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**From Jakarta to Documenta: ruangrupa's influences as
collective community in Global Art Discourse**

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Abstract

This master's thesis embarks on a journey of ruangrupa, an Indonesian artist collective, origins in Jakarta to its influential role in global contemporary art discourse, documenta fifteen. The research explores the active and dynamic relationship between ruangrupa initiatives and the activities involved in the contemporary surroundings and the evolution from grassroots initiatives to international recognition, focusing on their collaborative methodologies, thematic explorations, and impact on the global art scene. From unconventional mediums to collaborative processes, the research delves into the artistic ways in which artists and communities collaborate to shape the narrative and societal norms. By highlighting ruangrupa's artistic journey, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of collective art practices in the contemporary era, emphasising the innovative approaches by the collective sphere to challenge norms, create inspire dialogue, and enact meaningful social change.

Key words: ruangrupa, Art Collective , Collaborative, documenta , Global Art

Introduction

Collective working in art production often leads to misconceptions about the dynamics of collaboration, particularly when considering how a group of individuals—each with their own perspectives and creative visions—can effectively work together. One common assumption is that such a collective process may result in tension or discord, as individual interpretations of a particular concept could diverge, sparking debates or disagreements. This potential for conflict often leads to scepticism about the viability of collective art-making, with the assumption that the more voices involved, the harder it becomes to create cohesive and meaningful work.

However, this thesis seeks to challenge that misconception by exploring how, despite the diversity of thought and the potential for disagreement, collective working in art production can actually generate richer, more innovative outcomes. Rather than viewing differing perceptions as obstacles, collective art practices embrace these differences as essential components of the creative process. Through open dialogue, negotiation, and the sharing of ideas, collective groups are able to turn individual viewpoints into a more dynamic and multifaceted artistic vision. Claire Bishop mentioned “What stands against this model is the collective: collaborative practice is perceived to offer an automatic counter- model of social unity, regardless of its actual politics.”¹ Bishop's critique highlights the tension between the idealised notion of collective unity and the often messy, unpredictable nature of collaboration. Yet, it is this very unpredictability—this constant negotiation of ideas and power—that makes collective working so vital to contemporary art. It encourages a democratic process where multiple voices are heard, allowing the group to push boundaries, challenge assumptions, and generate innovative solutions that would not have been possible through individual effort alone.

In generating more accurate data, this research was significantly enriched by the invaluable contributions of one of ruangrupa's participants, Farid Rakun. Throughout the process, I conducted online interviews with him via video chats, and we also

¹ C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells : Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London :Verso, 2012, p. 12.

engaged in frequent email correspondence. Farid, as part of ruangrupa, not only provided guidance but played a crucial role in shaping the direction and depth of this writing. It is important to note that, in alignment with the collective's ethos, Farid specifically requested that his name be written in all lowercase letters the same way as ruangrupa.

In focusing on how collective working enables us to deepen the engagement with social, political, and cultural issues, this thesis will highlight how collaboration can drive both individual and group growth. It will demonstrate that, far from being a source of discord, the diversity within a collective can serve as a powerful tool for innovation, pushing the boundaries of what art can achieve when approached from multiple perspectives. In examining ruangrupa's artistic journey, this study will offer insights into how collaboration in art production can overcome the challenges of differing opinions to create work that is both meaningful and impactful on a larger societal scale.

Before delving deeply into ruangrupa's processes and activities, it is essential to first explore the broader foundation of collective art and the dynamics that surround it. We will examine well-known precedents of collective art practices from different historical and cultural contexts, analysing how these collectives functioned and the profound impact they had on society. Following this, the focus will shift to how collective communities have been shaped specifically in Asia, with particular attention to Indonesia. In this section, we will explore how the region's unique socio-political and cultural conditions have influenced the development of art collectives. In Indonesia, the rise of collective art groups is deeply intertwined with the country's historical struggles, activism, and communal values. By understanding this context, we can better grasp the emergence of ruangrupa and how their approach reflects both local traditions of collaboration and a response to global art discourses.

Furthermore, this thesis will explore how the Indonesian art collective ruangrupa navigated their journey, beginning in 2000 during a time of intense political upheaval in Indonesia, to ultimately securing a place for their activities within the bustling metropolitan landscape of Jakarta. A key element of their practice is the introduction of their *Lumbung* spirit, a philosophy and method that embodies their way of living

and working as a collective. Derived from the Indonesian concept of communal rice barns, *Lumbung* is both a metaphor and a practical framework for sharing resources, knowledge, and ideas among the group and with broader communities. As we trace ruangrupa's journey from Jakarta's local context to the global art stage, we will see how their *Lumbung* spirit not only defines their internal working dynamics but also offers a counter-narrative to the competitive, individualistic tendencies of the global art world.

Not only focused on conveying the narrative that ruangrupa seeks to express, the collective has also placed significant emphasis on the artistic process itself—how their works are created and the collaborative methods that drive them. By doing so, ruangrupa has established their presence both locally and globally, participating in a wide range of projects that blend social engagement with artistic practice. We will explore how ruangrupa has strategically positioned themselves as participants in some of the world's most influential art exhibitions, such as the Gwangju Biennale, Singapore Biennale, and São Paulo Biennial, among many others.

In successfully gaining international recognition, ruangrupa has continuously expanded their role beyond that of participants contributing individual works to global exhibitions. Their journey saw a pivotal moment when they were chosen as the artistic directors for SONSBEK'16 in the Netherlands. This was a significant role, as it allowed ruangrupa to shape the entire curatorial vision of the exhibition, rather than merely presenting their own work. From SONSBEK'16 ultimately paved the way for a bigger opportunity: being selected as the artistic directors for documenta fifteen in 2022. As artistic directors of documenta fifteen, ruangrupa had the opportunity to bring their *Lumbung* philosophy to a global platform, creating an exhibition that was deeply participatory and focused on resource-sharing and collective action. From documenta fifteen we will deeply explore how ruangrupa showcasing static works that turned documenta fifteen into a living, evolving process that encouraged dialogue, mutual support, and a more inclusive form of art-making. Moreover, as we delve into the events surrounding documenta fifteen, we will also examine the controversies that arose, particularly the debate on antisemitism that sparked just before the exhibition opened. This issue led to significant public

discourse and brought to light complex intersections between art, politics, and historical sensitivities. The debate added another layer of complexity to the exhibition and raised questions about how artists and curators navigate the responsibilities of global representation while tackling sensitive and contested issues.

Overall, this writing takes a deeper dive into the concept of collaborative working in the world of art and how it influences contemporary artistic practices and conditions. I chose ruangrupa as the subject of this study because they exemplify concrete progress in their journey as a collective. Starting as a local art collective in Jakarta, they have steadily expanded their presence on the global stage, while remaining committed to their core values of cooperation, shared resources, and community-driven creativity. Through their evolving participation in international art platforms, ruangrupa continues to spread the spirit of collective work, demonstrating how collaboration can transcend geographical and cultural boundaries to create lasting impact.

Chapter I Collective Art in Collaborative Action

1.1 Understanding Collective Art: Definitions and Perspectives

The notion of the solitary artistic genius working alone in their studio has dominated over centuries. Individual artists often faced challenges in affording the necessary equipment or accessing the required training². However, in the early 20th century, cracks began to appear in this individualistic ideal that challenged existing artistic conventions in paving the way for the emergence of radically different models of collective artistic practice that would significantly challenge and disrupt assumptions about individuality, authorship, and what constituted art itself. Collaborating with others became a practical and strategic response to these limitations, enabling them to pursue new artistic and political objectives that would be unattainable on their own. This collective approach not only pooled resources and skills but also fostered a supportive network that amplified their creative potential. Their employment of expertise that combined multiple identities into a collective process that created the eventual emergence of explicitly collective and collaborative practices. The emergence of collective art practices would turn traditional concepts and modes of creating art by embodying a sense of community where individuals unite around shared perspectives and beliefs to pursue common objectives and effect meaningful change within their environment. Collective art emphasises collaboration and shared ownership, transcending individualistic approaches to artistic creation. Howard Becker defines the concept of “Art World” where individuals who work together produce, distribute, and even appreciate artistic practices. Becker emphasised:

Participants in an art world regard some of the activities necessary to the production of that form of art as “artistic” requiring the special gift or sensibility of an artist. The remaining activities seem to them a matter of craft, business acumen or some other ability less rare, less characteristic of art, less necessary to the success of the work and less worthy of the respect.

² S. Bacharach, J. Neil Booth, Siv B. Fjærestad, *Collaborative Art in the Twenty-First Century*, New York-London: Routledge, 2006.

They define the people who perform these special activities as artists and everyone else as support personnel.³

The collaborative nature of art ensures that artists do not work in isolation; instead, they collaborate, participate in projects, and develop ideas within the broader cooperative context of the art world to which the place belongs. Becker's research emphasises the collaborative and collective nature of artistic production, demonstrating how artists work together, exchange ideas, and influence each other within specific social and cultural environments. He asserted: "The interaction of all the involved parties produces a shared sense of the worth of what they collectively produce."⁴ This collaborative process fosters a sense of ownership and pride among participants, as each member contributes their unique skills and perspectives to the final creation.

The curator Maria Lind discusses the collaborative turn that has become a new approach in society that acts collectively in a form of interaction where every individual in the group comes together, be together and work together⁵. This collective action also linked to social engagement that collaborative behaviour arouse new action and innovative progression which also said by French social theorist Henri de Saint-Simon⁶ in the early 19th, a society in which scientists, engineers, and artists would play crucial roles in guiding social progress. He believed that artists, in particular, had a vital role in shaping the values and direction of society. Saint-Simon emphasised the importance of cooperation and collaboration among individuals with different talents and expertise to achieve social advancement through something they stand for. He saw artists as essential bridges for cultural and moral transformation, capable of inspiring society towards higher ideals and values. Through the collectively-produced works it is possible to directly shape and influence the consciousness of their audiences in profound ways.

³ H. Becker, *Art as Collective Action*, "American Sociological Review", vol. 30, no. 6, 1974, p. 768, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2094151?origin=crossref> [Last access on 19 May 2024]

⁴ H. Becker, *Art World and Collective Activity*, University of California Press, 1982, p. 39.

⁵ M. Lind, *The Collaborative Turn*, in *Taking the Matter into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007.

⁶ Henri de Saint-Simon was a French, political, economic and socialist theorist and businessman whose thought had substantial influence on politics, economics, and sociology of science. Britannica. Editor Encyclopaedia, "Henri de Saint-Simon". Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15 May 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henri-de-Saint-Simon>, [Last access on 28 May 2024]

Aligned with the concept of *Relational Aesthetics* by Nicolas Bourriaud, relational works are a set of artistic practices that originate from the entirety of human relations and their social context, rather than existing in an isolated and private space. This concept challenges the traditional notion of art as an object of contemplation and instead creates spaces for social exchange and dialogue.⁷ This participation with the audience focusing on creating situations and experiences that fostered social interactions and relationships between people, Bourriaud used the term “transitivity” to delve the concept of relational:

It is a tangible property of the artwork. Without it the artwork is nothing other than a dead object, crushed by contemplation [...] It denies the existence of any specific place of art, in favour of a forever unfinished discursiveness and a never recaptured desire for dissemination [...] It seems possible in our view to describe the specific nature of the present-day with the help of the concept of creating relations outside the field of art: relations between individuals and groups, between the artist and the world and by way of transitivity, between the beholder and the world.⁸

As he sees artworks not as unique objects, but as a medium for encounters and relationships to take place. The artwork exists in the relational field and creates an extension to participation, dialogue, and relationships to unfold. Transitivity proposes that artworks create interhuman spaces, relations, and modes of communication that are as much the artwork as any residual object. Bourriaud highlights the transformative potential of art to shape and influence social relations. This perspective shifts the focus from the aesthetic qualities of an art object to the participatory and interactive experiences, thereby democratising art and making it a collective process that resonates within the broader society as well as encouraging individuals to engage with one another in meaningful ways, promoting empathy, understanding, and solidarity. Moreover, Bourriaud emphasises not only the importance of the community working collectively but also highlights how collective forms⁹ subjectivity shapes the interactions between the art and the viewers, ultimately achieving a relational aesthetic. In this framework, the artwork is co-created through the shared experiences and interactions of both the creators and the audience, fostering a dynamic relational space.

⁷ N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetic*, Les Presses du Reel, 2002.

⁸ Ibid. p. 26.

⁹ Ibid. p. 61.

In addition, Blake Stimson & Gregory Sholette wrote “These collaborative encounters between artists and nonprofessionals also blurred the lines of specialised distinctions.”¹⁰ In this way, aesthetic appreciation expanded beyond visuality and individual virtuosity to encompass themes like social activation and spontaneity. It unleashed liberating spaces outside institutional control, creating impactful artistic works and cultivating inclusive environments that empower diverse voices and inspire community engagement. It recognizes that creativity and valuable insights can come from anyone, regardless of their professional training or background. Participants are not merely observers but active contributors whose input is essential to the final outcome. This shared involvement can lead to a deeper connection to the artwork and a stronger commitment to every shared theme and message.

From some narrative explained above we can see that artists became facilitators, engaging audiences as active collaborators rather than passive observers. The line between artist and viewer blurred, as the creative process itself became a shared journey of exploration and expression. Pieces that once hung on gallery walls now adorned the streets, sparking conversations and provoking thought within the public sphere. The collaborative action began to explore new mediums and methods, breaking free the boundaries, and instead utilising public spaces, digital platforms, and community-centred projects. Moreover it also emphasises that art in this current era is no longer just a medium for individual self-expression or aesthetic experimentation, it has become a powerful tool for catalysing social change and altering the concept of how people perceive and experience reality itself that we can see in contemporary society, art intersects with activism, politics, and social justice, serving as a means to address and reflect upon pressing issues such as inequality, climate change, and human rights. This transformation redefined the purpose of art, emphasising its role in social change, cultural discourse, and the everyday lives of people, ultimately broadening the horizons of both artists and audiences alike.

¹⁰ B. Stimson & G. Sholette, *Collectivism after Modernism*, Regents of The University of Minnesota, 2017, p. 24.

1.2 Navigating Social & Political Issues in Collaborative Artistic Projects

Extending the concept of collective work, Grant Kester presented in *The One and the Many*¹¹ that these practices embrace a fluid and open conception of the artwork, viewing it not solely as a finished product but as an ongoing process and it extends to address social, political and cultural issues emphasising the shifting of individual authorship to collective authorship. After the sense of belonging is achieved, it delves into the role of the artist as facilitator or mediator in collaborative projects, highlighting their ability to create dialogue and community engagement. In this role, artists can take control of the creative process, opening up possibilities for new forms of political subjectivity and agency. By doing so, they democratise art, ensuring it reflects a collective vision and resonates with diverse voices and experiences. Kester added in his essay the concept of collaborative action and social aspect that:

The goal is not the violent extraction of value or the suppression of difference, but a co-production (literally, a “co-labour”) of identity at the interstices of existing cultural traditions, political forces, and individual subjectivities. The projects challenge us to recognize new modes of aesthetic experience and new frameworks for thinking identity through the thickly textured haptic and verbal exchanges that occur in the process of collaborative interaction. They call upon us, in turn, to reconsider the formation of modern subjectivity.¹²

He emphasised that this approach not only enhances the relevance and impact of the artwork but also strengthens the role of the community, promoting sustained engagement and open future collaboration that can address topics such as social justice, inequality, and community empowerment, using art as a tool for activism and change. Connecting with the sociopolitical concept, we recall the idea of Relational Aesthetics, as Bourriaud stated “The future of art, as an instrument of emancipation, and as a political tool aimed at the liberation of forms of subjectivity, depends on the way artists deal with this issue.”¹³

The formation of collaborative art practices have often arisen in response to current conditions that arise in society using their collaborative efforts to raise

¹¹ G. Kester, *The one and Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, Duke University Press, 2011.

¹² G. Kester, *Collaboration, Art and Subcultures*, “Cuaderno Video Brasil”, Vol. 2, 2006, p. 30.

¹³ N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetic*, Les Presses du Reel, 2002, p. 78.

awareness and incite action. From the anti-establishment avant-gardes in the early 20th century to activist art collectives during civil rights movements, the formation of these artistic collectives has been intrinsically linked to broader social and political forces. It is well-established that art serves as a powerful tool in political matters as written in “philosophy of the curatorial” as advanced by Jean-Paul Martinon:

[...] a political tool outside of politics, a procedure to maintain a community together, a conspiracy against policies, the act of keeping a question alive, the energy of retaining a sense of fun, the device that helps to revisit history, the measures to create affects, the work of revealing ghosts, a plan to remain out-of-joint with time, an evolving method of keeping bodies and objects together, a sharing of understanding, an invitation for reflexivity, a choreographic mode of operation, a way of fighting against corporate culture, etc.¹⁴

This approach opened the door for collaborative art to be used for sounding political purposes beyond the control of traditional institutions in an aesthetic way in shaping dialogue, reflection through works or even performances. Felix Guattari believed that art could open up new perspectives, affect people's unconscious desires, and prefigure alternative social realities as well as how the collective itself appears in public, he stated “Organising such a collective depends not only on the words that are said, but on the formation of images underlying the constitution of any group and these seem to something fundamental the support upon which all their other aims and objects rest.”¹⁵ Moreover Guattari advocated for a term “molecular revolution” where grassroots collectives and marginalised groups would enact change through micropolitical actions and creative experimentation, rather than waiting for a top-down revolutionary event. The molecular revolution placed its situation in social change that occurs not through centralised structures of power and that later shaped the art practices that were collaborative, transdisciplinary, and engaged with social and political realities. In addition to Guattari's ideas, it reflects that this collective action has a powerful impact on shaping political and social issues. Blake Stimson & Gregory Sholette stated on how the role and behaviour of the artists achieved the goal of an action:

Their task as artists was either to envision a radically new society, often in terms that resembled a monumental social design problem, or to represent

¹⁴ J. Martinon, *Introduction in The Curatorial, A Philosophy of Curating*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 4.

¹⁵ F. Guattari, *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*, Penguin Book, 1984, p. 35.

the physical consequence of the loss of a premodern collective human bond caused by the emergence of mass culture and new technologies.¹⁶

These dual approaches not only offered a critique of the present but also provided a vision for the future, using art as a means to question, challenge, and ultimately reshape the socio-political issues. Through their creative endeavours, artists played a crucial role in both documenting the impact of modernity and proposing alternative paths forward, emphasising the importance of community, empathy, and human connection in the process of ongoing change.

As individuals engaged in collective art start from a shared perspective, the group often develop new ideologies that were previously uncommon in society that extend to political issues. Through the joint efforts, these artists challenge conventional norms and push the boundaries of conventional thought, giving rise to new cultural narratives and social paradigms. As a consequence of this new concept according to Bishop, the art work is automatically political in implication and emancipatory in effect.¹⁷ She explores how participation became an important buzzword in the social inclusion discourse, Bishop highlights the complex ethical problematic situation and power dynamics involved in artists' attempts to constructively represent or collaborate with marginalised social constituencies. Bishop frames the political aspect of participatory art practices not in their ability to directly solve issues, but in their capacity to rupture conventions and rehearse new social models. Bishop positions the participatory artworks that construct immersive social environments and "artificial situations" as uniquely capable of modelling alternate forms of collective social organisation and political subjectivity¹⁸. This model allows individuals to experiment and rehearse new ways of relating to one another and to power structures, thereby challenging existing norms and encouraging the exploration of innovative social and political paradigms. Through these immersive and contrived settings, participatory art becomes a laboratory for envisioning and enacting potential futures, highlighting its critical role in both reflecting and shaping societal change. This process not only challenges existing

¹⁶ B. Stimson & G. Sholette, *Collectivism after Modernism*, Regents of The University of Minnesota, 2017, p. 5.

¹⁷ C. Bishop, *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, "The MIT Press", Vol.110 (Autumn, 2004), p. 62.

¹⁸ C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells : Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London :Verso, 2012.

power dynamics and societal conventions but also inspires new ways of thinking and living. Participatory art thus acts as a catalyst for transformation, offering tangible experiences that can influence public discourse and policy, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society.

After recognizing the multifaceted aspects that accompany the establishment of collective action, we can delve deeper into some notable groups that have effectively utilised artistic tools to voice contemporary societal issues. Through their collaborative practices, these art collectives have shown that the act of creating together can be a form of resistance, a way to reclaim agency, and a means to envision and work towards a more equitable and just society.

1.2.1 Notable Precedents in Collective Art Groups

Throughout history, collective art groups have played a significant role in addressing social issues, challenging dominant power structures, and advocating for marginalised voices. These groups, often emerging during times of political and social upheaval, have harnessed the power of collaboration to amplify their impact and create lasting change. From the early 20th century movements to contemporary initiatives, collective art groups have demonstrated the transformative potential of art when it is rooted in collective action and shared goals. The following are some notable precedents that highlight the diverse strategies, motivations, and aesthetics embraced by these groups over time:

The Russian Constructivist emerged as an influential avant-garde art movement advocate for the creation of art and design that is utilitarian and serves a social purpose, using industrial materials and modern technology. Many of the notable artists like Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko were committed to the revolutionary ideals that sought to overthrow the old social order and create a more equal society. They exemplified one of the most coherent efforts in integrating advanced abstraction, constructivist elements, and a focus on materiality that were intended to educate and inspire the masses. The movement was deeply intertwined with the social and political upheavals of its time. Artists believed in the transformative power of art to instigate social change and reflected revolutionary

ideals in their work. An art historian Chirstina Kiaer wrote “The Russian Constructivist offers an alternative model of how commodity desire can become comprehensible to us and available for social transformation.”¹⁹

Moving to the era of World War I’s devastating impact, a radical art movement known as Dada, emerged defying the conventions of aesthetics, politics, and society itself. Dada embraced the irrational and the spontaneous, creating a space where everyday objects became art, and satire became a tool for political critique. Claire Bishop has discussed Dada in the context of its revolutionary approach to art and its lasting impact on contemporary practices. She stated: “This model of delayed reaction has been foundational to my selection of examples, whose inclusion is based on their relevance to the present day, rather than for their significance at the time of their making.”²⁰ In addition to Bishop, Bourriaud also sees Dada as a pivotal historical precursor to the participatory, socially-engaged art forms that connect with the "relational"²¹ paradigm. He explores the continuity between Dada's practices that aimed to collapse art into radical real-life experiences and today's artworks that construct social situations and environments. Focusing more on community grouping, Fluxus emerged with a concept similar to Dada. Fluxus artists emphasised the importance of collaboration and collective experience, often involving the public directly in their performances and creations. They aimed to democratise art, making it accessible to all and blurring the lines between artist and viewer.

In the late 1960, collaborative actions also had a significant impact on feminist discourse, exemplified by the influential group known as Guerrilla Girls that focus on intersectional feminism, actively use humour and public interventions to challenge sexism and racism for women in the art world and wearing gorilla masks in public appearances to remain anonymous. Their work often appears near prestigious art institutions, in order to catch the attention of the art world and the public. This action can be related to Bishop statement:

¹⁹ C. Kiaer, *Imagine no Possessions the Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, The MIT press Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2005, p. 7.

²⁰ C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells : Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London :Verso, 2012. p. 7

²¹ N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetic*, Les Presses du Reel, 2002.

[...] asserted that political commitment alone was not enough; an effective artistic revolution was essential to supplement their cause. At the point of reception, they argued, a work of art should have a similar effect to a political action: ‘If the contents are to be expressed in a revolutionary manner, if the work is to make an effective impact on the recipients’ consciousness, it is essential to deal with the material in a shocking, disquieting, even violent way.’²²



Guerrilla Girls in front of banners and photos at Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2016. The names of the museums that ignored their questionnaire were placed on the floor, where visitors walked on them. Copyright © Guerrilla Girls. Photo source: screen grab from “Guerrilla Girls – 1985-2017.”

At their core, the Guerrilla Girls have maintained a steadfast commitment to feminist politics and dismantling patriarchal power structures within the elite art world establishment. Sholette and Thompson in their book viewed the Guerrilla Girls as a crucial example of how art can be employed as a form of social and political intervention, effectively disrupting the status quo and advocating for greater equity and inclusion.²³ Through this powerful and concrete action, it becomes clear that gaining positive feedback is possible. In the 2010s, the Guerrilla Girls revisited and updated two of their works from three decades earlier. They discovered that major museums had made little progress in hosting solo exhibitions for women artists: three

²² C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells : Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London :Verso, 2012, p. 127.

²³ G. Sholette, N. Thompson, *The Interventionists: Users' Manual For The Creative Disruption Of Everyday Life*, The MIT Press Cambridge. Massachusetts, London. England, 2006, p. 138.

museums had increased from 0 to 1 such shows, and one museum from 1 to 2. The most elite museums have been particularly slow in according to women the significant honour of a solo exhibition.²⁴ Following this remarkable impact, in 2018 The National Gallery of Art appointed Kaywin Feldman as a female director for the first time in history. This groundbreaking appointment marked a significant shift in the institution's leadership and was part of a broader initiative to transform the gallery's vision. The new leadership aimed to foster a more inclusive and diverse environment, both in terms of the gallery's collections and its staff. This action underscored a commitment to embracing diversity, promoting gender equality, and ensuring that a wider range of voices and perspectives are represented within the gallery's exhibitions and organisational structure.²⁵ Their campaigns have prompted self-reflection within the art industry, leading to critical evaluations of practices and policies that perpetuate inequality. With these concrete actions, collective art has continually evolved as a powerful tool for social commentary, offering alternative narratives and visions for a more inclusive and equitable society as we can see these communities stand together to amplify their voices, sharing their beliefs and endeavours. Collective art practices have the powerful ability to challenge dominant narratives, disrupt power structures, and envision new social realities. By harnessing the strength of collaboration and collective action, these artistic endeavours can amplify marginalised voices and mobilise communities towards social and political change.

Moving to the Asian continent, numerous art collectives have also emerged, contributing uniquely to the region's issue. In east Asia there is a renown collective group from Japan called Chim↑Pom, they are known for their provocative works that tackle urbanisation and social issues through their experiments and projects in the

²⁴ R. Cordova, *Taking it to the street: the Guerrilla Girls struggle for Diversity*, Glasstire, 28 November 2021, <https://glasstire.com/2021/11/28/taking-it-to-the-street-the-guerrilla-girls-struggle-for-diversity/>, 2012 [Last access on 20 May 2024]

²⁵ Z. Smal, *National Gallery of Art Reopens With a New Vision: 'For All the People'*, in "The New York Times", 13 May 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/13/arts/design/national-gallery-washington-reopen-rebrand.html> [Last access on 22 May 2024]

public space.²⁶ Chim↑Pom actively participated in exhibitions throughout the world and developed various independent initiatives as well as brought up urban issues that drew the attention of the public. One of the well known ones was the video installation about gigantic garbage fields typically hidden from tourists in Bali, where locals make a living by collecting plastic bags. In doing this project Chim↑Pom was supported by the local people in Bali, in result the video and the installation of the trash were brought to Japan to be exhibited.



Installation view of CHIM-POM's *Saya Mau pergi ke TPA*, 2008, video installation with garbage bought in Bali, dimensions variable, at Parco Museum Tokyo, 2012. Photo by Kenji Morita.

Through this collective action that made a remarkable participatory impact on society, numerous collective art groups have emerged worldwide, each with distinct concepts and methods. This global spread of collective art groups underscores the evolving role of art in addressing contemporary issues and shaping the future of

²⁶ Art Asia Pasific, *Energy of Chaos: Eight Essential Works of Chim↑Pom*, 18 February 2022, <https://artasiapacific.com/people/energy-of-chaos-eight-essential-works-of-chim-pom>, [last access on 8 July 2024]

societies worldwide. This phenomenon is not limited to Western countries; collective action has also rapidly spread across Asia, securing a significant place in the cultural landscape. These diverse groups harness the power of collaboration to address local and global issues. In Asia, for example, collectives have embraced traditional art forms alongside contemporary practices to create works that resonate deeply with their cultural contexts and even political sides that shape the community's way of doing. One of the most interesting examples of this artistic shaping in Asia is found in Indonesia. Indonesian art collectives have played a pivotal role in the country's contemporary art movement, blending traditional Indonesian artistry with modern and often politically charged narratives that enrich the cultural aspect through provoking thought and dialogue.

1.3 The Forces Shaping Indonesia's Art Communities

The collaborative group is generally unified by a shared perspective and ideology among its members. It primarily engaged with political and social situations, which could vary significantly from one location to another. The contemporary art community in Indonesia has been shaped by various cultural, historical, and socio-political factors, resulting in a dynamic and diverse artistic landscape. Indonesia's complex political landscape, including periods of authoritarian rule and social upheaval, has profoundly influenced its contemporary art community. Artists often use their work to critique social and political issues, such as corruption, human rights violations, environmental degradation, and religious tensions. This engagement with pressing societal concerns can be traced with the earliest precedent named PERSAGI (*Persatuan Ahli Gambar Indonesia*) or the Association of Indonesian Drawing Experts, founded in 1938 by a group of artists Agus Djaja, Emiria Soenassa, S. Sudjojono. This group emerged during the Dutch colonial era, a time when most artists were heavily influenced by Western styles of painting. The prevailing artistic norms were largely shaped by European aesthetics, techniques, and subject matter, often neglecting the rich cultural heritage and diverse traditions of Indonesia. However, with the present of PERSAGI there was a significant shift in the

artistic result.²⁷ There was a revival and celebration of folk art, which drew from Indonesia's vast array of cultural stories, traditional motifs, and historical narratives. During this colonial period, S. Sudjono, known as the father of Indonesian modernism, embedded the concept of *sanggar* (creative communities). *Sanggar* can be described as a place where artists gather and work together. The conception of *sanggar* both prepared the climate for the abiding importance of dual attention to collectivity and the individual in Indonesian art.²⁸ This idea of a shared creative space has been deeply ingrained in Indonesian culture and has naturally evolved to suit the needs of contemporary artists.

More about the era of colonialism, according to Supangkat One of the practitioners of Contemporary art in Indonesia, the history of colonisation by European powers, particularly the Dutch colony for 350 years, has left a lasting impact on the art scene.²⁹ Supangkat argued that Indonesian art should not be defined solely by ethnic or regional characteristics but rather by its ability to engage with and respond to the complexities of the Indonesian experience, including its colonial past, cultural diversity, and socio-political realities. The struggle to reconcile traditional Indonesian art forms with contemporary expressions remains a central theme in the work of many Indonesian artists. This ongoing dialogue between past and present, local and global, traditional and modern, is a testament to the complex legacy of colonialism in Indonesia's art scene. Additionally, according to Keith Foulcher, the response to Western culture during colonialism should not be viewed as a hindrance to the development of art in Indonesia. Instead, it should be seen as an opportunity to learn from and enhance our own cultural expressions³⁰. Colonial encounters led to cultural exchange and hybridization, influencing artistic styles, themes and more to open debate. This interaction between indigenous traditions and European artistic

²⁷ T. Sumardjo, *The Tendencies of Indonesian Art: Folk Traditions and Western Influence*, Atlantic Magazine, 1956, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1956/06/the-tendencies-of-indonesian-art-folk-tradition-s-and-western-influence/641422/>, [last access on 10 July 2024]

²⁸ R. Kolb, D. Ritcher, *Documenta fifteen—Aspects of Commoning in Curatorial and Artistic Practices*, Documenta, Issue 54/November 2022.

²⁹ J. Supangkat, *A Brief History of Indonesia Modern Art*, Edited by C. Turner, Brisbane, University of Queensland Press, 2003, pp. 47-57.

³⁰ K. Foulcher, *Social Commitment in Literature and the Arts: The Indonesian Institute of Culture*, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1986, p. 198.

influences has led to a rich, complex tapestry of contemporary Indonesian art that continues to evolve.

The beginning of the contemporary art movement in Indonesia is closely tied to the community that emerged in the late 19th century. This collective was significantly influenced by the Reformation era during President Soeharto's dictatorship. The rigid regulation stipulated during this era made the environment difficult to act freely and echo the voices of society becoming impossible, this period known as the New Order era which lasted from 1966 to 1998. This era followed the fall of President Sukarno, Indonesia's first president, and was characterised by significant political, economic, and social changes. In this era the government surveillance extended into personal spaces, including monitoring public opinion and activities. Following the massive political change in this era, artistic creation exerted tight control and censorship over the arts, restricting freedom of expression. The government encouraged and promoted art that aligned with the regime's nation-building narratives, often depicting themes of development, unity, and Indonesian identity. Artists had to navigate strict guidelines and avoid any work that could be perceived as critical of the government or contradicting the state's nationalist ideology. Several artists' groups and communities were forced underground or had to operate discreetly to avoid persecution. Covert exhibitions and underground publications became modes of resistance in order to keep the existence of the community during the new order era. Through this urgent situation, the formation of artist groups in Indonesia has been driven by at least four primary motivations.³¹ Firstly, artists have shared the need for a common physical space or facility to create and produce their works. Secondly, there has been a desire to unite with other artists, to form affiliations or organisations based on common interests, world views, or socio-cultural backgrounds. Thirdly, artists have sought opportunities to exhibit their works together or organise collaborative activities that support the arts. Fourth, they have aimed to collectively articulate their viewpoints and artistic manifestos, seeking stronger reception and validation through a unified voice. Notably, some artist groups were formed by simultaneously combining two, three, or all four of these motives.

³¹ Hujatnika, A. Zainsjah, *Artist Collectives in The Post-1998 Indonesia: Resurgence, or a Turn (?)*, International Conference on Aesthetics and the Sciences of Art, 2020.

For example, Taring Padi, one of the precedent and influential art collectives in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, emerged in 1998. The collective is known for its powerful use of visual arts, particularly in addressing issues of social justice, political oppression, and grassroots activism.³² Their work often combines traditional Indonesian styles with contemporary political messages, making them a critical voice in the post-authoritarian cultural landscape of Indonesia. With these reasons, Taring Padi has fulfilled the essence of collective; they occupy a dedicated physical space in Yogyakarta, they unite members around a shared vision and mission, and they facilitate individual artistic development while maintaining their collective, militant character. Through their collaboration, they strive to achieve broader social change, using art as a tool for activism and public engagement.

Following the motives that shaped the artist's production during the era, Dirgantoro through her writing about Indonesian Contemporary art saw the artistic process in Indonesia as a post-traumatic journey as artists continue to respond to human rights abuses and political conflicts through art-making and exhibitions.³³ Dirgantoro highlights how exhibitions and art spaces have become sites for collective healing and memorialization, allowing for the processing of shared histories and the imagining of alternative futures. It addresses issues of violence, memory, and justice through various mediums. This post-traumatic perspective provides a deep and nuanced understanding of the socio-political foundations that shape much of contemporary Indonesian art. It highlights how historical traumas and collective memories continue to influence artistic expression.

This understanding also sheds light on the emergence of art organisations that reflected and responded to the political climate of that time. Two such organisations, LEKRA (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat) and GSRB (Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru), emerged in response to the political situation under Soeharto's regime. These groups have utilised art to address pressing issues, challenge authoritarian regimes, and advocate for the voices of the marginalised.

³² D. Sinaga, Kiswondo, M. Aleida, W, Dirgantoro, Y. Yatkama, B. Agung, R. Sirait, E. White, J Lumban Gaol, E. Faryadi, M. Kusumawijaya, A. Crosby, *"Taring Padi Seni Membongkar Tirani"*, Lumbung Pres, Ford Foundation, 2011.

³³ W. Dirgantoro, *From silence to speech: witnessing and trauma of the anti-communist mass killings in Indonesian contemporary art*, "World Art", 10:2-3, 301-322, 2022.

1.3.1 Lekra's Contributions to Indonesian Art

The Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (Institute of People's Culture), commonly known as LEKRA, played a pivotal role in the development of Indonesian art during the mid-20th century. Founded in 1950 as the cultural wing of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and supported by the first president, Sukarno. The organisation actively supported President Sukarno's policies, including his guided democracy and anti-imperialist stance through artistic expression with political activism, advocating for a people's culture that reflected the struggles and aspirations of the working class. They aimed to counter what they saw as the individualistic, apolitical art of the time by creating democracy as a cultural movement. The concept of the group emphasised that art could be a source of enjoyment and expression for everyone not just the upper class, and that it could articulate the aspirations of the people as well as portraying the working class, social progress, and the collective struggle for a better society³⁴. The forerunner of LEKRA, Sugiarti Siswadi, sounded her expression into a poem that against the dehumanising oppression and exploitation in Indonesia during that era:

*We have cried out, from behind the walls of segregation,
from the clutches of the spiteful bed,
from the nightly business in the gutters,
from the revenge of unwilling wedlock
“We are human beings!”³⁵*

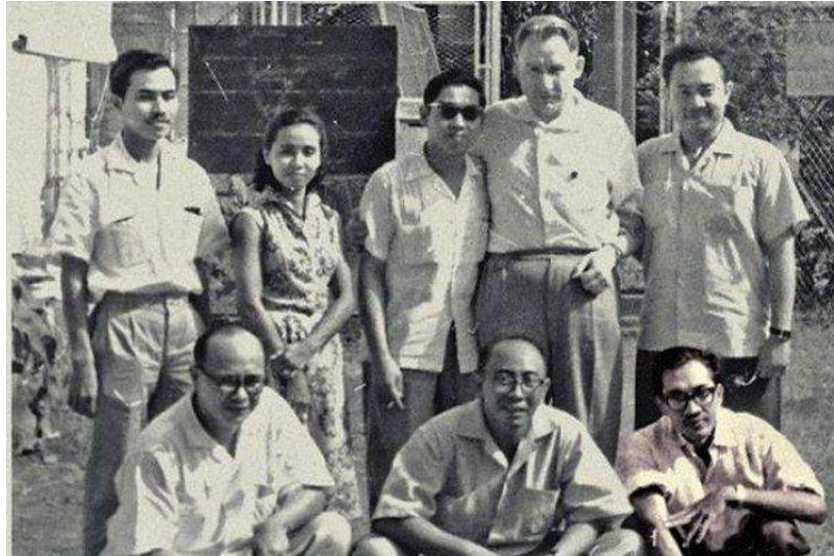
One of Lekra's key principles was *Turun ke bawah* or *turba* ('descend from above' or 'going down to the masses'). It means going down to the grassroots – working, eating, living with labourers, landless peasants, and fishermen.³⁶ This principle emphasised the importance of immersing oneself in the daily lives of the common

³⁴ PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia) or Indonesia communist party was established in 1920 under the rule of the first president Ir. Soekarno, making it one of the oldest communist parties in the world. It initially emerged as a response to colonial rule and was part of the broader anti-colonial nationalist movement in Indonesia, which was then a Dutch colony.

³⁵ Original translation: Kami Berteriak dari Balik dinding, dari cengkaman tempat tidur yang diisi dengki, dari bisnis malam di selokan, dari balas dendam atas hubungan yang tidak diinginkan. Kami adalah manusia, Wieringa, S. (2002). Gerwani: *Towards the Vanguard of the Women's Movement*. In: *Sexual Politics in Indonesia*. Institute of Social Studies, The Hague. Palgrave Macmillan, London. p. 139.

³⁶ M.Bodden (2012). *Dynamics and Tension of LEKRA's modern national theatre 1959-1965*, Heirs to world culture; Being Indonesian 1950-1965 KITLV Press, 2012.

people, particularly the labourers, landless peasants, and fishermen. It meant not just observing their struggles from a distance but actively participating in their routines, sharing their meals, and experiencing their hardships firsthand.



