety must be held as best as possible. Methods for building a collective social agreement must be established. Differences in understanding must be repeatedly checked, and individual expression and listening are fundamental. Collective negotiation is also necessary.

These experiences contributed to how we planned MCH's Learning & Support programs for 2023-2025, including the "Learning Workshop – Guided Conversational Learning about Ethical Dilemmas in Arts Practice."

We did not use the term "training," but instead described it as "guided conversational learning," because this learning process is not a one-way acquisition of skills and methods from a trainer. Rather, a facilitator with extensive experience in theory, research, and practice on this subject acts as a guide and supporter, designing a shared space for mutual learning. It is a series of "conversations," where the facilitator provides reference cases, documents, and audiovisual

materials, and each participant brings their personal experiences and actual cases, sharing their ethical dilemmas, considerations, questions, and perspectives. Participants also offer their own opinions to others—highly personal viewpoints that may include clearly identified or overlooked stakeholders, relationships within that context, and the constrained and dynamic energies present. This learning space was described by Deirdre as one for “practicing our muscles to articulate, discuss, and reflect on ethics in our work in arts.”

Situations related to ethics may seem obvious, yet people may not use the vocabulary or perspective to make sense of their own experiences. In arts practice, these are rarely discussed, and there is little guidance or methodology to support practitioners. This workshop provides a rare opportunity within the Asian arts practice context to engage in such discussions.

We used “ethical dilemmas” to describe the topic of the workshop, but later realized the terms “ethics” and “dilemmas” are inherently complex and are understood in varied or limited ways across the region. We adapted our communication by presenting common scenarios to explain what “ethical dilemmas in arts practice” means, rather than assuming everyone is familiar with the vocabularies.

In the third year, we interviewed participants from previous cohorts, to share why they joined and what they gained, as a way to introduce the topic and the workshop through short video clips. “Finally! This is something we’ve long needed,” participants said.

A safe space for a constructive conversation

I think it’s a very rare opportunity to experience, even more so within the Asian network. Often, we are very reserved in the Asian culture; we don’t really openly talk about things... so, that was a great opportunity to have this reflective exercise. After reading through the application requirements and looking at some of the previous programs run by MCH, I felt like it was a safe space for a constructive conversation.

- Participant, 2024 cohort

WORKSHOP STRUCTURE AND METHODS

The workshop is conducted online, with up to 15 participants, and spans five consecutive weeks, with one three-hour session per week. There are plenary discussion periods and multiple small-group discussions. Over the duration, each participant identifies and works on their own ethical dilemmas through visual collages. Participants can also register for a one-hour consultation with the facilitator, focused on ethical issues in arts practice they would like to explore further.

A journey into understanding myself

I remember one activity was creating the collage—a continuous task that happened over several weeks. I’m not naturally inclined toward making visual art, and so it was quite a challenge for me; however, by choosing the images and photos, and reflecting on why I was drawn to them... it became a journey into understanding myself.

- Participant, 2024 cohort

Stage 1 – Learning program (all 15 participants)		
Before the workshop	Orientation	Weekly workshops
Each participant will get a clear guideline of what to prepare and collect before the orientation.	Orientation is for all to come together as a group to get to know each other and get a sense of how the group is formed. The facilitator briefs the following weekly workshops and checks participants' understanding and consent.	<p>Every participant needs to participate in all weekly workshops.</p> <p>The facilitator will assign some reading or exercise between workshops. The weekly exercise/reading is estimated to be within 60 minutes.</p> <p>There will be one-to-one catch-up time that participants can sign up for to talk to the facilitator to support their specific focus in discussing their dilemmas.</p>
<p>Stage 2 – one-to-one follow up consultation [optional]</p> <p>After the final weekly workshop, Deirdre offers the participants who have completed Stage 1 the option to register for a 60-minute one-to-one session, where they can seek her advice and guidance on specific questions related to their ethical issues in their arts practice.</p>		

A COMPLEX WEB OF CONCERNS

The ethical dilemmas that participants brought to the workshop for discussion are briefly listed below. Each case often involves more than one issue or aspect. The cases can be organized into five areas, as outlined below, including the topics or perspectives involved:

1. Community Engagement, Representation, and Extractive Practices

These dilemmas relate to how artists and cultural workers interact with, portray, and impact the communities they engage with. The tension between authentic advocacy and unintentional exploitation or misrepresentation were highlighted.

- Appropriation vs. genuine engagement
- Extractive community residencies
- Exploitation of financially fragile artists and cultural workers
- Exploitation of social movements for individual benefit

- Journalistic ethics
- Claimed contributions to community vs. actual impacts on community

2. Power Dynamics and Stakeholder Relationships

These issues reveal imbalances of power and the complexities of building trust, maintaining boundaries, and ensuring equitable relationships in collaborative art spaces.

- Navigating power dynamics in community arts settings
- Power imbalances in the community arts field
- Relationships with stakeholders in art-making
- Cultural appropriation and who can represent the culture

3. Censorship, Safety, and Institutional Pressures

This theme encompasses the external pressures artists and cultural workers face from funders, venues, and authoritarian structures, pushing them to navigate their artistic voice within constraints related to physical safety, job security, or bureaucratic compliance.

- Safety vs. artistic integrity (in conflict zones)
- Institutional complicity in exclusion or inclusion
- Censorship by funders, venues, or by oneself
- Guardian for safety
- Institutional censorship: employees' views and their concerns about job security
- Bureaucratic misconduct in projects involving regulated ways of working among different stakeholders

4. Financial Integrity, Fair Compensation, and Intellectual Property

These dilemmas deal with the ethical management of resources, the devaluation of artistic labor, and the challenge of distributing benefits fairly.

- Financial mismanagement

- Exploitation of financially fragile artists and cultural workers
- Intellectual property, copying, and fair profit-sharing
- Fair compensation for project leaders and collaborators

5. Personal Authenticity and Societal Expectations

This captures the internal and external struggles artists and cultural workers face when their authentic expression clashes with societal norms, traditional values, or public reception.

- Personal perspectives vs. social, family, or cultural norms
- Public backlash vs. cultural norms

Without judging what is right or wrong

“Within that short period of time, it’s quite amazing actually to be able to listen to each other in a very intimate way. And I think that trust—being open and listening attentively to each other without judging what is right or wrong—that’s the important thing. I felt that was a very beautiful experience. When you hear a story and you kind of relate to it, the relational aspect of conversations and experiences makes you feel more seen and validated because it makes you realize that other people also have the same experiences as you.

- Participant, 2024 cohort

FINDINGS AND FOLLOW-UP

The resources invested in this program from 2023-2025 represent MCH's commitment to supporting the cultural changemakers we serve. Participants' feedback indicated that this is urgently needed. They have not had other similar opportunities or spaces in the region to reflect on past unresolved and current ethical issues and consider how to face the future.

Lack of Case Studies

Deirdre and I spent a lot of time searching for appropriate materials for discussions on ethics, including case studies to serve as references for the workshop. Possibly due to language limitations—the workshop's working language was English—materials from Asia, especially Southeast and East Asia, were very scarce. Many helpful materials came from or were related to Western contexts, which clearly involve very different cultural conditions. This is important, as culture is an important factor influencing individuals' ethical decisions and actions.

This finding led to the decision to launch a case-writing project starting in 2025. Six participants were invited to write their own cases. Deirdre and MCH each contributed a reflective article—she from her role and observations, and myself, on behalf of MCH, from the perspective of the program organizer. We are now publishing these eight articles, with the aim of contributing to more documentation of arts and social actions in Asia, and to serve as a platform for different forms and perspectives on ethics.

Dialectics of Safe(r) Space and Brave Space

The case-writing project included inviting writers, consultants, and MCH to provide support and discussion throughout the writing process. A “road-test” process was done, allowing fellow writers to engage with multiple perspectives and opinions on their cases

before finalizing their writing. The goal was to help them continue discussing and look at the ethical aspects of their cases with others during the writing process.

The first road test was conducted when MCH was invited by ICAF Hub Singapore to lead a workshop for other community arts practitioners. We organized the “Ethical Dilemmas in Community Arts Practice” workshop, co-facilitated by MCH staff and three case writers. Over the 120-minute workshop, we introduced MCH's ethics workshops, partially demonstrating our approaches, including the concept and practice of creating a co-agreed safer and supported discussion space. The three cases were also used as materials for small-group dialogues, each facilitated by one of the writers.

After the workshop, I was asked whether I might be emphasizing “safe(r) space” too much, and whether I would agree with the idea of a “brave space.” The notion of being brave to speak and to confront different opinions assumes that everyone has an equal capacity to take risks, to speak, and to confront—when in reality, these capacities are unevenly shaped by education, socialization, and lived experience. Placing the burden of engagement on individuals who may never have been afforded the conditions necessary to feel safe, confident, or heard risks positioning them as “not being brave,” and reflects a conceptually premature idea of brave space, one that presumes a universal capacity and ignores structural realities shaped by histories.

In the workshop, participants came from different positionalities and practices, even if they were all involved in community arts. In such a space, to call for “bravery” without attending to these differences risks placing unequal demands on participants, and can reproduce the same unequal structures shaped by privileged systems. What we were trying to hold was not the absence of conflict, but a more careful way of staying with it and recognizing that the ability to enter dialogue is itself unevenly distributed, and must be held with care.

Unexpectedly transformative

It turned out to be unexpectedly transformative. It was not only about the knowledge—the specific content or information I learned, though that will certainly be helpful in my future practice. What stayed with me most were the four sessions of interaction and sharing as a whole. I felt like it is not something that can be experienced again.

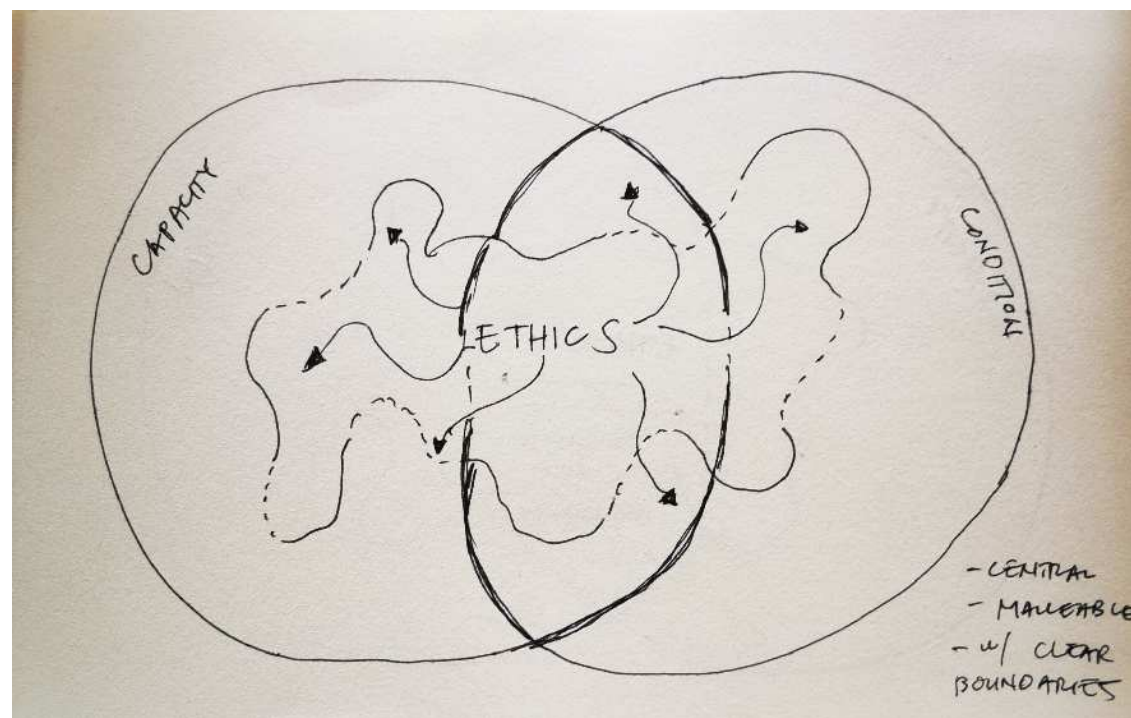
- Participant, 2024 cohort

CONCLUSION

This article is a reflective and learning note, written from the perspective of the organization and primarily authored by the project lead. As a reference for those who are interested, it hopes to invite more dialogues and suggestions as important references for future practice and learning. It also hopes to enable greater understanding on ethical dilemmas and to validate the social contributions that arts and cultural workers make through their practice.

At the same time, this reflection leaves us with a question: if ethics requires space, time, and support—then who gets to have them?

Thank you for reading, and if you would like to continue the conversation, please contact us at info@mekongculturalhub.org.



Ethics in Play,
Ralph Eya (Philippines)

FRAMING ETHICS: PRACTICE, NOT THEORY

Deirdre Prins-Solani



As a six-year-old, I witnessed my dearly loved, beautiful mother being instructed to “go to the back” to be served via the back door of a shop, as people of color were not allowed front-door entrance to any stores. The disparaging, humiliating tone with which she was spoken to can still be recalled viscerally to this day.

I was born at a time in my country, South Africa, when the laws that governed society brutally oppressed and discriminated against the vast majority of South Africans. Growing up under the apartheid regime meant understanding that right and wrong were not externally patterned by the state, but rather informed from within community and resistance movements. Apartheid laws degraded and humiliated. Access to well-being, education, and self-determination were curtailed not only by law, but through an insidious system that cultivated a sense of inferiority and superiority through various avenues, including cultural institutions, public education, and school systems.

Fast forward many years later, I found myself engaged in work through the South African Museums Association, reimagining the cultural and heritage landscape of South Africa after the ushering in of democracy in 1994. One of the pillars we introduced into these discussions, debates, and actions, was thinking through what an ethical museum or heritage practice could be. We knew at the time that the process of evolving a new code of ethics for museums would be iterative, and that it would need to remain grounded in practice and responsive to the dynamics of life and well-being of all. In many ways, this lengthy and intensive consultative process continues to be a touchstone for me in navigating ethical dilemmas.

The stories of participants in the LAI and MCH ethics programs resonate deeply with me. Though I am from the continent of Africa, and we live in different contexts and circumstances, a deeper shared sense of justice and restorative practice echoes across these experiences.

