



49TH INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL ROTTERDAM

22 JANUARY – 2 FEBRUARY 2020

IFFR Sessions

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What is a collective? How should we work together? What can a multiplicity of voices bring to a film, artwork or idea? How are roles defined or purposefully undefined through working with a group of equal members in producing a film? The inaugural edition of **IFFR Sessions** explored these topics and many more through five days of presentations by invited guest filmmakers/artists/curators, discursive conversations, screenings and by building a group of thoroughly engaged and critical participants.

IFFR Sessions' 2020 edition focused on **Collectivity** and was moderated by **Rachael Rakes**—Curator for Public Practice at BAK basis voor actuele kunst in Utrecht, co-curator of [Art of the Real](#) in New York and Editor at Large for Verso Books, among many other affiliations and projects—and organised in conversation with IFFR programmers **Julian Ross** and **Peter van Hoof**. Rakes convened the daily sessions, introducing each day's guests and prompting discussions but most importantly creating a sense of cohesion and exchange between participants, members of a new and temporary collective.

And who are those members? Twenty or so filmmakers, programmers, academics, critics and some members of other collectives themselves. Echoing the festival's international focus, IFFR Sessions' participants hailed from a number of different locations, many living somewhere other than where they were born. People deriving from Armenia, Colombia, Malaysia and the Philippines are variously based in places like Los Angeles, Paris, London and the Netherlands, whereas others call Seoul, Sofia or rural Wales home. Likewise,



participants' introductions were often hyphenated: filmmaker-professor; curator-critic; producer-programmer and so on. Quickly it became apparent that the biggest benefit to the sessions—in addition to great presentations from IFFR-screening artists and filmmakers—is coming together with a group of people who form a temporary think tank, hang-out club and critical discussion group, one that aims to maintain connections even after its participants disperse back to their own corners of the world.

This collective of participants continually and reflexively questioned and defined itself in relation to the collective practices discussed with the invited guests of IFFR Sessions 2020: Karrabing Film Collective (Australia), Rojava Film Commune (Kurdistan), Hafiz Rajanle (Indonesia), Eric Baudelaire (France) and Nest Collective (Kenya). Each brought to the sessions different contexts, different ways of working, different relations between collective members, practical and theoretical perspectives on working together and radically divergent forms of work produced: films, exhibitions, publications, events, ideas and platforms born of the fruits of collectivity.

The **Karrabing Film Collective**—represented at the festival by Angelina Lewis, Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Aiden Sing and Kieran Sing—are an indigenous media group made up of around 30 people who are mainly based in the Northern Territories of Australia. They clarified that “collective” is not *their* word (“we say it for you people [to understand]”) but rather Karrabing is “more like a mob”. They make films for fun, and to keep a record of their histories, but they are glad others are interested in their stories and lives as well. The group uses money that the films bring in to buy things for themselves, like boats, small houses and structural changes to make their living easier.

After initially being filmed by a crew of outside technicians, they realised that instead they wanted to make all aspects of the films themselves. Karrabing shoot on iPhones, choose their own acting or production roles and approve edits by consensus. While working collectively informs the group's approach, the sense of communality goes deeper within their culture. Karrabing's ancestors are vibrant and continual participants in their lives. Ancestors, they explain, exist in the past but also in the present and future. Films like



Saltwater Dreaming complicate notions of past, present and future, as characters ask: “Is it 2015? Or 1952?”

The **Rojava Film Commune**, a collective of Kurdish filmmakers founded in 2015 in the northern Syrian town of Rojava, similarly face constant questions of mediating the past through the present. They explained that Kurdish culture and history is passed down through oral tradition, as it was never written down or written records that existed have since been destroyed. Because of this, they identify something inherent within Kurdish culture about being an artist (“To be a Kurd is to be an artist.”). Within the daily struggles of the Kurdish political situation, the group members find that “if art stops, life will stop”.

Thus, they work collectively in stimulating film education through the Rojava Art Academy and by producing films like *The End Will Be Spectacular*, which the Sessions group viewed and provided basis for discussion. In contrast to Karrabing, the Rojava Film Commune do assign and credit specific roles within their productions, such as director, cinematographer, producer and so on. They find it more productive and efficient when peoples’ roles are defined within a production, though these roles may vary from project to project.