Portrait Of Lekra's Members
Source: © 2021 Tribunnews Wiki/Bangkit N

Moreover LEKRA members were encouraged to create works that aligned with socialist realist³⁷ principles along with their principles toward new artistic development that was promoted by the western capitalism during colonialism.³⁸ Bodden explains that socialist realism, as practised by Lekra, was not merely an artistic style but an ideological tool. It was intended to reflect and promote the goals of socialism and communism. Art and literature were seen as powerful tools to raise class consciousness, critique social injustices, and promote revolutionary ideals. This approach mandated that art and literature serve the people, particularly the working class, by depicting their struggles, aspirations, and victories. At the same time, LEKRA pushed for artistic innovation and experimentation as long as it upheld

³⁷ LEKRA promoted an idea of socialist realism that was based on the work of the Russian author Maxim Gorki (1868-1936). This socialist realism was a form of realism in its attempt to represent the nature, essence or truth of society and everyday life; it was socialist in presenting an idealist, revolutionary vision of the future with suggestions, changes and solutions for a better Indonesia. From E. Jurriens, *Social Participation in Indonesian Media and Art: Echoes from the Past, Visions for the Future*, "BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL- LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE", vol.169, no.1, 2013, pp. 7-36.

³⁸ K. Foulcher, *Social Commitment in Literature and the Arts: The Indonesian Institute of Culture*, Bandung, Pustaka Pias, 2020, p. 195.

socialist realist principles and emphasised the interests of the proletariat masses. However, its prominence came to a sudden end following the anti-communist purge of 1965, which led to the organisation's dissolution and the suppression of its members. Suharto's regime officially banned the communist party and all affiliated organisations, including LEKRA. This legal action effectively dismantled LEKRA as well as the cultural and intellectual contributions of LEKRA were largely erased from public discourse during the New Order era. Despite its eradication, the impact of LEKRA's innovative approach to merging art and politics continues to be felt in the following movements and the broader narrative of Indonesian art history.

1.3.1.2 The Impact of GSRB on Indonesia Artistic Evolution

In response to the suppression of LEKRA and the overall atmosphere of political control in 1975 a group called *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GSRB)* translated to “*Indonesian New Art Movement*” emerged by challenging established norms and embracing experimental and conceptual approaches. Spearheaded by a group of young artists, like Jim Supangkat, S. Teddy D, Nanik Mirna and FX Harsono, GSRB sought to break away from the formalistic and decorative tendencies prevalent at the time. Instead, they emphasised socio-political themes, everyday life, and the use of unconventional materials and techniques. This movement challenged traditional boundaries and promoted art as a means of social and political commentary.³⁹ GSRB played a crucial role in shaping modern Indonesian art, fostering greater artistic freedom and expression, and influencing subsequent generations of artists in Indonesia. This dissent primarily focused on academically, starting around discussions on modernist principles and fresh perspectives concerning contemporary art. The participating young artists opposed the international style, universalism, and the predominant emphasis on painting within Indonesian modern art. In strengthening the mission and vision of the group, the members proclaimed a manifesto that called “*Emancipation of Fine Art*” in Jakarta, 2 May 1987:

³⁹ FX. Harsono & S. Adiyati, Catalogue of the GSRB exhibition *Interpreting New Art Movement: Re-examining the Historical Journey of New Art 1975-1987*, Galeri RJ Katamsi ISI Yogyakarta, 2016.

Fine art emancipation is an expression based on an awareness of the need for the emancipation of definitions of fine art. The form of this expression prioritises the reality and the spirit of exploration, based on an aesthetic of emancipation. The emancipation of fine art is an initiative to change the definition of fine art. The principal of this awareness is that fine art is a symptom of plurality, based on a variety of sources. The definition of fine art that is recognized and acknowledged these days is shackled to definitions of: painting, sculpture and printmaking. Fine art is confined to the frames of reference of “High Art”.

Fine art needs emancipation. Expression of visual art should prioritise the deconstruction of misunderstood traditions of fine art. Rational visual art expression should prioritise statements based on the aesthetics of emancipation. A redefinition of fine art is required, to free it from the definition rooted in artes; liberales seek a new definition which can accommodate every expression of visual art. Emancipation of encultured thought is required to counter isolated points of view that only acknowledge one notion of art, and only one global society within a unified and harmonious culture.⁴⁰

The manifesto called for an end to the dominance of conventional, academic, and colonial art forms, advocating instead for new, innovative, and experimental approaches. This included moving beyond the confines of painting and sculpture to embrace multimedia, performance, and installation art. The movement advocated for art that was socially relevant and could address pressing issues such as inequality, corruption, and oppression. By doing so, GSRB aimed to make art a tool for social change and political commentary.⁴¹

In fostering a spirit of innovation and critical engagement, GSRB paved the way for future generations of Indonesian artists. It demonstrated that art could serve as a powerful means of exploring and challenging socio-political issues, even under restrictive regimes. The group's emphasis on artistic freedom and experimentation remains a cornerstone of Indonesia's dynamic art scene today. Through their daring explorations of unconventional mediums, techniques, and themes, the members of GSRB challenged the status quo and inspired subsequent generations of artists to question existing norms and conventions.

The group embarked on a journey of organising exhibitions across various locations to advocate for their vision of a new art revolution in Indonesia. By curating and showcasing diverse artworks, they aimed to challenge traditional artistic

⁴⁰ The original manifesto was published in the exhibition catalogue of 'Proyek 1: *Pasaraya Dunia Fantasi*' (*Project 1: Department Store Fantasy World*). Full translation in English by Indonesian Visual Art Archive (IVAA)

⁴¹ M.Bodden (2012). *Dynamics and Tension of LEKRA's modern national theatre 1959-1965*, Heirs to world culture; Being Indonesian 1950-1965 KITLV Press, 2012.

norms and promote contemporary, socially-engaged art practices. The initial signs of a shift from representation to presentation in Indonesian contemporary art emerged with GSRB artists who began experimenting with installation art. Another pioneer of Indonesian installation art, Balinese artist Nyoman Erawan, described installation art as responding to space (*merespon ruang*), being interactive (*interaktif*), tangible (*bisa dirasakan*), and having a broad and direct conceptual approach (*konsepnya luas dan langsung*).⁴² These characteristics demonstrate how installation art, as described by Nyoman Erawan, transcends traditional boundaries by integrating space, interactivity, sensory experience, and broad conceptual thinking. This multifaceted approach also elevates the viewer's engagement, making installation art a powerful medium for contemporary expression.

FX Harsono, a member of the group, displayed his work at the GSRB exhibition in 1975, which was later re-exhibited by the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) in 2010. The exhibition at SAM revisited and re-contextualized many of the themes Harsono explored during his time with GSRB. It showcased his evolution as an artist while maintaining a focus on the critical examination of Indonesian society's transformations and highlighted his ongoing commitment to using art as a medium for social and political commentary, as a core principle of GSRB.

⁴² E. Jurriëns (2013), *Between Utopia and Real World: Indonesia's avant-garde new media art*, "Indonesia and the Malay World", 41:119, 48-75, DOI: 10.1080/13639811.2012.750103



FX Harsono, *Paling Top (Most Top)*, 1975
 From the exhibition FX Harsono: Testimonies, Singapore Art Museum, 2010
 Plastic rifle, textile, wooden crate, wire mesh and LED tube
 99.5 x 156.7 x 50 cm
 © FX Harsono/ National Gallery Singapore 2006

As a major part of GSRB, Harsono during his interview with Haimana said that “Art with cultural context, social and political existence is far more substantial to me than those centres.”⁴³ Through a diverse array of, and mixed media works, he provided a comprehensive overview of his creative responses to Indonesia's socio-political condition. However, much like the majority of LEKRA's literature and visual art, GSRB focused on representing social commitment rather than fostering direct social participation. This emphasis on representation meant that the movement's works were designed to reflect and comment on societal issues, aiming to raise awareness and provoke thought among viewers. While GSRB artists were deeply committed to social and political causes, their primary mode of engagement was through the creation of art that highlighted these issues rather than involving the public in active participation.⁴⁴ Moreover they also contributed to a broader cultural and intellectual discourse, thereby influencing public opinion and potentially inspiring future actions.

⁴³ In conversation with FX Harsono (English Translation) by Aisha Johan, 17 April 2017, <https://hainamana.com/in-conversation-with-fx-harsono-english-translation/> [Last access on 15 June 2024]

⁴⁴ E. Jurriëns, *Social Participation in Indonesian Media and Art: Echoes from the Past, Visions for the Future*, “BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL- LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE”, vol.169,no.1, 2013, pp. 7-36. doi:10.1163/22134379-12340021. p. 16.

The influences of these notable groups have given significant impact to the current collective art that managed to have notable recognition. Their innovative approaches and radical ideologies have left a lasting legacy, fostering an environment where collaborative creativity thrives and not only led to notable recognition within Indonesia but has also garnered substantial attention on the global stage.

Some of the multidisciplinary communities that have emerged in the post-New Order period⁴⁵, each with varying levels of activity and continuity, include ruangrupa (Jakarta), Forum Lenteng (Jakarta), Common Room (Bandung), Tromarama (Bandung), Video Lab (Bandung), Ruang Mes 56 (Yogyakarta), Jatiwangi Art Factory (Jatiwangi), WAFT (Surabaya), and Klinik Seni Taxu (Denpasar). These collectives have played a crucial role in shaping contemporary Indonesian art by contributing in innovative practices, promoting collaborative projects, and providing platforms for diverse artistic expressions. One of the prominences that has spread their career on the international level is ruangrupa. This collective art community based in Jakarta became the artistic direction for documenta fifteen 2022 in Kassel, Germany. ruangrupa infused the art scene with a broader focus on community engagement, collective creativity, as well as addressing contemporary socio-political issues that will be discussed deeply in the following chapters. Through their efforts, ruangrupa ensured that the pioneering spirit of Indonesia's art collectives continued to inspire and shape the future of the art community both local and international.

⁴⁵ E. Jurriëns, *Between Utopia and Real World: Indonesia's avant-garde new media art*, "Indonesia and the Malay World", 41:119, 48-75, DOI: 10.1080/13639811.2012.750103, 2013, p. 51.

Chapter 2 ruangrupa Influences on Urban Environment

2.1 The Initiation of an Art Space in Jakarta: ruangrupa

The vibrant metropolis of Jakarta, renowned for its cultural diversity and rich historical context, witnessed a profound shift in its contemporary art with the establishment of ruangrupa. This collective brought fresh energy and ideas, helping to shape a space where creativity, collaboration, and meaningful conversations could flourish against the backdrop of the city's complex socio-political climate. The roots of ruangrupa trace back to the 1990s when its future members were art students, often gathering informally at a local warung (kiosk) near the Jakarta Art Centre to discuss art and collaboration. Officially established in 2000, ruangrupa became a driving force in fostering artistic creativity and critical dialogue. The name “ruangrupa” combines the words *ruang*, meaning space, and *rupa*, meaning visual art. The use of a lowercase 'r' in their name symbolises their commitment to creating an open and inclusive space for visual arts, allowing creativity to thrive in the face of social and political challenges.

The first people to initiate ruangrupa was Ade Darmawan then followed by other colleagues Iswanto Hartono, and Reza Afisina, who acknowledged that their collective was influenced by the transformative period that began in 1998 when president Suharto stepped down. This was a period marked by the fall of the New Order regime under Indonesia's second president, Soeharto, whose authoritarian rule had gripped the country for over three decades. Suharto's New Order regime replaced Sukarno's Old Order and established a centralised, military-dominated government that prioritised economic growth and political stability, often at the expense of civil liberties and democratic freedoms. The regime's downfall sparked widespread social and political upheaval, including student protests and calls for reform⁴⁶. This pivotal

⁴⁶ This period, known as the *Reformasi era*. Suharto's regime, which lasted for over three decades, was known for its authoritarian rule, corruption, and suppression of political dissent. In May 1998, mounting pressure from student protests and civil unrest forced Suharto to resign, ushering in a period of political reform. The post-Suharto era saw a significant relaxation of media censorship, allowing for greater freedom of the press and expression. From the interview of S. Goltz with R. Afisina, A. Darmawan, I. Hartono; *Collective Crafting in Post-Suharto Indonesia: A Journey with Ruangrupa from the Jakarta Institute of the Arts to Documenta Fifteen in Kassel. Cultural Politics* 1 November 2022; 18 (3): 430–458. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-9964885>

moment in the nation's history marked the beginning of the Reform era, characterised by significant political, social, and cultural changes. Witnessing the profound changes sweeping through Indonesia, they deepened their relationships and engaged in intense dialogues about the tense political climate. These conversations were not just about understanding the immediate changes but also focus on envisioning the role of art in a society undergoing rapid transformation. The political instability and the newfound freedom of expression inspired them to rethink the purpose and potential of art, moving beyond traditional boundaries to explore how it could contribute to social and political discourse. From the interview with e-flux, the members clearly stated that “During the Suharto regime there was a vertical fight: the people versus the state/authority. This transformed into a horizontal contest: the people versus the people.”⁴⁷ Freed from the oppressive censorship and control of the New Order, the media more frankly reported political issues, and civil society became more active and vocal. The initiation of ruangrupa led to a community-oriented approach that reflects some of the democratic ideals and openness of the post-Soeharto period.

Formed as a group during the New Order regime, the participants of ruangrupa brought together a diverse range of expertise. These varied backgrounds included visual arts, design, music, architecture, teaching, writing, and research, often with individuals possessing a blend of several disciplines. From the same interview the members stated:

By acting as a stand-alone citizens’ initiative, the group rendered its vitality by becoming a form of supportive infrastructure for both art and the community. It envisioned itself as living among the people. Our neighbors’ unmediated influence and involvement could also act as an artistic exploration strategy.⁴⁸

This diversity enriched the collective, enabling them to approach projects with a multifaceted perspective. The varied skills and backgrounds within ruangrupa allowed them to address complex issues creatively and innovatively, enhancing the impact and relevance of their projects. This blend of expertise meant that their works

⁴⁷ Ruangrupa and Nikos Papastergiadis in Conversation: *Living Lumbung: The Shared Spaces of Art and Life*, “E-flux Journal”, Issue #118, 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/118/395154/living-lumbung-the-shared-spaces-of-art-and-life/>, [last access on 10 July 2024]

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 4.

were not only aesthetically engaging but also rich in content and context, deeply resonating with audiences and fostering meaningful dialogue. By 2024, the core contributors of ruangrupa included: **Ade Darmawan**, an artist, curator, and director of ruangrupa who graduated in Graphic Art; **Ajeng Nurul Aini**, a journalism graduate who manages ruangrupa and works as a project officer in various art projects; **Daniella Fitria Praptono**, a Graphic art graduate who manages workshops for urban women, teaches Arts Introduction for Kids at Gudskul, and oversees ruangrupa's financial affairs; **farid rakun**, an architecture graduate, he also involved in numerous local and international curation projects; **Indra Ameng**, a program coordinator at ruangrupa and also a band manager for a music group in Jakarta; **Iswanto Hartono**, an artist, architect, curator, and writer, his role as a coordinator of ArtLab at ruangrupa; **Julia Sarisetiati**, a photography graduate who teaches Collective Sustainability at Gudskul and curated the media art festival OK.Video; **Mirwan Andan**, a Political Science graduate, and serves as a researcher and developer at ruangrupa; **Narpati Awangga (Oomleo)**, educated in Printmaking and active in digital art media, online radio streaming (RURU Radio)⁴⁹, music events, and workshops in the urban visual art scene; and **Reza Afisina**, a new media artist who utilises performance art, has participated in numerous international exhibitions, and directs ruangrupa's ArtLab.

The diverse backgrounds and roles of ruangrupa members illustrate the collective's interdisciplinary and collaborative nature, which is integral to their approach to art and cultural practices. This variety brings together a wide range of expertise and perspectives, enabling ruangrupa to address complex social, political, and cultural issues from multiple angles. Even though each individual in ruangrupa has their specific roles, other participants are actively encouraged to contribute their perspectives to ensure the success of every activity. Moreover, this approach ensured that each project harnessed the collective's diverse strengths and perspectives, reinforcing their commitment to collaborative and socially-engaged practices.

⁴⁹ RURUradio is an online streaming radio run by artists and interdisciplinary creative professionals to discuss current issues faced by people in the city of Jakarta. It echoes stories of everyday life, from the frivolous to the conceptual and absurd. RURUradio speaks from the standpoint of art and the broad scope of contemporary culture.



ruangrupa team: Ajeng Nurul Aini, farid rakun, Iswanto Hartono, Mirwan Andan, Indra Ameng, Daniella Fitria Praptono, Ade Darmawan, Julia Sarisetiati, Reza Afisina. Courtesy documenta fifteen. Photo: Jin Panji.

With this concrete and apparent story, the people of ruangrupa recognized a pressing need for a dedicated space in Jakarta, both physical and conceptual. They envisioned a place where artists could focus on intensive work and prioritise analytical exploration over mere production. Such a space would facilitate the examination, mediation, and dissemination of visual art ideas, including public art, performance art, photography, and video art. Through the same interview ruangrupa stated “The primary goal was to create space for discussion and experimentation with art. Before this period, it was considered a subversive act to form an organisation or hold self-organised events without permission from the authorities.”⁵⁰ This statement defined the collective's mission to challenge the status quo and provide a platform for creative expression and critical dialogue. In the context of Indonesia's socio-political landscape, particularly during the oppressive New Order regime, ruangrupa's efforts represented a bold move towards autonomy and artistic freedom.

⁵⁰ Ibid.



First house in Southern Jakarta. The house was like a clubhouse—always open, always filled with people. It functioned simultaneously as a studio, a library, a research lab, and a party venue. Courtesy of ruangrupa.

During the first era of the establishment, ruangrupa frequently moved from one house to another, this was partly due to Jakarta's lack of established art infrastructures, which forces artists to seek affordable and practical spaces, often in residential houses and from this transmigration they adapt the term *living room* which represents a practical paradox between domestic and public spaces. It serves as a central, communal area where everything is shared⁵¹. People gather in the living room for meetings, exhibitions, workshops, and activities. It is a versatile space, constantly adapting throughout the day—even used for sleeping at night. This context of the Living Room feels like a space without boundaries among individuals. It creates an open and inclusive environment where everyone can develop their own projects and freely share them for feedback from others. This fosters a sense of community and mutual support, making the living Room an ideal place for connection and collaboration.⁵²

⁵¹ C. Guida, D. Maggiolo, P. Pietronave, *Taking care of Ecosystem through the Lumbung Process and the intangible infrastructure. A Conversation with: Reza Afisina, Iswanto Hartono, and Bellina Erby (from ruangrupa and Gudskul Ecosystem, Jakarta Indonesia)*, Milan Italy, 13 & 14 May 2023, <https://www.roots-routes.org/taking-care-of-ecosystems-through-the-lumbung-process-and-intangible-infrastructures-a-conversation-with-reza-afisina-iswanto-hartono-and-bellina-erby-from-ruangrupa-and-gudskul-ecosystem-jakarta/> [last access on 22 June 2024]

⁵² Ibid.

Ruangrupa began the initial activity by organising a fundraising exhibition⁵³ at Cemara 6⁵⁴ in Jakarta on 30th March-8th April 2000. This initiative was undertaken to secure the necessary funds for their first public project as a platform for contemporary art discussions and exhibitions. This event not only showcased their collective talent but also demonstrated their commitment to supporting and promoting collective art projects. The exhibition received tremendous support and involvement from about twenty-five artists from Jakarta, Bandung, and Yogyakarta. Part of the selling in this exhibition was donated to ruangrupa future development. From this exhibition, ruangrupa published their commitment that provides and organises a workspace for artists to live and work on a periodic basis, as well as announced their timeline program that is divided into 4 periods per year. In each period, the artists will work on and analyse specific focus issues that have been determined by the program coordinator from the Foundation and agreed upon with the artists with the following missions:

1. Tracking and seeking new ideas in art and culture, especially in visual arts.
2. Allowing creative potentials to move freely by creating an independent and intimate workspace for artists to intensely develop their individual ideas.
3. Serving as a meeting place and platform for sharing ideas from various disciplines of art and science⁵⁵

The result of this exhibition enabled ruangrupa to launch their initial public project, setting the stage for their future endeavours in the community. Following the success of their establishment as a creative community in Indonesia, ruangrupa managed to join RAIN (Rijksakademie Initiative International Network)⁵⁶ meeting that focused

⁵³ Ruangrupa first exhibition from 30 March - 8 April 2000 in Cemara 6 Gallery, Jakarta. The exhibition invited 24 artists from Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta to introduce ruangrupa's roles in Indonesia.

⁵⁴ Cemara 6 is an art gallery in South Jakarta that focuses on making relations between art and society, between Culture and basic rights and human capacity, and also frequently manages the exhibitions and special events in Jakarta. From Cemara 6 website <https://cemara6galeri.wordpress.com/about/> [last access on 15 July 2024]

⁵⁵ From the press release of ruangrupa fundraising exhibition, 1 February 2000, <https://ruangrupa.id/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Press-Release-Pameran-Fundraising-ruangrupa.pdf> [last access on 25 June 2024]

⁵⁶ RAIN (Rijksakademie Initiative International Network) is a network of (visual) artists' initiatives from countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, set up by artists who are former participants of the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Besides ruangrupa the initial members of the network included Los Mutantes (Mexico City, Mexico), Guias Latinas (Mexico City, Mexico), Open Circle (Mumbai, India), Centre Soleil d'Afrique (Bamako, Mali), TRAMA (Buenos

on setting up the virtual network, and exchanging artists, information, publication and documentation. This network significantly supports ruangrupa in developing a method to analyse individual artistic work that covered autobiographical, universal, national, regional, and global execution. By participating in RAIN, ruangrupa gained access to a broader platform for collaboration and exchange with other international art collectives and initiatives. This involvement opened up new opportunities for creative partnerships and the sharing of knowledge and resources across borders. An early example of this is when ruangrupa participated in an artist exchange program in Mumbai, India, where they conducted a painting workshop. This experience not only showcased their artistic capabilities but also allowed them to engage with a different cultural context, enriching their understanding and practice of art. Such international collaborations have been instrumental in expanding ruangrupa's network, allowing them to draw inspiration from diverse artistic traditions and practices.

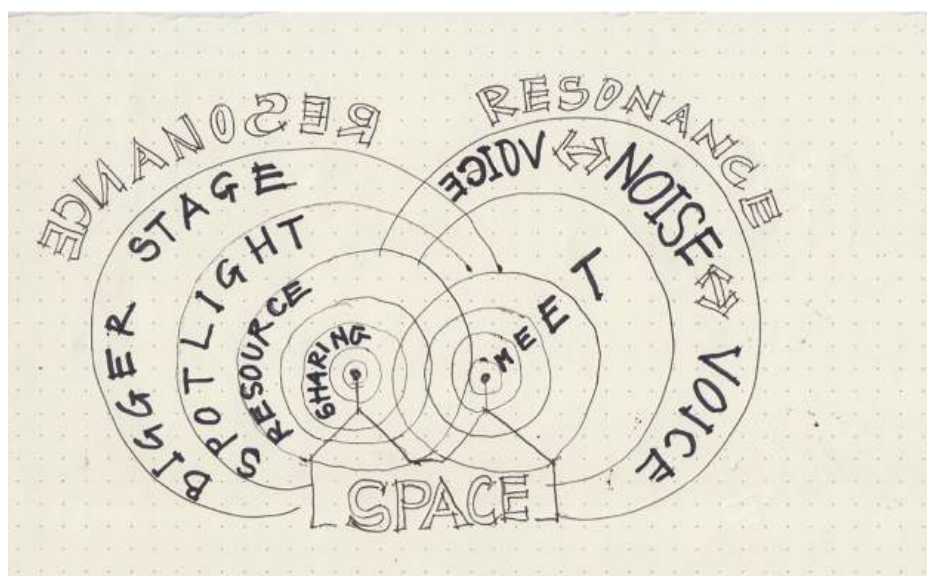
Building on this strong and solid foundation, ruangrupa established a significant presence in Jakarta's art community, which gradually extended to the national level and global recognition. Through their innovative and impactful projects, they demonstrated that an art community could profoundly influence society by addressing current conditions or various topics in an aesthetically engaging manner.

2.2 Core Value and Artistic Philosophy

At the intersection of art, activism, and community, ruangrupa champions a vision of art as a catalyst for social transformation and collective empowerment. Embracing a collaborative ethos rooted in inclusivity and cultural diversity, ruangrupa redefines the boundaries of contemporary art practice. Through their innovative projects and participatory approaches, they challenge conventional hierarchies and foster dynamic exchanges that resonate beyond the art world, using art as a tool to provoke dialogue, inspire change, and envision alternative futures. Grounded in a deep-seated belief in the power of art to shape society, ruangrupa's work continues to forge new paths in the public discourse on art and activism.

Aires, Argentina) and PULSE (Durban, Afrika Selatan) from <http://www.r-a-i-n.net/> [Last access on 23 June 2024]

Established amidst a politically turbulent era in Indonesia, the members of *ruangrupa* discovered that their unity was rooted not only in a shared perspective on collective artistic projects but also in a familial bond that enhanced their connection to one another, as Reza Afisina stated: “We were rich at heart but poor economically, and this is how we connected, in this search for a relation, a relation without means. As a family.”⁵⁷ This concept of belonging as a family has been deeply ingrained in *ruangrupa* since their early days together in school. During that time, they faced economic and educational struggles, and witnessed the political turbulence in Indonesia firsthand. These shared experiences fostered a strong bond and a sense of solidarity among them. Their enduring connection is not just about overcoming hardships but also about a shared vision for creating collective artistic journeys. This familial bond and unified vision have been pivotal in shaping their collaborative ethos and driving their collective projects forward. Through challenges and successes, their commitment to each other and to their collective mission has remained steadfast, reflecting a profound sense of belonging and mutual support.



Concept of Ruangrupa in collective work, Created by Hartono,
 Drawn on paper, 2021 Courtesy of ruangrupa

⁵⁷ S. Goltz with R. Afisina, A. Darmawan, I. Hartono; *Collective Crafting in Post-Suharto Indonesia: A Journey with Ruangrupa from the Jakarta Institute of the Arts to Documenta Fifteen in Kassel.* *Cultural Politics* 1 November 2022; 18 (3): 430–458. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-9964885>

In addition, their collective journey is also bound by several aspects that creates the connection stronger. According to creative director Ade Darmawan, emphasises the importance of the "in and out"⁵⁸, a concept within their collective journey meaning that every individual has their own principles and activities outside ruangrupa that should be prioritised. They have never fully immersed themselves in the group but embracing a fluidity where individuals move in and out of involvement. This dynamic integration, both spatially and over time, strengthens both the individual and the collective entity of ruangrupa, contributing to their longevity, resilience and at the same time they celebrate and support the idea that every member engages in this fluid movement, seeing it as integral to their collective strength. Darmawan emphasised the concept of "in and out" as:

We cheer our differences; we believe that the group is a collection of different people. We adore each other, we envy each other; we don't read the same stuff, and we don't necessarily watch or listen to things in common. Of course, there is always overlap, intersections between our respective engagements and interests, but we think that the divergences make the collective life of ruangrupa richer. It wasn't always like this—in the beginning, we were, more or less, a group of art school students, sharing a collective life together in such informality—but after some years, we preferred to use the term "ingredients"—like a kitchen—to construct or represent our identity where one element can actually trigger, accelerate, or strengthen the others.⁵⁹

This metaphor of "in and out" reflects how the unique contributions of each member are essential in creating a vibrant, dynamic, and robust collective. By valuing and integrating diverse perspectives and experiences, ruangrupa cultivated an environment where individual strengths are amplified through collaboration. Moreover, this statement by Darmawan also confirmed by other members, farid rakun during our online meeting, he clearly declared that individual statements and ideas are foundation of the sustainability of ruangrupa artistic journey, every person has their own speciality in managing particular topic and it is very important to hear their voice then it opens to continue dialogue of other members⁶⁰. From the beginning, ruangrupa's workflow was intentionally designed to be flexible, allowing everyone to continue their individual work and open to collaborate with a diverse

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Online interview with farid rakun, One of ruangrupa's members on 15 April 2024.

range of individuals. This flexibility not only encouraged personal artistic growth but also enriched the collective with a multitude of perspectives and ideas. This practical principle enables ruangrupa to approach projects from a wider perspective through hands-on experience and open dialogue that can tackle projects with a comprehensive and inclusive mindset instead of relying on specific theoretical aspects that might limit their actions. While collaboration undoubtedly enriches artistic endeavours, valuing the distinct contributions of each creator honours their creative agency and fosters a deeper appreciation of their artistic vision and skill. Moreover it also showed that ruangrupa redefined the central role of the individual artist, traditionally seen as the sole creator of an artwork, by emphasising the importance of collaboration. This collaboration encompasses not only interactions among artists and exchanges between artists, curators, and their audiences but also involves the production of joint artistic processes rooted in the collective's artistic identity. In this context, the artist functions more as a facilitator, enabling the visibility and realisation of the collective effort.⁶¹ As a result of the collaborative approach embedded in ruangrupa's core activities, they have created a way to engage with the world, as the art historian Thomas Berghuis suggested: “This statement allows artists’ initiatives such as ruangrupa to provide the world with an aesthetic function.”⁶² This method of collaboration is not just a practice but a foundational philosophy that permeates their work and enables ruangrupa to open up new avenues for artistic expression and cultural dialogue, transforming the role of art in society. Their collective efforts serve to not only produce art but also to cultivate an environment where art becomes a medium for social interaction, community building, and critical discourse.

Expanding on the idea of collaboration, ruangrupa try to encompass a wide range of topics that are closely related to societal issues. They do not limit themselves to a specific focus; instead, their primary concern is how they collectively engage with a particular topic and bring it to the forefront. This approach allows them to address diverse and pressing issues, ensuring that their work remains relevant and impactful as farid rakun through our interview stated:

⁶¹ T. Berghuis, *ruangrupa: What Could Be 'Art to Come'*, “New York-London: Routledge”, Third text, Vol. 25, Issue 4, July 2011, 395-407, p. 403.

⁶² Ibid.

Themes, whether sensitive or not, come naturally and are not fixed points of reference. With this mindset and behaviour, we avoid the trap of representationalism—trying to serve all interests. We serve our own interests. What we can do is encourage the understanding of 'we' to include parties that are always evolving. Once again, this evolution must occur naturally, over time, and should not be forced.⁶³

In doing so, they aim to develop strategies for dealing with future realities, allowing them to address both what is seen and unseen⁶⁴. By applying this inquisitive spirit, the community creates a dynamic cultural space where dialogues can flourish and the production and distribution of knowledge can occur. For ruangrupa, the issues they engage with are not confined to any specific limits. They strive to address and promote a diverse range of topics equally, ensuring that their collective identity remains dynamic and inclusive. Furthermore, this concept enables ruangrupa to become a hub for intellectual and creative exchange, encouraging continuous learning and adaptation while collaborating with other communities or individuals. Considering the valuable factors and theories that form the foundation of ruangrupa, they remain closely aligned with the concepts of *Ekosistem* (Ecosystem) and *Lumbung* (rice barn). These terms are deeply intertwined with ruangrupa's core values, emphasising sustainability, collective resource sharing, and mutual support. Together, as can be found both terms are frequently used to describe ruangrupa's projects that guide the collective practices, ensuring their activities are inclusive, dynamic, and reflective of the evolving needs and strengths of their community.

2.2.1 Ruangrupa as a Creative Ecosystem

Throughout its journey, ruangrupa has redefined the concept of an ecosystem during its innovative and collaborative approach, demonstrating the profound impact of a well-cultivated creative network. From the Encyclopedia of National Geographic, the meaning of Ecosystem is referring to the geographic area where plants, animals, and other organisms, as well as weather and landscapes, work together to form a bubble of life. Ecosystems contain biotic or living, as well as

⁶³ Online interview with Farid Rakun, One of ruangrupa's members on 15 April 2024.

⁶⁴ M. Andan, *All for Jakarta – a note on the tenth anniversary of ruangrupa: Decompression #10, Expanding the Space and Public*, "Inter-Asia Cultural Studies", 12:4, 591-602, 2011, DOI: 10.1080/14649373.2011.603921

abiotic factors, or nonliving parts. Biotic factors include plants, animals, and other organisms. Abiotic factors include rocks, temperature, and humidity.⁶⁵ From the humanity aspect, the ecosystem is defined as a social component that refers to all human activities that include economy, technology, politics and culture.⁶⁶ Then ruangrupa adapted this concept, traditionally linked to natural life, into an intricate web of human interrelations and their environments. For ruangrupa themselves, the ecosystem is described as collaborative network structures through which knowledge, resources, ideas, and programs are shared and linked.⁶⁷ By adjusting artistic and cultural connections, ruangrupa creates a thriving ecosystem where creativity and community coexist, illustrating how human interactions can mirror the balance and complexity of natural ecosystems. This perspective guides their approach to project development, ensuring that every initiative contributes to the overall health and sustainability of the creative community.

In my personal interview with Farid Rakun, he strengthened the foundation of the ecosystem, he said “Good relationships and balance among the players in the ecosystem, which definitely change from time to time, are our way of surviving.”⁶⁸ From this statement ruangrupa acknowledges that they are one of many players in a complex, multifaceted ecosystem. This implies an understanding that their success and well-being are linked to the success and prosperity of others within the ecosystem. Together these principles create a creative continuity to every process ensuring that each project is not just an isolated effort but a part of a larger, evolving environment.

Ruangrupa firstly promoted Ecosystem in 2015 when they started a cultural platform *Gedung Sarinah Ekosistem* (Sarinah Building Ecosystem). The platform derives its name from its new location in Pancoran, South Jakarta, known as Gudang Sarinah. *Gudang Sarinah Ekosistem (GSE)* is an interdisciplinary space dedicated to maintaining, processing, and building an integrated support system for creative talents, diverse communities, and various institutions. GSE aims to foster an

⁶⁵ Encyclopaedia entry, National Geography <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/ecosystem/>, [Last access on 28 June 2024]

⁶⁶ F. Berkes, C. Folke, *Linking Social and Ecological Systems: Management Practices and Social Mechanisms for Building Resilience*. “Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press”, 2000.

⁶⁷ Documenta fifteen, Glossary, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/glossary/?entry=ekosistem> [last access on 28 June 2024]

⁶⁸ Online interview with Farid Rakun, One of ruangrupa’s members on 1 July 2024.

environment that nurtures networks, collaboration, knowledge sharing, and the exchange of ideas, while encouraging critical thinking, creativity, and innovation.⁶⁹ GSE has become a central hub for artistic and cultural activities in Jakarta, exemplifying the ecosystem in collective growth. Principally, Ecosystem becomes the cornerstone of ruangrupa practices in maintaining good relationships and balance, continuously understanding the changing roles and potentials of ecosystem components, and prioritising collective advancement, ruangrupa cultivates a thriving, resilient, and inclusive creative ecosystem.



Gudang Sarinah Ekosistem (GSE) Activities: Exhibition and Bazaar
Courtesy of ruangrupa

The collaborative efforts of the community manifest in a variety of public offerings, including exhibitions, festivals, workshops, discussions, film screenings, music concerts, and journals. In the practical result GSE not only showcases the results of these collaborations but also actively engages the public in the creative process, creating a vibrant and playful cultural ecosystem. As the community continues to grow and evolve, ruangrupa has continually sought to enhance and expand its educational and collaborative initiatives and it became clear that a new approach was necessary. Recognizing the need for a more dynamic and innovative platform,

⁶⁹ Ruangrupa, about, <https://ruangrupa.id/en/about/> [Last access on 24 June 2024]

ruangrupa transitioned from GSE to Gudskul⁷⁰ in 2018. This new initiative builds on the foundations laid by GSE but introduces a more comprehensive and forward-thinking model of educational exchange. This evolution ensures that the community remains vibrant, dynamic, and responsive to the changing of art discourse and education.

2.1.2 The Interplay of *Lumbung* in ruangrupa's Work

The concept of *lumbung*, symbolising a communal rice barn in Indonesian culture, serves as a cornerstone in ruangrupa's collective artistic practice. This traditional notion of shared resources and communal support seamlessly integrates into ruangrupa's ethos, guiding their collaborative efforts and community engagements. *Lumbung* itself can be defined as a traditional agrarian practice in Indonesia. It refers to the process of sharing resources. While the *lumbung* concept gained widespread recognition as the central theme of Documenta 15 in Kassel, for ruangrupa, it has been a guiding principle from the very beginning. This concept has continuously shaped their approach as a collective, influencing their practices and collaborations throughout their journey. Ade Darmawan also emphasised that *lumbung* is part of their identity: "It's simply a way to be us, a way of living and being ourselves."⁷¹ Long before it became a focal point on the global stage, *lumbung* served as the foundation for ruangrupa's ethos of resource sharing, mutual support, and community engagement. It has informed their projects, decision-making processes, and interactions with communities. Outlining the term of *lumbung*, for ruangrupa it is not just a philosophy but more than that is has a deeper meaning, a direction and perpetual practice:

However, *lumbung* is not only an architecture for grain storage. It is also a spirit and a way of living that is revealed in your day-to-day life. From the granary, ceremonies, parties, art, tales and stories emerge. *lumbung* is a place to gather and

⁷⁰ Gudskul is a creative learning space focused on collective working simulation study space that promotes the importance of critical and experimental dialogue through a sharing process and experience-based learning.

⁷¹ S. Goltz with R. Afisina, A. Darmawan, I. Hartono; *Collective Crafting in Post-Suharto Indonesia: A Journey with Ruangrupa from the Jakarta Institute of the Arts to Documenta Fifteen in Kassel*. *Cultural Politics* 1 November 2022; 18 (3): 430–458. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-9964885>

share. You may have problems to solve, or you may be celebrating the harvest, partying and performing rituals together.⁷²

Their commitment to these principles has established ruangrupa as a pioneering force in contemporary art, influencing practices and inspiring others globally. This concept encompasses more than just physical storage; it represents a communal ethos where resources, ideas, and experiences are shared among members of a community. The ongoing efforts continue to shape the cultural place in Jakarta and beyond, demonstrating the power of collective creativity and community-driven initiatives.

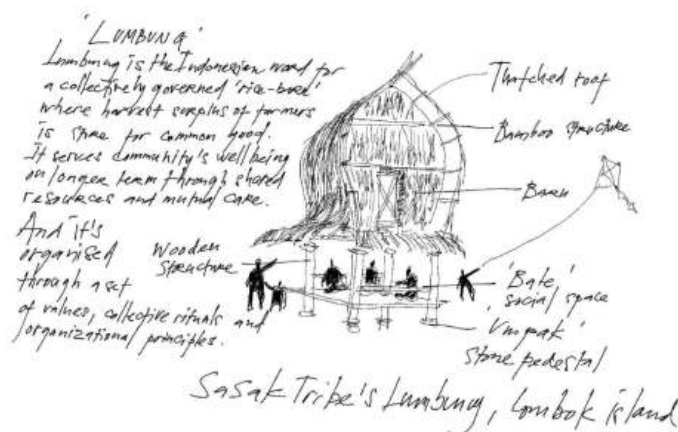


Rice barn at Traditional Sasak Village Desa Sade, Lombok, Indonesia
Photo by Midori - Personal collection, CC BY 3.0,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=10574028>

Explaining in detail, the word “*lumbung*” in Indonesian literally means “rice barn,” a structure commonly used by villagers to deposit and store their surplus crops. It also functions as a space to meet, celebrate, and share appreciation for the previous

⁷² P. Hidayatullah, *Lumbung Story*, ruangrupa, 6 December 2022, <https://ruangrupa.id/en/2020/06/12/lumbung-story/> [last access on 24 June 2024]

harvest. As architecture, it can only remain relevant and sustainable if its users continuously renew and refill its resources.⁷³ By adapting this principle to an urban setting, ruangrupa has transformed the living room into a dynamic space for skill and network exchange, creating an environment where art intersects with social activism and community management. The team emphasised that “It is built on the initiative of people who have the same needs, who try to organise themselves to share resources and have space to grow together along with the surrounding community.”⁷⁴ Ruangrupa sees *lumbung* as a continuity concept that they apply in everyday life throughout their community. This principle of shared resources and collective support extends beyond mere artistic practice, permeating the daily interactions and collaborative efforts of the group. In deeply resonating this collaborative effort with the *lumbung* concept which involves the collective storage and equitable distribution of surplus crops, in ruangrupa’s context, resources such as funding, materials, and space are pooled together. This shared access allows members to undertake projects that might be beyond the reach of individuals working alone. Through collaborative projects, members can develop new skills and expand their capabilities, contributing to both individual and collective growth. Moreover this collaborative spirit extends beyond the immediate collective to include partnerships with local communities, other artists, and other organisations.