The Arts, specifically arts undertaken in the service of social justice and restorative work within vulnerable and marginalized communities, mostly operate from good intentions. However, good intentions are not enough, and without careful thought to the “how” of our service, we risk doing more harm than good. Artistic processes are often substantially collaborative, participatory, and co-created, diametrically opposed to the solitary labor of an individual Creative working in his/her studio from ideation to creation.

Often, a combination of community-based knowledge and lived experience, together with the Creative’s ideas, skills, and expertise in artistic forms, gives rise to sensory expressions. Because these projects are co-created with communities, they immediately raise issues such as copyright and ownership, the potential for healing or traumatizing participants, and the politics of representation, among others.

With the context of MCH’s network in mind, the emphasis of this

Ethical Dilemmas in Arts Practice program is on **practice**. That means building muscle strength to engage with ethical issues in a deep and meaningful way to translate the learning into encounters between Creative, institution, communities, and individuals. The workshop process is not a cerebral exercise; and so, deliberate effort is made to avoid the use of dense academic texts. Participants are encouraged to read on their own and create smaller gatherings if they wish to focus on the theoretical. However, priority is given to creating space for theorizing practice, experience, and self-reflexivity within a collective setting.

Throughout these pages, I aim to guide you, the reader, through our program’s process—a journey that blends thoughtful inquiry with the ongoing development of ethical practices rooted in context, while also fostering an ability to make sound ethical choices. I also invite you to consider the workshop itself and the methodologies we used as a live case of practice underpinned with careful consideration of ethical principles.

THE BIG QUESTIONS

What are ethics?

During our workshops, we grapple with defining this concept. We seek answers grounded in our own experiences, ways of being in the world, and belief systems. We then gently let it go and invite a reflexivity toward what frames our understanding of ethics and why we hold our own individual and institutional perspectives.

What makes for an ethics practice “ground-up,” and why does it matter?

The law is neither unbiased nor without its own constructions of power and identity, and so in thinking through how we define ethics, we need to move beyond the legal domain and consider how ways

of being in the world—informed by philosophies, histories, contexts, religions, belief systems, and social norms—lead to our sense of what is right, what is wrong, and the spaces in-between.

Our world views and the ways we live and move through the world inform our personal sense of ethics. Institutional ethics are often driven by an ethos formed through a combination of dominant social and cultural milieu, as well as the legal frameworks that govern them.

Ubuntu (Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu)

“I am because we are.” An African philosophy that underpins a way of being in the world that foregrounds interconnectedness, shared humanity, and the relational between all beings.

Kapwa

In the Philippines, *kapwa* refers to a shared sense of self. It emphasizes relating to others with recognition, respect, and mutual responsibility.

Bayanihan

Also from the Philippines, *bayanihan* describes the practice of working toward mutual good and collective well-being

The above examples were shared and discussed in the sessions and revealed the diverse ways in which ethics is formed through combinations of religious, cultural, social values, and economic systems.

Critically examining our understanding of ethics and ethical behavior becomes a means through which to cast a closer look at the context/s in which we live and work. One participant, grappling with the issue of LGBTIQ rights and representation within the arts in a society that metes out punishment and judgment against gay rights, began to think and plan carefully around spaces that would engender safety in sharing, co-creating, and creating a space of belonging through experiential art practice. The value and power of illegibility for a minority group were explored, and the ethics of protecting this right, while also engaging and finding ways to share the art, led to invigorating debates and generation of ideas.

What makes for equitable relations between Creatives and communities of practice?

This question is aimed at supporting relationship-building between Creatives and communities as they work towards building and sustaining an equitable set of relations that recognizes historical and present-day inequalities and injustice. In doing so, Creatives are invited to examine the ways in which administrative systems, mobility, access, cultural nuance, diversity and the politics of representation intersect at every stage of the creative process. One participant grappled with the dynamics of donor dependency within the arts, and how donor expectations and objectives may have an adverse effect on the rhythms and timing needed for building and sustaining good relations between local arts organizations and the communities they serve and work with.

How does a Creative translate an ethics of care into practice?

Concerns ranged from whether to use an open-ended application form or registration that gender-identifies an individual, to whether to make provision for special dietary requirements at gatherings, to whether a generic banking or payment system operates across class or country—these are just a few examples of how an “ethics of

care” is defined and discussed within the workshop sessions. It is not only the provision of a supportive and attentive environment during in-person engagements, but the whole experience of contact, including administrative interactions, which are often not the direct remit of the Creative when working with institutions.

Participants are introduced to the concept of “ongoing free prior and informed consent”—a practical tool with which to engage communities in a manner that affirms their rights to refusal, recusal, and participation according to boundaries that are co-designed.

How can a Creative make visible the nuance and complexities of context and community specific to the site of art making?

One of the tensions we grapple with in works of “representation,” is the extent to which these representations remain true to those who are represented. There is also the question of how to navigate never quite knowing enough about a people or a culture that is not our own or familiar to us. We discuss ways in which we can remain attentive to honoring all beings and stories, while remaining curious about unanswerable questions and challenges.

How can Creatives acknowledge colonial and repressive pasts and presents whilst imagining a new, transformed society?

Most participants have their own histories of trauma. Because of that, they have to think carefully about how they represent these experiences in their art, what responsibility they have, and how to hold this in balance with imagining a hopeful future. And for other participants, the situation is even more immediate as they are currently living under repressive conditions, making these ethical questions all the more urgent within their vulnerable and fragile contexts.

A careful unpicking of power relations embedded in historical circumstances revealed the multiple layers within which Creatives encounter communities, with implications for how relationships can be built and repaired.

How can the ethical principle of “repair” be applied in artistic practice?

The notion of “repair,” as applied within the program, is rooted in the extensive practice and theory of restorative justice. Embedded within an understanding of the fallibility and dynamic nature of human behavior, “repair” invites practitioners and participants to examine, with kindness, honesty, deep listening, and self-reflexivity, mistakes that have been made in past interactions between themselves and the communities they have engaged with. Repair is not assumed to be only direct, that is, between the wronged or harmed individual or community, but may also be indirect, as it becomes a lesson to be integrated into present and future interactions. A few participants struggled with the “mistakes” they believed they had made while engaging in community-based arts practice. The discussions on “repair” were robust and productive, with direct actions identified for implementation. One participant chose to apologize and spend time with an artist to better understand how they could be represented and included in administrative processes for future residency and visa applications. Another chose to assert clearer boundaries between personal and professional engagement. Yet another chose to investigate how an institution could better anticipate issues affecting power relations between itself and the communities it engages with.

PROCESS

In the application process, potential participants are invited to outline an ethical dilemma they have experienced or are currently facing. Their overview may or may not include an articulation of their resolution or lack thereof. These case studies or examples are then used to guide the structure, content, and discussions of the program.

This form of generative and organic learning is critical in not only engaging with real issues, but also in building the confidence and capacity of the participants in ways that are transferable to real-life contexts and situations.

Though participant-led, the exchanges in small group discussions are framed by questions tailor-made by the facilitator. Led by peers, these discussions prove to be an excellent pillar for building trust and creating a community of practice—one that encourages enough honesty and transparency to reflect on mistakes made and harm done, whether to the self as Creative or to the communities they engage with.

Pillars for a participatory peer-led process

One of the critical pillars of the workshop process is the identification of boundaries for creating a safer space.¹ Participants are invited through the application process to reflect on the conditions that would support their learning and participation. This inquiry is repeated during the orientation session before the formal workshops begin.

Key terms and concepts such as “diverse points of view,” “respect,” “dialogue,” “attentive listening,” and so on, are discussed to ensure there is a shared understanding of not only what these terms mean, but also how they can be recognized and applied within sessions. For example, participants may request a time out, flag a trigger through the chat, or allow sufficient space within conversations for silence as some may need time to translate or reflect in another language. The presence of the MCH coordinator throughout all the sessions ensures that there is a “weather check-in” to monitor participants.

A second pillar is deep listening and mirroring. Participants are invited to write a summary of their case studies for presentation across the sessions. A guideline, presented in a simple format, is provided to help them generate as much information as needed. This includes information about the main protagonists, location and geographical context, cultural, economic and social context, and the ethical dilemma.

¹ The term, “safeR space” is used as human nature is volatile and it is difficult to predict what may potentially become a trigger.

The development and writing of each case study is deepened using an image-and-word collage, which each participant works on at the inception stage of the program. Images and words are collected at the onset of the program to help develop a storyboard in collage form—one that is affective, illustrative, and analytical in nature. Presentations are made in plenary, with attention devoted to each case study. Only questions for clarification are allowed at this stage. Once participants have clarified issues or aspects that are unclear, they move into small, intimate group discussions using the guideline’s discussion questions.

METHODOLOGIES

Case studies

A selection of case studies from diverse sources was condensed and collated as reference material. Participants then began to write their own case studies, which became the basis for subsequent discussions. It is during the search for and identification of related case studies that the paucity of regional sources emerged as a concern that needed to be addressed.

The case studies developed by participants through the program are deeply moving and represent the particularities of country, local place, and contested issues, making them a valuable learning resource.

Storytelling

I introduced storytelling by sharing experiences and insights from encounters throughout my life’s work, then inviting participants to do the same. Storytelling, as a mode through which to reflect and learn, is important for its dialogical nature. There is no judgement and no intention to persuade or convince listeners to a particular viewpoint; rather, it invites them to trust themselves and each other as they explore both the facilitator’s and their own “mistakes.”

Peer learning

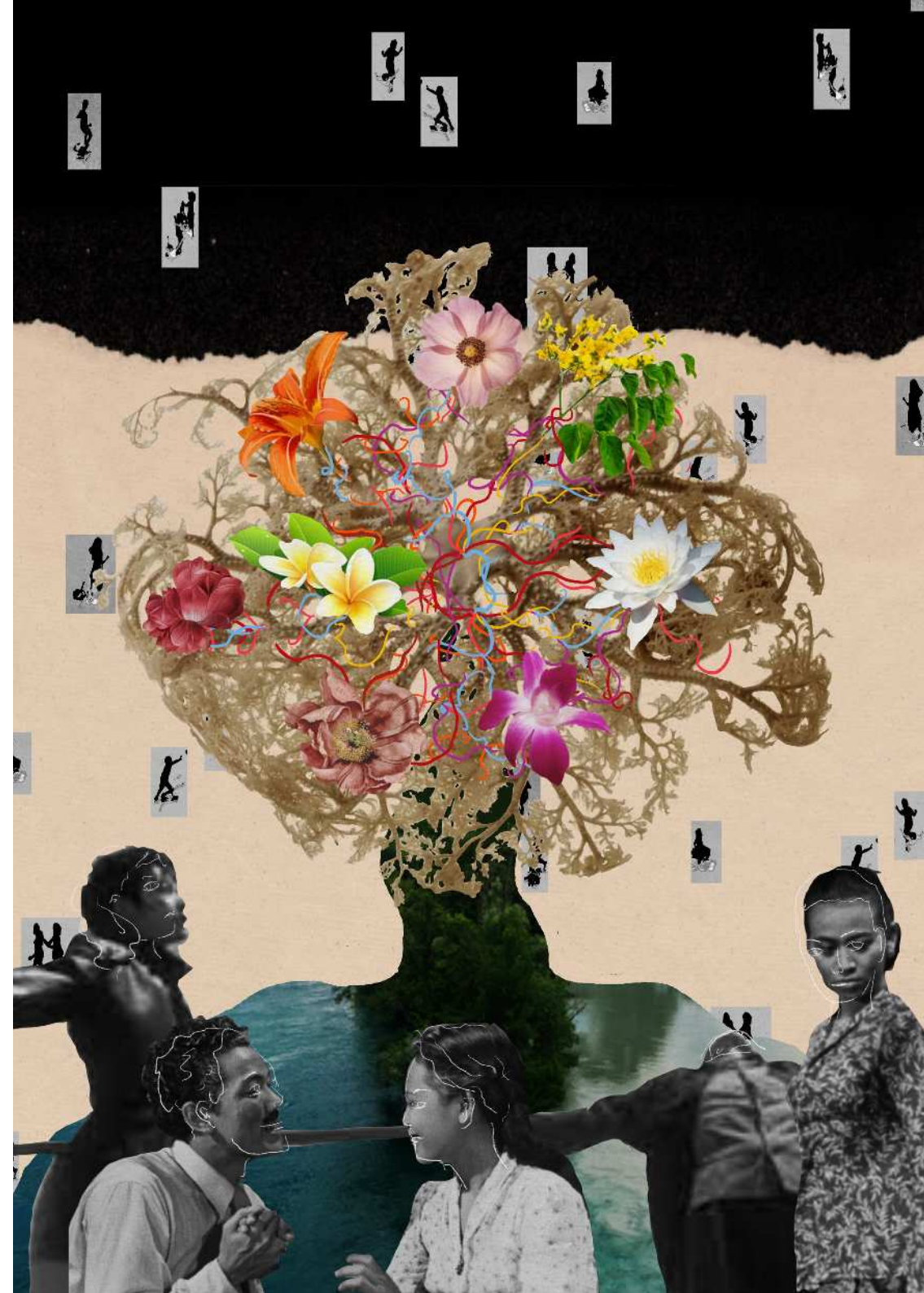
MCH is highly skilled in constituting effective small groups to maximize peer learning and teaching. Opportunities are regularly interspersed within sessions for small group discussions, discussions in pairs, as well as plenary exchanges. Both facilitators closely monitor levels of interaction, sharing, and discussion.

Collaging as self-reflexive practice

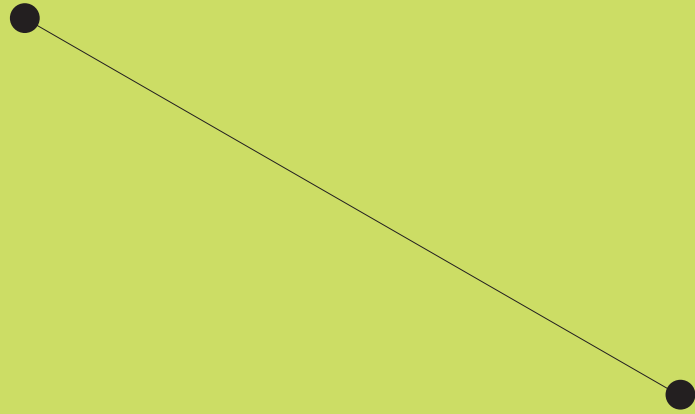
Collaging presents an opportunity for visualizing the ethical dilemma being grappled with. It invites engagement at an affective and subliminal level. Through this creative process, challenges can be layered and nuanced over time, much like the putting together of a puzzle. Images work at a symbolic and interpretive level. The choices of colors, images, and words invite self-reflexivity through mood and careful consideration of emotional responses. The slow build-up of the collage presents an opportunity for reflection, mirroring by peers, and listening beyond words.