When asked how people decided to first come together in forming the Indonesian artist initiative ruangrupa, artist, curator and filmmaker **Hafiz Rajancle** replied, “There is no answer as to how, there is only commitment.” ruangrupa started in 2000, amid a boom of hundreds of other artist initiatives in the country and defined itself with the motto “Make friends, not art!” With a Do-It-Yourself ethos deriving from the country’s indie music scene in the 1990s, the collective used art as a way to connect people, producing street art, archival exhibitions, performances, participatory events and films as methods of fostering community and collectivity.

IFFR Sessions participants were surprised by Rajancle’s description of collectives within Indonesian art culture as capitalistic entities that attracted funding even from corporate sponsorships. This opened up challenging and productive conversations about the



function and distribution of money within collective projects, the risks of institutionalisation and stagnation over time, and decisions about when to dissolve or disband collectives. Rajancle recently left ruangrupa, which has transformed over two decades into a different membership and possibly different aims as well. Previously a project with hyperlocal focus, ruangrupa increasingly work internationally and have been selected as Artistic Directors of the 2022 edition of documenta.

On this third day of IFFR Sessions, the group elected to experiment with the form of the meetings, preferring to devote time to reflect apart from the guest presenters and have more of a free-flowing discussion. As each day's three-hour session sped by—and as a consequence of numerous conversations among group members across other screenings and events—we realized that while each guest had a wealth of information and experience to share, there was also a real necessity in making time to speak with each other as a group as well. There was a feeling of wanting to capture the magic and the potentials of different kinds of discussions when we were all in the room together, which was carried forward through the rest of the sessions until group members dispersed after the conclusion on Monday.

Artist-filmmaker **Eric Baudelaire** discussed the opportunities and challenges of working collectively with others in many different ways across his documentary-focused practice. Interspersing excerpts of his films with the works of influences like Kazuo Hara, Peter Watkins and Jean Eustache, Baudelaire raised both conceptual and practical hurdles to overcome when working collectively. For example, *Un film dramatique* was made in collaboration with twenty-one students of Dora Maar middle school in Saint-Denis in the northern suburbs of Paris. In speaking about crediting the film, Baudelaire explained, “When it comes time to fill out the form and I’m not able to input 20 peoples’ names into the director slot, it becomes an I.T. issue rather than a conceptual one. Festivals get behind all kinds of work but still have some rigidity when it comes to how they actually list and classify things.” The film, which the group viewed together at the festival screening the previous evening, brought up fruitful discussions about archiving the student-makers’ footage, about the structure and chaos of completing the project as part of a school class



and the embracing of accidents which Baudelaire described as “pregnant with possibilities”.

Jim Chuchu and Njoki Ngumi of Nairobi’s **Nest Collective** rounded off the week by introducing their multidisciplinary, collaborative, artistic and social practice. In addition to producing films like the controversial queer project *Stories of Our Lives* (2014, banned in Kenya where homosexuality is illegal) and the short fashion film *To Catch a Dream* (2015), Nest have published a diverse series of books, catalogues and graphic novels. They spoke about foreign funding, lamenting the fact that, from institutional perspectives, “Africans can only make ‘urgent’ and ‘necessary’ work, we’re not allowed to make anything frivolous that doesn’t comment on some social situation”. They also were frank about the challenges to distribution within the continent, explaining it’s often easier to exhibit their work in Europe than Africa, but also acknowledging that posting their videos on platforms like Facebook can start conversations that wouldn’t be possible through traditional forms of exhibition like screenings and installations.

Echoing other collective members’ sentiments expressed throughout the week, Chuchu & Ngumi stressed that they were only two members of the 10-person Nest Collective and their viewpoints could only tell part of the group’s story. But they also underlined the importance of non-consensus and even friction within a collective, as productive disagreements were needed to continually push work forward, rather than group members become stagnant and just going with the flow. These types of lessons—coming from the practical experience of the IFFR Sessions guests—seemed most generative towards the many different ways in which the participants are working with collaborative practices themselves.

Just as quickly as they came together for five days of films, conversations and connections through IFFR Sessions, the participants, guest artists and organisers quickly dispersed back to their own different corners of the globe. This temporary collective is now virtual and dispersed, fed through e-chats and shared docs, continued through currently unforeseen meetings at other festivals and hopefully collaborations as well. But



the experience of convening as active members of such a critical, discursive and inspiring group of fellow film practitioners and lovers—within the context of one of the most significant film events of the year—will certainly be an experience that reverberate outward across both singular and collective practices in significant and unexpected ways.