Lumbung concept as for ruangrupa
 Drawn on paper by Iswanto Hartono
 Courtesy of ruangrupa.

⁷³ Ruangrupa and Nikos Papastergiadis in Conversation: *Living Lumbung: The Shared Spaces of Art and Life*, E-flux Journal Issue #118, 2021.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

In terms of meaning, *lumbung* has an essential value and philosophy that drives the community. However this concept also gives broader meaning that related to ruangrupa aesthetic journey as the team stated:

In the context of contemporary art and society, *lumbung* is an idea for not only mapping resources but also identifying and understanding basic needs and self-limitations, to define the resources and surpluses of each initiative/organization to be shared with others. It has informed our ideas around sustainable, self-initiated interdisciplinary spaces. It is where art meets social activism, management, and various local networks. It was central to forming our collective, ruangrupa, and to understanding what is happening in our local environment and responding to it by initiating something together within that context.⁷⁵

Through this integration, ruangrupa harnesses the power of art as a tool for social change, utilizing creative expression to highlight societal challenges. This concept can be seen as creating art beyond traditional artistic boundaries that is able to develop an alternative system in projecting social matter that brings art into public spaces, community centres, and digital environments. Ade Darmawan later appointed:

As the consumers of the products of social and cultural history, we are capable of developing an attitude that is a mixture of collaging, mix-and-match activities and destruction and reconstruction of practices so as to accord with local needs. What is dysfunctional is functional.⁷⁶

He highlights the potential to transform what might seem outdated into something valuable and relevant, thus continually renewing and enriching then making them relevant and functional in a new context. This approach has been a central point of ruangrupa that is able to deeply understand the complexities of the local environment. Moreover, as the *lumbung* concept is closely linked to the idea of togetherness, ruangrupa has embraced the use of 'we' to represent their collective work. This choice reflects their deep appreciation for each member's contributions to their ongoing activities. By emphasising 'we'⁷⁷ ruangrupa underscores the importance

⁷⁵ Ruangrupa and Nikos Papastergiadis in Conversation: *Living Lumbung: The Shared Spaces of Art and Life*, E-flux Journal Issue #118, 2021.

⁷⁶ N. Juliastuti, *Ruangrupa: A Conversation on Horizontal Organisation*, "The University of Chicago Press", *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, Issue 30 (Summer 2012), pp. 118- 125.

⁷⁷ Frontiers of Commoning with David Bollier S1:E29, *Farid Rakun & ruangrupa Reinvent Artistic Curation at documenta 15*, <https://david-bollier.simplecast.com/episodes/farid-rakun-ruangrupa-reinvent-artistic-curation-at-documenta-15>, [last access on 25 June 2024]

of collaboration, mutual support, and shared responsibility in their practice. This collective pronoun embodies their belief that the strength of their work lies in the diverse skills, perspectives, and efforts of all members. Each individual's input is valued, and decisions are made through consensus, fostering a sense of ownership and solidarity within the group. In essence, the 'we' in ruangrupa's work is a testament to their commitment to egalitarian principles, where every voice is heard, and every contribution is acknowledged. It reflects a model of artistic practice that prioritises collective well-being and communal growth, staying true to the core values of *lumbung*.

Once the value of togetherness is fully embraced, the concept of sharing, inspired by the traditional practice of *lumbung*, is also integrated into the collective framework as stated during the interview with Ocula "they create their own models to share production and support within the group, and the network grows automatically."⁷⁸ Just as farmers store surplus rice in a shared barn, the *lumbung* model involves pooling resources, resources are distributed based on the community's needs, ensuring that everyone has access to what they require, especially during times of scarcity or hardship. In ruangrupa's collaborative approach, the emphasis on "we" effortlessly translates into a fluid sharing process, enriching their projects with diverse perspectives in a deep sense of community engagement. This dynamic interplay is integral to their creative output, making each work a testament to collective effort.

Furthermore, *lumbung* can also be seen as an artistic and economic model that will be practised alongside its values of collectivity.⁷⁹ The *lumbung* concept and economic sustainability, lies in their shared focus on communal resource management and equitable distribution. It encourages sustainable economic practices by emphasising the careful management and equitable distribution of resources. *Lumbung* emphasises collective ownership and mutual support, nurturing

⁷⁸ In conversation with Mi You, *ruangrupa: a sustainable model for documenta fifteen, and after*, Düsseldorf, Ocula, 25 May 2022, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/ruangrupa-sustainability-and-documenta-fifteen/>, [last access on 26 June 2024]

⁷⁹ Press information by documenta, *The lumbung concept for documenta fifteen Statement by ruangrupa* from 18 June 2020, <https://universes.art/en/documenta/2022/lumbung>, [last access on 26 June 2024]

an economic model that prioritises sustainability over individual profit.⁸⁰ This approach encourages communities to work together, share resources, and ensure that benefits are distributed fairly, reducing waste and promoting long-term resilience that supports every program through funding new projects, educational programs, and infrastructure improvements. Ultimately, the *lumbung* concept has significantly influenced ruangrupa's approach to collective work, fostering a strong sense of community and shared responsibility. This framework guides their artistic and cultural projects. Additionally, ruangrupa has established practical guidelines that embody the core values of *lumbung*, ensuring it remains focused and effective in practice.

2.1.2.1 Practical Guide to Lumbung Principles

In the practical work, ruangrupa thoroughly explores the *lumbung* concept and often connecting with these key elements to its foundation: a model of economy based on democratic principles of *rapat* (assembly), *mufakat* (agreement), *gotong royong* (commons), *hak mengadakan protes bersama* (right to stage collective protest) and *hak menyingkirkan diri dari kekuasaan absolut* (right to abolish absolute power).⁸¹ This practical guide delves into the foundational principles of *lumbung*, exploring how they can be applied to foster collaboration, sustainability, and social equity.

Starting with these steps, members develop their ideas through structured models, initially convening in an assembly or a *majelis* in Indonesian⁸². During this stage, participants take time to reflect and discuss proposed ideas, carefully evaluating their potential impact and how they align with the project's goals. At this step *majelis* can also be meant *Nongkrong*: it represents a relaxed and informal way of interacting where the dialogue allows members to refine their concepts collectively, establishing a strong foundation for further exploration and

⁸⁰ Online interview with Farid Rakun, One of ruangrupa's members on 1 July 2024.

⁸¹ Ruangrupa, *Lumbung story*, 2020, <https://ruangrupa.id/en/documenta-fifteen/> [Last access on 27 June 2024]

⁸² Majelis is a term for a gathering or meeting. This term is commonly used by ruangrupa in Documenta fifteen to gather all the participation to exchange ideas, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/glossary/?entry=ekosistem>, [last access on 28 June 2024]

implementation within the community. By applying open communication and mutual understanding, this process ensures that the ideas are well-rounded and beneficial to all involved, paving the way for successful outcomes.

After extensive discussion in the meeting, participants reach a conclusion known as *mufakat* (agreement). *Mufakat* is a form of Indonesian native culture of consensus building.⁸³ This agreement represents a collective decision, ensuring that all voices are heard and considered. Through this process, the group solidifies their shared commitment to the agreed-upon direction, fostering unity and collaboration. In Indonesia the term *mufakat* has a deeper meaning in a society, it allows for fair and sustainable decisions for all parties involved in an issue or important decision. *Mufakat* strengthens social bonds and builds trust among individuals, groups, and the community as a whole. In the article about the 10th anniversary of ruangrupa, Mirwan Andad claimed that the process of stipulating a project in ruangrupa takes a very long time to discuss, the topic of the discussion is respectively open to any ideas from each individual which will develop trial and error possibilities. It's crucial to acknowledge the individual creators and their unique roles as artists, instead of predominantly emphasising collaboration as the sole authorship of the created pieces⁸⁴.

This concept, deeply rooted in Indonesian society, holds tremendous cultural value.⁸⁵ It embodies the essence of working collectively, where individuals come together to support one another in achieving shared objectives. *Gotong royong* fosters a strong sense of community and solidarity, as people contribute their time, resources, and skills to benefit the whole group. In a more intimate sense, *gotong royong* can be valued as sharing the burdens between members and community. In this stage, active participation from every individual is crucial⁸⁶, aligning with the

⁸³ C. Anggita, T. Hatori, *Customary Practices of Musyawarah Mufakat: An Indonesian Style of Consensus Building*, "IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science", Sci. 589 012027, 2020.

⁸⁴ M. Andan All for Jakarta – a note on the tenth anniversary of ruangrupa: *Decompression #10, Expanding the Space and Public*, Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, 12:4, 591-602, DOI: 10.1080/14649373.2011.603921, 2011.

⁸⁵ N. Simarmata, K. Wahyu, B. Riyono, B. Patria, *Gotong Royong in Indonesian History*, "Digital Press Social Sciences and Humanities", vol 5: 0006, 2020

⁸⁶ Ruangrupa and Nikos Papastergiadis in Conversation: *Living Lumbung: The Shared Spaces of Art and Life*, E-flux Journal, Issue #118, 2021, p. 2.

final agreement discussed. Such involvement not only strengthens the commitment to shared goals but also reinforces trust and cooperation within the community.

Final schemes to deeply cover these crucial steps are *hak mengadakan protes bersama* (right to stage collective protest) and *hak menyingkirkan diri dari kekuasaan absolut* (right to abolish absolute power) are applied synchronously. The right to collective protest empowers communities to voice their concerns and challenge decisions or practices that may be harmful or unjust with the value of *ruangrupa*, also a way to foster a culture of active participation and accountability. Meanwhile, the right to dismantle absolute power emphasises the importance of preventing any single entity from holding unreliable authority, ensuring that governance remains inclusive and balanced among all the members. Together, these rights support a framework where community members are encouraged to engage in dialogue, express their creative ideas, advocate for change, and uphold democratic values, aligning with the core principles of *lumbung*. Furthermore, in shaping these practical guides, the values: generosity, humour, local anchoring, independence, regeneration, transparency and frugality are playing along together to maintain the fluidity of these principles. With the value of generosity that involves the willingness to share resources, knowledge, and opportunities freely among community members Next, the use of humour in the middle of the conversation helps to break down barriers, making collaboration more enjoyable and less formal. Since the *lumbung* concept originates from Indonesian practice, *ruangrupa* ensures that cultural authenticity remains central to their local engagement while maintaining the independence to pursue creative directions without external pressures. They actively promote sustainable practices that regenerate and renew, rather than deplete resources. Transparency is key, involving openness and clarity about processes, decisions, and resource allocations to build mutual trust. Lastly, frugality, which aligns with sustainability, emphasises the careful and efficient use of resources to avoid waste and excess.

These centre points enlarge a community-oriented approach, emphasising collaboration with broader areas, shared decision-making, and the empowerment of individuals within the collective. Through the interview with e-flux, *ruangrupa* emphasised more about this practical steps on *lumbung*:

We are drawing on ideas that bring people together in conversation rather than force them into authoritative processes. Conversations meander, and decisions spring forth. We reduce individual control and ownership. We share power and authority, as well as respecting silence and absence. Ideas emerge organically without clear intellectual ownership. It is a collage: thousands of pieces of ideas come together. Bad ideas are polished up with a little collective imagination.⁸⁷

With these core values working in harmony, *lumbung* emerges as a solid concept that shapes the daily life and community practices of *ruangrupa*. The interplay between *lumbung* and ecosystem highlights the essential role of maintaining cultural practices and traditions through collective efforts. *Ruangrupa*'s ecosystem reflects this philosophy by nurturing creative talents and cultural expressions, ensuring they are preserved and evolved within a supportive community framework. The *lumbung* philosophy provides a cultural and ethical foundation for *ruangrupa*'s ecosystem, influencing how resources are managed, how relationships are nurtured, and how creativity is sustained within the community. This approach ensures that every action and decision aligns with the values of generosity, humour, local anchoring, independence, regeneration, transparency, and frugality that are practically applied on *ruangrupa* activities.

2.3 The Collaborative Works of Ruangrupa

Since its establishment in 2000, *ruangrupa* has successfully upheld collective art practices that emphasise collaboration, social engagement, and cultural relevance. Over the years, *ruangrupa* has initiated and participated in numerous significant projects, beginning with engaging other communities and eventually establishing their own initiatives. These endeavours have become characteristic of *ruangrupa*, guided by the core principles of *lumbung* and ecosystem. Through strategic engagement, innovative projects, and a steadfast commitment to their principles, *ruangrupa* has established a unique identity within the art community, defined by their ongoing dedication to collaboration. This collaborative approach aligns with the concept of *ruangrupa*, as described by Samanth Subramanian in *The New York Times*:

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Instead of collaborating to make art, ruangrupa propagates the art of collaboration. It's a collective that teaches collectivity. For its projects, ruangrupa solicits accomplices: artists, of course, but also those otherwise stranded on the art world's margins, like slum residents or factory workers. Out of these social relations and communal feeling, Ruangrupa coaxes an aesthetic.⁸⁸

Ruangrupa's collaborative efforts involve working with local and international artists, cultural practitioners, and various institutions. By initiating a network that supports the exchange of ideas, resources, and experiences, ruangrupa opened up a dynamic artistic community. One of the notable projects initiated by ruangrupa is OK.Video, established in 2003 and continuously held every two years. OK.Video is an international video art festival that centres on video, media, and technology-based art. In hosting this event ruangrupa collaborates with the Indonesian National Gallery. This event showcases a diverse range of video art from local and international artists, emphasising experimental and innovative approaches to the medium. Moreover, OK. Video is also known for its thematic focus, with each edition addressing different socio-political issues and cultural phenomena. The event includes screenings, exhibitions, workshops, and discussions, creating an immersive and interactive experience for both artists and audiences. Furthermore, OK.Video started with the desire to understand how video and the default denomination in artistic contexts as "video art" used by artists, creatives, communities, and other agents of cultural production in the urban landscape of Jakarta.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ S. Subramanian, *A Radical Collective Takes Over One of the World's Biggest Art Shows*, The New York Times Magazine, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/09/magazine/ruangrupa-documenta.html>, [Last access on 1 June 2024]

⁸⁹ R. Close, *Technology, Food, Community and Art: Looking Back on This Year's OK.Video - Indonesia Media Arts Festival in Jakarta*, "The Artling", 2017, <https://theartling.com/en/artzine/okvideo-indonesia-media-arts-festival-jakarta/>, [last access on 14 July 2024]



Discussion session in OK.Video 2015: *Orde Baru* (New order)
Indonesian National Gallery
Courtesy of ruangrupa

In the seventh edition of OK. Video that was held on 15-28 June 2015 at Indonesian National Gallery, ruangrupa applied the theme of *Orde baru* which translates to New order. With this theme New order confronted into two main focuses:

1. The analog media technology politics controlled and used by authoritarian regimes (the state) to build public perception and resolve their problems
2. Digital media technology politics increasingly controlled by the public after the end of the Cold War that saw the fall of authoritarian regimes around the world and the onset of democracy.⁹⁰

These focuses lead to the further analysis of analog media technology alongside digital media technology aims to generate new perspectives on history and the myths perpetuated by authoritarian regimes, which continue to influence public perception to this day. A total of 73 artists from 21 countries such as Japan, France, Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Colombia, Vietnam, Pakistan, Taiwan, Czechoslovakia, South

⁹⁰ J. Ken, *OK Video 2015: Orde Baru*, "White Board Journal", 2015, <https://www.whiteboardjournal.com/events/event/ok-video-2015-orde-baru/>, [last access on 14 June 2024]

Korea, the Philippines, South Africa, Germany, Austria, Russia, Venezuela and Canada participated in this event. Some of the participants registered their work through the open submission process, meanwhile other artists were specifically invited by ruangrupa's team, ensuring a curated selection of high-quality contributions that align with the event's thematic focus. Through this extensive participation, showed a variety of approaches in response to the theme and utilisation of media and also brought a wide range of cultural and artistic perspectives to the forefront.



Exhibition situation in OK.Video 2015: *Orde Baru* (New order)
Indonesian National Gallery
Courtesy of ruangrupa

Expanding on the popularity of OK. Video, Singapore-based curator David Teh explained that the integration of local and international engagement in this event was a significant achievement. This is not only because local work draws upon and critiques international work, but also because both are interconnected, consciously or unconsciously, through the history of the video medium itself. Moreover, given that the exhibition is held in a museum, it can be inferred that the museum embodies significant aspects. He said: "When it comes to exhibiting media art, it bears remembering that the museum itself is a medium, one to which a lot of media art is

not native.”⁹¹ Media art, which includes video, digital installations, and interactive pieces are frequently designed for more flexible, informal, or digital environments that differ significantly from the structured, physical spaces of museums. This process is essential for expanding the scope of what museums can offer and for ensuring that media art is presented in a way that respects its original context and engages contemporary audiences. Thus, developing effective methods for integrating media art into museums requires innovation, collaboration, and a willingness to rethink traditional exhibition models.

By hosting OK Video, ruangrupa continues to advance its mission of promoting contemporary art practices, supporting artistic experimentation, and engaging with broader societal issues through the lens of video art. Moreover, the intense collaboration with the prestigious museum in Jakarta represents a significant step in enhancing the museum's role in contemporary cultural action. This partnership not only brings media art into the museum setting, bridging the gap between traditional institutions and innovative art forms, but also underscores the importance of institutional support in nurturing and showcasing experimental practices. Through these efforts, ruangrupa and Indonesian National Gallery jointly contribute to the evolving narrative of art discourse, ensuring that it remains dynamic, relevant, and accessible to a broader public.

Next, creating the space for musicians, RRRC (ruangrupa Record) Festival formed in 2010 to give a stage for music and sound art festivals that celebrates independent and experimental music. This event is an annual program that serves as a music festival, and unites various artist groups, communities, musicians and music organisers from many places around the world.

Since its initiation, RRREC (ruangrupa Record) has always taken place in Jakarta. However, seeking a location that offered a closer connection to nature, ruangrupa decided to move the venue in 2014 to Tanakita, Situ Gunung in West Java,

⁹¹ D. Teh, *Who Cares a Lot? Ruangrupa as Curatorship*, *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 30 (2012): 108–17. <https://doi.org/10.1086/667250>, [last access on 16 July 2024]

where it continues to be held to this day.⁹² The festival features performances, workshops, and discussions, creating a vibrant space for musicians, sound artists, and enthusiasts to connect and collaborate. Its main purpose is to foster strong relationships within the music scene and to support musicians in reaching larger audiences. By offering a platform for emerging and established artists to showcase their work, the festival not only enhances the visibility of individual talents but also encourages the exchange of ideas and the development of new creative partnerships. Through these efforts, the festival also strengthens the cultural space of the music community and contributes to its ongoing growth and sustainability.⁹³ The programs are designed to create a multidisciplinary meeting point for various generations, providing a platform for speakers, visitors, artists, musicians, nature lovers, and local residents to share experiences and skills.⁹⁴

During the event, the RRREC team organised the festival as a weekend getaway package deal/music camp, featuring a variety of programs. These include music performances, artist residencies, workshops, children's programs, and film screenings. Each program is carefully curated by a dedicated team of festival curators to ensure a comprehensive and engaging experience for all participants.⁹⁵

⁹² RRREC fest, About RRREC fest in the Valley 2023, <https://rrrecfest.ruangrupa.id/faq/>, [last access on 15 July 2024]

⁹³ Neighbour list, *ruangrupa announces RRREC fest in the valley of tanakita camping ground in Sukabumi*, 2014, <https://www.neighbourlist.com/2014/10/ruangrupa-announces-rrrec-fest-valley-tanakita-camping-ground-sukabumi/>, [last access on 15 July 2024]

⁹⁴ The display, *Retreat Yourself with RRREC Fest In The Valley 2017!*, <https://thedisplay.net/2017/09/14/retreat-rrrec-fest-valley-2017/>, [last access on 15 July 2024]

⁹⁵ RRREC fest, About RRREC fest in the Valley 2023, <https://rrrecfest.ruangrupa.id/faq/>, [last access on 15 July 2024]



RRREC Fest in The Valley, Music Performance,
Tanakita, Situ Gunung in West Java 2023
Photo by Dedi Yondra/JPNN.com

At the music festival, a wide range of acts captivated the audience, showcasing the rich diversity of musical talent. The lineup included energetic indie bands, innovative electronic artists, and experimental musicians, each bringing their unique sound and style to the stage. Additionally, instrumental traditional performers added a cultural depth to the festival. Next, the visual arts exhibition It is supported by Artists residency which invites practitioners from various studies, like artists, scientists, nature conservationists, and authors to work together with local residents, students, and art communities, together they developed talk sessions and workshops, led by knowledgeable practitioners and organisations also movie screenings include video works, short films, and feature-length films, enhancing the festival's vibrant atmosphere.



The camp view at night activity in RRREC Fest in The Valley
Tanakita, Situ Gunung in West Java, 2013
Courtesy of Neighbour list

This innovative concept of gathering together in a nature-based camping environment, while participating in various activities, represents another method used by ruangrupa to maintain collaboration and nurture connections within society. By bringing people together in a relaxed and immersive setting, ruangrupa encourages participants to engage more deeply with one another, breaking down barriers and building a sense of community.



Talk Show in RRREC Fest in The Valley,
Tanakita, Situ Gunung in West Java, 2023
Photo by SANGALU/HO-Ama Gaspar

Seeing the huge enthusiasm for this event, ruangrupa believes that fresh, audacious, and clever ideas are often conceived from the tradition of having laid-back, spontaneous, and natural meet-ups. This concept aligns with the term *Nongkrong* in the *lumbung* practical process, emphasising informal gatherings that arouse creativity in collaboration, and the exchange of ideas.

Transitioning to a more formal structure, ruangrupa established ArtLab (Art Laboratory) in 2008. This platform encourages artists to experiment with new ideas and practices, offering resources and mentorship to help them develop their projects. ArtLab focuses on process-based work, allowing artists to explore and refine their concepts over time. The participants of the projects are artists and people from different but related disciplines that can enrich the process of collaboration. After a series of research and observation, participants will work together to produce works in diverse medium and artistic approach in questioning, criticising, negotiating, creating public interaction by playing/experimenting or addressing statements towards the social issues, and the city.⁹⁶ Moreover, This program is also known as the residency⁹⁷ program developed by ruangrupa based on an open call process. It provides artists with the opportunity to develop their work in a supportive environment, offering resources such as studio space, materials, and access to a network of local and international artists, curators, and cultural practitioners.

These programs are designed to maintain ruangrupa's presence and enhance engagement with both local and global communities. Each project aims to address specific needs within the art community, fostering a deeper understanding of contemporary art practices and pertinent societal issues. Additionally, these initiatives demonstrate the collective's ability to push the boundaries of traditional art, exploring new media and technologies. Not only creating activities for the sake of their community, together with other collective groups, ruangrupa has established

⁹⁶ ArtLab, *Introduction: CD.ITC (City Design In The City)*, ruangrupa, 2008, <https://ruangrupa.id/en/2008/12/20/cd-itc-city-design-in-the-city-presentation-of-artlab-magazine-second-edition-2/>, [last access on 10 July 2024]

⁹⁷ Artres, ARTLAB - ruangrupa, <https://artres.moc.gov.tw/en/database/globalContent/fd63401159404dabb5ece2ff1eb74cba>, [last access on 15 July 2024]

activities that serve as platforms for sharing and exchanging ideas about art and urban life. One of the notable ones is Gudskul, which became a major focus of the collective's activities in Jakarta along with educating, the other major driver of the enterprise.⁹⁸ Additionally, Jakarta 32° initiated together with Gudskul is a significant initiative aimed at engaging students and young people, encouraging them to explore their creativity through open discussion forums. Here, Gudskul serves as a platform for broader collaboration, while Jakarta 32° and other major projects complement these efforts by engaging with broader participants.

2.3.1 Gudskul and its Practices

Gudskul, initiated by ruangrupa in collaboration with two other Jakarta-based collectives, Serrum⁹⁹ and Grafis Huru Hara¹⁰⁰ in 2018 is an educational platform and a collective learning space. The term "Gudskul" combines the Indonesian word "*gudang*" (warehouse) with "school," reflecting its dual nature as a place for storing knowledge and fostering education. Gudskul emphasises collective learning, where knowledge is co-created and shared among participants. The formation of Gudskul embodies the concept of ecosystem which consists of many elements: artists, curators, art writers, managers, researchers, musicians, directors, architects, cooks, artistic designers, designers, fashion designers, street artists and individuals with various other expertise. The concept of Gudskul is designed to be approachable and inclusive for every generation who wants to be involved in their community. Here artists can act as producers, mediator, distributors, and networkers, it is a process-based study concept.¹⁰¹ Gudskul's study concept emphasises on experiential

⁹⁸ T. Smith, *Unintended Consequences: Withdrawal from Documenta*, "Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art", DOI: 10.1080/14434318.2024.2358199, 2024

⁹⁹ Serrum is an art and education study group in Jakarta established in 2006. Serrum's activities covers a wide array of ventures such as, art project, exhibition, workshop, creative discussion and propaganda. Serrum's medium are video, mural, graphic, comic and installation art.

¹⁰⁰ Grafis Huru Hara (GHH) is a graphic artist collective from Jakarta initiated in 2012. GHH emphasises their practice on exploration method, experiment and education by using print as their ultimate medium. Their programs include exhibitions, printmaking classes, and various publishing projects on printmaking.

¹⁰¹ Ruangrupa and Nikos Papastergiadis in *Conversation: Living Lumbung: The Shared Spaces of Art and Life*, Issue #118, E-flux Journal, 2021.

learning where participants engage in practical projects and real-world collaborations, allowing them to learn through doing and to refine their skills in a supportive environment. Thus the main goal of establishing Gudskul is:

Becoming a collective and working collaboratively to establish a significant position in society by influencing both discourse and practice in the contemporary art world. This approach provides cross-disciplinary practices, openness, pluralism, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas, while also experimenting with power dynamics. Importantly, it achieves all this without losing respect for the individuality of its members, ensuring a harmonious balance between collective and personal growth.¹⁰²

This variety makes Gudskul an affluent and dynamic ecosystem and also shared pool system, where resources are gathered and distributed equitably according to the needs of each collective and member.¹⁰³ This action ensures that all participants, regardless of their background or the nature of their contributions, have access to the tools, materials, and support they need to succeed.



Gudskul building from above, Jagakarsa, South Jakarta
Courtesy of Gudskul

¹⁰² D. Kravchuk, *GUDSKUL.ART : Unifying Art & Education in South Jakarta*, <https://art.art/blog/gudskulart-unifying-art-education-in-south-jakarta>, [last access on June 28 2024]

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Gudskul sincerely believes in sharing and working together as two vital elements in developing Indonesian contemporary art and culture. Their intent is to disseminate initiative spirit through artistic and cultural endeavours in a society committed to collectivism, and to promote initiators who make local needs their highest priority, while at the same time contributing to and holding crucial roles internationally.¹⁰⁴ With this flexible flow, Gudskul embraces the concept of *nongkrong*, an Indonesian slang word meaning “hanging out”. *Nongkrong* represents a relaxed and informal way of interacting, allowing participants to engage in discussions without the pressure of formal meetings.¹⁰⁵ This laid-back atmosphere encourages open communication and the free exchange of ideas and even the casual nature of *nongkrong* often leads to spontaneous bursts of creativity. This practice involves people casually gathering to talk about projects or ideas over a cup of coffee.



Gudskul members and friends share a joyful moment around the table with *tumpeng* tradition¹⁰⁶.
Courtesy of art.art

¹⁰⁴ Documenta, Gudskul, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/lumbung-members-artists/gudskul/>, [Last access on 28 June 2024]

¹⁰⁵ Ruangrupa and Nikos Papastergiadis in Conversation: *Living Lumbung: The Shared Spaces of Art and Life*, E-flux Journal, Issue #118, 2021.

¹⁰⁶ The cone-shaped rice dish known as tumpeng is an inseparable part of celebrations and other important events in Indonesia. The meaning of tumpeng is inherent in its pointed cone, symbolising the devotion toward the one God. From the Jakarta Post, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2020/03/30/the-philosophical-significance-of-indonesias-tumpeng.html>, [last access on 15 July 2024]

In maintaining the sustainability of the Gudskul, the members developed a paid program to support its knowledge distribution model. While the majority of operational support for Gudskul still comes from donor institutions and sponsors, this paid program is a strategic initiative aimed at creating an independent sustainability system. When deciding to work together as an ecosystem, they aimed to create a shared *lumbung* system where all the resources are pooled and distributed proportionally, according to the needs of each collective. The diverse resources from each collective come in various forms: funds, programs, equipment, or books. These resources are collected to be accessed and shared among all collectives. With this stable infrastructure, Gudskul manages to create a variety of ongoing programs that are visible and accessible to every individual eager to develop their ideas or experience hands-on activities and at the same time will expand diverse knowledge of the community.

2.3.1.1 Core Activities at Gudskul

Focusing on nurturing educational growth and artistic collaboration, Gudskul paves the way for numerous activities that offer a diverse range of interests and skill levels. These activities show how art and education merge together in an artistic ecosystem. Adapting the ‘skul’ in Gudskul, they create a class that leverages the expertise of its members, aptly named “Collective Study and Contemporary Art Ecosystem.” This innovative class is designed to give a deep understanding of collective practices and the dynamics of contemporary art within a collaborative framework. This class is a non degree and accredited study program that lasts for one year using a dynamic curriculum approach. The class is led by experienced members of Gudskul who bring their extensive knowledge and firsthand experiences to the table. This ensures that participants receive high-quality, relevant, and practical education. In this program, participants will be directly involved in an art ecosystem and collaboratively determine artistic work practices together with access to national and international resources and networks that have been built by Gudskul. This study is open to artists, art managers, curators, researchers, and cultural practitioners who are interested in developing artistic work models based on collectives and

collaboration. Gudskul will be a place for joint learning for art and culture agents who want to contribute to the local context while also being involved in international dialogue. The class starts by introducing the collective works that encompass history, philosophy and notable precedents around the world. There are also open discussions where participants can develop more about the idea of the collective world and its impact on society.



Learning process in classroom
Courtesy of Gudskul, Angga Wijaya

Not only in class program, the hands-on experience also practised in a workshop format where participants perform intensively in certain mediums, including: graphic arts, multimedia approaches, drawing, and space-time-based art. This activity will complement the participants' experience to not only work at the level of discourse and study, but also directly dive into the field of fine arts by practising in it. As Angga Wijaya stated:

The focus of Gudskul is never on the assessment criteria or other signifiers that indicate success or failure, but on the concept of togetherness and solidarity. Instead of mimicking modern art schools, where we often learn to compete with each other and focus on the practices of individual artists, Gudskul hopes to instil in artists a

collective working ethos without diminishing the importance of each individual's contribution.¹⁰⁷



Hands-on experience during the class at Gudskul
Courtesy of Gudskul, Angga Wijaya

Still within the context of education and using art as a medium, creating the "Good School Short Course" is another innovative approach of Gudskul. This program offers a more relaxed and accessible format, running for just two weeks. The short course is designed to provide intensive, yet enjoyable learning experiences that cater to individuals with varying levels of expertise and time commitments. Implemented in a Hybrid manner, this program offers various subjects to explore how to create artwork, from archive media, film, video, history to new media art; writing about art; introducing art at home, creating comics, music journalism and managing creative spaces. To join the class, participants must register themselves either as individual or collective during the open call announced by the Gudskul team. Each class is facilitated by artists, designers, musicians, directors, and practitioners who have more than ten years of experience in their fields.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ A. Wijaya, *Gudskul Art Collective: Learning while nongkrong, nongkrong while learning*, Asia Art Archive, 2020, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/like-a-fever/like-a-fever/gudskul-art-collective-learning-while-nongkrong-nongkrong-while-learning>, [last access on 1 June 2024]

¹⁰⁸ Gudskul, Good school short course 2024, <https://gudskul.art/panggilan-terbuka-studi-kolektif-2024-copy/>, [last access on 29 June 2024]



Poster of Open call announcement published through social media platforms.
Courtesy of Gudskul

In this short course program, Gudskul offers a variety of courses that sharpens creative methods through access to instructors, artists, writers, musicians, curators, and the spaces within Gudskul. Throughout the program, participants will engage in casual networking sessions with these practitioners, further enriching their learning experience and expanding their professional connections. Moreover, participants will receive certificates and showcase their work in the Class Meeting, enhancing their portfolios. This initiative supports the sustainability of Gudskul as part of the local and global contemporary art ecosystem in supporting talents to be able to contribute to society.¹⁰⁹

Not only focusing on education for professionals, Gudskul has also developed a diverse range of programs that engage and implicate broader society. These initiatives include thematic exhibitions that showcase contemporary art and cultural trends, fostering public discourse and appreciation for creative expression. The community has also ventured into curating art markets, regular movie screenings offer the community access to thought-provoking films, often followed by discussions that encourage critical thinking and cultural exchange. Beyond these,

¹⁰⁹ Gudskul, Gudskul Shortcourse 2024, 15 March 2024, <https://gudskul.art/panggilan-terbuka-studi-kolektif-2024-copy/>, [last access on 15 July 2024]

Gudskul organises various other activities that emphasise collaboration and participation from individuals across different backgrounds.

2.3.2 Jakarta 32°

Initiated by ruangrupa under the roof of Gudskul, Jakarta 32° is a forum for dialogue and networking of students throughout Jakarta and its surroundings in the field of contemporary art and culture. Jakarta 32° tries to accommodate students' ideas and experiments in creating and discussing current campus issues through exhibitions, discussions and writing. The primary goal of Jakarta 32° is to connect the concept of *lumbung* in terms of sharing knowledge and engaging young artists and students, providing them with a platform to showcase their work and express their views on urban life as well as discuss about their upcoming projects both personal or within the final assignment task at the university.

University students or community members can register themselves for Jakarta 32°. The participants involved in this program are called '*komplotan Jakarta 32°*' which means 'the people of Jakarta 32°'. Once registered, the team organises a schedule to visit the initiating location, which is typically one of the invited universities. The event features a number of programs, such as exhibitions, workshops, discussions, artist talks, performance arts, and film and video screenings.



The forum also try to initiate and stimulate a network between students, especially in Jakarta.

Presentation process conducted by Jakarta 32°, 2004
Courtesy of Jakarta 32°, ruangrupa

In their practice, Jakarta 32° utilises the term *TARKAM (Tarung Kampus) Diskusi*, which can be translated as "Final Assignment Talk." This innovative approach is designed to create an open and inclusive platform for students to present and discuss their final assignments. Unlike traditional academic settings, Jakarta 32° imposes no restrictions on the themes or types of artworks that can be presented. Instead, the students themselves are encouraged to choose their topics and present their work, and let the discussion flow among the participants. During the TARKAM Discussion sessions, students present their work to their peers and the other participants are encouraged to convey their perspectives, providing constructive feedback and engaging in meaningful discussions. Moreover, the TARKAM sessions are not limited to just opening discussions. Students are also able to showcase their projects, such as exhibitions or music performances. This flexibility ensures that the program remains dynamic and inclusive, allowing participants to express their creativity in various forms. Despite being university-based, the atmosphere during TARKAM sessions is relaxed and pressure-free, encouraging students to engage more openly and confidently. This nurturing environment not only fosters artistic growth but also promotes a sense of community and collaboration among participants, making the TARKAM sessions a vital component of the Jakarta 32° initiative.



Discussion forum at Jakarta 32°
Courtesy of Jakarta 32°

This program is not only beneficial for the participating students but also for ruangrupa itself. This exchange of knowledge and perspectives helps ruangrupa stay in line with emerging trends and fresh viewpoints, enriching their own practices while simultaneously fostering the growth and development of the next generation.

During its practices, the process of Jakarta 32° and the students continues to evolve through a series of workshops and exhibitions. These activities are designed to provide students with hands-on experience and foster creative expression. During the workshops, the team from Jakarta 32° facilitates brainstorming sessions focused on themes that are closely related to urban life. This approach helps students to explore relevant issues and contexts, encouraging them to create works that reflect their personal perspectives and experiences it with alternative concept of visual communication¹¹⁰ within the urban environment.



Result of the workshop in Jakarta, 2004
Courtesy of Jakarta 32°

¹¹⁰ Ruangrupa, Jakarta 32° 2004, <https://ruangrupa.id/en/2004/10/23/jakarta-32c-2004-2/> [last access on 2 July 2024]

In addition to the workshops, Jakarta 32° addresses the lack of dialogue among Jakarta students and the limited opportunities to present their visual works to a broader audience. Historically, student exhibitions were confined to their respective campuses, with little to no interaction between students and teachers, and minimal engagement from visitors outside the campus community. To remedy this, the Jakarta 32° team has introduced the concept of hosting exhibitions in public galleries. This approach provides students with greater exposure and opportunities for meaningful feedback. There is no criticism and seeding of meaningful ideas between students and teachers.¹¹¹ By moving these exhibitions to more accessible public venues, Jakarta 32° ensures that student artworks reach a wider audience, including other students, art enthusiasts, and the general public.



Jakarta 32° Showcase at Senayan City Mall, Jakarta, 2009
Courtesy of ruangrupa

Through this grand innovation, providing a platform for university students to engage in workshops, exhibitions, and critical discussions, Jakarta 32° bridges the gap between campus-based art practices and the broader public sphere. Through Jakarta 32°, ruangrupa continues to build the values of inclusivity, creativity, and social engagement.

¹¹¹ Yunanto, Tidjels, *Showcase Jakarta 32°C*, ruangrupa, 2009, <https://ruangrupa.id/en/2009/02/01/show-case-jakarta-32c/> [last access on 3 July 2024]

In managing various activities, ruangrupa consistently integrates the value of collaboration, ensuring that it is not just about their central role but also about providing space for other individuals to showcase their talents and contributions, embodying the concept of lumbung. By creating these multiple platforms, ruangrupa transcends the boundaries of the local community, continually seeking to expand their work and establish connections on a global scale.

CHAPTER 3 ruangrupa on International Stage

3.1 Intercultural Exchange: RAIN

Since their inception in 2000 ruangrupa pulled the distance that had led them to a revolutionary journey of their own. This Jakarta-based art collective has continually redefined the landscape of contemporary art, seamlessly integrating urban issues, social engagement, and cultural activism into their diverse projects. As a result, their practice not only pushed boundaries of what art can be but also created strong bonds with the communities in which they worked. Following this expansion, ruangrupa's effort in gaining global visibility matches the concept of interculturality. From the *International Encyclopedia Education* this term is explained as: "Interculturality refers specifically to mutually respectful interactions and dialog between people from different cultures, that promote mutual understanding while preserving the cultural identity of each individual."¹¹² This concept is reflected in ruangrupa's efforts and actions as they actively participate on the global stage in voicing different issues. Interculturality also allows ruangrupa to process cultural exchange and declare their existence as an art collective in the global arena. By engaging in intercultural dialogue, ruangrupa can transcend local boundaries and engage with a diverse array of artistic traditions, methodologies, and perspectives.