We hope that the exceptional samples of case studies in this book will mark a beginning in the careful documentation of the experiences of Creatives within the region—to serve as exemplars for good practice, support ongoing learning, and strengthen ethical arts practice.

Untitled,
Tams (Singapore)



STRUCTURES



AND



SYSTEMS



The following case study begins by examining an ethical dilemma shaped by systems—contexts in which artistic practice is closely entangled with institutional frameworks, governance structures, and the distribution of power. Drawn from an ecological art project on an offshore island in Taiwan, it reflects on the challenges that arise in cross-sector collaboration, where artists, community actors, and government institutions operate within differing systems of responsibility and accountability.

At the center of the case is a decision that appears pragmatic: whether to follow a locally grounded, trust-based mode of collaboration or to insist on formal agreements required by funding structures and administrative systems. As the project unfolds, this tension exposes deeper issues of representation, authorization, and misaligned roles, revealing how shared intentions do not necessarily translate into shared practices.

The case traces how the absence of clear structures, uneven capacities, and shifting forms of accountability can lead to breakdown. It considers what happens when relational trust and structural responsibility cannot be sustained together, and how ethical decisions—such as withdrawal or termination—may emerge under such conditions.

Finally, the case attends to the personal dimensions of this process, including the limits of individual capacity and the forms of care required to sustain practice over time.



GOODWILL IS NOT A SYSTEM: AN ETHICAL FAILURE IN CROSS-SECTOR ART COLLABORATION

Yi-pei Lee (Taiwan)



This case examines ethical dilemmas commonly encountered in public-space and community-engaged art projects involving collaborations among artistic teams, local civic groups, and governmental bodies. Using an ecological art project on one of Taiwan's offshore islands as a case study, it analyses the decision-making tensions faced by different stakeholders amid formal partnerships, administrative frameworks, and shifts in community-driven momentum. The study further proposes strategies that art practitioners may adopt when navigating cross-sector collaboration. It also considers the mental health of the key organizer who curated the program as an important aspect of program support.

INTRODUCTION

In cross-sector collaborations, public art and socially engaged art must navigate between *good intentions* and *institutional frameworks*. Ethical challenges rarely arise from malice; rather, they emerge from friction among well-intentioned actors—particularly when artists, governmental bodies, and civic groups interact.

While coordinating an ecological art project on one of Taiwan's outlying islands, I encountered a situation that raised a practical and ethical question: *Should I respect the locally preferred, contract-free mode of collaboration, or insist on formal documentation and institutionalized cooperation—at the risk that the project might lose its sense of human connection and potentially collapse?*

What appears to be a simple decision involves professional responsibility, community ethics, cross-cultural communication, and administrative procedure. It also reflects broader differences across countries and systems in how “civil society” and the relationship between government, art, and community are understood and practiced.

In Switzerland, higher education and vocational training systems emphasize public governance, policy procedures, and civic participation, producing a well-developed “civic literacy ladder” that enables structured interaction through formalized institutional channels.²

By contrast, cultural and arts policy in the United States tends to operate through communication and collaboration between government bodies and a wide spectrum of art institutions. This system is characterized by a strong nonprofit ecosystem and funding-oriented mechanisms—often described as networked philanthropy and

institutional pluralism—alongside a vibrant landscape of grassroots cultural organizations, including nonprofits and community arts networks.

Government agencies such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) primarily provide policy frameworks and resources, while collaboration typically occurs through grants, networks, and platform-based partnerships rather than through formalized models of co-governance.³ As a result, universities and art schools in the United States frequently incorporate social practice, interdisciplinary research, and community engagement into their curricula, cultivating practitioners equipped with participatory methodologies and public-facing skills.

Taiwan presents a different configuration, marked by strong grassroots vitality alongside diverse and uneven institutional alignment. Civil society initiatives are highly active, with community groups and grassroots organizations often driving artistic and environmental work. Cultural policy has encouraged interdisciplinary education and NGO capacity-building, fostering a large number of cross-disciplinary practitioners. However, differing educational and professional backgrounds frequently lead to misalignments in professional standards, governance vocabularies, and procedural expectations.

While shared values and visions may gradually converge through sustained collaboration, the implementation phase of projects often reveals conflicts of objectives, information asymmetries, and -inflexible contractual arrangements—classic principal-agent problems arising from disparities in experience and organizational maturity. These tensions can significantly affect both the efficiency

² Kübler, D. (2024). Citizen participation through direct legislation: A road to success? *GPPG*, 4, 184–196 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43508-024-00092-7>

³ National Endowment for the Arts. (2025). *Exploratory findings from a national study of local arts agencies* <https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/publications/conduits-and-catalysts-exploratory-findings-national-study-local-arts-agencies>

and flexibility of project execution.⁴ (The author's own practice may be regarded as a representative case.)

Japan, meanwhile, operates under a centralized cultural policy and administrative structure, coordinated by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, national strategies implemented through local, project-based initiatives. Cultural promotion and regional revitalization are clearly defined at the national level, while local activities are carried out through subsidy schemes, festivals, and place-based development programs. Art–community collaborations frequently take the form of public–private partnerships and locally embedded cultural events.⁵ This model has become a key methodological reference for cultural policy planning and implementation in Taiwan.

When community-driven initiatives are incorporated into official programs, critical questions emerge: How should commitments be managed? How can shifting roles be navigated? And how can motivation be sustained?

CASE DESCRIPTION—ISLAND ART FESTIVAL

The Starting Point of Collaboration

Participatory and community-based art initiatives are public-facing and involve multiple stakeholders, which often results in overlapping design considerations. *Island Art Festival* was conceived as a locally grounded, community-embedded initiative.

⁴ Li, H.-W. (2025). *Exploring the operation of regional revitalization policy from the perspective of principal-agent theory* (Master's thesis). <http://tdr.lib.ntu.edu.tw/jspui/handle/123456789/98498>

⁵ Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). (n.d.). *Cultural policy and regional revitalization*. https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/bunka/toushin/05021601/

My organization, **SUAVEART**, is a research-based curatorial institution in Taiwan working across environmental, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural art practices. We follow a general principle: we do not intervene in a community unless we are explicitly invited by local residents. Trust always precedes art, and such trust is built through accumulated experience and sustained engagement.

Through repeated field research, community collaboration in Indonesia, and facilitating Taiwanese artists' international participation, our organization developed a body of work that led K to invite us to bring and adapt community practices from Indonesia, with the aim of introducing international artists to the island and exploring how they could engage with the local community.

Our initial dialogue with K focused on clarifying key parameters:

- Was this a community-based project, and what activities were envisioned?
- Who would assume primary responsibility and leadership?
- Who would handle administration, logistics, volunteers, and staffing?
- What were the sources of funding?
- Was partial cost recovery possible?

K indicated that she could activate her connections with the local government and suggested submitting a formal proposal to apply for public funding. Following this, several meetings were arranged by K, and we identified the project's stakeholders as follows:

- The SUAVEART team (artistic direction, curatorial work, international collaboration and network, organization, and execution)
- Local collaborator K (acting as an individual and as a member of a civic group proposer; leadership of local residents, B&B, and execution)

- Local civic organizations (evolved from volunteer groups recommended by K)
- Local government and designated officials
- Domestic and international artists

Early Preparation: Understanding “Island-Based Knowledge of Living”

Taiwan is composed of nineteen islands. The main island hosts the majority of the population, while offshore islands are inhabited by Indigenous peoples, descendants of early migrants from Fujian and Guangdong, and more recent migrant communities. Daily life remains closely intertwined with natural forces such as typhoons, earthquakes, heavy rainfall, and landslides.

Taiwanese education often emphasizes how to confront or solve problems caused by natural forces, but rarely addresses how to *co-exist* with it *and cultivate shared practices* in relation to it. Many members of local civic groups come from backgrounds in the basic sciences, social movements, or community education. While not professional scientists, they often operate with a quasi-scientific mindset. Friction among values, social systems, and professional standards became a key source of ethical challenges that later emerged.

Referencing the Collaborative Experience of Jatiwangi Art Factory (Indonesia)

Jatiwangi Art Factory (JaF) is an art community located in a rural area of West Java, Indonesia. One of its founders, a graduate of the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB), introduced the concept of an art collective to his hometown in 2005, where it has been practiced continuously ever since. JaF is now widely recognized internationally.

SUAVEART first connected with JaF in 2017, and through sustained

observation, learning, and relationship-building, we identified several key features of their approach:

- Long-term, place-based engagement by founders, their families, younger generations, and international partners
- Use of art as a strategy for social resilience
- A locally embedded ecosystem involving government officials, police, postal workers, villagers, laborers, and students
- The gradual formation of international networks through local festivals and international events, advancing ecologically oriented values

These experiences clarified for us what constitutes *effective socially engaged collaboration* and how mutual growth can occur within international cultural ecosystems.

After more than two decades of development, JaF continues to be supported by cultural practitioners and maintains strong participation in international projects, including the 2025 São Paulo Biennial, documenta fifteen in Kassel, G20 cultural programs, as well as the elevation of local art festivals to nationally recognized cultural events.

In Taiwan, local governments and communities—while drawing on Japanese cultural policy models for regional revitalization and infrastructure development—have increasingly used cultural initiatives to build international visibility, often through festivals aimed at stimulating tourism. In this context, K’s invitation reflected a similar desire to attract international attention while promoting local identity while also opening up the question of how such engagement might be shaped by more sustained, community-based approaches.

Establishing the Project Structure

During the preparatory phase, I travelled regularly to the island—each trip taking five to seven hours by land and ferry, with round trips totaling at least fifteen hours. In parallel, another SUAVEART team member committed to building local relationships and coordinating on-site work.

After multiple meetings, we agreed with K and the government to divide the project into two main components:

- **SUAVEART**: artist residencies, exhibition planning, and international exchange workshops
- **K**: local coordination, volunteer management, liaison with government, and on-site implementation

While this structure appeared clear, it became the source of subsequent challenges.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS

The core conflicts emerged from the following issues:

Representation

K is a resident of the island with in-depth knowledge of local infrastructure and the natural environment. She is a member of a civic organization, where she frequently acts as a coordinator.

From the early stages, K took the initiative to organize coordination meetings with government representatives and remained active in communication throughout the implementation phase. She repeatedly emphasized that she would participate in the project in her personal capacity as local coordinator and secondary project lead, with responsibilities divided accordingly.

K established a group of local private-sector operators, including café and homestay owners, and assumed responsibility for arranging accommodation for visiting artists and project staff through exchange arrangements in support of the arts program. She also indicated that she would negotiate with local associations to ensure availability of lodging.

As this was a government-funded project, multiple contracts were required to formalize collaboration with K, her civic organization, as well as the local businesses. These agreements were intended to clarify authorization, roles, responsibilities, and documentation requirements. K was informed that she needed to sign an individual contract with our company.

While the artistic components progressed as planned, local implementation remained unresolved. Key elements—including formal contracts, accommodation documentation, and working group coordination—were not completed. Activities related to the local ecological context, such as beach clean-ups, volunteer coordination, and on-site role allocation, became increasingly disconnected.

Despite continued efforts to confirm the structure of collaboration with K and her civic organization, no clear arrangement emerged.

Two critical issues then came to light: the civic organization had undergone a leadership change and had not formally approved its participation as an official project partner, nor authorized K to act on its behalf. As a result, contracts could not be finalized, even as the project moved forward.

Power Dynamics Following Approval of Approximately USD 60,000 in Government Funding

- The project shifted from informal, trust-based collaboration to partially formed ad hoc working groups
- Administrative, legal, and accounting requirements intensified

- Government funding was delayed despite ongoing revisions
- K continued to operate informally and was unable to meet these requirements

Government Response After Issues Were Reported

The government declined to mediate and instead suggested “splitting” overlapping subsidized beach-cleaning activities. However, K did not propose alternatives. As a result, much of the project entered a state of partial suspension.

Stalemate

- **K** failed to implement agreed principles, complete required procedures, or provide alternative plans.
- **SUAVEART** could not proceed without local institutional support or trust-based agreements. Attempts to proceed independently were constrained by the island’s remoteness. Some local individuals expressed reluctance to intervene on K’s behalf, while senior residents indicated that similar situations had occurred in the past and could only offer apologies.
- Government offered recommendations but did not intervene

Evaluating the Consequences of Each Option (Ethical Framing)

We conducted a mid-project review to gather feedback from artists, local partners, and internal team members. Even as participants expressed strong support for the artistic activities, several key administrative processes proved difficult to sustain. We encountered failures in communication and a lack of alternative solutions. We therefore had to consider the following options:

Option A: Forgo formal contracts

- Increased risk in international collaboration
- Full responsibility borne by the SUAVEART team without legal protection
- Reduced transparency in project operations

Option B: Insist on formal documentation

- Potential withdrawal of local collaborators
- Possible erosion of community trust
- Risk of project cancellation

SUAVEART’S FINAL DECISIONS

- Conduct phased review and improvement meetings
- Report factual findings to the government and propose termination of the collaboration
- Safeguard the rights and interests of participating artists and international partners
- Cancel remaining activities and formally close the project
- Produce an internal reflection document to inform future collaboration guidelines

PERSONAL-LEVEL CONSIDERATIONS

At this stage, I experienced a health crisis caused by prolonged work-related exhaustion. In order not to disrupt project operations, I maintained a professional demeanor and withheld emotional expression. However, sustained emotional suppression and internalized stress could lead to deeper harm than initially anticipated—a realization that became clear only in retrospect.

If faced with similar circumstances in the future, I would emphasize the importance of care structures alongside professional responsibility. While commitment to a project is essential, it must be accompanied by space for feedback, acknowledgment, and appropriate support.

- Schedule mid-phase project reviews alongside designated periods of rest to safeguard collective energy and reassess both structural frameworks and collaborative dynamics
- Seek psychological counselling proactively. For self-employed practitioners in particular, work-related harm often remains unrecognized unless actively acknowledged and addressed
- If a collaborator no longer demonstrates the capacity to work toward shared goals, conclude the collaboration early—regardless of governmental ties or local leadership positions
- Allow sufficient time for comprehensive physical, mental, and emotional recovery

Once recovery has progressed, it may be helpful to reflect on how to respond to moments of injustice within collaborative work. Community-oriented projects involve complex and uneven forms of communication, and resolution often takes longer than expected. Listening, documenting, allowing time for processing can serve as protective strategies, particularly where power is uneven or conflict cannot be addressed directly.

How can self-care be practiced effectively?

Self-care in arts administration is often overlooked, particularly in Asian contexts, where organizers face implicit double standards. While building the infrastructure for large-scale projects, the ethic of care that initially sustains the work can erode under pressure. Recognizing when to pause and seek support—whether through peers, advisors, or professional services—is essential not only for individual well-being, but for sustaining ethical practice.

How can appropriate support be identified?

Identifying appropriate forms of support requires both situational awareness and a willingness to move beyond immediate professional circles. Support is rarely singular; it often emerges through a combination of informal networks, institutional resources, and shared experience. Recognizing when and how to draw on these forms of support is essential—not only in moments of crisis, but for sustaining ethical practice.

CONCLUSION

Ethical dilemmas in cross-regional and multi-administrative art projects—spanning central government to local communities—are not exceptions but the norm. Jatiwangi Art Factory in Indonesia has been embedded in its local context for over twenty years, with multiple generations living together to address shared challenges. By contrast, although we thought the local networks were in place to be able to mobilize resources across schools, businesses, government agencies, and volunteers, no comparable intergenerational or cross-sector working group had been established.

Although we invited more than twenty international artists and engaged prominent figures as part of our outreach strategy, the overall impact remained limited. During site visits conducted with collaborating vendors shortly before the event, we found that no promotional materials had been displayed. Local awareness instead relied largely on informal efforts by teachers and parents.

Given the imbalance between curatorial planning and on-the-ground implementation, we decided to terminate the contract, halt further execution, and withdraw from the project. This decision was made both to safeguard well-being and in recognition of the following:

1. Identify stakeholders' roles and authorization status at an early stage
2. Establish pre-collaboration consensus documents and clear task-allocation
3. Appoint multiple project managers with practical experience
4. Develop mechanisms for energy management and emotional care
5. Recognize that terminating a collaboration may, at times, be an ethical choice

Artistic practice does not rely solely on romanticized action; it requires the capacity to *carry complexity*. Even when a team appears large, the number of individuals able to assume responsibility and withstand pressure is often limited. Ethical competence lies in maintaining transparency, integrity, and responsiveness amid disorder, while also taking care of oneself.

Untitled,
Tams (Singapore)



- SELF - FEELINGS
- SELF - DILEMMA
- POWER - DILEMMA (BETWEEN INTERNAL PEOPLE)
- POWER - DILEMMA (EXTERNAL PEOPLE)



The next case examines ethical challenges that arise when artistic and cultural practices are situated within large-scale development frameworks. Set within an urban riverine revitalization project in Samarinda, Indonesia, it reflects on how planning priorities, institutional arrangements, and funding structures shape both the scope and limits of participation.

Building on the previous case, which examined frictions within cross-sector collaboration, this account shifts the focus to how these dynamics are reconfigured within development infrastructures. Working as part of a community engagement team, the author moves between facilitating workshops with riverine communities and contributing to planning outputs that feed into the project's master plan. This dual position brings into focus a set of conflicts that are not easily reconciled: between relational forms of knowledge and the demand for standardized outputs, between the time needed to build trust and the timelines set by

project delivery, and between the intention to support community voices and the ways these are translated—often reduced—within decision-making processes.

Situated within longer histories of urban development, the case shows how riverine settlements are framed through categories that justify intervention while obscuring everyday practices and forms of dwelling. It also highlights the limits of participatory approaches when they operate within systems that have already defined their terms, raising questions about whose knowledge is recognized, how it is transformed, and what is lost in the process.

Taken together, the account reflects on working within overlapping responsibilities, where these pressures are not only negotiated but also constrained by the conditions under which knowledge is produced, interpreted, and used.

BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE: ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

Lutfiah Setyo Cahyani (Indonesia)



Between 2024 and early 2025, I was involved in an *urban riverine* revitalization project initiated by the municipal government of Samarinda, in collaboration with a Java-based urban and climate think tank.⁶ The project aimed to formulate a master plan for preserving and managing the urban riverine area, where waterways and human life are closely entangled.

Urban riverine areas are frequently framed in policy as problematic—associated with flooding, informal settlements, and poor sanitation—and are often categorized as “slums,” justifying intervention. In this project, they are framed as sites for flood mitigation, ecological connectivity, and tourism-driven growth, with green open spaces as the primary aim.

⁶ In Indonesia’s development context, Java often serves as the benchmark of modernity, leading knowledge models and practices developed there as normative standards for progress elsewhere. The history of development in Indonesia reflects the persistent reproduction of epistemic and material inequalities shaped by this ideology. For me, it is thus important to note the geographical and historical distance between the project site in eastern Indonesia and the institutional bases of the technocrats involved.

The project was funded primarily through the municipal government budget. This funding structure shaped not only the scope of activities but also the criteria by which success was evaluated: budget absorption, adherence to tight timelines, and deliverables of solutions. Within this framework, the river and its surrounding communities were rendered legible⁷ through engineering logics and spatial optimization.

Although the project's aim to create green open spaces may offer ecological solutions as well as opportunities for urban development, its implementation in Indonesia often reveals contested dynamics. Communities along the riverbanks are commonly labelled as "informal," or "illegal," classifications that often justify regulation, displacement, and eviction, while obscuring the everyday practices and social worlds of these communities.

Within the project, I worked as part of the Community Engagement team, affiliated with a socially engaged art collective based in Java. Working alongside local practitioners in Samarinda, we facilitated in-situ art workshops with the Tepian⁸ community—residents living along the banks within the project sites—while contributing to the translation of field encounters into planning documents in collaboration with the project's architects and designers. The workshops aimed to understand modes of dwelling, everyday practices, and

⁷ Following Scott (1998), legibility functions as a technology of state control that renders local knowledge and practices into forms that can be mapped, measured, and managed by authorities; consequently, while rivers are made readable as flows, zones, and measurements, riverine communities and their everyday practices are rendered illegible by state-defined administrative standards.

⁸ "Tepian" was chosen for its broader connotation of an edge or margin, encompassing both the physical and socio-cultural dimensions of communities dwelling in riverine areas. During workshops with residents, it was considered more ethically appropriate than the term "*bantaran*" (riverbanks), which is closely associated with technocratic language and the designation of urban risk zones. Throughout this text, the use of "Tepian" refers specifically to the communities who involved in our workshops.

local knowledge that could inform the revitalization process.

This dual position—as both a facilitator of community-based activities and a conduit within technocratic systems—became a site where ethical dilemmas accumulated. This paper reflects on how these tensions emerge when artistic and cultural practices are situated within development infrastructures that prioritize clarity, efficiency, and measurable outcomes, but operate through decontextualized and non-localized frameworks.

THE EVERYDAY ENCOUNTERS OF *TEPIAN*

The Tepian community lives along the riverbanks in informal settlements within a dynamic setting of nature amid a growing cityscape.

Housing largely consists of wooden stilt structures, incrementally adapted to fluctuating water levels.⁹ These houses serve multiple functions—as storage, rainwater tanks, and spaces for gathering and play—reflecting flexible and temporal forms of dwelling often rendered illegible in formal planning frameworks.

Practices such as *dongkrak* (house-jacking) allow homes to be elevated to respond to rising sedimentation or tidal flooding. These practices rely on collective labor, both within households and among neighbors, and shared knowledge.

Daily life is sustained through low-tech, informal economies. Women peel onions or jackfruit skin on verandas for market distribution; *tempe* production takes place in domestic spaces; residents engage

⁹ This incremental mode of housing relevant to what Ananya Roy (2005) describes as incrementality, in which dwellings are built, adapted, and extended over time through everyday negotiations with environmental conditions, tenure insecurity, and state regulation, rather than through completed or formally planned development.

in small-scale trading and informal water management. Shared rainwater tanks in alleyways function as communal infrastructure, supplying mosques, travelers, and neighboring households. These practices are developed in response to ecological precarity, insecure land tenure, and limited access to formal services.

Fire constitutes a persistent risk in these dense settlements. Residents have developed mitigation tactics grounded in sensory knowledge. Through olfactory cues, they learn to anticipate the dry season, often marked by rising heat. The faint smell of burning materials—carried by water or wind—functions as an early warning system. When such cues are detected, neighbors mobilize quickly, bringing personal water drums to contain the fire. In the aftermath, support often takes the form of shared food or drinks for those involved in extinguishing it. These practices distribute risk and responsibility across the community, rather than isolating it.

At the same time, it is important to recognize informal settlements such as Tepian as the outcome of long-term urbanization process, emerging as products¹⁰ of uneven development ideologies. Historically, urban riverine settlements emerged as part of a river-based trading network following the migration of Bugis¹¹ communities during the colonial period. Its geographical position offered both livelihoods tied to water and fertile land.

However, developments during Dutch colonial administration in the twentieth century and state-led urban planning projects in the region introduced a growing separation between “land” and “water” in contemporary dwelling practices, placing riverine settlements outside formal

¹⁰ Drawing from Roy (2005), informality is understood as state-produced condition, governed through selective suspension of law rather than as an absence of planning.

¹¹ The Bugis are an ethnic community in Indonesia whose ways of life are closely tied to migration and maritime activities. During the final period of the Gowa-Makassar kingdom, Bugis communities migrated to the riverine of what is now known as Samarinda.

zoning frameworks.

Today, they are increasingly defined as sites of risk, pollution, and informality, justifying interventions that are alienated from the lived realities of riverine dwelling and that often lead to displacement. In present-day Samarinda, the large-scale eviction of riverine settlements reveals a new mode of migration, in which communities once inhabiting the river’s banks are pushed toward hillside areas—equally informal—due to their diminishing access to river space.

These practices resonate with Ingold’s (2005) conception of dwelling as an ongoing engagement between humans and their environments. Yet this process does not necessarily generate a sense of control or certainty. The Tepian community’s agency operates within narrow, situational margins of informality,¹² shaped by ecological, economic, and policy pressures. In this context, they should not be reduced to a mere problem to be solved but subjects negotiating the conditions of life.

INFRASTRUCTURE OF DECISION-MAKING

The urban riverine revitalization project must be understood within a longer history of intervention. Since the late 1980s, the riverine has been subject to repeated normalization and “tidying” programs, culminating in large-scale evictions, relocations, land dredging, and infrastructure development from 2019 onward.

Within this context, the master plan reframes the riverine as a multi-functional asset legible to planning processes: an ecological corridor, a flood buffer, and an urban leisure space. The issue of so-called

¹² Ingold’s thought offers an important perspective on dwelling as a political practice, which allows us to consider the Tepian community in terms of what Roy (2005) describes as “... *informality is an important epistemology for planning.*”

“slum” is expected to be resolved through the provision of green open spaces, envisioned as flood absorption areas, instruments of urban beautification, and drivers of tourism-based economic growth.

The project involved municipal authorities, a Java-based urban and climate think tank, and a network of architects, designers, and NGOs, many based outside Samarinda. This reflects a broader pattern in which expertise is geographically and institutionally distanced from local context.

Within this structure, I worked as part of the Community Engagement team, responsible for organizing activities with local residents. Given that my affiliation was with a socially engaged art collective based in Java—and the limitations this posed in terms of lived experience—we partnered with a local art collective in Samarinda. Through this cross-local collaboration, and with our physical presence limited to workshop periods, we conducted two art workshops and an in-situ exhibition within Tepian settlements between 2024 and 2025.

Community Engagement was positioned as a participatory mechanism to incorporate the residents’ voices into the revitalization process. However, it operated within predefined frameworks where legal decisions regarding the Tepian communities had already been established.

Our team did not occupy a strategic position in decision-making. After the workshops and in-situ exhibition, our role shifted to translating field encounters into lists of facility needs, thematic categories, and settlement characteristics. These were then taken up by architects and designers to develop proposals for green open spaces and area branding within the master plan.

While this workflow appears efficient—distributing tasks according to expertise—it reproduces epistemic hierarchies. Situated, embodied, and relational forms of knowledge are often subordinated

to abstract, visual, technical and measurable outputs aligned with planning rationalities. In this sense, participation risks becoming extractive: community engagement is reduced to a mode of data collection rather than a process that redistributes power.¹³

Time—essential for building trust and sustaining relationships—was constrained by project schedules and funding conditions. When budget reallocation led to the termination of community engagement activities in early 2025, these relational processes were effectively severed from subsequent planning decisions. The project continued; the engagement did not.

ARTISTIC WORKSHOPS AS METHODOLOGICAL INTERVENTION

Within this framework, we facilitated a series of in-situ art workshops and an exhibition under the banner *Tidal Tactics* and *In-betweenness*. *Tidal Tactics* refers to tactics of dwelling developed in response to the river’s tidal rhythms—knowledge that emerges through repeated encounters with fluctuating water levels, weather, and risk. The second phase, *In-betweenness*, attends to moments of suspension, where stagnation and change coexist, and decisions have yet to solidify into policy.

Art was chosen as a method to engage ambiguity, ambivalence, and subjectivity—dimensions often excluded from formal planning. Rather than introducing the revitalization project or simply collecting community input, the workshops sought to create space for encountering the social worlds of the community: to understand

¹³ This pattern is related to post-1990s development trends at both global and national levels, where community-based activities in planning are assumed to include “grassroots” voices, but in reality, remain top-down. See: Roy (2005) and Widianingsih (2006) for Indonesia context.

modes of dwelling, structures of everyday life, and diverse forms of situated knowledge, and to mediate these into the planning process.

Each workshop was conducted in situ over one to two months, in collaboration with artists and community practitioners from diverse fields—including visual art, sound, film, pedagogy, and community work. Facilitators and collaborators maintained both physical and social presence, sharing experiences and working alongside residents to produce artworks and public programs. Rather than asking residents to articulate abstract needs or future visions, the workshops focused on documenting how people live with the dynamic rhythms of nature and informality.

Installations, photo archives, visual works, performances, and public events were produced using locally available resources. The entire process—from exploration to exhibition—took place within Tepian settlements, allowing time for play, experimentation, and collective engagement. This approach enabled residents to participate in shaping both artistic intentions and the narratives that emerged.