In fact, the need to expand their journey as a collective art practice in global discourse began in the same year as their initiation in 2000. Ruangrupa joined RAIN (Rijksakademie Artists' Initiatives Network), an international network that fosters connections and collaborations among artists and art institutions. This initiative is closely connected to Ade Darmawan, the director of ruangrupa, who was a resident at the Rijksakademie from 1998 to 2000. Elaborating more about the organisation, RAIN aims to strengthen the exchange of art, ideas, techniques, cultural heritage and knowledge between artists' initiatives in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and Europe. The concept of interculturality meets the mission of RAIN that promotes cooperation among artists' initiatives, facilitating cultural exchange and collaborative projects as well as creating a vibrant global art community where diverse ideas and practices can intersect and influence each other. From its website RAIN declares that:

¹¹² B. Leask, *Reimagining internationalization of the curriculum*, International Encyclopedia of Education (Fourth Edition), Elsevier, 2023, p. 220-232.

Strengthens the exchange of art, ideas, techniques, cultural heritage and knowledge between artists' initiatives in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and Europe, with the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam, making a key contribution both physically and virtually. In this exchange the emphasis is on 'south-south' and 'south-north' contacts, taking also into account the 'north-south' line which is already represented rather well.¹¹³

By linking artists' initiatives with larger institutions and international platforms, RAIN significantly boosted ruangrupa's visibility, helping it gain recognition on the global art scene. Moreover, the organisation also supports its members by providing funding for the development of art initiatives within its network. This grand action by RAIN aims to support artistic careers and the promotion of contemporary artists around the world. As for now RAIN actively support numbers of art initiatives around the world such as ART Bakery in Cameroon¹¹⁴, BAS from Istanbul, Turkey¹¹⁵, CEIA from Brazil¹¹⁶ and many others around South America, Africa, and Asia. This financial support is crucial for the sustainability and growth of these initiatives, enabling them to pursue ambitious projects, invest in necessary resources, and expand their reach. The financial backing also allows the collectives to develop and execute large-scale projects and exhibitions that might otherwise be beyond their means. This includes the creation of new works, the organisation of public events, and the facilitation of community-based activities.

Through this support, ruangrupa sees this opportunity as a chance to spread their existence wider, as Ade Darmawan said “We see RAIN as an important network to build on apart from the local and Southeast Asian network we participate in.”¹¹⁷ As

¹¹³ RAIN, info, <http://www.r-a-i-n.net/info/> [last access on 11 July 2024]

¹¹⁴ Artbakery aims to improve the chances of local artists and their production of contemporary art through interaction and exchange with more experienced colleagues within Cameroon and abroad. By organising workshops, master classes and the ‘portfolio programme, they try to reach this goal.

¹¹⁵ BAS (officially Istanbul Sanat Arastirmalari Dernegi – Istanbul Art Research Association) is an artist-run space in Istanbul initiated by Banu Cennetoglu (RA 2002/2003). With a primary focus on artist books and publications BAS collects, displays and will produce printed matter.

¹¹⁶ CEIA, was initiated in 2001 by Marco Paolo Rolla and Marcos Hill in Belo Horizonte, Brazil as a Centre of Experimentation & Information. Although contemporary Brazilian art is diverse and fluid, there is no process of dispersion and the potential of individual or collective efforts is never satisfactory utilised and recognised. CEIA aims to stimulate a space to reflect and develop communication (local, National, regional and international) to spread over the country a democratic system of information and inquiries of art.

¹¹⁷ Interview between Nuraini Juliastuti & Ade Darmawan, *Ruangrupa: A Conversation on Horizontal Organisation*, Afterall, June 2012, <https://www.afterall.org/articles/ruangrupa-a-conversation-on-horizontal-organisation/>, [last access on 10 July 2024]

a concrete result of the connection between ruangrupa and RAIN, in 2000 ruangrupa was involved in an exchange artist program with Center Soleil d’Afrique (Bamako, Mali) and Open Circle (Mumbai, India). In this event, ruangrupa sent their representatives, Hafiz, to conduct painting workshops, which provided a platform for cross-cultural artistic exchange and collaboration.



Workshop with Center Soleil d’Afrique, 2000
Courtesy of ruangrupa

The workshops, held over two weeks at the Center Soleil d’Afrique in Bamako, Mali, were a vibrant convergence of artists from diverse backgrounds, including participants from the Rijksakademie in the Netherlands, as well as artists from Indonesia, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Angola, and Mali. This gathering of creative minds facilitated a rich dialogue between different artistic traditions and practices, fostering mutual learning and inspiration. Within this network ruangrupa successfully generated new social engagement in the art sector and cultural diversity¹¹⁸ as well as up possibilities for future collaborations, joint projects, and continuous artistic dialogue, strengthening the global art community.

Maintaining the connection between ruangrupa and RAIN, ruangrupa hosted the RAIN yearly meeting in 2002. This meeting included participants from the

¹¹⁸ T. Berghuis, *ruangrupa: What Could Be ‘Art to Come’*, “New York-London: Routledge”, Third text, Vol. 25, Issue 4, July 2011, pp. 395-407, here p. 401.

following countries: Indonesia, Mexico, Argentina, India, South Africa and the Netherlands. The theme of the meeting was "Strategies of artists (initiatives) whereby they can relate to the socio-political context in which they work."¹¹⁹ In this meeting they were discussing creating a place, a structure and possibilities for artists in their local environment to develop and analyse their work. Also they focused on creating alternatives in the local context through artworks and projects and at the same time to contribute in international dialogue.



RAIN meeting in Jakarta, 2002
Courtesy of ruangrupa

Successfully hosting this global meeting further demonstrated ruangrupa's commitment to fostering intercultural exchange and collaboration, principles that remain central to their projects and initiatives. This effort also showed that ruangrupa was able to strengthen the position as an art collective in global discourse. The event boosted their visibility and credibility, attracting further opportunities for collaboration, exhibitions, and residencies. This partnership provided ruangrupa with a platform to exchange ideas and practices with other artist collectives globally, enriching their own methodologies and approaches. Furthermore, ruangrupa was able to leverage the international connections and collaborative opportunities to further their mission of integrating art with social and urban issues. It reinforced

¹¹⁹ RAIN, RAIN Network partner meeting Jakarta, 2002, <http://www.r-a-i-n.net/projects/ruangrupa/>, [last access on 12 July 2024]

their reputation as a forward-thinking and impactful collective, committed to using art as a tool for social change and cultural dialogue. The relationships and collaborations that emerged from partnership have had a lasting impact on ruangrupa's work, contributing to their growth and success as a leading art collective both locally and internationally.

3.2 ruangrupa Participations in Global Stage

ruangrupa's participation on the global stage reflects their dynamic and influential presence in art discourse. Since their founding in 2000, the Jakarta-based collective has engaged in numerous international exhibitions and collaborations, showcasing their innovative approach to integrating art with social and urban issues. Their contribution in leadership networks like RAIN, has highlighted their commitment to maintaining intercultural dialogue and collaboration. Expanding ruangrupa efforts on the global stage they also participated in prestigious events such as the Gwangju Biennale (2002), Istanbul Biennale (2005), São Paulo Biennale (2014), and also engaged in numerous international collaborations and residencies, partnering with global institutions and artist collectives. This recognition in the global eye has solidified ruangrupa's reputation as a formidable force in the international art world. Through interactive installations, performances, and community-driven projects, ruangrupa has effectively resonated with diverse audiences around the world, earning recognition and acclaim for their contributions to global art discourse.

3.2.1 ruangrupa in Gwangju Biennale

Continuing their journey of international engagement, ruangrupa participated in the Gwangju Biennale in 2002. This event, held in Gwangju, South Korea, is one of Asia's most significant contemporary art exhibitions, drawing artists and audiences from around the globe. Established in 1995, The Gwangju Biennale has transitioned from being an internationally-oriented yet regionally provincial exhibition in Asia, competing with other established biennales worldwide, to positioning itself as a distinctly Asian international biennale. Its focus now is on

developing a contemporary art and biennale network within the Asian region.¹²⁰ The curator of Gwangju Biennale 2000 even stated that “Gwangju Biennale is a distinctively Asian international event, substantialization the identity of Asia.”¹²¹ Highlighting the event's commitment to expressing a unique cultural identity rooted in the rich traditions, histories, and contemporary realities of Asia that is both rooted in tradition and dynamically engaged with global cultural currents.

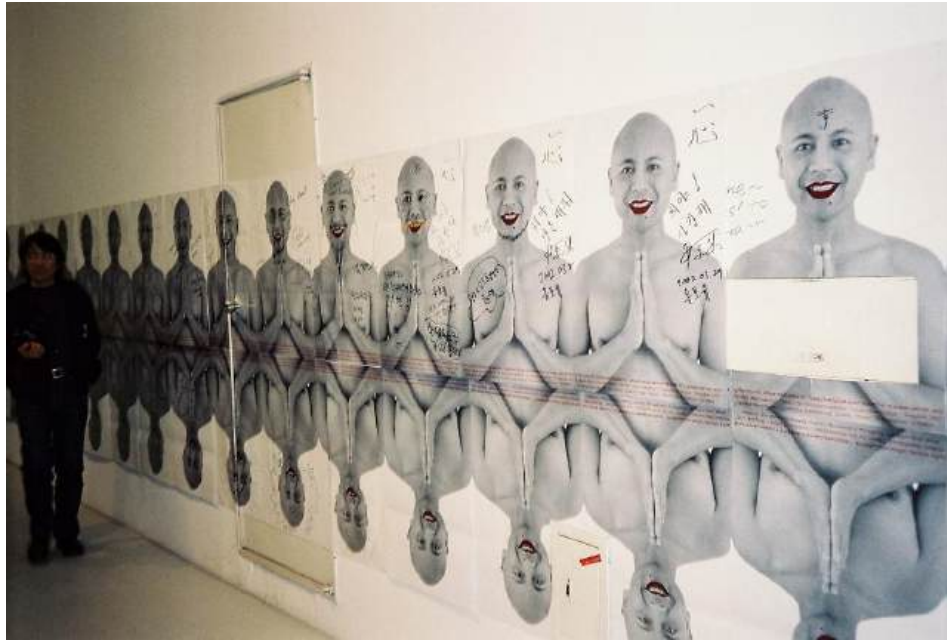
The 2002 Gwangju Biennale, in its fourth edition, was themed "P_A_U_S_E." This theme, inspired by the Eastern concept of meditation, encouraged participants and viewers to step back from the demands of contemporary society and reflect, thereby preparing for a transformative leap forward. The exhibition invited the participation from non-profit and experimental art groups and movements worldwide to foster communication and propose a departure from the narrative of modern art history, and even modern society itself, in an effort to build a new way forward.¹²²

In this event, ruangrupa recreated their unique space and curated their own presentation. Seven artists from the collective participated, showcasing a diverse kind of works including installations, books, and video arts. ruangrupa approached space in this exhibition not just as a physical location for display, but as a dynamic entity that connects and interacts with the body, illustrated by a visual representation of the body printed on the wall. These elements were crafted to provide viewers with a more immersive experience, prompting them to reflect on the interplay between physical space, the body, and the community.

¹²⁰ B. Mersmann, *Global Dawning: The Gwangju Biennial Factor in the Making and Marketing of Contemporary Asian Art*, *Third Text*, 27(4), 2013, pp. 525–535.

¹²¹ Statement by Kim Hong- hee, Gwangju Biennale Press, *A Window on the Future*, in *Gwangju Biennale Foundation*, *Gwangju Biennale 2000: Man + Space*, exhibition catalogue, Kwangju, 2000

¹²² L. Steeds, *Exhibitions and the City: To Accelerate or Pause? Two Case Studies*, *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 13 no. 2, 2014, pp 117-26.



Ruangrupa display at Gwangju Biennale, 2002
Courtesy of ruangrupa

One of the central pieces of their presentation was an installation that invited public participation. There was an installation involving a table set with food, accessible to visitors. After the food was consumed by the participants, the remnants were left on display, transforming the remains into an evolving artwork. This piece highlighted the themes of consumption, community, and the transient nature of social interactions. By involving the audience directly, they blurred the lines between artist and viewer, creator and participant. The installation highlighted the transient nature of art and life, using everyday activities to create a shared, reflective space.



ruangrupa installation *We don't have Any Message Today* at Gwangju Biennale, 2002
Courtesy of ruangrupa

ruangrupa's participation in the 2002 Gwangju Biennale was a significant milestone, showcasing the ability to create art that is both thought-provoking and socially relevant. Their work at this prestigious event made a strong impression on both the audience and the global art community, leading to special recognition from UNESCO¹²³. They were awarded a prize for outstanding creative achievement in the field of visual arts, a testament to their innovative approach and the profound impact of their work.

The interactive and participatory nature of their work at the Biennale demonstrated their commitment to breaking down traditional barriers between artist and audience, creating a more inclusive and dynamic art experience. This approach became a hallmark of their practice, setting the stage for future projects where the lines between creator and viewer are blurred, and where the audience plays an integral role in the artistic process. Over time, this concept of exhibition—focused on interaction, participation, and community involvement—became one of ruangrupa's specialties, defining their distinctive contribution to contemporary art. Moreover,

¹²³ H. Wiyanto, *ruangrupa. Alternative Space & Culture Analysis* Artists' group and alternative art space in Jakarta. Interview with the director Ade Darmawan, <https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2005/ruangrupa> [last access on 28 June 2024]

ruangrupa participation at Gwangju Biennale also helped to elevate Indonesian contemporary art within the global art community, highlighting the innovative and socially engaged practices emerging from Southeast Asia.

3.2.1.1 A Brief Explorations in Asian Contemporary Art Encounter

Expanding the significance of the Asian encounter in contemporary art, particularly in exhibitions, involves addressing the impact of colonialism on Asia¹²⁴ between the late 19th century and the 1950s. In his writing, John Clarke explained that during the colonial period¹²⁵ European powers sought to justify their domination of Asian territories by portraying their own cultures as superior, rational, and progressive, in contrast to the "primitive" or "decadent" East. This led to a body of knowledge about Asia that was constructed from a position of power and often served to reinforce colonial ideologies. This narrative created a body of knowledge about Asia that was deeply influenced by the power dynamics of the time. However, as Western influences in Asia fade and locally-focused modern and contemporary art movements grow, this change doesn't create a new model¹²⁶. This matter also supported by Oh Kwang Su, the artistic director for Gwangju Biennale, she stated:

The West-centralised view of contemporary art is still disillusioned with the idea that the West still rules the world. It should be restructured in various alternatives. A truly globalised culture will be born as innumerable visions are presented and integrated in such ways as to incorporate the whole in an active and critical structure.¹²⁷

Through this statement, Oh Kwang Su By embracing multiple perspectives in an environment where diverse artistic expressions can thrive and interact, the global art world can begin to reflect a more inclusive and representative cultural discourse. It also underscores the foundational elements that traditionally define biennials as

¹²⁴ M. Bartelik, *An Emerging Paradigm Derived from the Asian Biennials?: The Case Studies of the Mediacity Biennial (Seoul), the Busan Biennale (Busan), the Gwangju Biennale (Gwangju), and the Taipei Biennial (Taipei)*, President of AICA International, in 'Journal of Taipei Fine Arts Museum', 2014.

¹²⁵ J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought*, New York-London: Routledge, 1997.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Statement by Oh Kwang-su, artistic director of the Kwangju Biennale 2000; Kwangju Biennale 2000: Man + Space, p 27.

projects rooted in enlightenment ideals, revealing a gap where these historical and intellectual frameworks might otherwise provide depth and context.

This point later also emphasised by Caroline Jones in interpreting how the biennials worked as part of nationalism to enter more global discourse. She emphasised that “The biennials of the world are no longer dominated by the Euro-American vision of enlightenment. Indeed an invocation of ‘enlightenment’ may seem perverse when we consider the recent proliferation of the exhibitionary form in part-state systems (China) or autocracies (United Arab Emirates).”¹²⁸ This suggests that the biennial model is evolving beyond its Western roots, with new approaches and perspectives emerging from different regions. The concept of "enlightenment" in the context of biennials may seem contradictory when considering the recent rise of biennials in countries with different political systems. As biennials proliferate in countries with different political systems, such as China that started their own biennial (Shanghai Biennale) in 1996 and the United Arab Emirates, Sharjah Biennale in 1993, the concept of enlightenment may be adapted in ways that reflect local political realities. This shift challenges traditional notions of what biennials represent and raises dialogue about how enlightenment is interpreted in diverse and even restrictive contexts. However, as biennials emerge in countries with varying political climates, they often reflect the complexities and limitations imposed by their host countries. Furthermore, in the context of biennales, the complexity of their role extends beyond the surface-level perceptions often associated with these events. As Julie Ren and Ilse Helbrecht noted, “The art biennale is not just an elitist escape from local politics and strictures of institutional arrangements, nor is it simply a global marketplace, promulgating a vision of creativity-led urbanism.”¹²⁹ This statement emphasises that biennials cannot be reduced to mere showcases for artistic expression or commercial ventures. This raises important questions about how enlightenment ideals are interpreted and manifested in contexts where political and cultural restrictions may shape the exhibitionary practice.

¹²⁸ C. Jones, *Biennial Culture: A Longer History*, The Biennial Reader. Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010, pp 66-87, here p. 76.

¹²⁹ J. Ren & I. Helbrecht, *The art biennale as scalar arbiter: Gwangju latitudes*, Paper presented at the RC21 International Conference on “The Ideal City: between myth and reality. Representations, policies, contradictions and challenges for tomorrow's urban life” Urbino (Italy) 27-29 August 2015.

In addition to the historical and political factors that have significantly shaped the cultural climate in Asia, economic growth plays a crucial role as Okwui Enwezor stated “In Asia, for instance, it is already clear that the growing economy is not only creating a new class of wealth, it is also creating new audiences, participants, creative systems, and an awareness of cultural confidence that cannot be taken for granted.”¹³⁰ This affluent class has the resources to support and commission new works, thereby influencing artistic trends and contributing to a more diverse cultural scene.¹³¹ Based on this economic aspect, Olivia Bonito the curator of the 45th edition of Venice Biennale also mentioned “The development model's universal character has been demonstrated by the technological refinement of robotics and by the reception and sophisticated treatment in the Asian areas where enterprise and oriental discipline have been united.”¹³² It points out that in these areas, the combination of entrepreneurial drive ("enterprise") and cultural discipline ("oriental discipline") has allowed the model to be effectively implemented in showcasing the region's ability to adapt and excel within this global framework.

Together, these factors underscore the need for a more complex understanding of contemporary biennials and their role in reflecting and shaping global art discourse. As Asia’s cultural scene continues to evolve, it will be essential to recognize and engage with these diverse influences, ensuring that the rich and multifaceted contributions of Asian art are both acknowledged and celebrated on the world stage.

3.2.2 ruangrupa in Istanbul Biennale

The Istanbul Biennial is a significant contemporary art exhibition that has been held in Istanbul, Turkey, since 1987 organised under Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV), and it remains an influential event in the art world to this day. The Biennial serves as a bridge between East and West, reflecting Istanbul's unique position as a cultural and geographical crossroads. There are two distinctive

¹³⁰ O. Enwezor, *The Politics of Spectacle: The Gwangju Biennale and the Asian Century*, InVisible Culture, no. 15 (September), 2010, <https://doi.org/10.47761/494a02f6.6b2213af>.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² A. Olivia, The catalogue of 45th Venice Biennale, *Cardinal points of Art*, Marsili: Venice Italy, 1994, p. 12.

aspects of the inaugural Biennial to the present day¹³³: First is the incorporation of historical structures as settings for contemporary exhibitions. The second is the use of multiple venues spread across the city. As a result, from the very beginning, the city of Istanbul—arguably one of the most spectacular cities in the world—became an integral part of the Biennial experience. Moreover, the existence of the Istanbul Biennial has been helping to raise the profile of contemporary Turkish art and positioning Istanbul as an important centre for contemporary art.¹³⁴

Three years after their participation in the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea, ruangrupa successfully secured involvement in the Istanbul Biennale. The ninth edition of the Istanbul Biennale, held from September 16 to October 30, 2005, adopted the title "Istanbul" as a metaphor, a prediction, a lived reality, and an inspiration. This theme was rich with layers of meaning and aimed to explore the multifaceted identity of Istanbul, a city that has historically been a crossroads of cultures, ideas, and civilizations.¹³⁵

By choosing "Istanbul" as its central concept, the Biennale invited artists, curators, and audiences to reflect on the city's complex history and its dynamic present, where East meets West, tradition intersects with modernity, and local narratives merge with global currents as the curator Charles Esche said “This biennial is not a tool for selling the city to global capitalism but an agency for presenting it to its citizens and others with eyes awry.”¹³⁶

In utilising this title, ruangrupa displayed an installation of t-shirts as the medium with a theme ‘local hero’. Here ruangrupa presented the figure of Benyamin Sueb¹³⁷ as an icon that represents lower-middle class identity in Jakarta. Throughout

¹³³ T. Atagök & S. Platt, *The digestible other: The Istanbul Biennial*, New York: London-Routledge, Third Text, 15:55, 2001, pp. 103-109, here p. 106.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ C. Esche & V. Kortun on Curatorial text 9th International Istanbul Biennial, <https://bienal.iksv.org/en/biennial-archive/9th-international-istanbul-biennial> [last access on 17 July 2024]

¹³⁶ The 9th Istanbul Biennial Curatorial text, Charles Esche, 16 September - 30 October 2005, https://bienal.iksv.org/i/assets/bienal/document/9B_CHARLES-ESCHE-VASIF-KORTUN_EN.pdf [last access on 30 August 2024]

¹³⁷ Benyamin Sueb (1939–1995) is a multi-talented native Betawi artist in the field of popular theatre (*lenong* in Indonesian), film and music. In the event of Istanbul Biennale, ruangrupa presented a t-shirt showing the face of Benyamin S with a different look, imitating Mao Ze Dong, Che Guevara, Einstein, and other popular icons.

his career, Sueb was a vocal advocate for the recognition and respect of these communities, using his platform to bring visibility to issues of social inequality, economic hardship, and the cultural vibrancy of the urban lower-middle class. The t-shirt installation was not merely a tribute but also a powerful tool for provoking thought and sparking discussion about the intricate relationship between art, urban space, and community identity. Each t-shirt, emblazoned with imagery and slogans connected to Sueb, served as a wearable canvas that linked the personal with the political, the local with the universal.



ruangrupa installation at Istanbul Biennale, 2005
Courtesy of ruangrupa

Prior to the Istanbul Biennial in the same year, ruangrupa developed this project that they called t-shirt project. For this reason, runangrupa purposely used t-shirt's unique ability to serve as a canvas for expression, they chose this everyday garment as the medium for their project due to their mobile nature which follows whoever wears

them.¹³⁸ The T-shirt's widespread popularity and mobility—moving wherever its wearer goes—make it an effective tool for conveying messages in contemporary society.



One of the T-shirt projects by ruangrupa, 2005
Courtesy of ruangrupa

This project highlights how t-shirts are used to communicate socio-political statements through various channels such as socio-political actions, music, subcultures, and religious expressions.

Expanding on the concept of this t-shirt project, it is deeply connected to the notion of Culture Jamming. By using t-shirts as a medium, the project transforms a common, everyday object into a platform for subversive expression and social commentary. Each t-shirt serves as a mini-billboard, broadcasting messages that critique consumerism, corporate dominance, and the commodification of culture. Culture jamming is defined as the manipulation of the mass media by artists and activists. The intent, in most cases, is to critique the media's manipulation of reality,

¹³⁸ Ruangrupa, *Art Project – We Are The Generation That Wear Too Many T-Shirts*, <https://ruangrupa.id/en/2005/03/14/art-project-we-are-the-generation-that-wear-too-many-t-shirts-2/> [last access on 18 July 2024]

lampoon consumerism, or question corporate power.¹³⁹ This concept of culture jamming has emerged since the late 1980s as a reaction against what felt at the time like an overwhelming flow of media imagery turning us into passive consumers.¹⁴⁰ One of the many widely recognized examples of Culture Jamming is the work of Banksy¹⁴¹, the anonymous street artist whose provocative and often politically charged art has captured global attention. His satirical and subversive pieces that use dark humour to address contemporary issues.

In ruangrupa case, they utilised t-shirts more than just clothing; it became a canvas for political expression, a tool for reclaiming public space, and a way to provoke thought and dialogue. In this way, the project harnesses the power of visual and textual subversion, encouraging wearers and viewers alike to question the messages they encounter in their daily lives. Moreover, ruangrupa ensured that the project addresses pressing socio-political concerns while maintaining a socially conscious approach as well as amplifying the messages of their project on a global stage, aiming to reach a diverse and international audience.

3.2.3 Notable Global Participations in 2011

To broaden the existence of ruangrupa to the Middle East, ruangrupa participated in Art Dubai on 16–19 March 2011. Art Dubai is one of the leading international art fairs in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, held annually in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Art Dubai typically takes place in March each year at Madinat Jumeirah, a luxury resort and conference centre in Dubai.¹⁴² Moreover, Art Dubai has evolved significantly, reflecting the rapid growth of the art market in the region. It has expanded its scope to include digital art and has responded to global

¹³⁹ Bullock, S. Tombley, A. Lawrie, *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, London: Haper Collins Publishers, 3rd Edition, 1999.

¹⁴⁰ H. Jenkins, *What Do You Mean By "Culture Jamming"?: An Interview with Moritz Fink and Marilyn DeLaure (Part One)*, 30 October 2017, <https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2017/9/7/an-interview-with-moritz-fink-and-marilyn-delaurie-part-one> [last access on 27 August 2024]

¹⁴¹ W. Jones, *The Story Behind Banksy On his way to becoming an international icon, the subversive and secretive street artist turned the art world upside-down*, Smithsonian Magazine, February 2013, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-story-behind-banksy-4310304/> [last access on 27 August 2024]

¹⁴² A. Moghadam (2021) *The staging of cultural diversity in Dubai: the case of Dubai Art Fair*, *Identities*, 28:6, 717-733, DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2021.1933830

trends such as the rise of NFTs¹⁴³ and the increasing importance of digital platforms in the art world.

In 2011, Art Dubai introduced a new section called MARKER: a curated program of galleries and art spaces that highlights a different theme or geographical region each year. This section aims to exemplify the fair's role as a site of discovery and cross-cultural exchange, and is a feature of Art Dubai's extensive not-for-profit programming¹⁴⁴. Together with other galleries and collectives: Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum (ACAF) in Alexandria, Grey Noise in Lahore, Liu Ding's Store in Beijing, Makan in Amman they gave a fresh section on the art fair reflected a phenomenon that exemplifies the experiential turn in today's art world.



OK. Video Presentation at Art Dubai 2011
Courtesy of ruangrupa

In this event, ruangrupa showcased a range of video installations from the OK. Video Festival, originally held in 2003. These selections highlighted the diverse and experimental nature of the festival, which has been instrumental in exploring and

¹⁴³ Non-fungible token (NFT), a non-interchangeable digital asset such as a photograph, song, or video whose ownership has been authenticated and stored on a database called a blockchain and which can be collected, sold, and traded on various online platforms. From Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/non-fungible-token-data> [last access on 28 August 2024]

¹⁴⁴ A. Moghadam, *The staging of cultural diversity in Dubai: the case of Dubai Art Fair*, 'Identities', 28(6), 2021, pp. 717-733, DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2021.1933830

pushing the boundaries of video art in Indonesia.¹⁴⁵ The selected video installations offered insights into various socio-political issues, urban narratives, and everyday life experiences, reflecting ruangrupa's ability to use art as a medium for social commentary. This participation at Art Dubai helped to further solidify their presence on the global art stage, connecting their local artistic explorations with a broader international audience. By presenting the OK. Video installations that had previously been showcased in Jakarta to the audience in Dubai, ruangrupa managed to extend their artistic reach and influence beyond local boundaries thereby ruangrupa able to contribute to a more interconnected and dynamic global art community.

Participating in a neighbouring country, ruangrupa secured a spot at the Singapore Biennale. The Singapore Biennale, firstly announced in 2006, places a strong emphasis on contemporary art from Southeast Asia, but it also features works from artists across Asia and the broader global South Singapore. As a global city, put this event as a cultural pot where arts and culture not only coexist but thrive. The Singapore Biennale mirrors this multicultural ethos by curating a program that reflects the city-state's unique position at the crossroads of East and West.¹⁴⁶ The third edition of the Biennale took place from March 13-15, 2011, across prominent venues including the Singapore Art Museum, the National Museum of Singapore, the Old Kallang Airport, and Marina Bay.

Prior to the exhibition, ruangrupa has been developing this project that they intentionally created for the Singapore Biennale which is called *Singapura Fiction*¹⁴⁷. ruangrupa embarked on a unique project that gathered fictional stories from random individuals, aiming to reveal their personal ideas and imaginations about their experiences, memories, events, spaces, and histories. After collecting these stories, ruangrupa used objects sourced from various flea markets and second-hand shops to inspire and illustrate the fictional narratives. These objects, with their own silent

¹⁴⁵ Ruangrupa selected projects, *Art Dubai 2011*, <https://ruangrupa.id/en/2011/02/22/art-dubai-2011/>, [last access on 18 July 2024]

¹⁴⁶ J. Tang, *Spectacle's Politics and the Singapore Biennale*, 'Sage Journal', Volume 6 issue 3, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412907084519>

¹⁴⁷ P. J. Yao, *2011 Singapore Biennale*, E-flux, 18 March 2011, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/232627/2011-singapore-biennale> [last access on 18 July 2024]

histories, served as tangible connections to the past, enriching the fictional tales with a sense of authenticity and depth.



Ruangrupa, *Singapura Fiction*, Installation of used objects, video and documentation material. Singapore Biennale 2011
Courtesy of e-flux

By engaging directly with the community, the artists gathered personal stories and reflections that offer a unique glimpse into the lives and experiences of the people. Additionally, they conducted extensive research into the city's history, popular incidents, and local myths, weaving these elements together to create a brand-new urban legend for the city of Singapore.¹⁴⁸ Beside the messy installation, there was a spot that attract the spectators which was a miniature story of Annabele Chong¹⁴⁹ Here, ruangrupa reconstructed the narrative by creating a new character named Allabella Chong. Staying close to the original context, they included provocative items such as skimpy bars and underwear, as well as phallic-shaped objects, all displayed in a special case dedicated to her.

¹⁴⁸ Rainbow Art Projects, *biennale pick#10: Singapore Fiction by ruangrupa*, 4 June 2011, <https://rainbowartsproject.wordpress.com/2011/04/06/biennale-pick10-singapore-fiction-by-ruangrupa/> [last access on 17 July 2024]

¹⁴⁹ Annabele Chong is a Singaporean former pornographic actress who became famous after starring in an adult film that was promoted as the *World's Biggest Gang Bang*. Since her parents did not approve of her dropping out of law school, she needed a source of income to pay her college fees. In 1994, she started in porn by answering an advertisement for a modelling agency in *LA Weekly*. She was reportedly interested in blurring the boundary between pornography and performance art in her work.



Ruangrupa, *Singapura Fiction*, Installation of Allabella Chong,
Random objects in a glass box.
Singapore Biennale 2011 Courtesy of ruangrupa

This participation allowed ruangrupa to showcase their innovative and community-oriented art practices to an international audience in a different cultural setting. This experience enabled ruangrupa to address and engage with different issues beyond those specific to Indonesia, creating a dialogue with diverse cultures and perspectives. It also provided an opportunity for ruangrupa to learn from and contribute to the global art community, further enriching their practice and reinforcing their commitment to creating meaningful, socially engaged art.

3.2.4 APT7 Highlights: *The Kuda*

The Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT) is a significant recurring exhibition series held at the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) in Brisbane, Australia. Renowned for its focus on contemporary art from the Asia-Pacific region, including East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Pacific Islands, and Australia. Since its inception in 1993, the APT has become one of the most important art events in the Asia-Pacific region, showcasing contemporary art from Asia, the Pacific, and Australia. Through this spirit, the Triennial's emphasis on cross-cultural exchange and maintaining friendship in the neighbourhood

region.¹⁵⁰ The APT also emphasised art that illustrates the dynamic interaction between traditional and contemporary elements, connecting past and present within the region's cultures, while also highlighting works that oppose a future defined by a bland global uniformity.¹⁵¹

The 7th edition of APT, held from 8 December 2012 to 14 April 2013, was distinguished as the only exhibition worldwide exclusively displaying art from Asia, the Pacific, and Australia. This reason is based on the region's location that loosely can cover more than half of the globe.¹⁵² In this edition, APT7 continued the series' progressive exploration of geography, history, and culture, examining how contemporary artists address and interpret these themes through their work. Occupying the entire Gallery of Modern Art and key spaces within the Queensland Art Gallery, APT7 showcased new and recent works by 75 established and emerging artists and groups from 27 countries throughout the region.¹⁵³ Each participant in APT7 demonstrated their own approach to the theme, and among them, ruangrupa offered a unique perspective by exploring the collateral relationships between Jakarta and Brisbane.



In frame: Reza Afisina in preparation for *The Kuda space* at the 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT7), 2012.
Courtesy of ruangrupa.

¹⁵⁰ C. Turner, *Art Speaking for Humanity: The Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, *Art Journal*, 59:1, 2011, pp. 16-19.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² D. Losche, *The Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art: Global and Local in Australia*, *Australian Historical Studies*, 47:2, 2016, pp. 316-324, DOI: 10.1080/1031461X.2016.1163726

¹⁵³ J.S. Loong, *Transcending histories and disrupting the present at APT7*, 'Art Monthly Australia', (258), 2013, pp. 9-12.

At this event ruangrupa presented a fictional legend to illustrate the connections between Jakarta and Brisbane. They presented "*The Kuda*," or translated as Horse, an underground punk rock band supposedly active in Indonesia during the 1970s. ruangrupa brought up the story of *The Kuda* to illuminate the social and political shifts in Indonesian society during the transition from Sukarno's Old Order¹⁵⁴ to Soeharto's New Order. Formed under Soeharto's regime, the band symbolises the dynamic changes and turbulence of the era. *The Kuda* gained notoriety not only in Indonesia but also in Brisbane, Australia, during a time when the punk movement was rising globally. At that time, Queensland was embroiled in significant turmoil, marked by widespread corruption within the government and brutal suppression of dissent. The right-wing administration, notorious for its oppressive tactics, created an atmosphere of tension and unrest. Against this backdrop, *The Kuda*'s rebellious spirit and raw energy resonated powerfully with Brisbane's youth, who were eager for change and expression.¹⁵⁵

For the realisation of their space, ruangrupa curated a mini museum of fabricated artefacts from that era: the band's instruments, display cases filled with faux books and magazines about *The Kuda*, artificially aged to seem as if they were from the 1970s; band T-shirts; a Vespa; and black-and-white films depicting the band members in their nonchalant coolness.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Old order was coined by Suharto, the second president of Indonesia as the depiction of the rule of the first president of Indonesia, Soekarno. He used it to contrast his presidency methods which called the New Order. The Old Order referred to the era marked by Sukarno's emphasis on guided democracy, nationalism, and anti-imperialism, which, by the mid-1960s, had led to political instability, economic difficulties, and social unrest.

¹⁵⁵ C. Webb, *The Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art: Creating a myth*, 'The Jakarta Post', 17 February 2013,

<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/02/17/the-asia-pacific-triennial-contemporary-art-creating-a-myth.html> [last access on 20 July 2024]

¹⁵⁶ S. Subramanian, *multi-storied #21: The editing floor*, 19 June 2022,

<https://samanth.substack.com/p/multi-storied-21-the-editing-floor> [last access on 20 July 2024]



ruangrupa, *The Kuda: The Untold Story of Indonesian Underground Music in the 70's*, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view at the 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT7), 2012. Courtesy of ruangrupa.

Not only could visitors immerse themselves in the mini museum of The Kuda curated by ruangrupa, but ruangrupa also persuaded veteran Brisbane rockers to perform on stage. These musicians testified to the electrifying influence *The Kuda* had on their music, creating a powerful connection between the legendary Indonesian punk band and the Brisbane music scene.



Opening performance by Brisbane punk-style musicians at the mini museum space of *the kuda*, 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT7), 2012.

Here, ruangrupa was able to present another view of Indonesian history in a vibrant way. The show encapsulated their essence in numerous ways: it had a distinct street-urban edge, reflecting the pulse of contemporary Indonesian culture while also engaging with its rich historical background as well as arousing people's curiosity about the past events. Indra Ameng, one of the participants of ruangrupa, said that “It is a ruangrupa's tribute and also a parody. At the same time it’s a provocation and intervention into history and collective memory. It will allow people to question and even to re-create their own memories.”¹⁵⁷

The aggressive attitude in conveying the complex narratives of Indonesia’s past was particularly striking, as it challenged viewers to confront politically sensitive themes that resonate with the country’s tumultuous history. This dynamic interplay of art and activism not only captivated the audience but also sparked meaningful conversations about the relevance of history in shaping contemporary society. Ultimately, ruangrupa's exhibition stood as a testament to the power of artistic expression as a vehicle for social change and cultural reflection.

3.2.5 ruangrupa at the 31st São Paulo Biennial

Transitioning to the Biennial in Latin America, the São Paulo Biennale holds the distinction of being the second oldest biennale in the world¹⁵⁸, following the Venice Biennial. Established in 1951, it has become a pivotal event in the global contemporary art scene. Moreover, the São Paulo Biennale was groundbreaking as the first such event to be established in a geopolitical location outside the Northern Hemisphere and beyond the dominant United States-Western European axis. The Biennale's establishment in Brazil underscored the importance of the Global South in

¹⁵⁷ Interview with ruangrupa from the article of Cynthia, W, *The Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art: Creating a myth*, The Jakarta Post, 17 February 2013, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/02/17/the-asia-pacific-triennial-contemporary-art-creating-a-myth.html> [last access on 20 July 2024]

¹⁵⁸ C. Jones, *Biennial Culture: A Longer History*, The Biennial Reader. Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010. pp 66-87. here p. 83.

the cultural and artistic discourse, paving the way for future biennials in regions that had previously been underrepresented in the international art scene.¹⁵⁹

In the 31st edition of Sao Paulo ruangrupa participated in this event, which took place from September 6 to December 7, 2014. In this edition, São Paulo Biennale titled ‘How to (...) Things that Don’t Exist invited artists and audiences to fill in the blank with words that reflect the unseen or not yet fully understood aspects of modern society.¹⁶⁰ The title selected for this edition was directly influenced by the political situation¹⁶¹ in Brazil during the 31st São Paulo Biennial in 2014, a period characterized by widespread unrest and public dissatisfaction with the government. This unrest, which began in 2013, saw mass protests erupt across the country, driven by a broad spectrum of grievances, including corruption, inadequate public services, and the high costs associated with hosting the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

The biennial provided a significant platform for ruangrupa to present their work to a broader audience in South America, marking a key moment in their journey as a collective. ruangrupa's involvement in this event came at the invitation of the curator of the event Charles Esche. The event team believed that inviting ruangrupa was an excellent decision, given the significant impact of ruangrupa previous shows. This move aligned with the recent trend in biennales to compete in creating standout 'shows' using contemporary art, and ruangrupa's innovative approach perfectly suited this direction.¹⁶² For the 31st Bienal, ruangrupa showcased a dynamic architectural and sculptural installation located at the Biennale Pavilion. As a part of Ibirapuera Park, this building is one of Sao Paulo’s landmarks. The location illustrates the various activities of the group, capturing the meetings and experiences they had in São Paulo. By engaging with different facets of the city, they crafted a trans-city portrait—reflecting São Paulo through the perspective of Jakarta-based artists, while also engaging in a dialogue with local initiatives about the essence of collective identity.