Everyday activities—such as peeling onions, lifting wooden houses, or sensing fire through smell—were reframed as everyday technology and, drawing on Simone (2022), as processes of “becoming and making.” Listening became a methodological practice, through which knowledge emerged from fragments of memory, sensory experience, and everyday relations, rather than being reduced to formal metrics.

At the same time, these artistic practices had clear limitations. Differences between our embodied experiences and those of riverine communities risked oversimplifying the complexity. As facilitators, we were implicated in decisions with ethical and material consequences: participants were not always fully informed of the broader project and collaborating artists operated within the constraints of an extensive development apparatus.

This methodological approach remained fragile. When translated into planning frameworks, community practices were often reduced to technical problems, stripping them of their original meanings: smellscape became hazard, wooden houses became signs of precarity, and activities such as peeling onions were reframed as economic deficiencies needing intervention. The very flexibility and ambivalences that allowed these practices to be recognized as knowledge also made them difficult to accommodate within policy frameworks. Consequently, artistic practices on the ground risked being reduced to an aestheticization of participation within post-developmental paradigms.

QUESTIONS AND DILEMMAS

Can common ground be found?

As artistic outcomes entered planning processes, translation involved inevitable loss. Because funding was tied to measurable outputs, artistic practices were evaluated through legible proxies. These processes of simplification raise the question of whether meaningful common ground between state-led development and community life can be established.

Dual loyalties

As facilitators, the Community Engagement team was accountable to the community for the trust and relationships built through our activities. At the same time, as part of the planning apparatus, we were expected to produce usable knowledge for the planning process. These responsibilities frequently conflicted, particularly when policy frameworks had already defined the Tepian community as an informal settlement to be cleared.

Art—particularly socially-engaged art—works through relational, situated, and grounded practices, with lived spaces and real subjects.

Policy, by contrast, is driven by efficiency and the demand for solutions. These two follow different logics, and attempts to reconcile them risk positioning art in roles it cannot—and perhaps should not—fulfil. How, then, can one navigate these competing demands?

Emotional saturation

After our involvement ended in early 2025, I returned home with limited capacity to revisit the Tepian community, aware that displacement remained likely. While I believe that communities will always find ways to navigate and sustain their lives, I continue to reflect on the consequences of the choices my team and I made in the field—choices that, at any scale, carry real implications for life in Tepian, including the risk of deepening violence and inequality.

While these reflections are important, they come with an emotional cost. Art and cultural workers are often required to absorb forms of emotional saturation produced by such dilemmas. This raises an important question: how can one attend to the emotional—and potentially physical—risks that accompany long-term, relational engagement with communities?

Perhaps what is needed is time—not only as duration, but as a condition for care.

I remain uncertain whether common ground between state-led development imperatives and affected communities can be fully realized. Each reflection continues to generate more questions than answers. Yet it remains important to hold onto the idea that transformative justice does not emerge from spaces that are neutral, exclusive, or neatly ordered. Rather, it is assembled over time—fragmented, uneven, and often disjointed. Encounters with *Tepian* communities and collaborating artists, however brief, may constitute meaningful contributions to such processes.

Art, as a relational practice, resists being measured in terms of

effectiveness. Perhaps this also explains why exhaustion becomes a persistent condition within such work, especially in projects structured by unequal power relations. The *Patchwork Ethnography Manifesto*, grounded in feminist and decolonial theorizations of personal-professional entanglement, offers one way to reimagine community engagement as a practice of care. In this sense, relational art can be understood as “*working with rather than against the gaps, constraints, partial knowledges, and diverse commitments that characterize all knowledge production*” (Gunel, Varma, and Watanabe, 2020).

Time, then, is not only an essential resource but an investment in relational work toward transformative justice—through which relationships, meaningful moments, and forms of agency become possible.

FURTHER READING

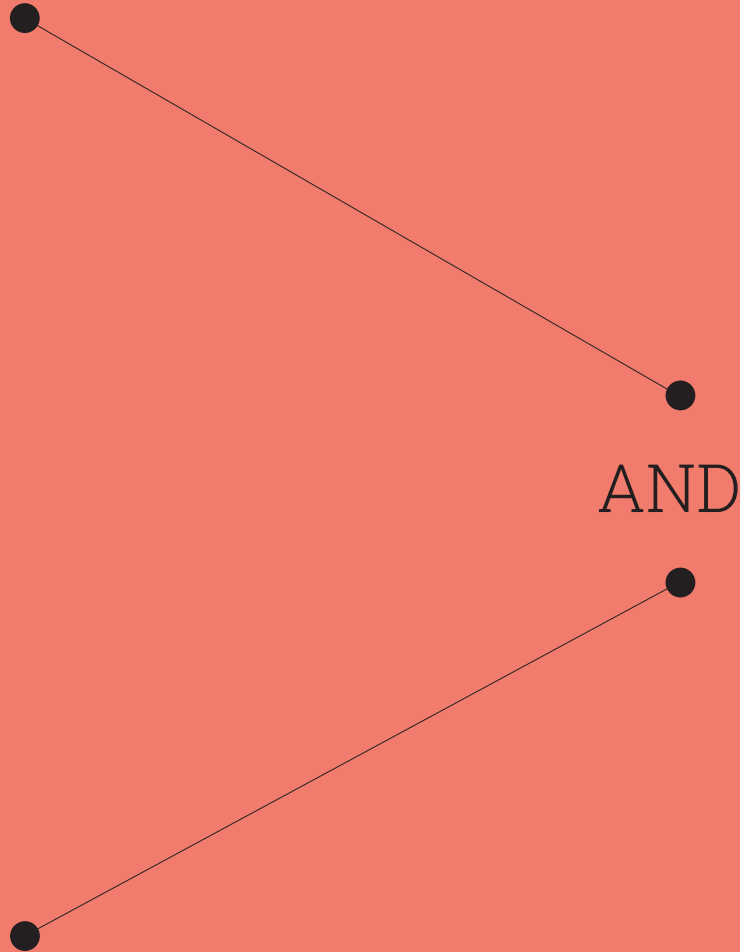
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We are
**making
things
better.**

Untitled,
Giah De los Reyes-Geronimo
(Philippines_Italy)

ENGAGEMENT



RESPONSIBILITY



With this section, the focus shifts toward engagements and responsibility—what it means to enter a community, to make work within it, and to leave. Set within a residency program in a coastal town in the Philippines, the narrative of the next case begins with a moment of feedback from community members—an observation about what was seen, and what was left out.

As the account develops, the conditions under which community-based art projects are carried out come into view. Limited time-frames, expectations of visible outcomes, and the pressures of funding and institutional continuity shape how relationships are formed and how work is produced. Within these conditions, the line between collaboration and extraction becomes increasingly unstable.

Here, attention is given to forms of knowledge and practice that exist within communities themselves—ways of organizing, sustaining livelihoods, and building relationships that do not depend on the language or frameworks of the art world. Encountering these realities unsettles assumptions about what artists bring into a space, revealing instead the depth of practices that already exist.

The result is a reflection on responsibility, temporality, and the ethics of engagement—raising questions about who benefits, who remains, and what it means to work with communities in ways that are accountable beyond the duration of a project.



LEAVING A MARK OR LEAVING THEM BEHIND? ETHICAL DILEMMAS ON COMMUNITY ARTS ENGAGEMENT

Giah De los Reyes-Geronimo (Philippines)



The video was projected onto a wall inside an old rice mill no longer functional and now used as storage for scrap materials. People from the town had come to see what the “artists” had been working on. The work combined voices gathered from interviews with the local fisherfolk, a farmer, and artisans. Snippets of everyday concerns and aspirations were juxtaposed with photos of hand-painted signs, commercial slogans, prices, and warnings— things the artists had noticed around town.

It looped continuously, with a viewing stand where people could watch and listen. A few people from the local community of blacksmiths spoke up. “We wish you had included more of the blacksmith’s faces,” one said. “More of what we do.” They were referring to how the video focused only on close-ups of hands pounding metal. The comment was said kindly and without judgment. Just something they noticed. Something they hoped to see more of. In that moment, the artist felt a shift, an awareness of how complex it is to work with communities, and how important it is to listen, even and especially in moments of feedback like this.

This case study draws from the personal experience of an artist who participated in and helped manage community-based projects in the Philippines, including cross-country art residencies and a Biennale. It reflects on the structural and ethical dilemmas embedded in such programs and raises questions about time, extractivism, and the very idea of “community engagement.” It’s a story she held close and struggled to write for a long time, but now recognizes as necessary to articulate. The personal is political, and this experience could also reflect many similar patterns in cultural work across the Global South.

Art residencies, particularly those situated in rural or marginalized communities, are often framed as immersive opportunities for artists to collaborate and “give back.” But what happens when these engagements serve more to sustain funding pipelines and build the cultural capital of artists and institutions, rather than genuinely address the desires or dreams of the communities involved?

The residency referenced in this case took place in coastal towns where rice paddies meet the mountains, and everyday life revolves around fishing, blacksmithing, and home-based livelihoods. The Biennale that hosted the program was held in an abandoned milling factory. While the initiative aimed to invite artists into deep engagement with local communities, in reality, they had only about a month on site.

The artist created a video projection work that combined the voices of local people collected through interviews with found imagery of commercial signage and slogans observed around town, such as “No Trespassing” or “Prices are rising—we can’t buy this ingredient anymore.” The goal was to juxtapose personal testimonies with broader visual cues of economic tension and precarity.

Her reflections were also strengthened by her growing friendship with some fisherfolk leaders in the island. She had met with one couple and was warmly welcomed into their home, where they

shared with her their work, including organizing community-led systems such as a local bank that supports fisherfolk during typhoons and economic hardships. These were mutual aid strategies developed in response to ongoing systemic neglect. They also travel across islands to attend conferences and community events, representing not just their community but also advocating for the protection of marine areas critical to their survival and to the places they call home.

In this island, fisherfolk face mounting challenges, and one of the most devastating is the recent Supreme Court decision allowing commercial fishing corporations to operate within the 15-kilometer municipal waters zone, which is an area legally reserved for small-scale, municipal fisherfolk. This decision has been met with strong opposition from communities and civil society groups, and they are seeking to intervene and overturn the ruling. The decision is widely seen as harmful to the livelihoods and economic security of small-scale fisherfolk as it further threatens communities that are already battling ecological degradation and economic precarity.

Against this backdrop, the fisherfolk’s self-organizing efforts take on greater urgency and significance. They have been cultivating extensive networks, relational systems of solidarity, and interdisciplinary practices. The artist reflects on how these approaches are often formalized as trend practices in the art world. Coming into contact with these lived realities, the artist was deeply humbled to realize that what the arts sector often theorizes as “relational aesthetics,” “network-based practice,” or “social sculpture,” already exists within these communities, not as abstract concepts, but as embodied practices of care, survival, and community-building. These communities do not need the language of art to validate their ways of living because their value has existed long before and continues regardless of external recognition.

It became clear to her that artists often arrive in communities assuming their engagement marks the beginning of meaningful

work, without realizing they are stepping into complex, interwoven ecosystems of resilience that have long sustained the community.

Going back to the context of the residency program, this led her to question: who benefits most from these arrangements? More often than not, it is the artist who gains visibility, cultural capital, and even funding. The community, on the other hand, may be reduced to a backdrop, a source of raw material or symbolic inspiration, without receiving any lasting benefit or meaningful inclusion in the artistic process. This ethical dilemma has made her more critical of the romanticization of community-based practices, especially when deeper structural imbalances remain unacknowledged.

This inquiry stems from witnessing how art residency practices often move forward without proper ethical considerations. Another instance was when partner programs were pressured to provide “communities” for visiting artists to “engage with,” as if to tick off a checklist. This raises a further question: shouldn’t it be the artist’s responsibility to research, reflect on their intentions, and understand the context and people they aim to work with? She believes this can be addressed by including geographers, anthropologists, or local cultural workers who are rooted in and knowledgeable about the place. Their involvement in residency programming could help equip artists with a deeper contextual understanding before entering a community.

At the heart of this case study is an ethical dilemma: how can artists and institutions engage with communities without perpetuating extractive practices, even unintentionally?

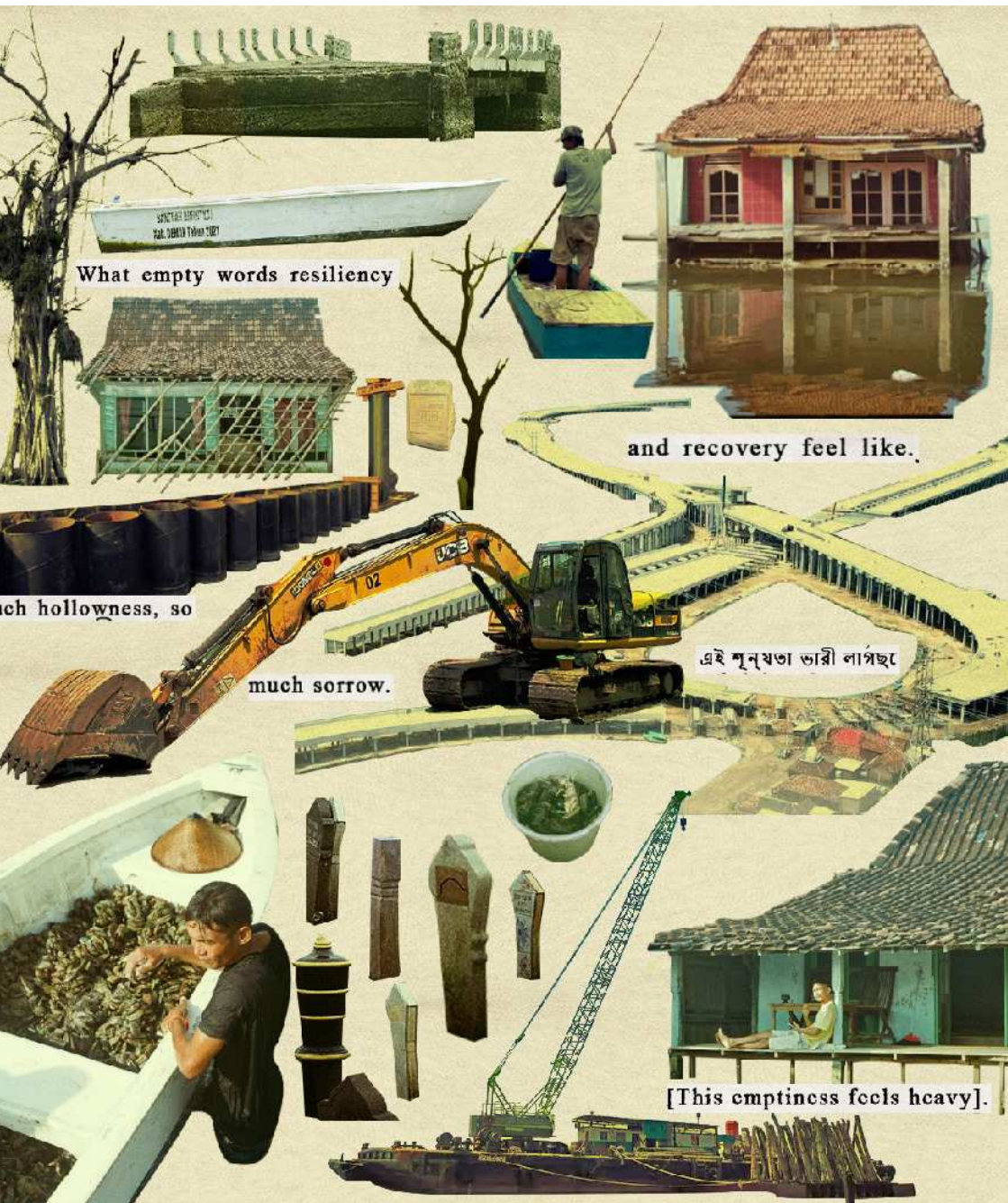
Residency programs often rely on visible, measurable outputs—exhibitions, photos, reports, documentation—that secure future funding and institutional support. In this race to show impact, there is a risk that genuine co-creation is replaced by performative inclusion. Personally, the artist saw how the program could have been more than a one-off project. The community had its own artistic ambitions

and stories to tell, beyond what artists came to “engage” with. This may also reflect the limited time and space available to deeply listen.