¹⁵⁹ I. Whitelagg, *The bienal internacional de São Paulo: A concise history, 1951-2014*. Perspective. *Actualité en Histoire de l’art*, (2), 2013, pp. 380-386.

¹⁶⁰ Wright, L, *31st Bienal de São Paulo*, 17 February 2015, <https://www.frieze.com/article/31st-bienal-de-s%C3%A3o-paulo> [last access on 17 July 2024]

¹⁶¹ A. de Souza, M. Costa, M. Adelman, *(Trans)Panamerican: gender and sexuality in the 31st São Paulo Biennial Revista Textura (ULBRA)*, Universidade Luterana do Brasil, vol. 18, núm. 37, mayo-agosto, 2016, pp. 234-251.

¹⁶² K. Jennie, *Ruang Rupa at the 31st Biennale of Sao Paulo*, 27 October 2024, <https://www.whiteboardjournal.com/focus/ideas/populist-art/> [last access on 17 July 2024]



The space of ruangrupa installations at The 31st São Paulo Biennale
Courtesy of ruangrupa

Different with the many previous shows before, here ruangrupa created a more alive atmosphere around the space that also aroused spontaneous action along the exhibition that also emphasised from the curatorial text of the biennale “In this way, ruangrupa is able to remain firmly anchored within their local situation while developing a collective awareness of how art is changing across the world.”¹⁶³

During the exhibition, ruangrupa implemented a strategy where they rotated different teams to manage and update their project. This means that rather than having a single group of people responsible for the entire duration of the exhibition, they periodically switched out teams. Each team brought fresh perspectives, ideas, and energy to the project, allowing it to evolve and stay dynamic throughout the exhibition. In reflecting on their participation in the 31st São Paulo Biennale, Ade Darmawan of ruangrupa expressed a sense of accomplishment in creating this project, noting that the opportunity to realise their long-planned idea finally came

¹⁶³ Curatorial text 31st São Paulo Biennale, RURU, 14 September 2014, <http://www.31bienal.org.br/pt/post/1497> [last access on 18 July 2024]

true¹⁶⁴. Due to previous constraints in earlier exhibitions, the team had been unable to implement this concept.



Ruru Radio tent installation at The 31st São Paulo Biennial
Courtesy of ruangrupa

However, with the opportunity given by the São Paulo Biennial they had the necessary space and resources to bring their vision to life. Each room was designed to duplicate the Jakarta counterpart, including a dedicated exhibition area, a theatre space, and a "Rurushop Radio" tent that broadcasts ruangrupa's radio programs. The setup was not just a physical replication but an intentional effort to bring a slice of Jakarta to São Paulo, thereby maintaining a deeper cross-cultural exchange and engagement within the biennial international context. One to highlight was a karaoke setup, operated by one of the ruangrupa's artists, Narpati Awangga (Oomleo), which added a unique touch to the experience. Same case to their usual practices, ruangrupa actively invited the public to engage with and participate in this project, creating interactions and collaborations that reflected their community-oriented approach.

farid rakun, one of the ruangrupa's team, expressed¹⁶⁵ the overwhelming positive response from the public, noting that many visitors were enthusiastic about

¹⁶⁴ K, Jennie, *Ruang Rupa at the 31st Biennale of Sao Paulo*, 27 October 2024, <https://www.whiteboardjournal.com/focus/ideas/populist-art/> [last access on 17 July 2024]

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

participating in their installation. Public were excited to engage directly with the artwork, finding joy in the unique opportunity to doodle and even scream within one of Brazil's most prestigious venues. With this positive feedback Farid Rakun emphasised that there was nothing to obtain specifically through this approach. He added: "Our main goal is to preserve the energy that is cultivated through this event."¹⁶⁶ Observing ruangrupa's show at this event highlights how involving visitors directly in a major exhibition can significantly enhance their experience and satisfaction. By inviting active participation and engagement, rather than maintaining a traditional, passive viewing role, ruangrupa created a more immersive and personal connection between the audience and the artwork. This level of interaction was particularly notable due to the image of biennales that often applied formal protocols and restricting public access to art, usually reserving engagement for high-profile artists. In contrast, their piece at this Biennale broke with tradition, offering an exception to the usual limitations and fostering a more inclusive and interactive experience for visitors.

The 31st São Paulo Biennial allowed ruangrupa to position themselves prominently as artists deeply invested in collective production. They practically created an engaging, enjoyable environment throughout the show, which contrasted with the often more formal and tense atmosphere of previous exhibitions. For the São Paulo Biennale, this innovative and relaxed approach to presenting artworks resulted in a vibrant, lively atmosphere, enhancing the overall experience for visitors and setting new standards for future exhibitions.

3.2.6 Innovative Curatorial Approach by ruangrupa at SONSBEЕК '16

After many instances of participating on the international stage and demonstrating their adeptness in creating art across various mediums, the Indonesian collective ruangrupa has secured another role as a collective art director behind the monumental exhibition SONSBEЕК'16 an outdoor sculpture exhibition series founded in 1949, that takes place in Park Sonsbeek, Museum Arnhem and the city of Arnhem, in the Netherlands. Michael Birchall later referred to Sonsbeek as an

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

example of socially engaged art¹⁶⁷, highlighting how the exhibition addressed social issues, encouraged community participation, and facilitated dialogue. This approach frequently involves collaborations between artists and local communities, aiming to produce work that resonates with and is relevant to the lived experiences of the people involved.¹⁶⁸ The conversion of these locations into exhibition spaces parallels the historical significance of the site, which was once the battleground of the pivotal Battle of Arnhem during the final stages of World War II.¹⁶⁹ The exhibition was initiated in 1949 by Arnhem's leaders to rejuvenate the city, and to bring the joy back to its memorial park. This historical context added a significant value to the exhibition, linking contemporary artistic expression with the memories of a pivotal moment in European history.

In the eleventh edition, ruangrupa was appointed as the curator for the program, which took place from June 4 to September 18, 2016. For Sonsbeek, the appointment of ruangrupa based on their capability in addressing multiple issues in a dynamic way.¹⁷⁰ Sonsbeek aimed to present art that directly engages new audiences with bold and experimental pieces. This vision made ruangrupa the ideal choice as the curator for this edition, as stated by Sonsbeek director Tati Vereecken-Suwarganda: "We wanted an unpredictable exhibition. ruangrupa combines urgent themes such as migration, colonialism and ecology in a light-hearted, humorous approach. The exhibition is spreading like wildfire across the city."¹⁷¹

For ruangrupa, contemporary art is about working together and connecting with individuals and groups. Hence, through ruangrupa research-oriented methodology, they emphasise the evolving nature of art, ensuring that the process of creation holds as much significance as the final presentation. This edition of SONSBEEK '16, ruangrupa brought the theme: "transACTION", places a significant

¹⁶⁷ M.G Birchall, *Socially engaged art in the 1990s and beyond*, *On Curating*, 25, 2015.

¹⁶⁸ Smith, V., J. Brand, and C. de Muynck, "Sonsbeek 93." 1993.

¹⁶⁹ Nina, S, *Dutch City Makes the Most of Its Park, and Its History*, New York Times, 16 June 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/16/arts/international/dutch-city-makes-the-most-of-its-park-and-its-history.html> [last access on 18 July 2024]

¹⁷⁰ Marian, C, *Peeing on a work of art? If it's a statement, fine*, 13 June 2016, <https://decorrespondent.nl/4712/over-een-kunstwerk-heen-plassen-als-het-een-statement-is-prima/e32fcc17-3dc4-04b9-26f6-0f7a2fe68a6c> [last access on 20 July 2024]

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

emphasis on the concept of exchange—not in the economic sense, but rather the exchange that occurs between people and between individuals and their environments.¹⁷² Moreover, transACTION also delves into the dynamic interplay within the city, reflecting on how these interactions shape urban life. To strengthen this project, ruangrupa began their Arnhem-based research in July 2015, establishing ruru huis in the city centre as a hub for connecting with the local community.

The concept of ruru huis¹⁷³ in SONSBEEK' 16 was the first time for ruangrupa as a home for collecting and sharing ideas as farid rakun added “The ruru huis, as a strategic space and curatorial approach, it has been implemented quite effectively.”¹⁷⁴ This effectiveness was evident in how the ruru huis served as a dynamic hub, facilitating meaningful exchanges between artists and local residents as well as creating a fun environment where ideas could be exchanged, collaborations could flourish, and diverse perspectives could be explored.



ruru huis from outside at SONSBEEK' 16
photo by Masha Bakker Matijevic, Sonsbeek

¹⁷² Reza Afisina statement on *COLLECTIVE CRAFTING in POST-SUHARTO INDONESIA A Journey with Ruangrupa from the Jakarta Institute of the Arts to Documenta Fifteen in Kassel*, Sophie Goltz in conversation with Reza Afisina, Ade Darmawan, and Iswanto Hartono, Duke University Press, Cultural Politics, Volume 18, Issue 3, 2022.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Online interview with farid rakun, on 29 August 2024.

To enhance the visual identity of SONSBEЕК '16: transACTION, ruangrupa has invited renowned artist Jan Rothuizen from Amsterdam to collaborate with the creative agency Thonik. This partnership is set to visually encapsulate the essence of exchange and interaction that lies at the heart of the exhibition. By intertwining the artistic insights of Rothuizen and Thonik, the visual identity will reflect the vibrant, interconnected spirit of transACTION, further enriching the overall experience of SONSBEЕК '16.



Visual Graphic of SONSBEЕК' 16, Drawing by: Jan Rothuizen
Courtesy of SONSBEЕК

The first installations located in the Park Sonsbeek served as vibrant hubs of activity and engagement throughout the exhibition. These installations are designed to be more than just art pieces; they are new meeting venues and platforms for acts of sharing. There were a total of 22 artists that featured their pieces along the Park Sonsbeek. The list includes, among others: Alphons ter avest (Arnhem, Netherland), Richard Bell (Brisbane, Australia), Maze de Boer (Amsterdam, Netherland), Rossella Biscotti (Molfetta, Italy), Kevin van Braak (Arnhem, Netherland), Louie Cordero (Manila, Philippines), Cinema Caravan (Kanagawa, Japan), Jeroen Glissenaar (Arnhem, Netherland), Shilpa Gupta (Mumbai, India), Jatiwangi Art Factory (Jatisura, Indonesia), Folkert de Jong (Amsterdam, Netherland), KUNSTrePUBLIK (Berlin, Germany), Eko Prawoto (Yogyakarta, Indonesia), Jan Rothuizen (Amsterdam, Netherland), Slavs & Tatars (Berlin, Germany) and Rob Voerman (Arnhem, Netherland). Every site-work invited people to meet, interact, and linger in the park, creating spaces that foster community and connection. Each

installation hosted a variety of activities, from workshops and performances to lectures and interactive sessions, all aimed at stimulating and engaging visitors.



Alphons ter Avest, *Bakehouse*,
Wooden frame with religious patterns, 2016.
Park Sonsbeek. Photo: Maurice Boyer



Alphons ter Avest, *Bakehouse*,
Inside the bakehouse with a firing oven, 2016.
Park Sonsbeek. Courtesy of Sonsbeek

The piece above was one of the installations that was shown at the Park Sonsbeek by Alphons ter avest. He created a wooden frame/cage with ornamental patterns rooted in global religions including Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist culture.¹⁷⁵ This intricate design served as a testament to the unity and diversity of spiritual traditions around the world. Inside the monument there was an oven that could be used by visitors to bake bread and enjoy the food produced from the 'bakehouse'. Specifically at this area, ruangrupa setted to be a space for urban space and public engagement with the artworks as Ade Darmawan a participant from ruangrupa stated "We are trying to use it as a space for people to transact."¹⁷⁶ As a result, people could really utilise the space to hangout around the park while exchanging ideas and interacting with the art.

SONSBEEK '16 includes a compelling exhibition at Museum Arnhem with specific titled transHISTORY. This segment of the exhibition reflects ruangrupa's keen interest in the importance of individual perspectives, micro-histories, and the exploration of alternative viewpoints on the history of colonisation. The area featured activities and installations from artists such as: Eva Kot'átková (Prague, Czech Republic), Agung Kurniawan (Jakarta, Indonesia), Tiffany Chung (Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam), Zbigniew Libera (Warsaw, Poland), Charles Lim (Singapore), Tayeba Lipi (Dhaka, Bangladesh), Otobong Nkanga (Kano, Nigeria), Jean-Gabriel Périot (Les Lilas, France), Marco Paulo Rolla (São Paulo, Brazil), Roy Villevoye & Jan Dietvorst (Maastricht en Bergen op Zoom, the Netherlands), Juul Sadee (Maastricht, Netherland). Each artist contributed works that embodied the theme, using their unique backgrounds and specialties to offer diverse and thought-provoking interpretations.

One of the highlighted shows in the museum of Arnhem was the performance arranged by Agung Kurniawan, an artist and activist from Indonesia. He showed a performance titled *Remember Day Parade and after*. Participants in the performance

¹⁷⁵ Designboom, *alphons ter avestbakehouse uses its frame as fuel for the bread oven inside*, design boom, <https://www.designboom.com/architecture/alphons-ter-avest-bakehouse-sonsbeek-06-23-2016/> [last access on 18 July 2024]

¹⁷⁶ Ade Darmawan statement from the article of Nina, S, *Dutch City Makes the Most of Its Park, and Its History*, New York Times, 16 June 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/16/arts/international/dutch-city-makes-the-most-of-its-park-and-its-history.html> [last access on 18 July 2024]

portrayed characters from colonial history¹⁷⁷, including soldiers from the KNIL (Royal Netherlands East Indies Army), guerrilla fighters, and local populations. Kurniawan's work was deeply rooted in his belief that the Dutch government and its citizens have never fully confronted or acknowledged the atrocities and abuses committed during Indonesia's colonial period. He also recognized a significant gap in awareness among the current generation of Indonesians, many of whom may not fully grasp the extent of the suffering and resistance that defined their nation's history under colonial rule.¹⁷⁸ Through their performance around the museum, ruangrupa introduced a fresh perspective on the concept of a museum. Rather than viewing the museum as a static and rigid institution, they approached it as an active and vibrant space as Afisina stated "We do not see the museum as a kind of temple that we can finally enter, but as an institution to hijack."¹⁷⁹



Agung Kurniawan, *Remember Day Parade and after*
 The performance began at the city hall and progressed to the gardens of Museum Arnhem, 2016.
 Courtesy of Sonsbeek

¹⁷⁷ The Dutch colonisation of Indonesia spanned over three centuries. It began in the late 16th century with the arrival of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), which quickly established dominance over the spice trade and set up its base in Batavia (modern-day Jakarta). The VOC used a combination of military force, alliances, and monopolies to expand its control over the region. The Dutch imposed heavy taxes and exploited Indonesia's resources through systems like the "Cultivation System" (*Cultuurstelsel*), which forced farmers to grow cash crops for export, leading to widespread poverty and resistance. The Dutch colonial period left lasting social, economic, and political impacts on Indonesia, influencing the nation's development long after the end of colonial rule. From M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*, Third edition, Palgrave macmillan, 2008.

¹⁷⁸ Sonsbeek, *Agung Kurniawan, Remember Day Parade and after*,
https://sonsbeek.org/nl_nl/sb-16-agung-kurniawan/ [last access on 20 July 2024]

¹⁷⁹ Marian, C, *Peeing on a work of art? If it's a statement, fine*, 13 June 2016,
<https://decorrespondent.nl/4712/over-een-kunstwerk-heen-plassen-als-het-een-statement-is-prima/e32fcc17-3dc4-04b9-26f6-0f7a2fe68a6c> [last access on 20 July 2024]

Next to the last location, Arnhem's city centre was also a primary venue for SONSBEERK '16: transACTION. The bustling urban environment combined with a variety of site-specific works, seamlessly integrating art into the everyday lives of the city's residents and visitors. The artists featured in this area include: Michael Blum (Montreal, Canada), Sebastian Diaz Morales (Amsterdam, the Netherlands), Iswanto Hartono (Indonesia), Kuratorisk Aktion (Copenhagen, Denmark), Fintan Magee (Sydney, Australia), Naamloozz (Arnhem, the Netherlands), Nnamari (Hungary), Mark Salvatus (Philippines), Sivanski (Arnhem, the Netherlands), Marishka Soekarna (Jakarta, Indonesia). Beside them, there were also live activities such as Film theatre presentation by Arkipel (Indonesia), Installation from a movie scene of WWII by Tranzitdisplay & Code Rood (Czech), Dance performance by Generale Oost with Contact Gonzo/Arnhemse meisjes (Osaka, Japan & Arnhem, the Netherlands, Motel Spatie with Crater Invertido (Mexico City, Mexico) and The city hosts residencies and interventions by Mixrice (Seoul, South Korea) and Cut and Rescue (Jakarta, Indonesia).

In the area of John Frost Bridge, the iconic WWII landmark immortalised. The bridge gained historical value during the Battle of Arnhem in September 1944. British paratroopers, led by Lieutenant Colonel John Frost, heroically defended the bridge for four days against overwhelming German forces, despite the operation ultimately failing. The bridge was later named in Frost's honour and rebuilt after the war.¹⁸⁰ In this historical location, the work by Iswanto Hartono stole the attention as he displayed famous life-size figures¹⁸¹ along the way. This project was rooted in the Hartono childhood memories, which were influenced by various global and local figures and events. The work explores how different characters—heroes, villains, politicians, artists—are perceived. Inspired by Tamiya's model of a German military field kitchen from World War II, this piece actually was a remake of the same title, a diorama installation set in a public park in Düsseldorf. This piece by Hartono invited the public to engage with the imagery of a wartime kitchen, which was both a

¹⁸⁰ A. Gilbert, *John Frost Bridge bridge, Arnhem, Netherlands*, Encyclopedia Britannica, 1 June 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/John-Frost-Bridge> [lastAccessed 29 August 2024]

¹⁸¹ Iswanto Hartono Selected works, SONSBEERK 2016, <https://www.iswantohartono.com/sonsbeek-2016> [lastAccessed 30 August 2024]

nostalgic reflection of the artist's childhood fascination with military models and a provocative commentary on the collective memory of Germany regarding its wartime history, particularly the Holocaust.¹⁸² By blending fiction and reality, Hartono posed a provocative question: How does it feel for the residents of Arnhem to see figures of German soldiers from WWII mingling with pop idols such as Madonna, Gandhi, and Charlie Chaplin, all humanised by participating in a variety of scenes. Through this work, Hartono delves into history to unearth overlooked stories, particularly those related to contemporary issues of international politics, wars, and power dynamics. He reflects on these themes from a deeply personal perspective, ensuring his work remains anything but predictable.



Iswanto Hartono, *Feldküche [Mellow] #2*,
80 printed on wooden figures from the end of WWII until the commemoration of John
Frost bridge, 2016, Courtesy of Iswanto Hartono.

The overall approach of this grand exhibition began with a comprehensive information-gathering phase, focusing on understanding the city of Arnhem and its surroundings in depth. They immersed themselves in the local culture by visiting public areas such as football clubs, community centers, and engaging with taxi

¹⁸² Online interview with Iswanto Hartono on 29 August 2024

drivers, all to collect a diverse array of stories and experiences from the residents. By tapping into these everyday social hubs, ruangrupa aimed to capture the authentic voices and nuanced narratives of the community. Next, on selecting the artists to collaborate with, ruangrupa took into consideration that the artists should have the same vision as they do, artists who do not think their works are autonomous but instead they who think outside the box and are bold in visual deliverance.¹⁸³ This statement was also supported by the director of Sonsbeek Tati Vereecken-Suwarganda: “They’re trying to perhaps find different perspectives on issues that are lacking, or need to be addressed, they can be social or socio-political. There’s definitely a demand for the artists to think about how to envision the future, and it has been our starting point.”¹⁸⁴

With their experience in curating the SONSBECK 16 ruangrupa elevates the concept of what an exhibition can be. By challenging conventional curatorial practices, they have transformed the exhibition space into a dynamic platform for cultural dialogue and interdisciplinary collaboration. Their work in SONSBECK 16 exemplifies a shift from the exhibition as a static display of objects to a living, evolving process that actively involves the community and responds to the sociopolitical context in which it is situated. This methodology not only elevates the conceptual framework of exhibitions but also democratises the space, making it more accessible and relevant to a broader audience.

3.2.7 ruangrupa’s Participation at *Cosmopolis* Centre Pompidou

Cosmopolis is a platform at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, launched in 2017. It focuses on research-based, collaborative, and interdisciplinary contemporary art practices.¹⁸⁵ The project engages with artists who explore the production of relationships and the exchange of knowledge beyond European culture, emphasising cosmopolitical approaches. The aim of Cosmopolis is to transcend traditional

¹⁸³ Marian, C, *Peeing on a work of art? If it's a statement, fine*, 13 June 2016, <https://deccorrespondent.nl/4712/over-een-kunstwerk-heen-plassen-als-het-een-statement-is-prima/e32fcc17-3dc4-04b9-26f6-0f7a2fe68a6c> [last access on 20 July 2024]

¹⁸⁴ Nina, S, *Dutch City Makes the Most of Its Park, and Its History*, New York Times, 16 June 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/16/arts/international/dutch-city-makes-the-most-of-its-park-and-its-history.html> [last access on 18 July 2024]

¹⁸⁵ M. Jecu, *Sociomuseology and Contemporary Art: Convergences. Cosmopolis – a case*, Universidade Lusófona, Research Gate, 2022.

exhibition formats by creating a space where artists, researchers, activists, and the public can engage in collaborative projects. It emphasises a participatory approach, often involving workshops, performances, discussions, and other interactive elements alongside more traditional artworks.

Positioning their role as participants, ruangrupa selected to promote their idea in the first edition of *Cosmopolis* that debuted from October 18 to December 18, 2017. This event, titled *Collective Intelligence*, focused on research-based artistic practices and aimed to explore themes of cosmopolitanism through a diverse range of activities including exhibitions, residencies, workshops, and performances.¹⁸⁶ The program included a variety of activities designed to develop interaction and knowledge exchange. These activities encompassed exhibitions, discussions, conferences, debates, and performances. In this first edition of *Cosmopolis*, the host event invited numbers of collectives around the world including ruangrupa (Indonesia), Arquitectura Expandida (Colombia,) Art Labor (Vietnam), Chimurenga (South Africa), Chto Delat (Russia), Council (France), Foundland Collective (The Netherlands / Egypt), Iconoclastas (Argentina) Invisible Borders (Nigeria), Laagencia (Colombia), Mixrice (South Korea) Polit-Sheer-Form Office (China) PorEstosDías (Colombia), The Tentative Collective (Pakistan).

For *Cosmopolis #1*, ruangrupa implemented their project *Parasite* involved creatively reimagining and repurposing the resources of the Centre Pompidou, one of the world's most renowned cultural institutions, to establish a dynamic resource centre within the exhibition space. The participation of ruangrupa notwithstanding due to the lack of Indonesian artworks¹⁸⁷ at Pompidou, finding only secondary references in the Centre's archives. To map the presence and culture of Indonesians in Paris, ruangrupa conducted public interviews with notable Indonesian figures within their installation at the Centre Pompidou during the exhibition. This installation functioned as a dynamic "site" where the collective worked to uncover and share the stories of their community members. Constructed from recycled materials sourced directly from the host institution, this evolving library exemplified

¹⁸⁶ E-flux, *Cosmopolis #1: Collective Intelligence*, 17 October 2017, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/145713/cosmopolis-1-collective-intelligence/> [last access on 19 July 2024]

¹⁸⁷ M. Jecu, *Sociomuseology and Contemporary Art: Convergences. Cosmopolis – a case*, Universidade Lusófona, Research Gate, 2022.

ruangrupa's adaptive and resourceful approach. This resource centre was built from recycled materials sourced from the host institution, symbolising the adaptive and resourceful nature of ruangrupa practice.¹⁸⁸ The library within this space was not static; it evolved continuously throughout the exhibition, reflecting the dynamic process of knowledge production and dissemination where people



ruangrupa exhibition view with recycle installation
Cosmopolis #1 Centre Pompidou
Courtesy of Centre Pompidou, Photo by Audrey Laurans

The concept behind "Parasite" underscores ruangrupa's belief that knowledge can be produced and shared through informal social interactions. This aligns with their maxim, "Don't make art, make friends,"¹⁸⁹ emphasising the importance of building relationships and community over the creation of traditional art objects. Moreover, ruangrupa created this space to invite people to use their installation at the Pompidou as a collaborative workspace.¹⁹⁰ This installation became a hub for uncovering and

¹⁸⁸ Mediterrane Fotografia, *Cosmopolis #1 Collective Intelligence*, <https://www.mediterranefotografia.eu/web/cosmopolis-1-collective-intelligence/> [last access on 19 July 2024]

¹⁸⁹ C. Guida, D. Maggiolo, P. Piotronave, *Taking care of ecosystems through the lumbung process and intangible infrastructures. A conversation with Reza Afisina, Iswanto Hartono and Bellina Erby*(from ruangrupa and Gudskul Ecosystem, Jakarta - Indonesia), <https://www.roots-routes.org/taking-care-of-ecosystems-through-the-lumbung-process-and-intangible-infrastructures-a-conversation-with-reza-afisina-iswanto-hartono-and-bellina-erby-from-ruangrupa-and-gudskul-ecosystem-jakarta/> [last access on 28 August 2024]

¹⁹⁰ Marta, J, *Intervention // Collective Intelligence: 'Cosmopolis #1' at Centre Pompidou*, 15 November 2017,

sharing stories with visitors and also became a living, dynamic environment where the boundaries between artists, audience, and participants blurred, creating a shared space for creativity, reflection, and cultural exchange.

3.2.8 Participation at Sharjah Biennial 14

The Sharjah Biennial is a major contemporary art event held in Sharjah, one of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Established in 1993 by the Sharjah Department of Culture and Information, the biennial has since grown into one of the most significant art exhibitions in the Middle East region. The biennial consistently aligns with trends set by previous biennials, evolving from a local, grassroots art fair that showcased regional artists working in various media and styles, without a standardised display format, to a more formalised exhibition. This transformation includes curation by internationally recognized, nonresident experts and the presentation of global artists in a traditional white cube gallery setting.¹⁹¹

The 14th edition of the Sharjah Biennial (SB14) in 2019, Presented under the theme of "Echo Chamber," emphasises how news media and their associated feeds are continuously circulated within a closed network, heavily controlled and influenced by private entities, governments, and corporations.¹⁹² It is also a metaphor for the historical dominance of capital and the cultural, social and political systems that dictate its access, production and distribution—this ‘capital’ wooing (and thus privileging) particular images, languages, skills, histories and geographies. Through this theme, the biennial sought to address the ways in which information is consumed and disseminated in the digital age, highlighting the implications for society, culture, and politics.

In this edition, ruangrupa engaged differently than before, emphasising the importance of collaborative spirit through their collective, Gudskul. This measure in assigning Gudskul to this event was a strategic move by ruangrupa to introduce and

<https://www.berlinartlink.com/2017/11/15/intervention-collective-intelligence-cosmopolis-1-at-centre-pompidou/> [last access on 19 July 2024]

¹⁹¹ E. Derderian, *Challenging terms: Contemporary Art and the Disciplining of Novelty in the UAE*, *Museum Anthropology*, Vol. 43, Issue 2, pp. 79-93, here p. 82.

¹⁹² S. Deturk, *Sharjah Biennial 14: Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, March 7–June 10, 2019*, *After image*, Volume 46, Issue 3, 2019.

highlight¹⁹³ the newly established initiative that began in 2018. Gudskul, a collaborative effort spearheaded by ruangrupa in partnership with Serrum and Garis Huru Hara, represents a significant expansion of their commitment to collective and community-based art practices. Moreover, this initiative aimed to infuse the Biennial with the distinctive collaborative approach that ruangrupa is known for, emphasising collective creativity, shared resources, and communal learning. This edition of Sharjah Biennale took place between 7 March and 10 June 2019.

Incorporating Gudskul into this exhibition was a strategic move that not only showcased another collective within the body of ruangrupa but also highlighted their focus on education. This integration provided a platform to introduce Gudskul's innovative educational practices and collaborative methodologies to a broader audience. Instead of creating installations or showcasing tangible creations to the public, Gudskul presented knowledge-sharing and mapping exercises titled "Speculative Collective."¹⁹⁴ This innovative approach focused on fostering dialogue, exchange, and collaborative learning among participants. "Speculative Collective" aimed to break down traditional barriers between artist and audience, creating an interactive space where ideas could be freely shared and developed. During an interview at the biennial, farid rakun¹⁹⁵ referred to this process as a 'knowledge market',¹⁹⁶ where everyone has the opportunity to teach and learn from each other based on their areas of expertise. In this section, participants would be grouped into teams of four. During a session lasting approximately one hour, these small groups will collaboratively develop their ideas about a collective projection that emerges from the learning process.

¹⁹³ Online Interview with farid rakun on 19 July 2024.

¹⁹⁴ Sharjah Art, *Knowledge Market: Speculative Collective* (2019), <https://sharjahart.org/sharjah-art-foundation/projects/knowledge-market-speculative-collective-2019> [last access on 21 July 2024]

¹⁹⁵ Video Interview with farid rakun from ruangrupa about Gudskul's project for SB14, <https://universes.art/en/sharjah-biennial/2019/arts-square/collections-building/gudskul-2> [last access on 21 July 2024]

¹⁹⁶ Knowledge market firstly coined by Serrum, one of the initiators of Gudskul. This activity aims to bring together people to share knowledge, build consensus on a subject that will be discussed, with no firm distinction between the giver and receiver of knowledge. This activity will try to build a learning interaction that is formed based on the desires and needs of the community, especially students.



Gudskul, Speculative Collective Process, 2019
Sharjah Biennial 14, Art Centres in Arts Square, Sharjah
Courtesy of ruangrupa

These intimate interactions encourage individuals to develop their own conversations, sharing insights and experiences they consider valuable or as 'knowledge.' In this dynamic setting, participants fluidly alternate between the roles of teacher and student, engaging in a rapid to-and-fro exchange.¹⁹⁷ By the end of the session, each group will have created a conceptual or tangible representation of their collective learning experience, which will contribute to the overall visual presentation of Gudskul at the Biennial.

By cooperating with Gudskul, ruangrupa showcased activities designed as a series of socially engaged initiatives imbued with collective value and meaning. These activities went beyond traditional art exhibitions, emphasising the importance of community participation, dialogue, and collaborative learning. Through interactive engagements, ruangrupa and Gudskul demonstrated their capacity to address multiple issues and incorporate various mediums of work. This approach included

¹⁹⁷ University of Dundee, *A Nongkrong (hangout) Class: Forming a Speculative Collective*, Video: Haupt & Binder, <https://www.dundee.ac.uk/events/nongkrong-hangout-class-forming-speculative-collective> [last access on 21 July 2024]

not only visual art forms but also tangible, hands-on activities that actively involved participants in the creative process.

The adaptive capability of ruangrupa in addressing various issues enables them to create diverse genres of contemporary art and utilise a wide range of media to convey their intentions. This versatility has allowed ruangrupa to extend their reach beyond Indonesia, engaging with global audiences and art communities. However, for ruangrupa, this opportunity is not merely about expanding their presence as a collective; it also serves to reinforce the very essence of collective work. Farid Rakun of ruangrupa emphasised this point, stating: “Introducing our practices is not the main agenda, but getting to know many other parties is more important. The relationships we maintain through these direct visit experiences are what we consider the most valuable outcomes that we need to preserve.”¹⁹⁸ This reciprocal process of learning and sharing enriches their work and strengthens their network. The relationships forged through these interactions are viewed as invaluable assets, contributing to the growth and sustainability of the collective. Moreover, their involvement in various global art events eventually led to a historic achievement: ruangrupa became the first collective to be chosen as the art director for documenta fifteen. This prestigious role gives ruangrupa a unique opportunity to advance their mission of promoting collective and community-based art practices on an international stage. Being in charge of one of the most important art exhibitions in the world allows them to push the boundaries of how art is created and experienced.

¹⁹⁸ Online interview with Farid Rakun, on 19 July 2024.

Chapter 4 ruangrupa Artistic Evolution at documenta fifteen

4.1 Introduction to documenta

The growing popularity of grand exhibitions has been a major turning point for contemporary art. Events like biennials and international art fairs have changed the way art is shown and experienced, enabling artists to connect with broader audiences and embracing new conversations across different cultures and styles. These events are not just beneficial for the hosts; they also give the participating artists a big opportunity to make a name for themselves in the art world. Moreover, this model of large-scale exhibitions has continued to evolve over time, trying to adapt to market demands and increasingly addressing current issues. As the art critique, Walter Grasskamp stated:

The repetition of the exhibition was meant rather to change perspectives, to present an alternative to the usual art-historical point of view, which after thirty years, as a rule, is only concerned with a few works and meanwhile forgets the artistic context, from which it isolates these works. [...] Artists participate in the emergence of priorities and in their propagation, just as art dealers do; their agents include collectors, exhibition managers, and the curators of estates. These priorities are extracted from the raw material of casual discussions, recommendations, ambitiously staged exhibitions, rumours, expert judgements, catalogues, auctions, juries, and commissions, and then upgraded.¹⁹⁹

Events like the Venice Biennale, Art Basel and documenta have emerged as pivotal events in the art field, each event serving their own approaches in showcasing art to the public as well as pushing the boundaries of what art can be and how it can be experienced.²⁰⁰ Biennials, usually occurring every two years, have become significant events in the art world, with the Venice Biennale being the pioneer of this format. Established in 1895, it has since evolved into a major international cultural event, where countries from around the globe present their artistic achievements through national pavilions. Art Basel, on the other hand, functions as a leading art fair with annual editions in Basel, Miami Beach, and Hong Kong. It is highly

¹⁹⁹ W. Grasskamp, *Thinking about Exhibitions*, Edited by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W.Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, New York-London: Routledge, 2006, p. 50.

²⁰⁰ A. Gardner & C. Green, *Biennials, triennials, and documenta: the exhibitions that created contemporary art*, John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

commercial in nature, bringing together galleries from around the world to display and sell works by established and emerging artists.

More to be discussed, documenta is an exemplar of the current propagation that has its own certain value and meaning then becoming one of the notable art exhibitions in the world. Since its inception in 1955, documenta has emerged as the preeminent stage for contemporary art, transforming the city of Kassel, Germany, into a global centre of artistic innovation that is held every five years. Conceived by artist and curator Arnold Bode in the post-World War II era, documenta was originally envisioned as a way to reconnect Germany with the international avant-garde art scene. At the time, the country was still grappling with the shadow of its Nazi past, and its most recent major exhibition of modern art had been the infamous "Degenerate Art" show, organised by the Nazi Party to discredit and demonise the avant-garde as politically subversive and detrimental to German society. documenta aimed to reverse that narrative and restore Germany's position in contemporary art. In an effort to support Germany's cultural rehabilitation, Arnold Bode organised an exhibition designed to "reveal the roots of contemporary art in all areas," as he described it.²⁰¹ With this ground reason, Arnold Bode planned to set up the art exhibition in a damaged but historically significant building. The building's past would visibly blend with the exhibition's layout and artworks, creating what Bode termed *Inszenierung* (staging or mise-en-scène)²⁰² which could be interpreted as the process of selecting, designing, adapting to, or modifying the performance space and its components. Bode's vision was to create an autonomous space for artists²⁰³ and to highlight the importance of innovation in rebuilding a fractured society. Following this matter there was an urgent necessity especially after the destruction of the Museum Fridericianum, the oldest public museum on the European continent, which was completely burned out during the bombings of 1943/44. In the face of Kassel's devastation, Bode saw art as a means of cultural and urban renewal.

²⁰¹ W. Grasskamp, *Thinking about Exhibitions*, Edited by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W.Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, New York-London: Routledge, 2006.

²⁰² M. Villere, *CONSTRUCTING "documenta"*, Int | AR Journal, Department of Interior Architecture, Rhode Island School of Design, https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=interiorarchitecture_intarjournal [last access on 26 July 2024]

²⁰³ F. Eckardt, *Planning for creativity? the concept of creative city and the case of the documenta in Kassel, Reclaiming Public Space through Intercultural Dialogue 17*, Lit Verlag GmbH&Co. KG Wien: Zürich, 2019.

He wanted to develop a genealogy of contemporary art, generated from a mood that might be described as a blend of postwar trauma and the eager to modernise.²⁰⁴ Bode believed that art had the power not only to mirror the collective traumas of the past but also to inspire a progressive and hopeful future. With documenta, he aimed to spark a vibrant cultural dialogue that would breathe new life into Kassel and reconnect the city with the broader currents of contemporary art. His efforts were fueled by the conviction that through art, Kassel could heal and grow, becoming a vital part of the global artistic community once again.

In realising his vision, he transformed the interior of the Fridericianum into a modernist gallery while preserving the building's historic façade. By stripping down the inside of the Fridericianum, he created a flexible space within its traditional structure, offering large open areas, an altered sense of mass, and a strong historical resonance.²⁰⁵ Located in the heart of the city, the Fridericianum had embodied Enlightenment ideals in both its architecture and purpose for nearly two centuries before Documenta. Hosting the exhibition in the Fridericianum can be defined as Kassel's hopes for a return to tolerant politics and a humanist society, a vision amplified by the building's grandeur. Amid a cityscape flattened by war, the Fridericianum stood as a beacon of hope for civilization, making it a significant and poignant venue for showcasing art once again. However, most of all this grand exhibition was not just about rebuilding structures; it was about sparking a cultural rebirth to heal and revitalise a society scarred by war. By organising documenta, he wanted to breathe life back into the city's cultural scene, creating a space where contemporary artists could freely showcase their work and where the public could immerse themselves in the latest artistic innovations.

Seeing Bode's concrete and clear vision, the objectives of documenta were evident from its very first edition. As for Kathryn Floyd, the unveiling of this groundbreaking event as a unification of many issues “The first documenta in fact comprised a wide constellation of synthesising approaches and arguments about unity and connectivity across traditional borders of art, politics, and culture that fit

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ M. Villere, *CONSTRUCTING “documenta”*, Int | AR Journal, Department of Interior Architecture, Rhode Island School of Design, https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=interiorarchitecture_intarjournal [last access on 26 July 2024]

the country's new democratic and capitalist interests."²⁰⁶ The first Documenta served as a comprehensive retrospective titled "Art of the Twentieth Century" showcasing works from major art movements that purely involved European arts that also featured masterpieces by brilliant artists such as Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst, Hans Arp, Henri Matisse, Wassily Kandinsky, and Henry Moore also included the works of German pioneers of modern art such as Paul Klee, Oskar Schlemmer, and Max Beckmann. In this challenging context, the first documenta reflected a post-war Europe that was still grappling with its historical identity and the new realities affected by the Iron Curtain.²⁰⁷ Mainly focused on European art, the first documenta could be seen as emblematic of a continent in the midst of reorganisation and self-reflection, as it worked to reconcile its past with the geopolitical divisions of the present as well as to understand its history while navigating new political realities. Anthony Gardner views documenta as a unique and transformative event within the broader art world, distinguishing it from other large-scale exhibitions as he says that "the exhibition thus recuperated the apparently hostile and anti-museum trajectory of 1960s art and relocated it inside a particular curatorial form, the high-profile international exhibition that might even temporarily occupy normally staid art museums."²⁰⁸ Gardner suggests that this curatorial move allowed documenta to transcend its role as merely an art show, creating a space where radical artistic practices could temporarily inhabit and even subvert conventional, often staid, art museum environments. This makes documenta not just another art exhibition but a powerful tool for rethinking the role of institutions and the potential of art to critique, transform, and inspire.