She sees a need for a deeper conversation around time as an ethical resource. Residencies must question not only who has access to resources, but also who has time to build trust, to return, to follow up. Who carries the emotional labor? Who benefits in the long term? To be clear, the artist does not question the good intentions of many involved. But are good intentions enough when structures remain extractive?

This case study is not just about one community. It reflects a broader pattern in the cultural world, especially across the Global South. The personal is political, and by telling this story, she hopes to open a door for others navigating similar complexities.

In the end, the artist offers this in humility, and with the hope that we can build a future for cultural and artistic work rooted not just in art—but in accountability, healing, and justice.



What does it mean to sustain a tradition when the conditions that support it are increasingly unstable?

The next case centers on a family-run paper-making enterprise in Luang Prabang, where “saa” (mulberry) paper has long been embedded in cultural, religious, and everyday practices. Through an interview with the current manager of Porsaa Art & Craft Center, the case traces how this inherited knowledge is now under pressure from changing labor patterns, shifting markets, and the proliferation of mass-produced imitations that undermine both its economic and cultural value.

Efforts to increase the value of handmade products require creativity and experimentation, yet these same innovations are quickly copied and devalued. At the same time, fewer young people are willing to continue the work. Attempts to build collective strategies—such as creating spaces for higher-value production—are constrained by the immediate economic realities faced by artisans. Questions of responsibility also emerge at a personal level, as the decision to continue or close the business carries implications not only for the family, but for a wider community of workers and knowledge holders.

The dilemma here is not simply how to preserve tradition, but how to sustain it under conditions that continually erode its foundations.

What empty words resiliency and recovery feel like,
Haratua Zosran (Indonesia)



FRAGILE CONTINUITIES: CRAFT, LABOR, AND THE ETHICS OF SUSTAINING TRADITION

Salyna Malaidet (Laos)



Porsaa Art & Craft Center is located in Luang Prabang, Laos. It's a local family business currently providing paper making workshops, customized paper products, and creative art on *saa* paper. It also operates an art gallery celebrating craft.

Saa handmade paper is made from the bark of a mulberry tree native to northern Laos. Eight artisans have been working with Porsaa Art & Craft since its establishment and have been producing *saa* paper for more than 20 years. The enduring bond between the artisans and Porsaa ensures the continuation of this knowledge and practice, which has long been part of traditional culture and has been used for centuries in traditional temple decoration and religious practices.

However, advances in technology and machine manufacturing, combined with changing social and economic conditions, pose growing challenges in continuing this traditional knowledge and production. The artisan community is aging, while younger generations are drawn to modern careers. Local farmers, artists and artisans also face economic challenges, such as low wages and competition from mass-produced copycat alternatives, which dilute the value of handmade paper products.

Maintaining the intricate and time-consuming craft of saa paper products can be difficult when financial returns are limited. As the leader of a cultural business like Porsaa, our Fellow Salyna faces the struggle of how to sustain, enhance, and promote this traditional craft and its associated values in the present day. In the following interview by Jennifer Lee, Knowledge Hub Lead at MCH, Salyna elaborates on the challenges and dilemmas she is grappling with.

JL: Salyna, you manage the Porsaa Art & Craft Center, Luang Prabang, which was started by your father and specializes in making saa, mulberry paper. What is the significance of this paper in Laos?

Salyna: In Luang Prabang, mulberry paper is used in daily life and culture. For example, in temples, we use traditional paper to create shapes of the Buddha, of animals, of nature, and use these as stencils for painting on the temple walls, ceilings, doors—everywhere! It's also used to make prayer books, and during Buddhist lent, when we celebrate with dragon boat racing, we decorate our homes and temples with lanterns made from this paper. This tradition is practiced across the whole of Luang Prabang. Every village participates, and some even hold competitions for the best lanterns. We can create different types and styles—and it's something people take pride in.

One of the most special designs is the spinning lantern, where images or words are cut into the body of the lantern, and a lit candle is placed in the center. The heat from the candle makes the lantern spin, while its light creates shadows that project the images or words onto the wall.

Some of the traditional images might be of Buddha, or of dragons or boats, but people nowadays are becoming more creative, and businesses even use this design for advertising. It's quite technical though so we tend to see this mainly at the temples. At home people are more likely to make a simple round lantern or a star shape.

JL: So, do people always use mulberry paper for these traditional activities and rituals?

Salyna: Traditionally, this would always have been mulberry paper, but now of course we can access all different kinds of machine-made paper. However, a lot of this is imported, especially from Thailand, which means the price fluctuates. With the current exchange rates, imported, machine-made versions of the thin paper used for traditional activities like lantern-making are now actually more expensive than local handmade mulberry paper.

JL: That's interesting—that regional politics and economics affect the choice between local crafts and mass-produced materials. Can you tell us a bit more about Laos and its position in the region?

Salyna: Laos shares borders with China, Thailand, and Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar. I am based in Luang Prabang, which is located in northern Laos, and surrounded by the mountains. It's a UNESCO Heritage town.¹⁴ Eighty percent of the province is covered

¹⁴ Luang Prabang was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1995 as an outstanding example of the fusion of traditional Laos architecture and 19th-20th century colonial architecture

in mountains, which is why we eat so much mountain rice, more commonly known as sticky rice. We also have many Buddhist temples throughout the province, which is part of the reason you can see so many handicrafts and artisans here.

We learn Lei Lao in school and as children, so even those who aren't artisans, still have some knowledge and experience of crafts and may practice them for festivals and rituals.

The main work in Luang Prabang is connected to tourism. In recent years, a train that comes from China started operating, which is changing the makeup of the tourists—previously tourists were mainly Europeans—and increasing the tourist numbers. It is also changing business ownership.

Despite tourism, Luang Prabang still faces challenges. As is typical in a small town, many young people leave to study or work elsewhere. Currently, many seek work in Thailand and in Korea, as they can earn a better salary there. We are losing a lot of young people.

JL: So, what has made you stay in Luang Prabang?

Salyna: My story starts with my father. He got a scholarship to study physics in Russia, but when he returned to Laos, he realized that becoming a university professor wouldn't allow him to support his family. He started exploring import-export opportunities, and he met some people in Thailand running a paper mill. They wanted mulberry bark, so he learned how to grow and harvest mulberry in such a way that allowed the trees to regenerate every year and the bark to dry. He taught locals in Laos the techniques so they could supply him, and he could export to the mill in Thailand and to others in China.

Over time, he realized that all the hard work was happening in Laos, yet they received a very low price per kilo that did not reflect the long processing time involved.

He began thinking about how to increase the value of his work and concluded the best way was to produce and export the paper chips, not just the dried bark. So that's how he began the process of producing handmade paper. He learned from different factories in the countries he was supplying to and brought the skills back to teach local producers, especially women. Over time, he introduced small machinery into the manufacturing process, and began producing specific paper products in order to meet the demands of our buyers.

JL: So, the business is linked to the local environment and culture?

Salyna: Yes. Part of our strength comes from the natural environment in Luang Prabang and the way that the mulberry tree fits into daily life. As I mentioned earlier, we are a mountainous province and we have a lot of trees. The mulberry trees aren't in plantations; they grow freely by the rivers in the mountain forests. Villagers coppice trees, mainly to use wood for cooking, and they would often discard the bark. With many species, including the mulberry, if the tree is cut improperly, it may die. However, if you know the right way to coppice a mulberry tree, it will not just regrow but triple. And it can grow quickly, within a month. So, for villagers cutting wood for home use, or clearing trees so they can grow mountain rice (sticky rice), the mulberry bark becomes a by-product they can use for extra income.

In many countries, like Thailand and China, they mix mulberry with other pulp, like bamboo, coconut fiber or banana trees, because it's cheaper. In Laos, we can still make pure mulberry paper. Mulberry makes much stronger, better-quality paper.

What my father has built with the business has created work for a lot of families through the supply chain for our business. Some have even started their own small businesses. He is proud of this. It's not a business that makes us rich, but it gives people jobs. Especially women.

JL: So, how did you come to work for the business?

Salyna: I used to work in the tourism industry, in a hotel and then for a tour agency, but when the COVID pandemic came, things changed. Not just for tourism, but also for my dad's business – imports and exports were stuck, and people started using more local products. Plus, our artisans—the ladies making the paper—were able to keep working from home; they didn't need to come to our center. We started making different products, like paper boxes, so business continued.

When things started reopening, I had the idea of opening small workshops, so tourists could come and experience making paper. It went well, and then I started to get requests from local schools—from kindergarten to high school—to bring students to learn, and I came up with different workshops, making different products... lanterns, bags, boxes, and books, so people can come and try different things.

Like my father a few years before, I began exploring ways to increase the value of our products. I wanted to change the model from large quantities of cheap items for local sale to higher-value products that could reach different markets. I also had the idea of working with young artists. I started doing it a couple of months ago.

JL: What kinds of things are you working with them to create?

Salyna: One of the standard products we manufacture is a paper rope. We use thin, light paper and roll it by hand to make twine. We can sell it for 2,000 kip (less than 10 US cents) per meter, maximum 5,000 kip (25 US cents) depending on the size. So, what we have been trialing is using this rope to create artwork, making designs and images on paper that people can buy to display in their homes or to give as a gift.

JL: It's nice to work with artists as well as artisans. You've shared with me how part of your family's pride and value in the business is giving work to women, especially housewives. Do you have concerns about how the business can adapt to keep supporting the community that is in the ecosystem around your business?

Salyna: Yes, this is a real dilemma. We need to consider our community, and I am also concerned with how to preserve the traditional crafts while also adapting to new tastes.

The reality we are facing is that while in my father's generation, it was a real opportunity for women to be able to gain paid work—especially housewives of the military—today the young generation don't want to do this work. In our direct business at the center, we employ eight people. They are mainly seniors, and now we have several ladies who are starting to have health problems and cannot produce. There's also the challenge that these traditional products aren't well known even within Laos. The artisans know about these special products, but we need some kind of nationwide marketing to get people thinking about mulberry paper and traditional cultural products.

I have to decide whether to continue the business or let it go. My sister has kids, so she doesn't want to borrow money. I don't have kids, so I need to decide whether I should take the responsibility and the risk to keep it going.

I'm trying a new idea of working with artists, and I think it's a good one, but I don't know if it will work or not. And if we can't generate income, the artisans won't survive. Creativity is critical if we want to increase the value of the products we create. But what we see is that many artisans just repeat the same designs again and again, without trying new ideas. And worse, when someone does create something new and it sells well at the night market in Luang Prabang, others quickly copy it. Then the market becomes flooded with similar products, and the value drops. This lack of consideration for creativity and intellectual property makes it hard for artisans to benefit from their own work.

That also affects us at the center, because if we create a new product, others will copy it and the price goes down within a month of launching it.

JL: Are the artists and artisans aware of this problem?

Salyna: I believe so. We produce paper, and many artists also come to our shop to buy it. I often talk to them about this issue—asking why artists selling in the market continue to decrease the value of their work in this way. They tell me that trying new things takes a long time, and yes, initially you can sell a new product at a good price, but the next week, others have already copied it. This discourages artists from sharing their work. They become less willing to innovate, and they would just produce copies—it’s easier for them, and they can sell them. But they aren’t thinking about the bigger impact on our handicrafts.

An even greater challenge comes from mass-produced, machine-made copies of traditional products, mainly imported from China. They use the same patterns and create handmade textures so tourists wouldn’t know the difference. Hotels tend to be more supportive of local craft, but still, things like menu covers used to be made from handmade local mulberry paper, and now it’s cheaper to buy mass-produced alternatives.

I suggested organizing a special gathering of artists and artisans—maybe once a year—where they could sell their masterpieces at a higher price. But their response was that they don’t have time. They are focused on survival, and many of them already have other jobs alongside making and selling their crafts.

JL: It’s really hard balancing a long-term vision and dream with urgent needs of today. I love your idea. But it sounds like it’s not something one person can do alone; you need a bigger community with you. What about government policy?

Salyna: Various departments—Agriculture, Heritage, Industry, and so on—all express support for small businesses and local products but there is limited material support. We have to take action directly ourselves.

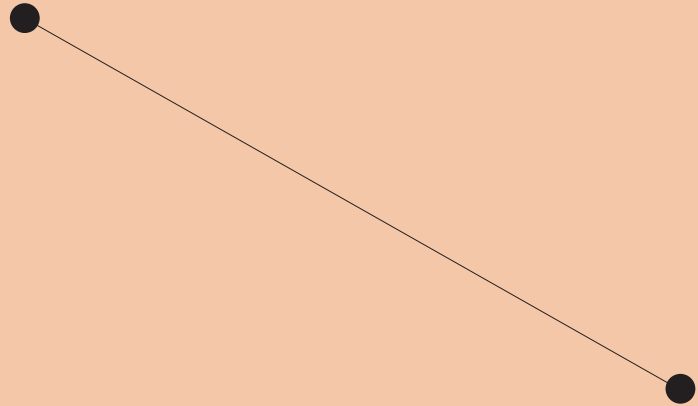
They do organize fairs and exhibitions, but I think something like a national marketing or education campaign would be helpful, so that people become more aware of the value of handmade products, why they cost more, and also what the added value is.

JL: It sounds like there are so many dimensions you need to consider.

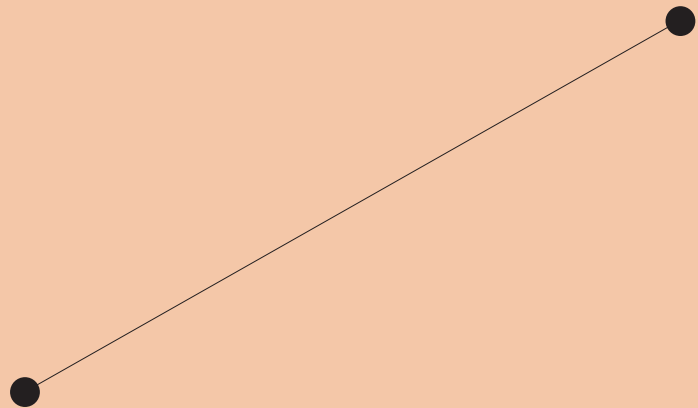
Salyna: Yes. If I were thinking purely from a business perspective, I might approach things differently. But I am concerned to approach the future in a way that preserves and values our traditions, while also providing valuable work to the community. The economic struggles that young people, especially artists, are facing now, and the barriers to creativity that come from a lack of respect for intellectual property, make it difficult to determine how to move forward. I feel the weight of this responsibility.

JL: When I listen to you, I really am aware of the struggles that come from the intersection of this beautiful craft with an economic system. As a young cultural leader, you are not simply running a business with profit as your measure of success, but you are working to make sure there is food on the table for your artisans, and ensuring the continuity of the tradition while also encouraging new art and design. I am sure you are making many difficult decisions each day, but I am inspired by your bigger vision and values. Thank you for taking the time to share your story.

REPRESENTATION



AND



MEMORY



In this section, questions of representation come into focus—specifically, the ethics of looking at, selecting, and displaying images of death. Within the context of Vietnam’s post-war memory, the writer reflects on the enduring presence of graphic photography and its role in shaping how violence is remembered and understood.

The account begins with a personal encounter with iconic wartime images and develops through the process of curating an exhibition on death photography. What follows is a sustained engagement with the roles and responsibilities involved in presenting such images: who has the right to show them, under what conditions, and for whom. These questions are not only theoretical but emerge through concrete curatorial decisions, including what to include, what to exclude, and how to frame images that carry both historical weight and human cost.

Attention is given not only to the images themselves, but also to the cultural contexts in which they are received. In Vietnam, where death is often treated as an intimate and private matter, the public circulation of such photographs raises questions around remembrance and exposure, dignity and spectacle.

The curatorial process becomes a site of negotiation, shaped by uncertainty as much as tension. This case reflects on the difficulty of navigating these conditions, showing how ethical responsibility is not fixed but continually negotiated in relation to context, audience, and the act of viewing itself.





Nama Kepala Keluarga
Alamat
RT/RW

JL. MOJO 1/350
057/015
55225

KARTU KELUARGA

NO. ...

Desa/Kelurahan : ...
Kecamatan : ...
Kabupaten/Kota : ...
Provinsi : DAERAH ISTIMEWA YOGYAKARTA

CONFLICTED

	Tanggal Lahir	Agama	Pendidikan	Jenis Pekerjaan	Penghasilan
	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
1	21-03-1960	ISLAM	MA IV/STRATA I	KARYAWAN SWASTA	
2	27-04-1967	ISLAM	STRATA I	MENGURUS RUMAH TANGGA	
3	03-10-1996	ISLAM		PELAJAR/MAHASISWA	
4	22-02-1999			PELAJAR/MAHASISWA	
5	06-03-2005			PELAJAR/MAHASISWA	



RIK

Nama Orang Tua



(2) I Shall Not Hate



Tanda Tangan/C

Daftar ... ra elektronik menggunakan sertifikat elektronik yang diterbitkan

Family Card,
Riskya (Indonesia)

CURATING DEATH: THE ETHICS OF GRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHY

Đắc Hoàng Nguyễn (Vietnam)



As I write this case study, Vietnam is marking the 50th anniversary of the end of what is commonly known as the Vietnam War, or the Second Indochina War. The streets are adorned with national flags, propaganda posters, and photographs of victory. Around the same time, *The New York Times* published an article on wartime photojournalism, noting that “Vietnam was the first so-called living room war, watched on TV and seen through remarkable photography.” From Malcolm Browne’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Burning Monk* (1963) to Eddie Adams’ infamous, also Pulitzer-winning *Saigon Execution* (1968), these graphic photographs have become powerful tools for documenting history, influencing perception of the war, and shaping public memory across generations.

I first encountered these iconic photographs in my “Introduction to Photography” class in my third year at university. I was drawn to the duality of these images—the way they walk a fine line between art, memory, and exploitation. The ethical implications of violent images, which often circulate without context or respect for the people they depict, were particularly troubling for me.

For the class's final project, I proposed a visual essay on death photography/the death of photography. I questioned the ethical responsibility of photographers, curators, and audiences in engaging with these images. This case study reflects on the ethical dilemmas I faced in curating, examining the personal and cultural contexts, as well as the broader responsibilities involved in displaying death.

WHO OWNS IMAGES OF DEATH?

I began my research with the question of whether death is a public or private event.

Vietnamese culture places significant emphasis on the sanctity of death. In many families, death is deeply private. Rituals—mourning, memorials, and death photography—are performed within a closed, familial context. Death photography in Vietnam often serves as a ritualistic practice to preserve the memory of the deceased in the most dignified way possible. Photos are typically displayed on family altars to honor ancestors and capture the deceased in a serene, composed state. The images are not meant for public consumption; rather, they are intimate reminders of love, respect, and remembrance.

This cultural understanding of death contrasts sharply with how photojournalism often uses death as a spectacle. In journalism, war photography has historically drawn attention to political causes, stirred emotions, and influenced public opinion. What troubled me was the cost at which these images are produced. When photographers captured these moments, were they truly ethically considerate?

I began to question whether it was right for photojournalists to capture the final moments of individuals who may not have consented to their deaths being made public. The people in these images could not speak for themselves, and their families, who may still be living, had no say in how their loved ones were represented. This

raised questions about ownership: while photographers may hold the legal rights to their images, who holds them ethically? Is it the photographer, the institution, or the family of the deceased?

These questions led me to think more deeply about ownership and responsibility in curating images of death. I was deeply influenced by texts such as Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Saidiya Hartman's *Venus in Two Acts*, and Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Each of these works offered a different way of understanding how images of suffering are produced, circulated, and consumed.

Alongside this, I visited war museums and archives, thinking about the ethical stories behind stolen or contested artifacts. I also looked at exhibitions in other post-conflict societies similar to Vietnam. These experiences led me to question whether photography can truly honor the dead, or whether it inevitably risks turning them into spectacle.

In a society where death is so profoundly private, the public display of such intimate moments seemed both intrusive and disrespectful. As a post-war contemporary, I cannot rewrite history, but I can decide how to engage with these difficult images without perpetuating violence. Photography became a way for me to confront these ethical issues directly. What responsibility do curators have when deciding which images to display, and how can they balance social impact with respect for dignity? These were the questions that guided my project, and they were the ethical dilemmas that I had to navigate throughout the process.

CURATING DEATH

I developed this project as an exhibition for my Introduction to Photography class, part of the Art and Media Studies major at the first liberal arts university in Vietnam. The institutional and cultural setting was significant, as we were encouraged to think critically and freely

within a safe and censorship-free environment. The assignment required us to curate 10 to 20 photographs that together built a visual narrative or a critical visual argument. Throughout this project, students learned how to curate photographs, sequence them, and think conceptually about exhibition space and format.

I proposed the project on death photography/the death of photography, and I teamed up with four other classmates: Huong Giang, Quoc Thai, Gia Han, and Quynh Thu. We began collecting death photos of all kinds, eventually gathering a pool of more than 100 photographs. These included globally iconic photographs from sources such as LIFE Magazine's *The 100 Most Important Photos Ever*, Magnum Photos, and images of wars and disasters, like the ruins of the Chernobyl explosion and the Second Indochina War.

As we curated, we struggled to reconcile conflicting perspectives. Initially, I intended to include violent war images as part of my exploration of death photography. I believed that these images, raw and unfiltered, were integral to understanding the brutal realities of war. Yet, as I reflected on the ethical implications of displaying such images, I became increasingly uncomfortable. Was it ethical to put these photographs on display for public consumption, knowing that they might be seen as a form of spectacle rather than a solemn reflection on the cost of war?

We discussed *The Most Beautiful Suicide* (1947), depicting Evelyn McHale's leap from the Empire State Building, and how pop culture repeatedly romanticized her death without consent. We also discussed Kevin Carter's *The Vulture and the Little Girl* (1993), a photograph of a starving child with a vulture, engaging in ethical debates about photojournalism and humanitarian intervention.

We initially arranged the exhibit in three acts:

1. Death photography (images about death as an event),
2. Photography of the dead (depictions of deceased individuals),

3. The death of photography (a conceptual critique of photography in the digital, AI-driven age).

This three-act structure emerged from our group's ongoing debate about the roles of the photographer, the subject, and the medium in image-making—especially in this society where taking pictures has become almost automatic through smartphones and social media. We kept asking: *What are the ethics of photographing today?*

In the middle of all these discussions, I proposed a more radical concept of showing only the duct tape marks where photographs would have been, leaving blank spaces, accompanied by curatorial notes that described the images we had chosen not to show. This was meant to question what is visible, what is hidden, and whether refusing to show an image could itself be an ethical act. Some teammates felt this was too risky or would confuse viewers, especially in a classroom setting with grading criteria and limited time.

We consulted our professor, who listened to all of our proposals and offered vague, half-encouraging feedback. She appreciated our broader theme and pushed us to think harder, but deliberately avoided providing a direct answer. I think this was part of the training approach of a liberal arts educator—nudging us to think for ourselves, rather than handing down a solution.

That left us somewhat stressed and confused, especially with a grading deadline approaching. After endless group debates, we chose a safer compromise. One suggested excluding explicit images of death from the exhibition. The group opted to curate more metaphorical representations of death: images of graveyards, dead flowers, animals, and an elderly person, suggesting the cycle of life and death, without showing explicit violence. We drew inspiration from Sally Mann's *Family Pictures* for its intimate but dignified approach.

Considering the ethical implications and cultural sensitivities of

our topic, we decided to construct the exhibition as an immersive experience. We printed only black-and-white photographs and installed them on two facing mirrors, partially covered with a dark blanket. The space was shaped like a narrow tunnel, allowing only two visitors at a time, creating a sense of sacredness and solemnity. Our goal was to draw attention to the act of viewing itself, inviting visitors to reflect on their role in consuming violent imagery and confront the ethical implications of their actions as viewers.

Inspired by Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, the two facing mirrors created an endless visual loop of death images, echoing the infinite reproduction and circulation of images in the digital age. This raised a question: as images are endlessly reproduced, does their power remain, diminish, or transform?



Figure 1.
Death Photography/The Death of
Photography, 2023. Installation
view.



Figure 2.
Death Photography/The Death of
Photography, 2023. Installation
view.

After the show, one viewer commented that our mirrored tunnel did suggest a powerful problematization of death and photographic ethics, but he encouraged us to consider photography also as a respectful witness to the dead, not only as a carrier of visual violence. My professor ultimately praised our ethical thinking and concept, but hinted that our curation could have been bolder, directly engaging with the war and disaster photographs we initially gathered. I sensed she was encouraging us to accept the risk of dealing with difficult images, rather than choosing a safe solution.

In retrospect, I questioned whether I sacrificed too much in pursuing ethical responsibility. Was I too cautious in trying to protect the dignity of the subjects? Had I watered down the power of death photography to spare viewers from discomfort, which they might not need protection from?