With this strong historical background, documenta brought another sense of exhibition that merged international art historical lineage that connected postwar modernism with its prewar origins. This approach brought a deeper sense of continuity and context to the exhibition, showcasing how contemporary artists were

²⁰⁶ K. Floyd, *d is for documenta: institutional identity for a periodic exhibition*, On curating issue 33, 2017, <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-33-reader/d-is-for-documenta-institutional-identity-for-a-periodic-exhibition.html>, [last access on 26 July 2024]

²⁰⁷ W. Grasskamp, *Becoming Global: From Euro-centrism to North Atlantic Feedback—documenta as an "International Exhibition" (1955–1972)*, On curating issue 33, 2017, p.98.

²⁰⁸ A. Gardner & C. Green, *Biennials, triennials, and documenta: the exhibitions that created contemporary art*, John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

influenced by and built upon the innovations of earlier movements. Moreover, this inaugural exhibition successfully established a new identity for the city of Kassel, expanding it into a renowned centre for contemporary art. This issue of bringing Kassel as one of the main destinations beside Berlin and Munich also had been the concern of Bode to motivate visitors to consider Kassel a true destination, not just a stopover.²⁰⁹

As documenta expanded in both size and influence, Kassel gradually became synonymous with the exhibition itself, earning the nickname documenta city. Kassel also evolved into a symbol of economic and cultural connectivity, connecting European culture as a unified whole. The city became a hub for expanding criticism, exhibiting and discussion of contemporary art.²¹⁰ Documenta's role went beyond showcasing art; it transformed into a forum for rethinking serious and complex issues from various regions, engaging in micro-politics, and creating meaningful dialogue. The exhibition's commitment to presenting visually impactful works while addressing pressing global and local concerns became a cornerstone of its identity.

4.1.2 The Evolution of documenta

Since it first began in 1955, documenta has grown into a globally recognized and respected art event. Over the years, this grand exhibition has continually embraced new ideas and approaches, ensuring its prominent place in the global art scene while staying true to its roots as a healing force during the past war. As times change and new issues emerge, documenta strives to stay relevant by addressing contemporary societal concerns. The exhibition consistently brings these issues to the forefront, providing a platform for the public to engage with and critique them.

The second edition of documenta in 1959 was a ground shifting from its previous edition²¹¹ under the supervision of Arnold Bode as the art director along

²⁰⁹ K. Floyd, d is for documenta: institutional identity for a periodic exhibition, On curating issue 33, 2017, <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-33-reader/d-is-for-documenta-institutional-identity-for-a-periodic-exhibition.html>, [last access on 26 July 2024]

²¹⁰ W. Lin, *A Comparative Study of Kassel Documenta and the National Art Exhibition in an Interwoven Context*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, v. 673, Atlantis Press, 2022, p. 438.

²¹¹ W. Grasskamp, *Becoming Global: From Euro-centrism to North Atlantic Feedback—documenta as an “International Exhibition” (1955–1972)*, On curating issue 33, 2017, p. 103.

with his colleague, art historian Werner Haftmann. While the first documenta promoted the idea of art's universality, the second edition emphasised abstraction as a the highlight of the show with the more narrow theme “art after 1945” and with the slogan “Art has become abstract”.²¹² The controversy surrounding the exhibition also stems from its implicit reinforcement of Western cultural hegemony. In presenting abstraction as the universal language of modern art, the exhibition perpetuated the idea that Western art movements were inherently superior or more advanced, sidelining alternative forms of expression that challenged this narrative. This edition emphasised the impact of contemporary art produced after World War II, reflecting a broader understanding of artistic movements that extended beyond Europe. Notably, American artists were heavily involved, thanks in part to collaborations with the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and the assistance of the chairman of MoMA Porter McCray made this opportunity go well. Reportedly there were forty American artists including Robert Rauschenberg and Jackson Pollock. Furthermore, with this broader participation, the number of visitors reportedly surpassed that of the previous edition, highlighting the growing influence and appeal of the exhibition.

Not much changed for the third and fourth editions of documenta, as the themes remained quite similar to those of the previous edition, with most of the participating artists still coming from Europe and America. However, these editions were not without controversy. Werner Haftmann, a key figure in the exhibition's early years, resigned from his position in 1968 and several other committee members also left²¹³ due to disagreements over the direction of documenta, particularly about whether it should focus more on contemporary artists moving forward. In addition, this fourth edition raised criticism for the noticeable lack of women artists, highlighting ongoing gender imbalances in art participation (women have always been underrepresented! It is not that now there were less women than before, but perhaps it was finally noticed and became an issue.²¹⁴ These issues stirred debates about the future of documenta and raised questions about how inclusive and forward-thinking the exhibition should be as it continued to grow.

²¹² Documenta, catalogue, M. DuMont Schauberg, Cologne, 1959.

²¹³ Universes art, *documenta - History All editions of the documenta in Kassel since its beginning in 1955*, <https://universes.art/en/documenta/history> [last access on 27 July 2024]

²¹⁴ W.Grasskamp, *Becoming Global: From Eurocentrism to North-Atlantic Feedback—documenta as an “International Exhibition” (1955 – 1972)*, On Curating Issue 33, 2017.

After the turmoil in documenta 4 there was a significant turn over on the next edition. This era of documenta changed drastically onwards by appointing a new artistic director and sole curator for documenta 5 in 1972, Harald Szeemann. He chose the title “Questioning Reality – Pictorial Worlds Today” and gave the exhibition a clear and unprecedented thematic focus with a more dynamic, action-based, and performance-oriented program. His concept distinguished between: The reality of the visual representation, The reality of the subject, and The identity or nonidentity of visual representation and subject.²¹⁵ Unlike the earlier editions, where the focus was on celebrating the artists only, this edition Szeemann shifted the spotlight to the curators and mediators who organised and presented the art. Szeemann’s concept of *Individuelle Mythologien* (Individual Mythologies), which became the slogan for documenta 5, embraced the complex and personal narratives within modern art which included Conceptual Art, Happenings, Installations, Land Art, Performance Art, and Photorealism, not to mention photography itself, or film, which up to then had never been counted as art before in Kassel.²¹⁶ This groundbreaking shift not regardlessly influenced by his earlier exhibition, *When Attitudes Become Form*²¹⁷ that had already shown in Kunsthalle Bern that curators could achieve significant recognition by showcasing presenting artists at a pivotal moment in an ideal setting. Furthermore, with this huge amendment, Szeeman successfully changed the trajectory of contemporary art exhibitions, influencing how

²¹⁵ A. Gardner & C. Green, *Biennials, triennials, and documenta: the exhibitions that created contemporary art*, John Wiley & Sons, 2016, p. 20.

²¹⁶ W. Grasskamp, *Becoming Global: From Euro-centrism to North Atlantic Feedback—documenta as an “International Exhibition” (1955–1972)*, On curating issue 33, 2017, p. 106.

²¹⁷ The exhibition *Live in Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form* was held in 1969 at Kunsthalle Bern. The show was a controversial international survey of Post-minimalism and Arte Povera, at a time when these movements were still in the early stages of development and had yet to gain widespread exposure and recognition. Featuring 69 artists from America and Western Europe, the show became one of the most documented and commented upon exhibitions in recent art history. At the time of the exhibition, the role of the curator and the artist within institutions, as well as the very approach towards exhibitions, was being questioned and found itself at a turning point. *When Attitudes Become Form* reflects these particular questions and new approaches. What was perhaps the most innovative aspect was the relationship between the curator, the artists, and the exhibition itself. The artists participating in the show began making their works on site, basically taking over the institution of the Kunsthalle and using its spaces as their artist studios; many of the artworks on display were made in the weeks leading up to the show.

From Artland Magazine, *The Shows That Made Contemporary Art History: Live in Your Head. When Attitudes*

Become Form, <https://magazine.artland.com/shows-that-made-contemporary-art-history-live-in-your-head-when-attitudes-become-form/> [last access on 29 July 2024]

art would be curated and experienced in the future exhibition. Documenta 5 is remembered not just for the art it presented, but for how it reshaped the art world, making curators central to the conversation and highlighting their power to define and direct the discourse around art. The impact of documenta 5 profoundly influenced the evolution of the next editions, creating a new standard for art exhibition and also shifted the focus from simply showcasing art to engaging with broader, more complex themes that resonated with diverse audiences.

The next documenta 6 in 1977 was curated by Manfred Schneckenburger who explored the relationship between art and new media, including photography, film, and television. In essence, *documenta 6* represented a turning point in how contemporary art interacted with and responded to the technological advancements of its time. By embracing new media, Schneckenburger broadened the scope of the exhibition, positioning it at the intersection of art, technology, and society.²¹⁸ It was the first documenta to prominently feature video art and other media technologies, reflecting the growing influence of mass media on society and art.

Moving to the 7th edition in 1982, the Dutch artistic director Rudi Fuchs chose not to assign a title or a theoretical framework to documenta 7. Instead, he aimed to present the exhibition as a conversation between recent works, highlighting their aesthetic independence. The highlighted topic in this edition was the presence of the *Transavanguardia*²¹⁹ movement or Italian version of Neo-expressionism known for its opulent and vibrant paintings in the late 1970s, alongside the bold and expressive works of the German *Neue Wilden*²²⁰ artists. With strong emphasis on painting and sculpture, bringing a more traditional focus back to documenta. The exhibition was characterised by a dialogue between modern and postmodern art, showcasing artists who engaged with history, memory, and the cultural role of art.

²¹⁸ Retrospective, *Documenta 6: 24 June - 2 October 1977*,

https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_6 [last access on 27 July 2024]

²¹⁹ Italy's Transavanguardia was a fundamentally important art movement that responded to an emerging excitement, a "hysteria for the new", that sought to return to traditional elements of the painterly practice. Transavanguardia, or trans-avant-garde, which introduced these artists as harbingers of what would be destined to become an internationally recognised phenomenon, becoming one of the most important post-war art movements since the Arte Povera.

²²⁰ Neue Wilden is the term German artist used for neo-expressionism. In the 1970s and 80s, expressive painting emerged once more in the country, and artists embraced the intense colours and broad brushstrokes used. The movement grew in opposition to minimal and conceptual art.

Presented again at documenta 8 in 1987, Manfred Schneckenburger became the artistic director on short notice, making him the first and only person, except for Arnold Bode, to hold this role twice in the documenta history. In this edition, he turned back the theme of political emphasis to be the core issues while putting aside aesthetic autonomy, Schneckenburger wanted to again examine "the historical and social dimension of art"²²¹ and this measure can be traced by the lack of painting compared to the previous edition and instead placed greater importance on sounds, video installations, and numerous performances. These mediums became central to the exhibition, allowing artists to engage more directly with contemporary issues and the social context of their work as Schneckenburger expressed in the catalogue that there was an abandonment of "belief in thematic encyclopaedias" in which one theory "solves all of the puzzles of the world at once."²²² This approach is defined as a conceptual orientation that requires conceptual focus that demands exploration of themes like violence and war.

Confirmed as the most popular documenta of all the previous exhibitions, documenta 9 in 1992 was directed by the Belgian curator Jan Hoet adapted the sense of "almost everything is available"²²³ reflecting the diverse and expansive nature of contemporary art at the time. This edition was characterised by its diverse styles, media, and cultural perspectives, presenting a wide array of works that spanned different genres and disciplines. Moreover this edition was noted for its inclusion of more non-Western artists, reflecting a shift toward a more global perspective. Hoet emphasised the idea of this edition: "The ninth documenta is a documenta of places; its topography is the framework that supports it all. But it is also a documenta of artists; for they alone create the spaces within the framework."²²⁴ With this grand evolution made in documenta 9 as a remarkable event as well as open new wider chances for another groundbreaking idea for the next edition of documenta.

Another huge shift happened in the 10th edition of documenta that was held from 21 June – 28 September 1997. The French curator Catherine David became the

²²¹ Universes art, *documenta - History All editions of the documenta in Kassel since its beginning in 1955*, <https://universes.art/en/documenta/history> [last access on 27 July 2024]

²²² Documenta 8, Catalog, Weber & Weidemeyer GmbH & Co KG, Kassel, 1987.

²²³ J. Hoet, "An Introduction," *Documenta IX*, Exhibition catalogue, vol. 1, Edition Cantz, Stuttgart, 1992.

²²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 17

first female director appointed to handle this grand exhibition, focused on the relationship between art and its social context. Catherine David emphasised the intellectual and critical potential of art, exploring themes of globalisation, identity, and the political role of the artist which she referred to as a *manifestation culturelle*.²²⁵ The goal of this idea was to critically examine the political, social, economic, and cultural issues of the globalised world. Through this idea, she embraced interdisciplinarity beyond cultural practices and traditional art forms, and the exhibition actively sought to engage with the city of Kassel itself in emphasising migration processes and urban transformation. Throughout the exhibition, David created many juxtapositions—placing different works side by side to highlight connections.²²⁶ This kind of arrangement was intended to show how previous projects influenced the latest pieces and how contemporary works related to each other conceptually and structurally. Moreover, David placed documenta x and Kassel as a unity that continuously moves throughout time.

The start of the new millennium marked a groundbreaking moment in the history of documenta. For the first time, a non-European curator, Okwui Enwezor, a Nigerian-born curator, was appointed to lead the prestigious event. In realising his ideal vision of documenta Enwezor was supported by an international team of curators: Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, Octavio Zaya. Prior to the exhibition in Kassel, there were transdisciplinary programs which took place on four continents, fundamentally expanding the dynamic of documenta²²⁷: “Democracy Unrealized” in Vienna (15 March - 20 April 2001) and the same theme in Berlin (9-30 October 2001), “Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation” in New Delhi (7-21 May 2001), “Créolité and Creolization” in St. Lucia (13-15 January 2002), “Under Siege: Four African Cities” in Lagos, Nigeria (16-20 March 2002). By expanding the existence of documenta to a truly global platform for dialogue underscored Enwezor's commitment to addressing urgent contemporary issues and

²²⁵ Documenta IX, Catalog, Edition Kantz, Stuttgart, 1992.

²²⁶ M. Amor, *Documenta X Reclaiming the political project of the avant-garde*, Third Text, 11:40, 95-100, DOI: 10.1080/09528829708576689, New York-London: Routledge, 2008.

²²⁷ Universes art, Documenta 11 2002, <https://universes.art/en/documenta/2002> [last access on 29 July 2024]

expanding the geographical and intellectual horizons beyond its usual practices as he stated:

Traversing continents and cities, locations and disciplines, practices and institutions, formats and publics, Documenta I's proposition to open up new spaces for critical reflection on contemporary artistic and cultural situations, creates for us—in dialectical interaction with heterogeneous, transnational audiences—a public sphere through which to think and analyse seriously the complex network of global knowledge circuits on which interpretations of all cultural processes and research today depend.²²⁸

From this point of view it can be traced that documenta 11 challenged Western exhibition hierarchies and indicated views on foreigners' side. It emphasised reciprocal gaze and dialogue, bridging cultural divides by showcasing works by artists from 45 countries, with 70% of the pieces explicitly created for the show. Furthermore, documenta 11 set a new standard for inclusivity and representation in major international art exhibitions and again opened new chances for any groundbreaking ideas for the next edition of documenta.

Moving on to documenta 12 in 2007, the exhibition underwent significant evolution with the appointment of double director. Roger M. Buergel as the artistic director, while Ruth Noack as the curator. This pairing role marked a transformation from the traditional single-leader model, embracing documenta as a collaborative dynamic event that brought fresh perspectives to the exhibition. Together, they crafted a programmatic concept of a theme: "The Migration of Forms." This idea suggested that throughout human history, visual culture has adapted with a limited set of fundamental forms that have been continually adapted and reinterpreted across various contexts of history of art.²²⁹ Again in this edition featured a high percentage of artists from Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe and marked as the largest share of women artists in documenta history.

Continuing the trend of strong female leadership, documenta 13 that was held in 2012 saw the appointment of Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev as its director. Also supported by her co-partner Chus Martínez, together they created a central theme "Collapse and Recovery,"²³⁰ focusing on how art can help heal the traumas of war.

²²⁸ O. Enwezor, "The Black Box," in Okwui Enwezor et al., eds., *Documenta11_Platform 5*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, Exhibition catalogue, 2002.

²²⁹ Documenta 12, Catalog, Taschen, Cologne, 2007.

²³⁰ Documenta (13), The Book of Books, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2012

This theme connected to Kassel, a city heavily damaged in World War II, and Afghanistan, where a documenta exhibition took place in the ruins of Kabul's royal palace. In response to this theme, they extended the exhibition program not just in Kassel in order to presenting their oscillating relationships²³¹ with specific focus on each place: onstage in Kassel representing the act of performing a role or re-enacting, with the theme “Under siege in Kabul” representing feeling surrounded or besieged by others, Hope and revolt in Cairo and Alexandria representing dreaming and anticipating the future, and Retreat in Banff. With this spirited program, documenta 13 sought to deepen the exploration of how local histories and realities are interconnected with broader global narratives.

Broadening the issues of previous exhibitions, documenta 14 in 2017 was appointed Adam Szymczyk as the artistic director. He was adapting the same concept in expanding the exhibition beyond Kassel which also took place in Athen as reflected in the working title "Learning from Athens"²³² emphasised decentralisation and decolonization of the northwestern canon. Szymczyk emphasised that the reasoning behind this approach was multifaceted.²³³ It stemmed from the pressing social and political dynamics in both Europe and the wider world, which drove artistic expression which also aimed to address the explicit tension between the North and the South through contemporary cultural production. Szymczyk recognized Greece's economic hardship, coupled with its geographical location. Thus, Szymczyk sought to reframe the conversation around the art world's role in addressing broader socio-economic issues.²³⁴

²³¹ Artistic director statement on documenta 13 press release, https://d13.documenta.de/uploads/tx_presssection/3_Introduction.pdf [last access on 30 June 2024]

²³² Documenta 14, Reader, Prestel Verlag, München, 2017.

²³³ Artistic director statement on documenta 14 press release, <https://universes.art/en/documenta/2017/press-2014-10-07> [last access on 30 June 2024]

²³⁴ E. Rikou & E. Yolouri, *Learning from documenta: A Research Project Between Art and Anthropology*, The Documenta Issue, Issue 33 /June 2017.

4.2 ruangrupa Selected as Artistic Director in documenta fifteen

The selection process for documenta fifteen, which was held in 2022, began as early as 2019. During this period the committee engaged in extensive discussions and evaluations to fill the position. The finding committee²³⁵: Ute Meta Bauer, founding director, Centre for Contemporary Art (Singapore); Charles Esche, director of Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven, the Netherlands); Amar Kanwar, artist and documentary filmmaker (New Delhi, India); Frances Morris, director of Tate Modern (London, Great Britain); Gabi Ngcobo, curator, Berlin Biennale 2018 in Germany (South Africa); Elvira Dyangani Ose, director of The Showroom London, (England); Philippe Pirotte, director, Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste – Städelschule Frankfurt/M., Germany (Belgium); Jochen Volz, director, Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, Brazil. The nominees were initially requested to submit their concept notes. Following this, they were required to refine their proposals before undergoing interviews conducted by the eight members of the Finding Committee. This process was highly competitive and conducted behind closed doors, with only the most compelling ideas advancing through each stage.²³⁶ In responding to the invitation to documenta, *ruangrupa* has their own approach to curating *documenta fifteen* by reversing the traditional curatorial process. Instead of simply submitting a proposal to fit within *documenta*'s established framework, they extended a "counter-invitation"²³⁷ to *documenta*, inviting this grand exhibition to integrate into *ruangrupa*'s own ecosystem, which is shaped by their values and practices.

The appointment of *ruangrupa* was announced by the general director of documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH, Dr. Sabine Schormann. As a result, documenta organized by an artist collective for the first time took place from June 18 to September 25, 2022 in Kassel. With this huge step taken by documenta fifteen, the committee elaborated the motive behind this measure:

We have appointed *ruangrupa* because they have demonstrated the ability to appeal to various communities, including groups that go beyond pure art audiences, and to promote local commitment and participation. Their

²³⁵ Documenta fifteen, Documenta commission, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/documenta-commission/> [last access on 17 July 2024]

²³⁶ Online Interview with farid rakun

²³⁷ Ruangrupa and Nikos Papastergiadis in Conversation: *Living Lumbung: The Shared Spaces of Art and Life*, E-flux Journal Issue #118, 2021.

curatorial approach is based on an international network of local community-based art organizations. We are eager to see how ruangrupa will develop a concrete project for and from Kassel. At a time when innovative strength particularly stems from independent organizations active on the community level, it seems only logical to offer this collective approach a platform with documenta.²³⁸

The committee expressed anticipation for how ruangrupa would translate their practice into a concrete project specifically tailored to and emerging from the context of Kassel. This approach was particularly relevant at a time when the most innovative and impactful creative energy was seen to be emerging from independent organisations operating at the community level. Another significant aspect worth highlighting is how documenta 15 provided a platform for Asian perspectives to take centre stage in Europe, as the Hessian Minister of Higher Education, Research and the Arts, Angela Dorn said:

[...] With the selection, documenta is consciously giving room to the non-European view of the art world and bringing the world to Hesse in a completely new way. ruangrupa uses art in its home country to address public issues and problems. I'm looking forward to seeing how they incorporate this idea in documenta fifteen.²³⁹

This move not only broadened the scope of the exhibition but also reinforced the importance of diverse, global narratives in shaping future discourse. In response from ruangrupa, farid rakun and Ade Darmawan saw documenta as platform that able to go beyond artistic practices as they emphasised:

We want to create a globally oriented, cooperative, interdisciplinary art and culture platform that will have an impact beyond the 100 days of documenta fifteen. Our curatorial approach aims at a different community-oriented model of resource usage – economical, but also taking ideas, knowledge, programs and innovations into account. If documenta was launched in 1955 to heal war wounds, why shouldn't we focus documenta fifteen on today's injuries, especially ones rooted in colonialism, capitalism, or patriarchal structures, and contrast them with partnership-based models that enable people to have a different view of the world.²⁴⁰

Drawing a parallel with the origins of documenta in 1955—when it was conceived to heal the wounds of war—ruangrupa proposed that documenta fifteen should focus on

²³⁸ Press Release documenta fifteen, ruangrupa Selected as Artistic Direction for documenta fifteen, Kassel 22 February 2019.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

addressing the injuries of today, offering partnership-based models that empower people to view the world differently.

When discussing collective curatorship, it is important to recognize that *ruangrupa* took part in expanding upon the direction of Okwui Enwezor in documenta 11 in 2002.²⁴¹ Enwezor's approach marked a significant departure from traditional curatorial methods; he also invited a curatorial team to manage the exhibition. In his book, Paul O'Neill highlights how Okwui Enwezor, as the Artistic Director of Documenta 11, introduced a curatorial model that consciously shifted away from the traditional "exhibition-auteur"²⁴² approach. Enwezor was critical of the idea that large exhibitions could become so expansive and inclusive that they diluted the unique voice of individual artworks and artists. However, rather than impose a singular curatorial vision in response to this, he chose to implement a collective model where curators worked as a team. Despite being the Artistic Director, Enwezor made it clear that he was not the sole author of the exhibition; instead, he formed a "think tank" of curators, where each member could bring their strengths and weaknesses into play, contributing equally to the development of the concept, content, and contextual writings that shaped documenta 11. Enwezor believed that by delegating curatorial roles, exhibitions could better reflect diverse perspectives and address complex global issues. In documenta fifteen, *ruangrupa* took this idea even further by extending it not only to curators but to the artists and local communities as well, aligning with their core concept of *Lumbung* that turned the curatorial process into a horizontal network of decision-making where responsibility is shared among many voices.

4.3 **Lumbung as the main Curatorial Concept for documenta fifteen**

The *Lumbung* concept, deeply rooted in the cultural and communal traditions of Indonesia, has long served as a guiding principle in *ruangrupa*'s artistic and organisational practices. This idea, which translates to "communal rice barn" in Indonesian, symbolises a shared resource pool that is collectively managed and

²⁴¹ See documenta 11 retrospective, <https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta11>

²⁴² P. O'Neil, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, The MIT Press: Cambridge, United States, 2012, p. 79.

distributed according to the needs of the community. Far from being an idea conceived solely for documenta fifteen, *Lumbung* has been integral to ruangrupa's ethos and approach since 2016, shaping their collective work both within Indonesia and on an international scale. By embedding the *Lumbung* concept into the projects, ruangrupa strongly emphasised values of collaboration, mutual support, and sustainable resource management and it became the collective sharing that lies at the heart of documenta fifteen.²⁴³ Building on the values of *Lumbung*, ruangrupa has developed a curatorial approach that diverges from traditional, centralised models of curatorship, as Ade Darmawan stated:

ruangrupa is not a curator in the traditional sense with curatorial muscle that is very centred, our approach was many times misread as slow, indecisive, or even vague. One can see it as a curatorial method as well, but for us, it is just us being us, being ruangrupa. It's how we as an organism live and survive.²⁴⁴

For ruangrupa, their curatorial style is not just a professional stance but a reflection of their identity and how they exist. It's not a curated performance but rather an authentic expression of how they live, work, and survive as a collective. Their approach to curating is shaped by their commitment to a shared, communal mode of operating, which prioritises collective input, process over product, and long-term sustainability over immediate outcomes. To deepen the meaning of *Lumbung* within the context of documenta fifteen, ruangrupa has emphasised that *Lumbung* is not merely a theme for the exhibition but rather a foundational concept and guiding principle²⁴⁵ that applies every aspect of the event and extends beyond it as ruangrupa asserted "Ideally, lumbung can be a model that can be owned, adapted, developed, and utilised by many, without rigid control. This way membership is not needed."²⁴⁶

Principles

Lumbung is a proposal for self-initiated interdisciplinary collectives to sustain. It is where art meets social activism, management, and also various local networks. Firstly, to have a space, to understand what is happening in one's surrounding

²⁴³ ruangrupa, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022.

²⁴⁴ Ade Darmawan statement on C. T. Yalçinkaya, *Making Friends' as Labour: The Political Economy of the Lumbung in Documenta Fifteen*, Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art, 2024.

²⁴⁵ Ruangrupa and Nikos Papastergiadis in Conversation: *Living Lumbung: The Shared Spaces of Art and Life*, E-flux Journal Issue #118, 2021.

²⁴⁶ Ruangrupa, documenta fifteen Exhibiting Lumbung Artists, Asphalt Issue, 2022, p. 40.

environment, and respond to it. Secondly, to act to initiate something together within our context and localities.²⁴⁷ The first step in this process is to establish a space—a physical or conceptual environment where individuals and groups can come together to critically observe and understand the realities of their immediate surroundings. After finding a space, they deliberately take collective action within these contexts and localities. *Lumbung* encourages the initiation of projects and initiatives that are deeply rooted in local needs and aspirations. This explains how *Lumbung* is also closely related to sustainability action where strategies should be developed and cultivated together, inspired by the sharing principle. Furthermore as for documenta fifteen, *Lumbung* growing continuously in response to the needs of its participants and even extending beyond documenta. Through this ongoing exchange of resources, collaborative efforts, and the nurturing of friendships over time, a new art economy is emerging, one that is rooted in principles of collectivity and care.

Values

After a concrete principle of *Lumbung* was stipulated, ruangrupa developed the values²⁴⁸ behind it that should be followed during its practices at documenta fifteen:

- HUMOUR: Humour constitutes an essential mechanism for joy and easing tensions in human communication. Humour is also a space for experimentation and improvisation with new ideas.
- GENEROSITY: *Lumbung* can only thrive if the mindset of its members is generous. *Lumbung* lives if everyone works towards sharing and collective wellbeing
- CURIOSITY: Curiosity is a real commitment to get to know the other and listen to what is different – to enjoy working with the unknown.
- SUFFICIENCY: Members of *lumbung* can be small or big, young or old. What is important is that they feel sufficient in their core existence.
- INDEPENDENCE: Agendas are developed apart from outside pressures, including commercial, funding, governmental, peer – although we realise that real independence is fictional.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

- LOCAL ANCHORING: The organisation is built on needs and practices in a specific locality and in constant collaboration with a variety of people and communities in that locality. It can bring in specific experiences and knowledge from this anchoring.
- TRANSPARENCY: Building trust will be the most essential principle of *lumbung*. Trust cannot go without a certain degree of transparency.
- REGENERATION: The organisation is in a constant reflection process in relation to its context. It seeks ways to adapt/re-invent/regenerate itself in response to and in relation to others in its surroundings (ecosystem). This concerns both the human as well as the non-human elements.

After thoroughly grasping the underlying principles and values, the process of establishing²⁴⁹ *Lumbung* can be implemented in the following steps. These steps involve not only the practical application of the concept but also the continuous reflection on and reinforcement of the communal ethos that *Lumbung* embodies

1. The Artistic Team of documenta fifteen in conversation with a group of organizations and collectives – the *lumbung* members – have developed a common pot of resources together. Each of the members contributes to this *lumbung* with their resource surpluses, such as people, time, space, food, money, knowledge, skill, care, and art.
2. The different collectives and organisations started to *nongkrong*²⁵⁰ online and in Kassel in order to build trust.
3. They have built mechanisms for how to use and distribute the resources through meeting in assemblies, or *majelises*²⁵¹, and forming working groups around the economy and wellbeing of the *lumbung*.
4. The *lumbung* members created a surplus through the *majelising* and working groups, and this surplus was shared with others. The mechanisms and shared infrastructure created by the *lumbung* inter-lokal – the network of *lumbung*

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Nongkrong is an Indonesian slang term from Jakarta and means “hanging out together”. Casual conversation and togetherness, but also the sharing of time, ideas or food are anchored in this term.

²⁵¹ Majelis is a term for a gathering or meeting. In person or digitally, regular *majelis* are an important tool of the *lumbung* network to exchange ideas and projects.

members – were shared with their own ecosystems²⁵² as well as the group of lumbung artists that the artistic team has invited.

Throughout these process in implementing *Lumbung*, ruangrupa introduced the term ‘harvest’²⁵³ which refers to the artistic documentation and interpretation of discussions, meetings, and collaborative exchanges. As written in documenta fifteen handbook, ruangrupa considered harvest as:

Harvesting can be seen as a way of collective writing that enables continuous collective learning, from different sensory experiences. Harvests are made to share what is being discussed with absent members and the general public and they are present throughout the handbook and the exhibition to illustrate and expand our thinking and methodologies. They are also published in books, zines, on social media, and on the lumbung’s digital publishing platform lumbung space.²⁵⁴

Harvesters, as they are called, engage deeply with these interactions, listening attentively and reflecting on the content, then expressing their interpretations through their unique artistic lenses. As ruangrupa explained

“When it is time to harvest, the surplus is not exhausted, but collected and stored in the lumbung instead. The excess crops become something to be used by the community in times of scarcity, like a climate-related disaster or famine. By carefully maintaining the resources available within, farmers also give themselves time to rest and allow the soil to recover.”²⁵⁵

This process of harvesting is not confined to a single format or style; instead, it embraces a wide range of creative expressions, allowing for diverse representations of the shared experiences. Harvests can be anything from humorous to poetic, or even straightforward and candid, depending on the harvester's perspective. They might manifest as something as simple as a sticky note or as elaborate as a written narrative, a drawing, a short film, an audio piece, or even a meme. In projecting harvest alongside with lumbung, Harvesting not only documents the collaborative journey but also enriches it, providing new insights and perspectives that contribute to the ongoing dialogue

²⁵² *Ekosistem* is the Indonesian term for ecosystem, developed in reference to, but not synonymous with, the ecological concept of ecosystem. “Ekosistem” or “ecosystem” describes collaborative network structures through which knowledge, resources, ideas, and programs are shared and linked.

²⁵³ ruangrupa, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ Ruangrupa and Nikos Papastergiadis in *Conversation: Living Lumbung: The Shared Spaces of Art and Life*, E-flux Journal Issue #118, 2021.

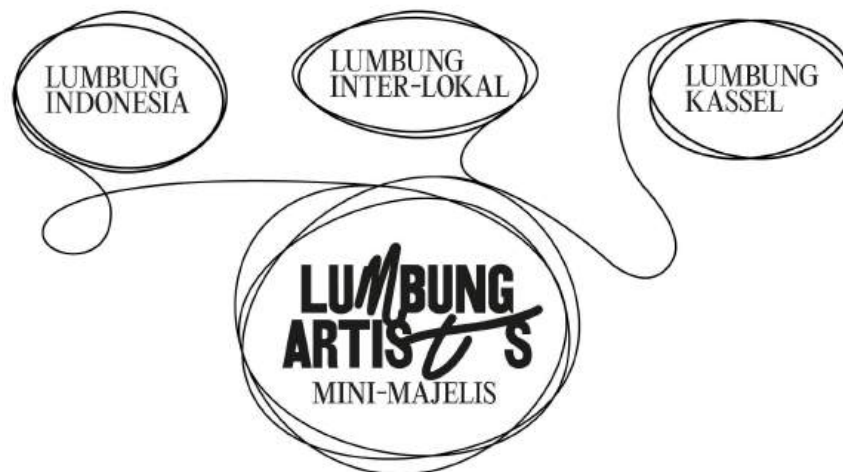
4.4 Lumbung Encounter

As collaboration is the foundational principle of *Lumbung*, ruangrupa recognized that to truly embody this spirit, they needed to extend their efforts beyond their immediate community. As ruangrupa said: “This way, we were sure that documenta fifteen would not be solely ruangrupa but would also belong to others.”²⁵⁶ Understanding that the essence of *Lumbung* lies in the sharing of resources, ideas, and support on a broad scale, they saw the necessity of reaching out and forming partnerships with other collectives, organisations, and individuals who share similar values. This expansion of collaboration was not just about including more voices; it was about building a diverse and interconnected network that could collectively address broader social and cultural challenges.

In the process of the selection for the collaboration, ruangrupa did not use the process of open submission however prior to the event, they have received many unofficial proposals from individuals and groups interested in participating. The team emphasises that documenta fifteen operates differently, focusing on a broader collective approach rather than traditional submission models.²⁵⁷ The focus was on inclusivity and collaboration, with a clear desire to involve the Kassel community, not just through formal invitations but through organic partnerships and shared creative efforts.

²⁵⁶ ruangrupa, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022.

²⁵⁷ In conversation with Mi You, *ruangrupa: a sustainable model for documenta fifteen, and after*, Ocula, Dusseldorf, 25 May 2022, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/ruangrupa-sustainability-and-documenta-fifteen/> [last access 2 September 2024]



Lumbung artist concept
Street Magazine Asphalt, October 2021

Firstly, *ruangrupa* reached out to five individuals located in Kassel, Germany; Amsterdam, the Netherlands; Jerusalem, Palestine; and Møn, Denmark—those are selected people by *ruangrupa* they believed could naturally extend the ethos and practices of *Lumbung*. This led to the formation of the Artistic Team. However, they also recognized that there were other initiatives around the world already embodying the principles of *Lumbung* in their work so that *ruangrupa* invited these like-minded groups to join in collectively reimagining what *documenta fifteen* could become.

To bring the concept of resource-sharing to life through collaborative action, *ruangrupa* introduced the idea of a common pot.²⁵⁸ In this model, each participating group contributes its unique resources—whether artistic, intellectual, material, or even social capital. These contributions are not merely pooled but are used as the foundation for generating new synergies and opportunities, referred to as "surpluses." These surpluses represent the unexpected creative, intellectual, and practical benefits that emerge when diverse groups work together, allowing the whole to become greater than the sum of its parts.

The first fourteen initiatives were reached out to embrace the invitation and committed to participating in the *Lumbung*-building processes, both before and beyond the duration of *documenta fifteen*. These pioneering groups became known

²⁵⁸ *Ruangrupa and Nikos Papastergiadis in Conversation: Living Lumbung: The Shared Spaces of Art and Life*, E-flux Journal Issue #118, 2021.

as the *Lumbung* inter-lokal members. Their involvement was not just about contributing to a single event; it was about becoming part of an ongoing, global network dedicated to reinforcing collaboration, resource-sharing, and community-driven practices. Together, they aimed to create a sustainable model of artistic and social engagement that would continue to thrive long after the conclusion of documenta fifteen, reinforcing the *Lumbung* philosophy on a worldwide scale.

In response to this idea of collaboration in *Lumbung* practices, Hsiang-Pin Wu offers his perspective on the network²⁵⁹ of *Lumbung* participants expanded by ruangrupa for documenta fifteen. He draws on Anne Cauquelin's concept of the "communication regime," first introduced in 1992, which describes contemporary art as a complex, interconnected system. According to Cauquelin, each participant—whether artist, viewer, or institution—acts as a "node" within a vast communication network, continuously exchanging (input and output) information. These nodes, much like the *Lumbung* collectives, are constantly evolving and regenerating, not fixed or static, but dynamic and responsive to their environment. This expanded network becomes a living system of exchange, where ideas, resources, and knowledge flow freely between members. The nodes within this system are not isolated, but connected through shared values and the collective practice of resource-sharing. As a result, *Lumbung* participants are empowered to co-create, regenerate, and innovate within a framework that again fosters inclusivity and collaboration.

Subsequently, the numbers of people involved increased by more than 50 additional artistic practices—both individual and collective—joined the initiative, forming what was now recognized as the *Lumbung* Artists. These new participants expanded the scope and diversity of the project, bringing a wide range of perspectives and creative energies into the fold. In addition to these invitations, it became essential for ruangrupa to deepen their presence and engagement within existing localities, both in Indonesia and across international networks to establish a new, meaningful presence in Kassel. To achieve this, ruangrupa initiated the creation of three distinct yet interconnected groups: *Lumbung* Indonesia, *Lumbung* inter-lokal

²⁵⁹ H. Wu translated by Chi-Fan Li and Hsian-Pin Wu, *Malaise of Commons: on the Quality of the Relationships in documenta fifteen*, 'Curatography', ISSUE 8 Reformatting documenta with lumbung Formula: *documenta fifteen*, <https://curatography.org/8-3-en/> [last access 4 September 2024]

also known as *Lumbung* members, and *Lumbung* Kassel. Through this concept, ruangrupa also aimed to create a “New Arts Economy”²⁶⁰ The goal is to redefine the role of art, emphasising its potential to imagine and realise alternative ways of living and organising societies. Rather than treating art solely as an object of consumption or a display of creativity, this approach envisions art as a tool for declaring justice, humanity, and holistic living. The passage suggests that art can be used to inspire and activate new ways of addressing issues related to space (urban, rural, public), economics, education, and ecology. With the *Lumbung* concept, ruangrupa hopes to create an economy where art contributes directly to social change, cultivating a deeper connection between creative practice and activism.

After all the people involved were settled, ruangrupa hosted a first *majelis akbar* or mega assembly with all the *Lumbung* participants. This meeting was held online and attended by 150 - 200 artists and members. They talked about specific projects²⁶¹ as well as on how to be in solidarity with each other, and how to share space, knowledge, program, and equipment together during *documenta fifteen*. Moreover, *majelis akbar* was designed to reflect the horizontal and participatory ethos of ruangrupa, where power and resources were shared, and decisions were made collectively.

²⁶⁰ Ruangrupa and Nikos Papastergiadis in Conversation: *Living Lumbung: The Shared Spaces of Art and Life*, E-flux Journal Issue #118, 2021.

²⁶¹ ruangrupa, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022.



First Majelis Akbar
 Harvest drawings by Sari Dennise (left) and Andrés Villalobos (right)

Lumbung Members

The *Lumbung* members were a core group of collectives and artists that ruangrupa specifically invited to help realise the *Lumbung* concept for *documenta fifteen*. These members, representing diverse backgrounds and communities from across the globe, were not just participants but co-creators in bringing the vision of *Lumbung* to life. Within this framework, ruangrupa further reinforced their concept of a "collective of collectives" in managing *documenta fifteen*. The 14 members are:

- **Britto Arts Trust (Bangladesh)** - Focuses on contemporary art and cultural exchange in Bangladesh.