REFLECTIONS ON DEATH

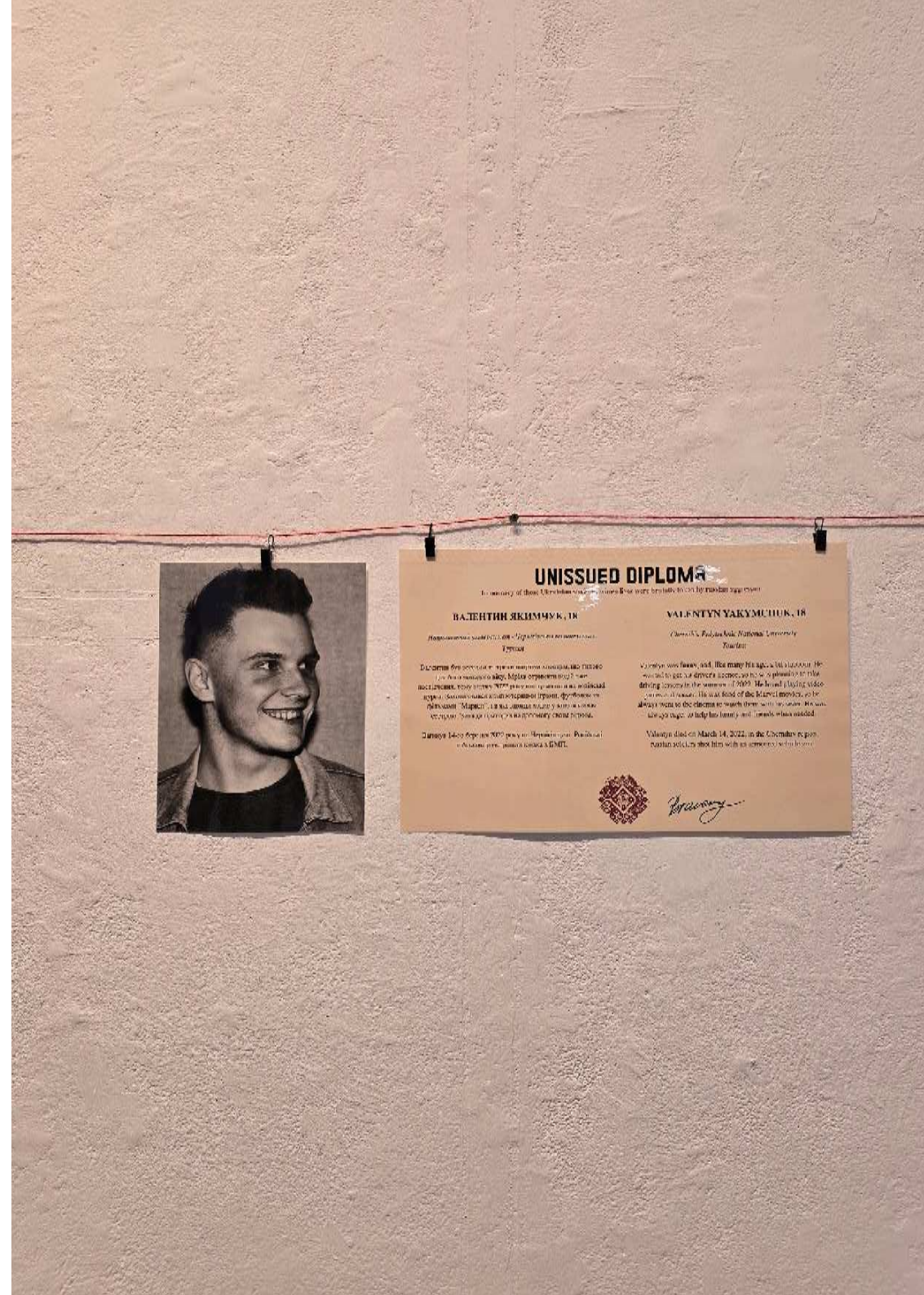
Questions still followed me after the class ended. A year later, while studying abroad, I encountered the exhibition *Unissued Diplomas*. It focused on Ukrainian students who had been killed in the war, presenting portraits of the deceased in a format that honored their lives rather than their deaths. The exhibition displayed these portraits alongside descriptions of their dreams, hobbies, and the futures they had lost. This approach was a revelation to me. Rather than depicting them as victims of war, it humanized them by showing who they were before their lives were tragically cut short.

Since returning to Vietnam and attending the recent 50th anniversary of the war's end, I have continued to reflect on these questions. During the war, explicit images of violence, death, and suffering were widely published and played a role in shaping public opinion. These photographs, taken by both international and local photojournalists, later fed political narratives from many sides. Fifty years on, their legacy remains unsettled. The resurfacing of these images reminds me of the unresolved trauma woven through our society.

I now think about the right to forget for the living, and the right to be forgotten for the dead. I wonder how those captured in wartime photographs—often without consent—might feel about being dehumanized and reduced to symbols within larger historical narratives. It raises questions about the boundary between public history and private grief, the politics of archives, and the tension between national or international narratives and individual dignity. These people were once ordinary human beings, yet history has flattened them into tragic emblems. How do we unthread those narratives, to see their individuality, to restore their humanity?

Figure 3.

Unissued Diplomas, 2024. Exhibition view.





In that sense, I remain partly reassured by our cautious approach in the class project. It felt right to prioritize dignity. At the same time, I also understand why our professor hoped we would take the ethical risk of confronting difficult imagery head-on. There is no easy answer.

Curating death photography is an ongoing negotiation—a balance between respecting the dignity of the deceased and acknowledging the need to document history. Ethical storytelling is not about presenting a fixed position, but about navigating a spectrum of choices with respect, responsibility, and humility.

If there is one thing I hope readers take away, it is that there is no perfect answer to curating images of death and trauma. Every decision about what to show, what to withhold, and how to contextualize carries a burden of responsibility.



Figure 4.
Unissued Diplomas, 2024. Exhibition view.

TRAUMA, CARE,

AND

SAFETY



This final case turns to the more intimate and embodied dimensions of ethical practice—where questions of trauma, care, and safety are not abstract concerns, but lived realities. Grounded in the author’s experience of participating in a residency program in a politically fragile context, the account reflects on what it means to work within environments that are shaped by conflict, displacement, and multigenerational trauma.

What begins as a desire to contribute meaningfully through artistic and social practice becomes a confrontation with the limits of such work. The narrative moves through moments of uncertainty, emotional strain, and a growing awareness of how easily harm can occur, even within initiatives that claim to support or care for others. The idea of “safe space,” often assumed as a given, is tested through situations where safety was not felt and responsibilities were unclear or unmet.

Here, the author also looks at the practical and relational dimensions of care—how decisions around facilitation, logistics, and communication shape the conditions in which participants work and interact.

The questions that remain do not resolve the dilemmas presented, but continue to shape how responsibility, repair, and care are approached in contexts where harm is already present.



HOLDING SPACE, LOSING GROUND: ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS

Lily (Myanmar)



MY BACKGROUND STORY

In my early twenties, I worked with INGOs. I believed that NGOs and INGOs would allow me to serve the community while also earning a decent income. I thought it was a win-win situation.

Myanmar has faced ongoing crises—education, health, and political instability—even before I was born. Wanting to do something for social change felt like a survival instinct. We never had, and still don't have, a government that truly serves its people.

As a young person working with youth, I was eager to make a difference. I believed I could support others like me and contribute meaningfully. But when I began working in project-based roles, I slowly realized something was off. We would design projects on paper, implement them, and then... nothing. There was no clear next step. Over time, I began to question whether we were truly making an impact.

In a place like Myanmar, almost every project can appear meaningful. I used to think, “It’s better than nothing.” But I came to realize that generalizing like that isn’t right. Still, I didn’t know what was right. Without enough opportunities to explore, learn, or receive support, I didn’t know what the alternative could be.

Since then, I’ve carried questions with me:

- What happens when we can’t follow through?
- Is it harmful to the community or not?
- Who benefits the most?

These became my first ethical dilemmas.

Eventually, I burned out and lost my sense of direction. I began working as a freelancer. I started searching for what *real* change means when we talk about social transformation. What kind of practices lead to genuine impact? Not just reports. Not just results.

Now I work as a documentary filmmaker. In this role, I also face ethical dilemmas. Even though there are many examples and resources about how to navigate these challenges, I still struggle—especially with self-judgment. This internal questioning has stayed with me on my journey until now.

RESIDENCY PROGRAM EXPERIENCE

In 2021, when the coup happened in Myanmar, the Spring Revolution began. Like many others, I participated in my own way to resist the military regime.

Before I share my case study, I want to explain my relationship with ethnic conflict in Myanmar. Long before I was born, Myanmar had deeply rooted and complex ethnic tensions. These have caused generational trauma.

Although I was born in Dawei, an ethnic region, I grew up in Yangon as part of the Burmese majority. I’ve seen and felt the tension, the hatred, and the disconnect between identities. It felt like we were wasting time and energy—failing to heal, generation after generation.

After the revolution began, many people fled the country. I myself was torn: should I leave or stay? My brother was detained for two years. My mother had COVID but survived. I was under immense stress—the revolution was emotionally overwhelming. I needed a way to release what I was carrying.

The residency program was held in a border area between Myanmar and China, known as the “liberated area”—a region where people have been resisting military rule for over 60 years. The war and trauma here are deeply generational.

As someone from the Burmese majority, it wasn’t easy to travel there. But when the opportunity came, I took it. I was excited. I hoped the revolution could become an opportunity to bridge identities through honesty and shared humanity.

But reality hit hard.

I soon realized that many participants were attending military training or part of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). During the program, I noticed problems with the organizers. I began to question whether this was a genuine initiative or simply a project designed to appeal to funders or international audiences.

The term “safe space” was used frequently, but I did not feel safe. There was mismanagement and poor facilitation. Personal emotional issues from the organizers also spilled into the space. The area was already politically sensitive, yet the organizers seemed unaware of the gravity of their responsibilities.

Despite these issues, they continued to invite new artists in an effort

to meet their objectives. I was triggered. It reminded me of the same project-based mentality I had tried to leave behind.

My purpose there was to produce a documentary about artists in the liberated area. Once filming began, I felt pressure to finish. But I was overwhelmed emotionally. Should I leave or stay?

I still carry that trauma—of being alone, of struggling silently, of trying to do my work in unsafe conditions.

MULTIGENERATIONAL TRAUMA AND ETHICAL PRACTICE

During one of our sessions, I was moved by what Deirdre said:

“Multigenerational traumas have been cultivated; it’s not accidental. They’ve been cultivated by political systems and ideologies. So even when the intention is clear, if we forget the layered histories of trauma, it can easily lead to unintended consequences that are quite negative.”

This reflection helped me better understand what I had been going through.

What if we approached multigenerational trauma *before* starting these projects? How might things change?

We need to ask:

- How can we prepare ourselves when working with multigenerational trauma?
- How do we ensure we don’t harm one another unknowingly?
- How can we build *common ground in such fragile contexts*?
- Can we truly co-create—*not* perform co-creation?
- Do we have time to prepare ourselves during a revolution?

I also want to question the trend of creating projects just to please foreigners or meet donor expectations. Some people know exactly what international funders want to hear. But what happens when we organize spaces where everyone carries trauma?

ON HEALING AND RESPONSIBILITY

History hurts people. It wounds generation after generation. How can we *relearn* our history in a way that heals?

Recently, I listened to Alok on the *Man Enough* podcast, and these words struck me:

“The way we heal pain is not by transmitting it. It’s by transforming it. Your pain is valid. But your weaponization of that pain to harm others is not. Hurt people hurt people. We must interrupt the cycle.”

That line stayed with me.

It’s never easy to express myself through this project. This writing is also part of my healing. Some things I write here are deeply personal. But I believe: **enough of hurting each other. We don’t need another project built on harm.**

If you don’t see the problem, you are part of the problem.

REFLECTION: SAFE SPACES AND LOGISTICS

After healing and reflecting, I now see how important safe space projects *can* be—if they are done with care. But if taken lightly, they can cause harm. They can even transmit hate.

If an organizer knows how to hold space emotionally and physically, it becomes possible to bridge trauma and build trust.

I learned that **logistics are ethics**. Small details matter—emotional safety and support systems matter. When artists are staying in family homes, even something as simple as doing laundry can become a problem. If artists are dealing with their host's family pressure or conflict, what is the organizer's responsibility?

Who are the *communities* we claim to serve?

Are hosts responsible for providing space to rest, reflect, and set boundaries?

When I shared our experience with others as part of developing this case, I felt truly heard and seen. Ethical dilemmas are often lonely. I needed to know that my vulnerability mattered. The cultural producers in the room asked important questions. They wanted to understand.

What emerged was a layered ethical reflection.

PROFESSIONALISM, REPAIR, AND CARE

In another residency, I saw how a professional production team could truly support artists. Their care made it possible for us to create meaningful work.

But even then, things happened. A mentor said something hurtful to an artist. She struggled emotionally. But the mentor tried to repair it. I realized then that when dignity is harmed, repair is essential.

When we talk about ethical dilemmas, we must also talk about repair, healing, and accountability.

THE QUESTION OF AGENDAS

Deirdre once said: *"We all come with agendas. What matters is being transparent and intentional."*

I had my own agenda—to connect with communities and contribute meaningfully, long-term. But communities also have their own needs and questions. They want to know who we are and why we're here.

Having an agenda does not mean bad intentions—it means we must communicate openly.

Relational repair is an ongoing responsibility.

My ongoing questions are:

- What happens when artists stay silent to protect harmony?
- What are the costs?
- How do we express authenticity?
- What is the role of the artist in a traumatic world?
- What kind of care must we practice in our process?
- What principles should we carry into projects involving collective trauma?

If I return to this kind of project again, my question will be:

What do I need to repair before I begin again?



CLOSING REFLECTION



To move through the cases gathered in this publication is to encounter a landscape that resists flattening. The terrain is uneven—not only in the conditions each practitioner faces, but in the distribution of power, responsibility, knowledge, and care that shapes their decisions.

What becomes clear across these accounts is that ethical practice is never situated on stable ground. It emerges within conditions shaped by misaligned institutional frameworks, limited timeframes, cultural complexity, and personal limits that surface under pressure. In each case, practitioners are asked to navigate without certainty, often making decisions with incomplete information and uneven support.

The unevenness is not incidental. It is structural, historical, and relational. It appears in the gaps between intention and impact, between participation and extraction, between visibility and dignity. It is felt in the weight carried by individuals who must hold together competing responsibilities toward communities, collaborators, institutions, and themselves. At times, it is also internal, taking the form of doubt, hesitation, or the quiet recognition that no choice is without consequence.

Across different contexts—cross-sector collaboration, development work, community engagement, craft traditions, representation, and trauma—the same condition persists: ethical dilemmas do not resolve neatly. They stretch across time. They return in different forms. They ask to be revisited.

Yet, if the terrain is uneven, it is also shared.

What threads these cases together is a shared commitment to staying with difficulty. Practitioners continue to ask questions even when answers are not forthcoming. They adjust, withdraw, persist, or pause in response to the specific conditions they are faced with. In doing so, they show that ethical practice is about how one moves through uncertainty with attentiveness and care.

This publication does not attempt to stabilize that terrain. Instead, it brings the unevenness into view. It offers a set of encounters—grounded in specific places, shaped by particular conditions—that ask the reader to consider their own position within similar landscapes. Where do we stand when faced with competing responsibilities? What do we prioritize when conditions are constrained? What do we carry forward, and what do we choose to leave behind?

If there is something to take from this, it may be this: ethical practice is not found in firm footing, but in the act of navigating instability with awareness.

To work on uneven terrain is to learn how to move within it carefully and responsively, with attention to others, and care for the self that makes this work sustainable.

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Authors

Jennifer Lee
Deirdre Prins-Solani
Yi-Pei Lee
Lutfiah Setyo Cahyani
Giah de los Reyes-Geronimo
Đắc Hoàng Nguyễn
Lily
Jen Gamboa

Collage Creators

Foo Wei Meng
Ralph Eya
Tams
Giah de los Reyes-Geronimo
Haratua Zosran
Riskya Duavania
Hang Nguyen

Mentoring & guidance during writing process

Deirdre Prins-Solani
Jennifer Lee
Frances Rudgard

Editors

Lead editor: Jen Gamboa
Support: Frances Rudgard

Designer

Nannicha Sriwut