- **FAFSWAG (New Zealand/Aotearoa)** - A queer indigenous art collective challenging norms through performance and activism.
- **Fondation Festival Sur Le Niger (Mali)** - Promotes cultural and artistic activities along the Niger River, blending art with social development.
- **Gudskul (Indonesia)** - An educational platform fostering collaborative art practices and knowledge-sharing.
- **INLAND (Spain)** - Merges art, agriculture, and rural development, promoting sustainable practices.
- **Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt (Cuba)** - Combines art and activism, focusing on social justice and civic participation.
- **Jatiwangi Art Factory (Indonesia)** - A community-based collective using art to transform rural life and environments.
- **Más Arte Más Acción (Colombia)** - Engages with art to address environmental and social issues in Colombia and beyond.
- **OFF-Biennale Budapest (Hungary)** - A grassroots initiative challenging institutional power structures in art.
- **Project Art Works (UK)** - Advocates for neurodiverse artists and inclusivity in art practices.
- **The Question of Funding (Palestine)** - Questions traditional art funding models, advocating for community-driven alternatives.
- **Trampoline House (Denmark)** - A community centre combining art, education, and activism to support refugees and asylum seekers.
- **Wajukuu Art Project (Kenya)** - Empowers communities in Nairobi through art and education in informal settlements.
- **ZK/U – Center for Art and Urbanistics (Germany)** - Blends art, urban research, and socio-political activism to explore urbanisation and civic engagement.

Lumbung Artists

The term *Lumbung* artist embodies the core practice of *Lumbung*, the central concept of documenta fifteen.²⁶² This practice, rooted in communal resource-sharing and collective effort, forms the foundation for collaboration between the Artistic Direction, led by *ruangrupa*, and the participating artists. Arranged in the structure of their mini-majelis and with their respective time zones, the exhibiting lumbung artists²⁶³ of documenta fifteen are:

ikkibawiKrrr (Korea Standard Time) / ook_reinaart vanhoe (Central European Time) / Richard Bell (Australian Eastern Standard Time) / Taring Padi (*Waktu Indonesia Barat* - West Indonesian Time) / Wakaliwood (East African Time) / Agus Nur Amal PMTOH (*Waktu Indonesia Barat* - West Indonesian Time) / Arts Collaboratory (diverse time zones) / Black Quantum Futurism (Eastern Standard Time) / Chimurenga (South African Standard Time) / Jumana Emil Abboud (Eastern European Time) / Nino Bulling (Central European Time) / Subversive Film (Central European Time, Eastern European Time) / Cinema Caravan and Takashi Kuribayashi (Japan Standard Time) / Kiri Dalena (Philippine Time) / Nguyen Trinh Thi (Indochina Time) / Safdar Ahmed (Australian Eastern Standard Time) / Sakuliu (Taiwan Standard Time) / Atis Rezistans | Ghetto Biennale (Eastern Standard Time, West African Time) / Marwa Arsanios (Central European Time) / Sourabh Phadke (Western European Time, India Standard Time) / yasmine eid-sabbagh (Baghdad Time, Western Sahara Standard Time) / *foundationClass*collective (Central European Time) / Alice Yard (Atlantic Standard Time) / Erick Beltrán (Central European Time) / LE 18 (West African Time) / MADEYOULOOK (South African Standard Time) / Party Office b2b Fadescha (India Standard Time, Eastern Standard Time) / Serigrafistas queer (Argentinian Time) / Amol K Patil (India Standard Time) / BOLOHO (China Standard Time) / Cao Minghao & Chen Jianjun (China Standard Time) / CHANG En-man (Taiwan Standard Time) / Sa Sa Art Projects (Indochina Time) / Hamja Ahsan (Western European Time) / Jimmie Durham / (Central

²⁶² documenta fifteen press kit, 2022, https://documenta-fifteen.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/documenta_fifteen_press_kit_en.pdf, [last access 5 September 2024]

²⁶³ E-flux, *Exhibiting Lumbung Artists*, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/389191/exhibiting-lumbung-artists/> [last access 5 September 2024]

European Time) / La Intermundial Holobiente (Western European Time, Argentinian Time, Eastern Standard Time) / Pınar Öğrenci (Central European Time) / Saodat Ismailova (Uzbekistan Time) / Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture (Indochina Time) / Dan Perjovschi (Eastern European Time) / Fehras Publishing Practices (Central European Time) / Nhà Sàn Collective (Indochina Time) / The Nest Collective (East African Time) / Another Roadmap Africa Cluster (ARAC) (West African Time, Central African Time, East African Time) / Archives des luttes des femmes en Algérie (West African Time) / Asia Art Archive (Hong Kong Time) / Centre d'art Waza (Central African Time) / El Warcha (West African Time) / Graziela Kunsch (Brasília Time) / Keleketla! Library (South African Standard Time) / Komîna Fîlm a Rojava (Eastern European Time) / Sada [regroup] (Atlantic Standard Time) / Siwa plateforme – L'Economat at Redeyef (West African Time) / The Black Archives (Central European Time). The *time zone* approach, in this sense, was both a logistical solution and a way to maintain the spirit of community and trust-building central to their process. In this context, time zones refer to the practical necessity of organising artists and collectives for digital meetings, especially when participants are spread across different parts of the world. The time zone approach, in this sense, was both a logistical solution and a way to maintain the spirit of community and trust-building central to their process.

Lumbung Kassel

Lumbung Kassel refers to the collaborative effort behind *documenta fifteen*, symbolising the artistic team's work, which was a fusion of ruangrupa and the documenta team. The Artistic Team of *documenta fifteen* was formed through long standing friendships and collaborations with allies close to ruangrupa as the team added “The involvement of these people as our Artistic Team makes it possible for us to engage, imagine, work hard, hang out, and enjoy the journey of *documenta fifteen*.”²⁶⁴

Key figures like Gertrude Flentge, who has worked with ruangrupa since its early days, played a vital role in shaping relationships between various global

²⁶⁴ *documenta fifteen* press kit, 2022, https://documenta-fifteen.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/documenta_fifteen_press_kit_en.pdf, [last access 5 September 2024]

initiatives. Other team members, such as Frederikke Hansen and Lara Khaldi, were long-time collaborators from different parts of the world, contributing their unique perspectives and experiences. The team also included Kassel-based figures like Ayşe Güleç and Andrea Linnenkohl, who provided valuable local insights and connections to past documenta exhibitions and the city's institutions. This unique partnership blended the vision and approach of *ruangrupa*, with its collective and community-oriented ethos.



Artistic Team Assembly in Kassel 2019, Photo: Nicholas Wefers
Courtesy of documenta

4.5 *Lumbung* as a Collaborative Economic Model for documenta fifteen

As the spirit of *Lumbung* prepared for documenta fifteen among all the participants, several key aspects emerged that positioned *Lumbung* as an ideal economic model for this global art event. Rooted in principles of collective resource-sharing, mutual support, and decentralised decision-making, *Lumbung* offers a direct challenge to traditional hierarchies and market-driven approaches that typically define major art exhibitions. Inspired from regions like Southern Africa and Mali, where traditions such as *Ubuntu* and *Maaya*²⁶⁵ have long embodied communal

²⁶⁵ *Ubuntu* and *Maaya*, as economic models for *ruangrupa*, represent a shift towards collective resource-sharing and communal responsibility. Rooted in African philosophies, *Ubuntu* (from Southern Africa) emphasises interconnectedness, where individual well-being is tied to the well-being

values and the practice of sharing.²⁶⁶ These deeply rooted philosophies emphasise interconnectedness, collective responsibility, and the well-being of the community, making them vital contributions to the *Lumbung* model. In these contexts, the idea that one's humanity is inseparable to the humanity of others aligns closely with the ethos of collective resource-sharing and mutual support that *Lumbung* promotes. Their experience in nurturing solidarity and cooperation through indigenous cultural frameworks would enrich the collaborative spirit of *documenta fifteen*. Additionally, achieving the outcome of *Lumbung* required an essential process known as Harvesting, which played an essential role for those involved. As ruangrupa explained:

Regular harvest celebrations should happen with transparencies exercised from the outset. Resources should be shared, discussed, and co-governed both within and outside of a collective of collectivities, with stories made through financial spreadsheets, from planning up to the realisation phase, for anyone to learn from.²⁶⁷

While there is an intention to support diverse and alternative forms of art production, many aspects of how art is made, distributed, exhibited, and owned remain ingrained in older models. This includes the structures surrounding the artworks, the ways they are presented to the public, and the economic systems underpinning their creation and distribution. This includes the structures surrounding the artworks, the ways they are presented to the public, and the economic systems underpinning their creation and distribution.

As *documenta* has decided to support *Lumbung* as its main value proposed then every aspect of the artistic process—from the forms and positions of the works to the infrastructures built around them—must be reconsidered.²⁶⁸ This rethinking extends to ownership, where the goal is to foster more collective and equitable forms of stewardship, moving away from the individualistic and commodified approaches that dominate the global art market. There needs to be a fundamental shift in how both art production and the economic frameworks surrounding it are constructed,

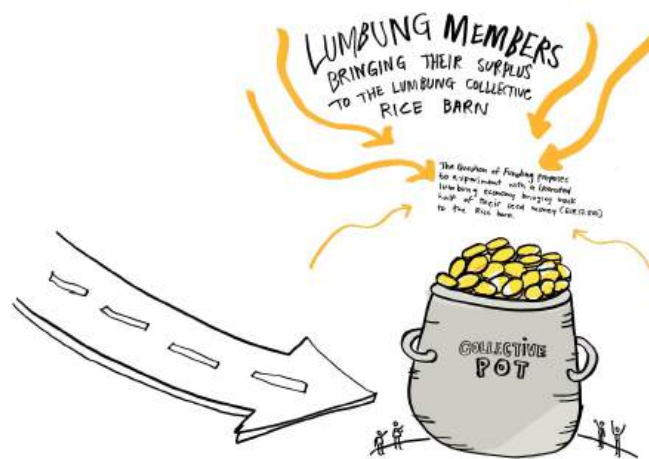
of the entire community, encouraging equitable resource distribution over competition. Similarly, *Maaya* (from Mali) stresses social cohesion and mutual support, advocating for the reinvestment of resources back into the community for the benefit of all.

²⁶⁶ Ruangrupa and Nikos Papastergiadis in *Conversation: Living Lumbung: The Shared Spaces of Art and Life*, E-flux Journal Issue #118, 2021.

²⁶⁷ ruangrupa, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022, p. 40.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

demanding more than superficial changes; it calls for a deep transformation of the systems that govern art and culture.



Lumbung Economy concept, drawn by Abdul Dube, 2021
Courtesy of documenta and ruangrupa

Despite *ruangrupa*'s best efforts to create a decentralised, grassroots approach for documenta fifteen, the exhibition still operates within the framework of a major, conventional art "mega-event." As one of the most prestigious and globally recognized contemporary art exhibitions, documenta comes with longstanding expectations, norms, and structures that are deeply rooted in the traditional art world. However, ruangrupa invites visitors to engage with documenta fifteen in a new way. The event is envisioned as a "public harvest celebration," where the fruits of collective labour and shared resources are presented not just as finished works, but as dynamic, evolving experiences. The hope is that visitors will feel the difference in their own interactions with the exhibition, sensing the shift toward a more inclusive and participatory art experience.

In implementing *Lumbung* economy, ruangrupa divided the focus on different group as such²⁶⁹:

Lumbung Kios: is a network of self-run kiosks that sell goods made by *Lumbung* members and artists, aiming to create a sustainable income model with minimal

²⁶⁹ ruangrupa, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022, p. 24.

environmental impact. It experiments with the *Feral Trade*²⁷⁰ model, where products are distributed along existing travel routes, decentralising distribution and promoting eco-friendly trade.

Lumbung Gallery: is a collectively governed, non-speculative model that redirects resources from traditional art economies towards a commons-based system aligned with *Lumbung* values²⁷¹. It serves as both a gallery and a learning tool for similar global initiatives. During and after *documenta fifteen*, artworks by *Lumbung* members are showcased in Kassel at ruruHaus and online via a platform with TheArtists. Pricing is based on basic needs and production costs, rather than market speculation.

Lumbung land: This section played a crucial role in the *Lumbung* Economy as it offers a space where communities can collectively govern resources and develop economies rooted in *Lumbung* values. The *Lumbung* Land working group explores holistic, regenerative, and community-governed land development models that integrate culture, agriculture, and ecology.

Lumbung Currency: aims to strengthen and connect community currencies. These currencies allow the community to define value based on direct needs and shared values, strengthening an independent exchange system. Community currencies could allow *Lumbung* to create an economic exchange system where the community determines value, and exchanges are based on immediate needs and shared values.²⁷²

This practical economic model serve as tangible mechanisms to generate unrestricted resources for the long-term building of the *Lumbung* system—essentially, redirecting financial flows from the traditional²⁷³ market-driven exhibition economy towards a commons-based, community-focused *Lumbung* economy. By doing so, ruangrupa aimed to challenge the conventional profit-oriented models that dominate major art

²⁷⁰ Feral Trade is a grocery business and public experiment, trading goods over social networks. The word 'feral' describes a process which is wilfully wild (as in pigeon) as opposed to romantically or nature-wild (wolf). The passage of goods can open up wormholes between diverse social settings, routes along which other information, techniques or individuals can potentially travel. From <https://feraltrade.org/statement/> [last access 5 September 2024]

²⁷¹ E-flux, *lumbung economy at documenta fifteen*, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/467572/lumbung-economy-at-documenta-fifteen/> [last access 5 September 2024]

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Ibid.

events, transforming them into more sustainable, cooperative, and socially driven alternatives. This shift was not just about re-allocating money but also reimagining the economic structures that support artistic production and collaboration, aligning them with values of sharing, mutual aid, and collective ownership.

4.6 Practical Approaches to *Lumbung*

Methods

In the realisation of every concept proposed by the artists, *ruangrupa* emphasised to highlight their authenticity through their locality. Instead of creating a showcase of collective practices—a format they saw as limiting or even superficial—they aimed for something more substantive. The goal was not to simply present works that are collective in nature but to collaborate with artists and collectives who are deeply engaged in their local communities, both socially and politically. These are individuals and groups who actively practise values that impact their surroundings, rather than just preaching about them. The key to their approach was focusing on how these artists and collectives work in their respective localities, paying attention to the larger role they play in forming or participating in social and political movements. They also added critical emphasised that “Art is rooted in life. The ensuing objects and methods help in thinking through the issues at hand and in finding solutions that are useful to the community.”²⁷⁴ Rather than concentrating on the physical artworks or artistic outputs that could be displayed in Kassel, *ruangrupa* emphasised the importance of understanding the social, cultural, and material infrastructures that support these practices. In practical terms, they embodied the idea of “Make Friends not Art,”²⁷⁵ suggesting that enhancing human connections, cooperation, and community-building were the true outcomes of artistic engagement rather than the creation of traditional works of art. In addition to this, Ade darmawan also stated that *Lumbung* is closely related to socially-engaged practice as he explained that *lumbung* “is rooted in a tradition of how collectives are part of the process of nurturing a certain practice towards criticality, towards artistic practice as well. [...] so it’s been very influential in many ways, but never really focused on a

²⁷⁴ *ruangrupa, documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022, p. 300.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 9.

particular movement.”²⁷⁶ This perspective also resonates with Claire Bishop’s exploration of socially engaged art, which she categorises under various forms, such as community-based art, dialogic art, participatory art, and collaborative art, among others.²⁷⁷ These forms all emphasise interaction, participation, and dialogue, often shifting the focus from the artwork itself to the social processes and relationships that emerge from it. In this way, both *Lumbung* and Bishop’s theories highlight a shift from traditional art-making to more inclusive, process-driven approaches that are deeply connected to social engagement.

In addition, in the *Lumbung* process ruangrupa was more interested in the processes and systems that allow these artists to sustain themselves and their communities rather than merely focusing on the physical outcomes of artistic production. ruangrupa asked participating artists to continue their existing practices and explore how these ongoing projects could be adapted and translated to the context of Kassel.²⁷⁸ This meant bringing with them not just their art but also the cultural and social systems that support it. Artists were encouraged to attach their work within the story of the city, creating living, evolving projects that responded to local needs and contexts.

To explain more about ruangrupa curating methods which they put more emphasis on decentralisation²⁷⁹, the artists involved were invited and given an unprecedented level of creative freedom. They were empowered to determine not only the nature of their participation within the exhibition framework but also how to allocate their assigned budgets. This open-ended approach represents a broader shift in the art world, where the traditional role of the curator is being redefined. This shift signals a more collaborative and less hierarchical approach to organising art events, where the focus is on collective decision-making, shared resources, and a more fluid exchange of ideas between artists, audiences, and institutions. This idea is also emphasised by Ade Darmawan: “It’s not really thinking about making an exhibition,

²⁷⁶ Ade Darmawan statement on Conversation with ruangrupa by Siuli tan, <https://artsg.com/news/a-conversation-with-ruangrupa/> [last access 5 September 2024]

²⁷⁷ C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells : Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London :Verso, 2012.

²⁷⁸ ruangrupa, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022.

²⁷⁹ A.Rostkowska & G. Bellinetti, *What documenta fifteen offered to the future – documenta fifteen closing days #1*, metropolis, 23 September 2022, https://metropolism.com/en/opinie/47748_what_documenta_fifteen_offered_to_the_future_document_a_fifteen_closing_days_1/ [last access 5 September 2024]

that's not in our mindset. It's really about who we should like to work with, be inspired by, learn from and so on in the longer term, rather than thinking about what to show, what to exhibit. That wasn't in our minds."²⁸⁰

This process of "harvesting"—capturing what is happening in their local communities—was key to making the artists' work relevant to the exhibition. Furthermore, to be more connected to sustainability, ruangrupa aimed to minimise the extractive nature of exhibitions like *documenta*, where works and ideas are often taken from their original contexts and showcased in isolation. Instead, they focused on ensuring that the resources, ideas, and contributions shared at *documenta fifteen* could be cycled back to benefit the artists' local contexts and ecosystems (*ekosistem*). This model emphasises reciprocity and long-term impact rather than a one-time showcase, aiming to foster sustainable artistic practices that continue to nurture the communities from which they arise.

Distributing Venues

The approach to venue distribution marked a significant departure from traditional methods. Since the artists were not required to respond to a specific theme or confined to predetermined venues²⁸¹ In Kassel, the selection of spaces was guided by functional needs and collaborative dynamics. The artists and collectives aligned with Kassel's local ecosystem, often choosing spaces that could serve both as exhibition sites and living quarters. This fluid approach reflected the intermingling of art and life—a key principle in many artists' practices, particularly for collectives who combined living and working environments, both locally and abroad. The distribution of venues was not rigid but evolved dynamically. Beyond simply matching venues to the functional needs of the artists, many artists and collectives were proactive in finding venues that suited their practice. This allowed for organic collaboration, especially for the *lumbung inter-lokal* members, who had more time to develop deeper relationships. Artists often gravitated toward venues close to others

²⁸⁰ Ade Darmawan statement on ArtReview, *Who's Exploiting Who? ruangrupa on documenta fifteen*, 26 September 2022, <https://artreview.com/who-is-exploiting-who-ruangrupa-on-documenta-fifteen/> [last access 5 September 2024]

²⁸¹ Ibid. p. 34

with whom they had shared affinities or practices, creating clusters of collaboration. This approach would translate as a unique ecosystem where artists nurtured each other, sharing communal spaces like kitchens, libraries, meeting rooms, and dormitories, moving away from the traditional format of isolated showcases.

The distribution of venues also became a resource in the *Lumbung* common pot, where the symbolic value of the venues themselves played a role. Traditionally, the centrally located venues such as the *Fridericianum* and *documenta Halle* are seen as the main exhibition spaces and tend to attract the most visitors. While the goal of *documenta fifteen* was to decentralise this hierarchy by creating a more evenly distributed network of venues across the city, the historical significance of these central spaces remained strong in the collective memory of visitors. To counter this centralization, the Artistic Team came up with an "acupuncture" strategy to decenter the *Fridericianum*, positioning the *Lumbung* building as the core of the exhibition, a dynamic and evolving space where all the harvested knowledge, stories, and experiences were stored. This reimagining of the exhibition's geography symbolised the shift from a hierarchical art display to a more egalitarian, interconnected system, where art, collaboration, and communal living were integrated seamlessly. The *Fridericianum*, long seen as the main venue of *documenta*, was deliberately reframed to allow for a more decentralised and inclusive approach, breaking the audience's traditional expectations and inviting them to experience a broader, more communal art ecosystem.

Funding allocations

It is important to recognize that as the host of *documenta*, the institution holds both the responsibility and the full authority to secure funding for the exhibition.²⁸² This responsibility aligns with the event's prestigious status and its impact on the global art scene. Documenta fifteen was funded through a combination of public financial support, primarily from the Federal Cultural Foundation of Germany (*Kulturstiftung des Bundes*), which plays a key role in promoting cultural and artistic

²⁸² Documenta fifteen press kit, 2022, https://documenta-fifteen.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/documenta_fifteen_press_kit_en.pdf, [last access 5 September 2024]

initiatives across the country. Additionally, the regional government of the State of Hesse and the host city of Kassel provided substantial contributions.

In distributing the resource fairly, ruangrupa developed a model that, while not perfect, aimed to be as equitable as possible. They referred to this model as *gado-gado*, inspired by the Indonesian dish that combines a variety of ingredients—symbolising an attempt to include a bit of everything in our approach. With this equitable concept Each *Lumbung* inter-lokal member was allocated a production budget²⁸³ of 180,000 Euros, along with an upfront payment of 25,000 Euros in "seed money." This seed money served as a recognition of the years of work these artists had invested in their local communities and as a symbol of the agreement to adapt that work for presentation in Kassel in 2022. Importantly, this adaptation was designed to be regenerative, ensuring that the projects could continue to thrive beyond documenta fifteen. For many of the artists, this financial support came at a crucial time, bolstering their sustainability during the pandemic. The artists themselves received 60,000 Euros each for production, with collectives receiving an additional 10,000 Euros in seed money and individual artists receiving 5,000 Euros. This funding model emerged after extensive discussions between the Artistic Team and the documenta gGmbH. Initially, the conversation focused on distributing part of the available budget as a basic income or to meet basic needs for all involved artists. However, during the discussions ruangrupa conceived the idea of creating a "common pot," where 20,000 Euros per participating group would be managed collectively. This approach allowed the artists themselves to decide how best to utilise these funds in the exhibition, reinforcing the collaborative and self-directed nature of the *Lumbung* process.

4.7 ruruHaus

After first introducing the concept of ruruHaus during SONSBEER'16, ruangrupa brought it back in a more expanded and integral form for documenta fifteen. The concept of ruruHaus started in the early 2000s, amid Indonesia's political and societal challenges, ruangrupa began transforming private living rooms into public spaces to create a platform for artistic practice. These informal, intimate

²⁸³ ruangrupa, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022.

spaces became centres of creativity and collaboration, addressing the lack of accessible cultural venues in Jakarta. In Kassel ruruHaus located at the corner of Treppenstrasse and Obere Königsstrasse, ruangrupa continues this legacy, but on a larger scale, using different means and a more expansive physical presence. ruruHaus, which serves as a central hub for interaction, collaboration, and community-building, was envisioned as a space where art, dialogue, and collective activities intersect, embodying ruangrupa's core values of sharing and inclusivity. ruruHaus, envisioned as a living room for Kassel, extends ruangrupa's tradition of *nongkrong* (Indonesian for gathering and socialising), which is central to ruangrupa practice.²⁸⁴ As an artistic concept, ruruHaus embodies the idea of creating an open space for collective engagement, where resources are pooled and shared. It serves as a platform to explore and connect with the broader *ekosistem* of Kassel, offering a model of how documenta fifteen expresses itself through community interaction and inclusivity.



ruruHaus, Kassel 2020, Photo: Nicolas Wefers
Courtesy of documenta

However, ruruHaus was not designed exclusively for ruangrupa, instead it established more than just an ordinary living room, as ruangrupa mentioned: “The

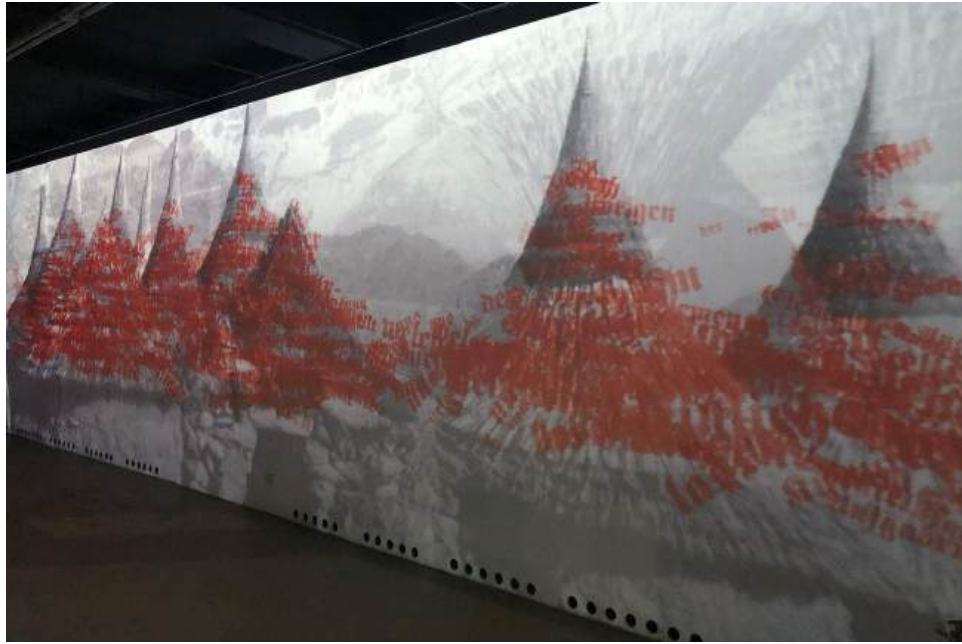
²⁸⁴ Documenta fifteen press kit, 2022, https://documenta-fifteen.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/documenta_fifteen_press_kit_en.pdf, [last access 5 September 2024]

idea of ruruHaus is not for ruangrupa to occupy space in the city center, but to be part of a context where initiatives from Kassel (and visiting artists and members) can connect, and where they can extend themselves into the future as collective of collectives [...] but also a laboratory to test their planned translations from their own locales to Kassel's ekosistem."²⁸⁵ Some key activities took place in ruruHaus such as hosted workshops, discussions, and exhibitions, focusing on collective practices and themes like solidarity and sustainability. The space also facilitated resource sharing and knowledge exchange among participants, while showcasing artistic projects involving both local residents and international artists. Social gatherings were a key feature, promoting informal interactions and fostering connections. Here are some highlighted activities at ruruHaus:

Video installation by Henrik Langsdorf titled "Rudolf Duala Manga Bell — a German Story" was shown for the first time.²⁸⁶ This installation highlights the life of Rudolf Duala Manga Bell, a Cameroonian leader who fought against German colonial rule in the early 20th century and was executed by the colonial regime. Manga Bell opposed the forced displacement of his people by the colonial government and was ultimately executed by the Germans in 1914. His story serves as a powerful symbol of resistance against colonial oppression. The video installation was displayed again at ruruHaus during the International Weeks against Racism in March 2022 and later at the MARKK Museum in Hamburg, Germany. The recurring presentation of this piece aligns with the goals of *Blind Spots in the Sun* to confront uncomfortable historical truths and encourage reflection on Germany's colonial past, particularly its connections to present-day issues of racism and social injustice.

²⁸⁵ ruangrupa, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022, p. 19.

²⁸⁶ H. Langsdorf, *Blind Spots in the Sun at ruruhaus (documenta fifteen) & art in public space*, <https://www.henriklangsdorf.com/projects/blind-spots-in-the-sun> [last access 6 September 2024]
Complete trailer of the video can be viewed here <https://vimeo.com/829864508>



Henrik Langsdorf, Video Installation,
“Burning Village”, a scene from “*Rudolf Duala Manga Bell – a German Story*”, ruruHaus, 2021-22.
Courtesy of Henrik Langsdorf

Another show that happened in ruruHaus was an exhibition “An Inner Place” by Jan-Hendrik Pelz²⁸⁷. These works featured life-size oil paintings, created in collaboration with over forty refugees. The paintings go beyond traditional portraiture, inviting viewers to engage with the people depicted, who are shown in calm, introspective poses with closed eyes. The work captures the personal memories, longings, and hopes of the portrayed individuals, reflecting their journey into a new society and culture. Moreover, this project also addresses the broader impact of migration on individuals and across generations, a theme close to Pelz, whose family history includes immigration from Eastern Europe.

²⁸⁷ J. H. Pelz, "An Inner Place" at ruruHaus *documenta fifteen*, <http://www.jan-pelz.de/news.html> [last access 6 September 2024]



Jan-Hendrik Pelz, Exhibition "An Inner Place", wood oil on canvas,
ruruHaus, 02.08.2022 - 10.09.2022
Courtesy of ruruHaus

Moving into the discussion session, "Urun Rembuk – Thinking and Acting on Sustainability," the discussion held on 5 November 2021 conducted in English and German, with German Sign Language Interpretation. The panel gathered a range of participants, including artists, activists, scholars, and community leaders, to explore the intersections of art, sustainability, and community engagement. The discussions highlighted the role of creative practices in addressing environmental challenges, fostering inclusive social structures, and promoting sustainable development. Emphasis was placed on a shared commitment to preserving a healthy environment, advancing social equality, and strengthening social and economic ecosystems, while also underscoring the importance of collaborative action and the power of art in driving meaningful, long-term change.



documenta fifteen, 'urun rembuk – thinking and acting on sustainability', panel discussion, ruruHaus, Kassel (5 November 2021).
Courtesy documenta fifteen. Photo: Nicolas Wefers.

In addition to presenting art and discussions, a workshop was organised by OnCurating “Untitled (Re-curating *documenta fifteen*)”²⁸⁸. The workshop aimed to “re-curate” documenta fifteen by transforming it into a deeply personal and embodied experience for the participants. Instead of simply engaging with the official curatorial choices and texts provided by ruangrupa and their collaborators, the workshop treated these curatorial elements as raw material, reflecting the collective spirit of *Lumbung*. Participants were invited to select one artwork from documenta fifteen beforehand. These selections then formed an improvised route that the group walked together during the workshop. As they stopped by each chosen work, participants offered their own personal narratives, creating alternative interpretations to the official curatorial texts. These spoken reflections were recorded and posted online, forming an evolving archive of a collaboratively guided exhibition tour.

²⁸⁸ T. Abraham & M. Sheff, *Reflections on the Workshop “Untitled (Re-curating documenta fifteen)”*, *OnCurating*, Issue 54, November 2022, p. 95.



“Untitled (Re-curating *documenta fifteen*)” Workshop by On Curating, 2022
documenta fifteen, Hafenstrasse, Kassel, ruruHaus
Courtesy of Dorothee Richter

With these diverse activities taking place in ruruHaus, the concept of the space remained dynamic and ever-evolving. Regularly adapting to new programs and ideas, it created a fluid, non-static environment that created continuous engagement, experimentation, and innovation. This flexibility allowed for the constant emergence of initiatives, making ruruHaus a hub for artistic collaboration, community involvement, and engaging dialogue.

4.8 Venues Highlight: Installations and Performances

The exhibition was centred around four key areas of Kassel: Mitte, Fulda, Nordstadt, and Bettenhausen. It began in Kassel's Mitte, home to many of the city's museum buildings, and extended along the Fulda River, a historically significant waterway. From there, the exhibition branched out to Nordstadt and, for the first time in *documenta's* history, to the industrial district of Bettenhausen. *Documenta fifteen*

intentionally preserves the historical and social imprints of these locations, placing them in new contexts for re-examination and reflection.

Mitte (Venue)

In this location the city's vibrant centre, known for its concentration in cultural institutions. In Mitte alone, 16 different venues were used, showcasing the works of 19 artist groups and individuals. Here are highlighted shows from Mitte:

Black Quantum Futurism

Based in Philadelphia, USA, Black Quantum Futurism (BQF) is a collaborative practice by Camae Ayewa and Rasheedah Phillips. Their work explores new relationships between time and space, freeing itself from the limitations of linear time. Through writing, films, and performances, BQF draws on diverse influences, including alternative futurities, Afro-diasporan temporalities, quantum physics, housing futures, and speculative fiction. These frameworks allow them to reconnect with the past and envision new possibilities for the future.

In Kassel, BQF²⁸⁹ is represented by three projects, with the largest located in the Fulda area, along the banks of the Fulda River. This project, *Clepsydra Stage* (2022), is an interactive installation featuring an abstract water clock composed of three intertwined circles, serving as a hub for memories, visions, and stories. Water sets two of the circular elements in motion, creating a space where different experiences of time, space, and identity converge, intertwining the personal with the universal. The installation opens new avenues for expression and exchange, particularly for marginalised local communities. Designed as an interactive space, it also functions as a floating stage during documenta fifteen, used by the collective and other participants. Reacting to the movements of each visitor, it amplifies diverse temporalities and identities.

²⁸⁹ ruangrupa, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022, p. 72.



Black Quantum Futurism, *Clepsydra Stage*, Installation view, Rondell, Kassel, documenta fifteen, Photo by Nicholas Wefer
Courtesy of documenta fifteen

Richard Bell

Second show that featured in the Mitte area was a *Tent Embassy* by Richard Bell. Richard Bell, an Indigenous Australian artist, is known for his provocative and politically charged work, often addressing issues of colonialism, racism, and the rights of Aboriginal. He presented a piece for documenta fifteen that centres around a modest tent, which has been featured in numerous exhibitions and later reside in Friedrichsplatz venue. The *Tent Embassy*²⁹⁰ aimed to foster cultural exchange, political discourse, and solidarity with global struggles. The original *Tent Embassy* was a landmark moment in the Indigenous land rights movement in Australia, and Bell's version draws on this history to engage with contemporary issues of cultural

²⁹⁰ ruangrupa, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022, p. 172.

sovereignty, political discourse, and global struggles for justice. Bell said “[Pay the Rent] represents a number calculating how much money the Australian government owes Aboriginal people — and that's just for the rent of the place. Because that is still our country. It always was, always will be Aboriginal land,”²⁹¹ In addition to the *Tent Embassy*, Bell exhibited protest and text-based paintings from the 1970s and 1980s, which have been central to his artistic critique of colonialism. Moreover inside the tent Bell also hosted a series of Embassy Talks, inviting artists and thinkers to discuss issues close to their hearts and their communities. In collaboration with Iulumbung artists, members, and speakers from Europe, Bell also invites *Digi Youth Arts*, a Meanjin (Brisbane)-based organisation, to participate.



documenta fifteen: Richard Bell, Taring Padi, 2022, installation view, Friedrichsplatz, Kassel
Courtesy of ArtViewer

He also introduced a new iteration of Duchampian urinal—a reference to Marcel Duchamp’s groundbreaking readymade—with shiny metallic balloons, a playful nod to Jeff Koons’ shiny, polished aesthetic. This juxtaposition served to critique the

²⁹¹ Richard Bell statement on J. Higgins, *Aboriginal artist Richard Bell brings replica tent embassy to Germany’s Documenta, ahead of 2023 Tate London installation*, ABC Arts, 1 July 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-07-02/richard-bell-tent-embassy-documenta-tate-london/101189166> [last access 7 September 2024]

commercialization of art and Western-centric art movements.²⁹² He placed a urinal on the floor near the toilets in the Fridericianum, signing it "R. Bell" where Marcel Duchamp once wrote "R. Mutt," on the surface.



Richard Bell, *Western Art*, 2017, Installation view, Fridericianum, Kassel, 2022
Photo by Nicolas Wefers Courtesy of documenta fifteen

Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture

Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture is a non-profit artist-run initiative committed to community-focused, socially engaged, and intercultural practices based in Nongpho, a rural village in Ratchaburi Province, Thailand. In their practices Baan Noorg also facilitates social enterprise to promote community ecological and economic sustainability while their programs and activities are partly funded by government/non-government institutions and self-fund.

²⁹² E. G'Sell, *Documenta 15 and the Power of Productive Disruption*, 'Hyperallergic', 5 September 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/755858/documenta-15-and-the-power-of-productive-disruption/> [last access 6 September 2024]

For documenta fifteen, Baan Noorg expanded their approach by centering on the relationship between humans and non-human animals, integrating their methods into a multifaceted project. This initiative consisted of three distinct components: a dairy farm exchange program, the traditional Thai art of Nang Yai (shadow puppetry), and skateboarding activities. Baan Noorg titled these activities as Churning Milk: the Rituals of Things. These diverse forms invited audiences and participants to become integral parts of the work, transforming the exhibition into an immersive experience. Here Baan Noorg highlighted the Ramayana's narrative arc, where cosmic forces of good triumph over evil, was linked to Thailand's enduring semi-feudal power structures and entrenched hierarchies, which continue to shape the nation's political and social systems as of mid-2022. Baan Noorg co-founder Jiradej Meemalai elaborated on this connection, stating: "The Ramayana is one of the ideas used to support the monarchy system,"²⁹³ pointing out how the epic's themes have been co-opted to reinforce the existing power dynamics in Thailand. This dynamic deconstruction of meaning unfolds in an open, interactive space that serves as both a visual field and a playful, experimental environment.



Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *The Ritual of Things*, Skateboarding ramp, Fridericianum, Kassel, 2022, Photo by Nicolas Wefers, Courtesy of documenta fifteen.

²⁹³ M.C-Jones, Why Collective Practice in Thailand is Under Threat, ArtReview, 11 October 2022, <https://artreview.com/why-collective-practice-in-thailand-is-under-threat/> [last access 7 September 2024]

Fulda (Venue)

The Fulda River, a central geographical feature of Kassel, played an important role in the exhibition, serving as the site for some outdoor installations and projects, particularly those that explored themes related to nature, time, water, and community engagement. Some works featured here include:

OFF Biennale Budapest

OFF-Biennale Budapest is Hungary's largest independent contemporary art event, established in 2015 as a grassroots initiative in response to increasing government control and influence over cultural institutions. The biennale operates without state funding or institutional affiliations, relying on a decentralised, self-organised model. OFF-Biennale presented two projects and a publication, including a long-term collaboration with the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC). This project explores the idea and challenges of a "RomaMoMA" (Roma Museum of Contemporary Art), addressing how the cultural heritage and contemporary art of Roma artists can be exhibited without formal institutions dedicated to their work. Through artworks and storytelling, the exhibition highlights both the untold past and evolving present of Roma artists, across generations, in a way that both constructs and questions the concept of a "RomaMoMA."

Specifically in the Fulda area, OFF Biennale created a dynamic space that blurs the boundaries between a playground, junkyard, and construction site—each symbolising different aspects of creativity, transgression, waste, and renewal. The space serves as an experimental ground for creative expression and play, where discarded materials and leftover objects from past constructions become tools for imagining new possibilities. Much like a junkyard where refuse is reimagined as potential, the site encourages participants to repurpose and rethink what is considered waste, allowing for spontaneous acts of creation and discovery.



OFF-Biennale Budapest, Eva Kořátková, *Daydreaming Workstation*, 2022,
Installation view, Bootsverleih Ahoi, Kassel, 2022,
Photo: Frank Sperling Courtesy of documenta fifteen

ZK/U – Center for Art and Urbanistics

ZK/U – Center for Art and Urbanistics is a Berlin-based interdisciplinary platform that explores the intersection of art, urban research, and social practice. Founded in 2012, ZK/U operates as a space for artists, researchers, and activists to engage with issues related to urban development, community building, and the impact of art on public life. The centre focuses on fostering connections between art and society,²⁹⁴ particularly in urban environments, by organising residencies, events, and collaborative projects.

ZK/U's two contributions to documenta fifteen were *citizenship* and *Beeholder – Beecoin*. As part of a building extension in Berlin, the main wooden roof of ZK/U was removed and became the foundation for *citizenship*. The roof was flipped upside down and transformed into a boat. Beginning in early June 2022, *citizenship* set sail from Berlin-Moabit to Kassel without the use of fossil fuels, relying instead on muscle power and renewable energy sources. The goal was to arrive in Kassel by July 23, 2022, where the boat would be flipped again at Hiroshima-Ufer and

²⁹⁴ ruangrupa, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022, p. 219.

repurposed into a community structure, displaying artefacts and rituals from the journey and fostering dialogue with the citizens of Kassel.

The *citizenship* spent 44 days on the water, travelling over 400 kilometres and stopping at more than 30 locations. However, the journey faced significant challenges on the Weser River, where the strong counter-currents and shallow waters slowed progress to just a few kilometres per day. Additionally, a severe drought caused the Weser river water level to drop drastically, leading to an official ban on further navigation until conditions improved.



ZK/U, *The Citizenship*, Boat from dismantles roof sailing from Berlin to Kassel, 2022
Photo by Martina Pozzan

Nordstadt (Venue)

Kassel is a city known for its abundant green spaces, often feeling more like a vast park than an urban centre. In the Nordstadt district, this lush greenery stretches along the banks of the Ahne, a tributary of the Fulda River, creating a serene natural setting in close proximity to the university campus and the Kulturzentrum Schlachthof, a key cultural centre in the area. The parkland here, particularly Nordstadt Park, plays a vibrant role in the community, offering a peaceful retreat as well as a dynamic gathering place for cultural and social events. Here some activities featured during documenta fifteen:

Arts Collaboratory

Arts Collaboratory (AC)²⁹⁵ is a global collective of organisations that operates across Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. Established in 2007 and evolving into a self-organised ecosystem in 2015, AC is made up of 25 diverse entities that collaborate on various projects and initiatives. Their work is rooted in the intersections of visual arts and social activism, with a strong focus on solidarity, sustainability, and collective governance. The collective functions through regular interactions and gatherings, including face-to-face meetings known as *banga*, a term from the Luganda language of Uganda, meaning "time and space." These meetings create opportunities for deep engagement and exchange between members, fostering collaboration that transcends geographic and cultural boundaries. AC also holds general assemblies nearly every year, rotating between different countries such as Costa Rica, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Senegal, and Uganda, ensuring that the collective's activities are grounded in the local contexts of its members.

In Kassel, the collectives of Arts Collaboratory (AC) came together under the unified framework of the Arts Collaboratory School (AC School), showcasing the shared practices and knowledge developed by the network and its members. Building on the physical and conceptual architecture established by other participants in documenta fifteen, AC School expands its presence through various initiatives that reflect its core values of openness, exchange, and collaborative learning. AC School's activities take place in multiple locations, including ruruHaus, Trafohaus, and a variety of temporary spaces brought to life specifically for different projects during the event. These spaces serve as dynamic environments for the exploration of ideas and the creation of new forms of engagement. The initiatives span a wide range of formats, emphasising the exchange of ideas and the blending of different "times and spaces." Throughout Kassel, printed materials from the network are displayed, contributing to the broader conversation around the themes of documenta fifteen. Additionally, AC School organised a series of meetings and events, including cooking sessions, where participants come together in informal settings to foster a sense of community and collaboration.

²⁹⁵ ruangrupa, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022, p. 61.

Sourabh Phadke

Sourabh Phadke²⁹⁶, an architect who found his practice shaped through his experience as a schoolteacher, where he taught subjects like science, ecology, and social studies to students aged three to 16. It was during this time that he noticed a disconnect between the educational content and the physical spaces in which teaching took place. This realisation led him to focus on designing environments and objects that reflect hyper-local, ecologically conscious knowledge systems, drawing inspiration from Indigenous building traditions, which often integrate celebration, ontology, and spirituality into their designs.

For documenta fifteen in Kassel, Phadke has been working on creating a renewable and proactive infrastructure for large-scale exhibition-making—especially critical in a time of crisis and scarcity. His project addresses the life cycles of materials used in constructing exhibition spaces, rethinking the use and exchange of resources such as wood and plastic. He has developed a system of collaboration between Kassel's material ecosystem—including government recycling services, design teams, for-profit organisations, and groups dealing with waste—and documenta's own network, allowing for a sustainable exchange of materials. Phadke's vision goes beyond creating functional exhibition spaces. He sees these environments as venues for knowledge production and artistic engagement. In a unique initiative, he has also turned his attention to toilets, viewing them as spaces with political potential. Together with students from the Kunsthochschule Kassel, he is designing compostable toilets with a user-friendly interface that also serve as sites for artistic intervention. Phadke will lead a three-month-long module on low-cost technologies, ecological sanitation, and localised design in conjunction with this project. Described by ruangrupa member Iswanto Hartono as “a mediator and translator,”²⁹⁷ Phadke bridges the gap between documenta's artistic community and their material needs, helping unite them through ecologically sustainable means. In addition to supporting individual artists with their projects, Phadke is also contributing his own ceramic expertise by crafting terracotta water bottles for visitors.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 189.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

Bettenhausen (Venue)

In Bettenhausen, five distinct venues were activated for documenta fifteen, transforming spaces once used for industry and production into platforms for artistic expression and collaboration. One of the standout venues was Hallenbad Ost, a former public swimming pool, which for the first time opened its doors to documenta as an exhibition space. This venue, with its historical significance and architectural distinctiveness, provided a fresh setting for contemporary art, allowing artists to engage with the site's past while introducing new narratives and installations. Here are some of the activities highlighted:

Trampoline House

Trampoline House is a community-driven art and culture space located in Copenhagen, Denmark, that focuses on supporting refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants by providing a platform for social integration and artistic engagement. The house serves as a space where people can come together to share experiences, build connections, and participate in workshops, classes, and exhibitions. Trampoline House confronted Denmark's increasingly restrictive immigration laws²⁹⁸ while dissolving the line between artistic projects and social work. Its initiatives highlight the dual nature of artist-led activism: when the resources offered by a project are essential to those in need, it can be difficult for participants to view the project purely as art.

Trampoline House's contribution to documenta fifteen²⁹⁹, titled *Castle* in Kassel, symbolically addresses both the physical and metaphorical aspects of territorial power and ownership. The "castle" is physically represented by a circle of chalk drawn on the floor, marking a defined space for a series of public programs. Within this circle, performances, debates, and screenings take place, all focused on critiquing the Danish asylum system and broader societal attitudes toward refugees and migrants. The "castle" also stands as a metaphor for the inescapable nature of the asylum process. In one theatre workshop, asylum seekers, rejected asylum applicants, and refugee youth collaborate to write and perform sketches that highlight

²⁹⁸ F. Sandström, *Trampoline House's Meandering Social Practice*, 'Frieze', 1 November 2022, <https://www.frieze.com/article/trampoline-house-2022> [last access 6 September 2024]

²⁹⁹ ruangrupa, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022, p. 205.

their experiences within the Danish asylum system, offering insights from a youth perspective.



Trampoline House, Castle in Kassel, Installation view, Hübner areal, Kassel, 2022,
Photo: Frank Sperling, Courtesy of documenta fifteen

Atis Rezistans | Ghetto Biennale

Atis Rezistans (Resistance Artists)³⁰⁰ is a dynamic collective based in the Grand Rue neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Grand Rue is a bustling avenue running through the heart of the city's downtown, and the collective, founded in the late 1990s by sculptors André Eugène and Jean Herald Celeur, has become a vital force in Haiti's art scene. Initially focused on sculpture, Atis Rezistans has grown over the years to include a diverse range of artists, both established and emerging, who work across multiple mediums. As the collective expanded, newer members introduced other forms of artistic expression such as performance, slam poetry, photography, and music, enriching the collective's multidisciplinary approach. Atis Rezistans' work reflects a deep engagement with the social and physical landscape of Port-au-Prince, while also drawing on global narratives, particularly Haiti's historical significance as a site of Black revolution and liberation. The collective's pieces are often seen as recuperations—artworks that reclaim and repurpose elements from

³⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 66.

their environment to forge new forms of expression. Eugène also elaborated on the early stages³⁰¹ of Atis Rezistans, explaining how the collective initially began by sourcing materials from local junkyards to craft their sculptures. Rather than adhering to traditional artistic methods, they experimented by combining wood and metal, merging different elements in a way that reflected both the rawness of their environment and the resourcefulness of their process.

Atis Rezistans' participation in documenta fifteen was extensive and multifaceted, encompassing multimedia sculpture, exhibitions, residencies, performances, film screenings, and discussions. One of the standout installations is a series of sculptures displayed in St. Kunigundis Church, alongside a floating structure designed by British architect Vivian Chanin in collaboration with André Eugène and Leah Gordon, both key figures in the Ghetto Biennale.³⁰² The structure's ceiling mirrors the geometric chaos and vibrancy of the streets behind Grand Rue in Port-au-Prince, drawing inspiration from the visual style of Haitian master painter Préfète Duffaut. The program they made also included a series of film screenings featuring work from the Ghetto Biennale and other collaborating artists. André Eugène explained the idea of Ghetto Biennale "We created the Ghetto Biennale, which has since been synonymous with Atis Rezistans. It has allowed us to move around the world, exhibit more of our artists' work and, most importantly, give more opportunities to our younger artists."³⁰³ Through this platform, the Ghetto Biennale has opened international doors for the collective, creating not only a physical space for artistic exchange but also serving as a cultural bridge for Haitian art.

Through their contributions at documenta fifteen, Atis Rezistans and the Ghetto Biennale not only showcase the rich, collaborative spirit of their work but also connect deeply with the documenta theme of *Lumbung*, which emphasised sharing, community, and collective creativity.³⁰⁴ Their interventions highlight how

³⁰¹ André Eugène statement on interview with Frieze, *The Collective Power of Atis Rezistans*, Frieze, 17 March 2023, <https://www.frieze.com/article/collective-power-atis-rezistans>, [last access 7 September 2024]

³⁰² The Ghetto Biennale is an international contemporary arts exhibition held every two years in Port-au-Prince, Haiti during November and December.

³⁰³ André Eugène statement on interview with Frieze, *The Collective Power of Atis Rezistans*, Frieze, 17 March 2023, <https://www.frieze.com/article/collective-power-atis-rezistans>, [last access 7 September 2024]

³⁰⁴ ruangrupa, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022, p. 66.

the creative practices emerging from their collective embody the power of cooperation, cultural reclamation, and resistance, all while engaging with global dialogues on art and politics.



Atis Rezistans | Ghetto Biennale, Installation view, St. Kunigundis, Kassel, 2022,
Photo: Frank Sperling, Courtesy of documenta fifteen

4.9 *Lumbung* and Sustainability Practices

Aligned with *ruangrupa*'s artistic vision and the *lumbung* philosophy, sustainability at *documenta fifteen* was embraced as an integrated approach, deeply embedded in every facet of the exhibition's planning and execution. This broad interpretation of sustainability extends beyond environmental considerations, encompassing cultural, social, political, and economic elements. Sustainability at *documenta fifteen*³⁰⁵ addresses the challenge of reducing environmental impact while being economically and socially fair. As the board says: “it worked out a strategy for the sustainable organisation and planning of the art exhibition that considers all the fields of its action with the goal of achieving as many practical improvements as

³⁰⁵ S. Schormann & P. Greghun, *Less Environmentally Harmful and Socially Fair on documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022, p. 267.

possible.”³⁰⁶ The exhibition, which lasts 100 days and attracts a global audience, aims to align with the artistic direction of resource sharing and participation.

Sociologist Sander van der Leeuw touches on this broader understanding of sustainability by highlighting the deeper forces at play in human institutions:

It would seem therefore that while on shorter timescales the interaction between the different ways in which matter, energy, and information spread through a system count, the long-term dynamics of human institutions are relatively independent of energy and matter, and are ruled by the dynamics of learning, innovation, and communication. These dynamics seem to be responsible for social interaction and societal patterning, and allow people to realise those material forms for which there is a coincidence between two windows of opportunity, in the ideal and the material/energetic realms respectively.³⁰⁷

These intangible elements, which influence social interaction and cultural development, are just as crucial in shaping sustainable future as well as social collaboration and knowledge exchange, ensuring that sustainability is not just an environmental goal but a complex societal patterning.

For ruangrupa, sustainability is rooted in principles of collective effort, sharing, and the exchange of knowledge—key values essential for promoting enduring and meaningful development. As such, sustainability is not just a theme explored through the artistic practices at documenta fifteen but is also a key component of its infrastructure. The planning, organisation, and physical setup of the exhibition reflect these principles. To assist in achieving this, documenta und Museum Fridericianum GmbH has partnered with the University of Kassel, drawing on their expertise to develop more sustainable exhibition models. This collaboration ensures that every area, from mobility to gastronomy, adheres to principles that minimise ecological impact. Through this integration, ruangrupa harnesses the power of art as a tool for social change, utilising creative expression to highlight societal challenges. This concept can be seen as creating art beyond traditional artistic boundaries that is able to develop an alternative system in projecting social matter that brings art into public spaces, community centres, and digital environments. Once the value of togetherness is fully embraced, the concept of sharing, inspired by the traditional practice of *lumbung*, is also integrated into the collective framework as

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ S. Leeuw, *Social Sustainability, Past and Future: Undoing Unintended Consequences for the Earth's Survival*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020, p. 150.

stated during the interview with Ocula “they create their own models to share production and support within the group, and the network grows automatically.”³⁰⁸ Just as farmers store surplus rice in a shared barn, the lumbung model involves pooling resources, resources are distributed based on the community's needs, ensuring that everyone has access to what they require, especially during times of scarcity or hardship.

For documenta fifteen, ruangrupa actively engaged with the sustainability of the program by also incorporating their lumbung practice, which focuses on collective resource sharing and community building. One major initiative was a tree-planting collaboration with HessenForst³⁰⁹, where reforestation efforts in the Reinhardswald forest were supported through funds from ticket sales. Another key partnership with Kasseler Verkehrs- und Versorgungs-GmbH (KVV) provided public transportation access for documenta visitors, powered by locally generated green electricity, ensuring environmentally friendly mobility throughout Kassel. Internationally, ruangrupa organised the Semah Bumi festival³¹⁰ in Indonesia, promoting environmental awareness through art and performance, while the "Sustainable Village" project encouraged the development of community-focused, eco-conscious living models. The KIRI Projects/One Hundred Trees³¹¹ initiative

³⁰⁸ In conversation with Mi You (2022), *ruangrupa: a sustainable model for documenta fifteen, and after*, “Ocula”, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/ruangrupa-sustainability-and-documenta-fifteen/> [last access 7 September 2024]

³⁰⁹ HessenForst manages 341.500 hectares of state forest and provides forestry services for an additional 282.000 hectares of municipal and privately owned forests. HessenForst manages the forests according to the principles of sustainability and seeks to contribute to the maintenance and improvement of environmental, economic and living conditions to the highest degree possible. From HessenForst website, <https://eustafor.eu/members/hessenforst/> [last access 7 September 2024]

³¹⁰ The Semah Bumi Festival, held in the Indonesian village of Pematang Kabau on March 12–13, 2022, brought together artists, researchers, and local inhabitants through concerts, exhibitions, theater performances, workshops, and residencies. This diverse range of activities highlighted various perspectives on the relationship between nature and society, emphasising how societal and economic needs shape environmental management. In line with documenta fifteen’s sustainability goals, the festival was supported by the Collaborative Research Center EForTS at the University of Göttingen and the University of Jambi, Indonesia. The project focused on the ecological enrichment of palm oil and rubber plantations in Sumatra. From documenta, Sustainability project in Indonesia, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/sustainable-village-project-and-semah-bumi-festival/> [last access 7 September 2024]

³¹¹ The KIRI Projects/One Hundred Trees initiative focused on reforestation and the regeneration of urban green spaces. This project sought to plant one hundred trees in various locations, contributing to both ecological restoration and urban renewal.

emphasised reforestation and urban ecological regeneration, while the osVVertical³¹² project explored sustainable urban farming methods.

documenta fifteen, under ruangrupa's leadership, exemplified a holistic and innovative approach to sustainability, seamlessly integrating environmental, social, and cultural elements through their *lumbung* practice. Iswanto, one of ruangrupa people mentioned: "Germany has its own ways of understanding what *lumbung* is. Likewise, we wanted to understand the term within Kassel's context, which became our entry point."³¹³ Through collaborations that prioritised ecological awareness and community building, documenta fifteen set a precedent for future exhibitions that might develop even further for the next events.

4.10 Antisemitism Debate in documenta fifteen

It is no surprise that art often intersects with politics and sparks debate, as art has long served as a mirror to society, reflecting its values, tensions, and conflicts. As a result, art frequently invites both praise and criticism, attracting proponents who see it as a force for social change, and detractors who view it as controversial or disruptive. Controversy began to surface around documenta fifteen just six months before the exhibition's official opening, casting a shadow over what is traditionally one of the art world's most anticipated events.

Controversy began to surface around documenta fifteen just six months before the exhibition's official opening, casting a shadow over what is traditionally one of the art world's most anticipated events. Accusations emerged regarding suspected affiliations of some participants with the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS)³¹⁴ movement, igniting intense debate within Germany's media. The

³¹² The osVVertical delved into sustainable urban farming techniques. It explored vertical farming methods as a way to address food security and promote ecological responsibility in densely populated urban areas. This project focused on maximising space in cities by growing plants in vertically stacked layers, which requires less land and water than traditional farming.

³¹³ In conversation with Mi You (2022), *ruangrupa: a sustainable model for documenta fifteen, and after*, "Ocula", <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/ruangrupa-sustainability-and-documenta-fifteen/> [last access 7 September 2024]

³¹⁴ BDS stands for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions. It is a Palestinian-led movement that promotes nonviolent resistance against Israel's policies towards Palestinians. The goal of BDS is to pressure Israel to comply with international law and respect Palestinian rights, including ending the occupation of Palestinian territories, ensuring equal rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel, and recognizing the right of return for Palestinian refugees. From J. Rosenfeld, "*Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions*".

controversy³¹⁵ was initially sparked by a blog post from Kassel and quickly gained momentum when the Central Council of Jews voiced concerns about not being invited to participate in a planned forum titled *We Need to Talk*, which aimed to address sensitive cultural and political issues. This growing tension highlighted the complex intersection of global artistic freedom and Germany's historical responsibility regarding anti-Semitism, which many felt was not adequately addressed by the curatorial team. The handling of the situation was widely criticised, with the commission appointed to investigate the matter later stating: "The documenta 15 functioned as an echo chamber for Israel-related antisemitism, and sometimes for pure antisemitism,"³¹⁶ as published by the DW news portal. Source? They also noted, "The trivialising way antisemitism was handled increasingly became a problem in and of itself."³¹⁷ Moreover, many critics expressed concern that antisemitic sentiments might be disguised as anti-Israeli criticism.³¹⁸ This fear was compounded by reports that no artists openly identifying as Jewish or Israeli were involved in the exhibition, which, according to the report, resulted in a one-sided portrayal of the Middle East conflict. The debate quickly escalated beyond the art world, drawing the attention of the German federal government, which expressed its own concerns about the exhibition's curatorial choices. Given Germany's historical responsibility to combat antisemitism and called for a more thorough review of the exhibition.

The controversy continued with the involvement of the Indonesian artist collective Taring Padi.³¹⁹ Just days after documenta fifteen's official opening, it was

Encyclopedia Britannica, 19 Sep. 2024,

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Boycott-Divestment-Sanctions> [last access 8 September 2024]

³¹⁵ Documenta statement on *Antisemitism and the debate surrounding it*, documenta fifteen, https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_fifteen [last access 8 September 2024]

³¹⁶ C. Burack, *Documenta 15 trivialized antisemitism, report finds*, DW, 2 February 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/documenta-15-trivialized-antisemitism-report-finds/a-64663005>, [last access 8 September 2024]

³¹⁷ C. Burack, *Documenta 15 trivialized antisemitism, report finds*, DW, 2 February 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/documenta-15-trivialized-antisemitism-report-finds/a-64663005>, [last access 8 September 2024]

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

³¹⁹ Taring Padi is a collective of artists and activists founded in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in 1998: a critical juncture in the nation's history, during which public dissatisfaction with the administration, economic collapse, and allegations of political corruption triggered nationwide protests and violent, often ethnically targeted, riots. These mass actions culminated in the resignation of then-president Suharto and the end of his three-decade-long New Order Regime, signalling the beginning of Indonesia's Reformation era. The majority of Taring Padi's founding members were art students, galvanised by the political concerns of the time, from Yogyakarta's Indonesian Institute of the Arts,

discovered that their large-scale mural contained imagery widely condemned as antisemitic. Taring Padi explained³²⁰ that the artwork in question initially depicted a gas pipeline explosion in East Java, which led to a series of fatal mud volcano eruptions. One element of the piece included a figure wearing what appeared to be a kippah, but this was later obscured with black tape. The collective behind the work has been criticised for this depiction, which some have described as a 'caricature of a greedy, long-nosed Jew'. In response to this misinterpreted artwork, Taring Padi has stated that the mural did not depict a Jewish head covering but was intended to represent Indonesian headwear known as a *kopiah*. Despite this clarification, they chose to amend the artwork to prevent any potential misinterpretation. In their statement, they emphasised that this adjustment was made not to conceal the original intent, but as an aesthetic response to the specific context in which the work was displayed.



A large-scale banner, a figurative representation of "*People's Justice*" by Taring Padi, staff members cover it during the documenta fifteen exhibition in Kassel, Germany, June 20, 2022. Photo by AFP

joined gradually by students and activists from other disciplines, universities, and cities. Taring Padi can be translated as "fangs of rice," referring to the sharp tips of unhusked rice. As Indonesia's staple food, rice conjures up its farmers and the working class whose interests the collective aims to serve. Moreover, the rice "fangs," which can prick careless fingers, are constant reminders to sharpen one's mind. From ruangrupa, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022, p. 193.

³²⁰ ArtReview, *Another Documenta artwork hit by antisemitism claims*, 18 August 2022, <https://artreview.com/another-documenta-artwork-hit-by-antisemitism-claims/> [last access 9 September 2024]

The commission's report further criticised documenta's handling of antisemitic incidents as "hesitant," "dragging," and resistant to addressing the issue directly. The response was also characterised by "ignorance" and "trivialization," which severely damaged the trust between public institutions, Jewish organisations, and the Jewish community, particularly in Germany. The Embassy of Israel in Germany also voiced strong concerns, calling for the immediate removal of the controversial artwork. The embassy condemned the piece, asserting that it crossed the line from free expression into promoting harmful stereotypes. "These images have absolutely nothing to do with the free expression of opinion," a statement from the embassy read, "but are instead an expression of old-style antisemitism."³²¹ This condemnation added further pressure on documenta fifteen. This issue, evoked with a perceived disregard for serious concerns raised by Jewish organisations, intensified public outrage. The absence of conflict management processes further complicated the situation, leaving many to question the responsibility and preparedness of those organising and curating such a prominent, globally recognized art event that also put much attention to ruangrupa as the director chosen for documenta fifteen.

The report acknowledged that ruangrupa faced instances of racism from external sources during the controversy. However, it noted that the commission's investigation did not extend to a thorough examination of this issue. The report emphasised the need for a more nuanced discussion surrounding the intersection of antisemitism and postcolonial critique, which became a significant point of contention during the public debate around documenta. "The relationship between antisemitism and postcolonial criticism deserves a more open and objective discussion than the local public is currently capable of,"³²² the report stated, highlighting the complexity of the issues at hand and the limitations of the current discourse in addressing them adequately. In response to the escalating controversy, ruangrupa, as part of the organising body, expressed regret over the incident. In a public statement, they acknowledged their oversight, stating: "We collectively failed

³²¹ A. Rai, *Indonesian artists' 'antisemitic' work removed from German show after upsetting Israel*, *Independent*, 22 June 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/indonesia-anti-semitic-art-removed-israel-b2106752.html>, [last access 8 September 2024]

³²² C. Burack, *Documenta 15 trivialized antisemitism, report finds*, *DW*, 2 February 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/documenta-15-trivialized-antisemitism-report-finds/a-64663005>, [last access 8 September 2024]

to spot the figure in the work, which is a character that evokes classical stereotypes of antisemitism."³²³ They took responsibility for this lapse and emphasised their commitment to addressing the issue. "We acknowledge that this was our error," ruangrupa admitted. Additionally, in consultation with Taring Padi, the collective supported the decision to remove the controversial piece. ruangrupa reiterated their dedication to working in close contact with citizens and respecting differences, including all ethnic groups and religions, aligning the removal with their core principles of inclusivity and respect. Further Ade Darmawan delivered an official statement reinforcing the collective's stance on the matter.

It has always been our intention to celebrate freedom of expression through documenta fifteen. It is important not only for the lumbung community and documenta, but for many struggles around the world supporting critical voices against nationalist violence and capitalism birthing climate crises – threats also to and in Germany. We understand that despite this conviction, this freedom should not extend to hurtful or inciteful imagery.³²⁴

In doing so, ruangrupa positioned their belief in the power of art as a tool for social and political critique but emphasised that it should never perpetuate harm, particularly through imagery that could be seen as discriminatory or offensive. Acknowledging the oversight, ruangrupa expressed their intent to learn from the situation while continuing their efforts to promote dialogue and collaboration. Their focus remained on nurturing an open, respectful exchange of ideas, making sure that documenta fifteen could serve as a platform for diverse perspectives while avoiding harm or division.

The controversy did not end there; public opinion was further ignited, particularly among those opposing the accusations of antisemitism and supporting ruangrupa. This public demonstration, featuring people with diverse perspectives on the issue, indicates how the antisemitism debate triggered a wider conversation about global justice, representation, and the role of art in activism.

³²³ ArtReview Writer, '*We collectively failed*': Ruangrupa apologise for antisemitic artwork, 27 June 2022, <https://artreview.com/we-collectively-failed-ruangrupa-apologise-for-antisemitic-artwork/> [last access 8 September 2024]

³²⁴ Speech by Ade Darmawan (ruangrupa) in the committee on Culture and Media, German, Bundestag, 6 July 2022, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/speech-by-ade-darmawan-ruangrupa-in-the-committee-on-culture-and-media-german-bundestag-july-6-2022/> [last access 12 September 2024]



Protests in support of ruangrupa, signs were often displayed saying that the artist collective was subjected to racism.

Photo: Uwe Zucchi/picture alliance/dpa

As a consequence of this major controversy, the new committee of documenta implemented stricter measures to avoid similar incidents in the future. They introduced a more rigorous selection process, ensuring that participants' backgrounds were thoroughly reviewed, not only in terms of their artistic merits but also in relation to potential political or social sensitivities.³²⁵ Additionally, the committee sought to reinforce the exhibition's commitment to inclusivity and respect for all cultural and historical contexts, while carefully navigating complex political terrains in contemporary art.

4.11 *Lumbung* after documenta

As ruangrupa clearly stated, *lumbung* is more than just a theme or method used for documenta fifteen—it is an intrinsic part of who they are and how they operate as a collective. It embodies a mindset and a way of working that extends well beyond any single project or event, including documenta fifteen. Again, *Lumbung* is not purposely created for documenta

³²⁵ M. Carrigan, *After Much Upheaval, Documenta Hits Reset With a New Finding Committee*, Artnet, 3 July 2024, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/documenta-new-committee-2507431> [last access 23 September 2024]

After documenta fifteen, *Lumbung* continues to thrive as a global network of artists, collectives, and communities who have committed to the principles of shared resources, knowledge, and collaborative practices. The connections and relationships formed during the exhibition have laid the groundwork for future collaborations that will extend across borders and contexts. During an interview with Sophie Giltz, Ade Darmawan affirmed that *Lumbung* will continue as it be after documenta fifteen:

We are dealing with another new ecosystem that also has so many good friends, and which is already connected to those other networks that have known us since the beginning of our time—this is a way of continuing, extending. It's not really a matter of being in Germany, with others in Jakarta—we blend in distances through this network, somehow.³²⁶

These networks are not constrained by geographic location or the temporal boundaries of the exhibition; instead, they form a decentralised and ongoing process of mutual support and creative exchange. This means that after documenta fifteen, the idea of *Lumbung* continues to evolve and adapt, not only in Kassel or Jakarta but across the various locations where artists and collectives from the *Lumbung* network operate. It reflects a long-term vision of sustainability, where artists are empowered to build resilient and interdependent communities that can support each other in creative and material ways.

For the local context in Indonesia, *Lumbung* continues to thrive as a foundational method of collective learning, particularly through its expansion in educational initiatives like Gudskul. This space serves as an experimental hub where individuals, artists, and communities can engage in *Lumbung's* values of resource-sharing, collaboration, and mutual learning. Moreover, beyond *ruangrupa* itself, the hope is that the involvement in *Lumbung* during documenta fifteen will continue to influence practices across various contexts.³²⁷ The collective spirit and resource-sharing philosophy that *Lumbung* represents have the potential to be sustained and applied not just in art communities, but in broader social and cultural frameworks. In this way, *Lumbung* continues to inspire a rethinking of how art can operate within society, shifting away from individualistic, market-driven models and

³²⁶ S. Goltz with R. Afisina, A. Darmawan, I. Hartono; *Collective Crafting in Post-Suharto Indonesia: A Journey with Ruangrupa from the Jakarta Institute of the Arts to Documenta Fifteen in Kassel*, *Cultural Politics* 1 November 2022; Issue 18 (3), p. 430–458.

³²⁷ ruangrupa, Introduction, *documenta fifteen handbook*, Hatje Cantz, 2022.

towards more inclusive, collaborative, and sustainable modes of production and engagement.

Conclusion

To conclude this thesis, several key aspects can be highlighted in tracing ruangrupa's artistic journey from Jakarta to the global stage, particularly through their involvement in the mega exhibition *documenta fifteen*. First, the expansion of ruangrupa reflects a profound engagement with Indonesia's socio-political context, particularly its emergence during the post-New Order era following the downfall of President Soeharto in 1998. This period of transition marked a significant momentum for Indonesian art, as the country shifted from decades of authoritarian rule to a new era of reform and democratisation. Widespread calls for social change, freedom of expression, and civic participation defined this time, creating an important ground for artistic collectives like ruangrupa to emerge in 2000. Their early discussions and informal gatherings during this period laid the foundation for the commitment to collaboration, critical discourse, and community-based art practices.

Second, ruangrupa's artistic method in which they called as the way of their working, embracing a more inclusive, participatory, and process-driven approach. Their focus on *Lumbung* that firstly introduced in 2016 set aside the commodification of art as merely a marketable product, instead focusing on the process of creation, dialogue, and exchange. This method encourages artists, curators, and participants to work together, share resources, and engage in continuous collaboration, creating a sense of solidarity and long-term relationships that extend beyond single projects or exhibitions. In local context, ruangrupa actively engage in various collaborative actions through the program that they manage such as OK.Video, rrec Fest, jakarta 32° and one of ruangrupa flagship initiatives is Gudskul, an informal education platform they co-founded, which functions as a collective learning space focused on art, activism, and social practice. With this active participation and expansion through diverse activities, ruangrupa demonstrates that collective collaboration can achieve something far greater than the traditional focus on art-making alone. Their work shows that the power of collaboration can create broader societal benefits, from

promoting critical discourse to empowering communities and individuals to engage with social issues in meaningful ways.

The third aspect is to highlight ruangrupa's significant activities on the international stage, where their participation in numerous art exhibitions has brought them widespread recognition such as the Singapore Biennial, Gwangju Biennial, Istanbul Biennial and their major role as artistic director for SONSBEK16. Through these international platforms, ruangrupa has been able to showcase their work, which is deeply rooted in addressing social issues and nurturing meaningful engagement with audiences. Through these international engagements, ruangrupa has successfully extended their influence beyond Indonesia, making their socially-conscious, community-driven art practices relevant on a global scale.

The peak of their international participation came with their curatorial leadership at documenta fifteen in 2022. This was the first time a collective from Southeast Asia had been given the responsibility to lead documenta, highlighting more inclusive and decentralised approaches to curation and art-making. Here ruangrupa implemented the *Lumbung* concept on a global scale transforming the exhibition into a space where artists, collectives, and communities could contribute to a shared, sustainable art practice. Rather than presenting isolated works, they fostered an ongoing dialogue between artists and audiences, emphasising process over product. This collective model challenged the traditional structures of the global art world, which often prioritise individual success and market value, by placing collaboration, mutual support, and shared resources as the main method.

With this thesis, I aim to emphasise that collaborative action has the potential to make a significant impact on broader society. Drawing from Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of Transitivity, I argue that art practitioners should move beyond the confines of the art world to engage actively with societal issues. Bourriaud suggests that artists should not only create within their field but also use art as a medium to connect and intervene in broader social contexts then combined with Claire Bishop's concept of Socially Engaged Art, which emphasises meaningful community engagement and critiques socio-political structures, these frameworks together

advocate for an art practice that not only reflects but actively intervenes in and critiques societal issues, prioritising real-world impact and engagement.

ruangrupa's journey illustrates this clearly: their approach to art, based on cooperation, dialogue, and resource-sharing, has demonstrated how collectivity can not only foster creativity but also address multiple issues that spark in society. Moreover, this collaborative approach enables individuals within the community to realise their potential more fully, as collective efforts encourage the exchange of ideas, skills, and perspectives. This thesis underscores that collaboration is not merely a method of artistic production but a vital tool for driving social progress and reimagining the possibilities of both art and activism in the current period.

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Appendix

Transcript of Interview with ruangrupa

The interview was conducted through e-mail correspondence.

JMP: Jean Marsha Pricilia

fr: farid rakun

IH: Iswanto Hartono

29 April 2024

JMP: Is there any particular topic or issue that led ruangrupa to decide to collaborate with other communities or individuals outside of ruangrupa?

fr: The further realisation that we cannot and have never lived alone. The term 'ecosystem,' which we often use (for example, from when we called it Gudang Sarinah Ecosystem or Gudskul Ecosystem), stems from this awareness.

JMP: With the growing number of political, gender, and other sensitive issues (e.g., Guerilla Girls, Russian Constructivists, etc.) raised by many collectives, is ruangrupa also open to addressing these kinds of sensitive topics?

fr: Themes or topics, especially those that are political and sensitive, are a consequence for us. Sustainability, in ways that are unconventional in capitalistic and centralised systems, is something we have learned to be more valuable to reflect on and put into practice. Themes, whether sensitive or not, come naturally as a result, not as a foundation. With this mindset and approach, we avoid the trap of representation—trying to serve all interests. We serve our own interests. What we can do is expand the understanding of 'we' to include ever-growing parties. Again, this growth must occur naturally, over time, and not be forced.

JMP: Are there any theoretical foundations that might have influenced ruangrupa ?

fr: What we have found is that theories (especially those from art, philosophy, and so on) are never fully sufficient to help us understand what we are actually aiming for. In part, these theories sometimes help, but never completely. This realisation led us to rely more on stories from different parts of the world. Through stories, interpretation becomes more open, and knowledge can be more easily passed across generations. In our view, the storytelling process is also more artistic, making it easier to digest and less didactic.

10 June 2024

JMP: Activities such as exhibitions, talk shows, and other events—how did these activities initially take place? Did specific communities or individuals contact ruangrupa first, or was it the other way around? How did the ruangrupa team participate in these activities?

fr: Often, the needs, which translate into topics, forms of activities, and outcomes, come from our own practices in everyday reality. These needs vary and frequently arise from our interactions with various parties, so they are collaborative in nature from the start. We

nurture our connections and networks for these needs, along with the awareness that we are indeed part of various ecosystems (both within and outside of the arts). What role can we play in these diverse ecosystems?

Exhibitions of young artists emerged because young artists (especially in Jakarta) found it difficult to get space to develop and present their artistic language to the public. Music festivals were created because of our passion for discovering music that wasn't given a place in the mainstream music industry. We organised curator and writing workshops for several years because we realised there was a demand for these positions that wasn't being met by the existing system at the time. Typically, we build infrastructure because it's needed and not (or hasn't yet been) provided by the existing system. The logic is simple and not difficult.

28 June 2024

JMP: From several journals I've read, I came across the statement, "Lumbung as an artistic and economic model will be practiced alongside its values of collectivity." Could you explain this concept in relation to ruangrupa, lumbung, and the economy?

fr: ruangrupa, as an artist collective, together with other collectives, has tried to apply the lumbung economic model, where we can share many resources—space, money, people, history, knowledge, etc.—because we want to create an (art) ecosystem where we can support each other, rather than compete and bring each other down. The sharing economy, which has long existed in our reality, even though it has now certainly become less popular compared to the neoliberal economy in our daily lives, is one possible interpretation of the lumbung model.

JMP: Regarding the ecosystem you previously mentioned, what is the deeper connection between the ecosystem and ruangrupa, and how is it implemented?

fr: We understand ourselves as one player within a diverse ecosystem. The relationships and balance between the players in this ecosystem, which constantly shift over time, are key to our survival. We aim to deepen our understanding of the different roles of each component in the ecosystem, the potentials they hold, and to advance the ecosystem and its players together (not growing alone). This is something we strive to understand each time.

18 July 2024

JMP: ruru often participates in international art events (prior to Documenta), such as the Istanbul Biennale and others. How does ruru view these opportunities? Is it seen as a platform to introduce ruru to the international arena, or are there other fundamental reasons? In such activities, are there specific elements that ruru always aims to showcase?

fr: ruangrupa has been aware from the beginning that we are global beings. Networking with many struggles in other parts of the world has become important. Learning about other artistic ecosystems and the world in general is made possible through the artistic practices at the events you mentioned. Introducing our practices is not the main agenda; rather, getting to know many other parties is more important. The relationships we maintain through these

firsthand visiting experiences are what we consider the most valuable outcomes that need to be nurtured. Engaging the local ecosystem has become our recurring modus operandi. The methods vary, depending on what opportunities the inviting parties can offer.

28 August 2024

Additional interview with Iswanto Hartono regarding his work at SONSBEЕК'16

JMP: I would like to ask about the installation work exhibited at SONSBEЕК16. Could you explain a little about the creation of this work and the underlying factors behind it?

IH: This work is actually a remake of my previous works in Tokyo titled *Flower* and in Düsseldorf titled *Feldkuche*, which are combined into one. The work *Flower* is based on my personal memories from childhood that are attached to global/local figures/events. It explores many dimensions of what it means to be a hero, a villain, a figure, a politician, an artist, and so on. The original work consists of mini figurines that the public can participate with; the composition of the figures changes as visitors engage with them according to their own imagination and visions.

The work *Feldkuche* is inspired by the Tamiya model toy of the German army's military field kitchen during World War II. I created a photographic diorama installation for the public, allowing them to become part of the imagery of this military field kitchen in a public park in Düsseldorf. As mentioned above, I have loved military model toys since childhood, and this work becomes contradictory when the model of the German World War II military toy is placed in public in Germany, carrying the collective memory of the Holocaust and World War II.

I am interested in exploring the intersections between personal memory and collective memory concerning identity, social politics, geopolitics, history, and colonial-postcolonial issues, particularly in relation to Indonesia and the global context.

When I was brought to Sonsbeek in the city of Arnhem, I chose a location next to a historic bridge that is part of the memory of World War II, where Nazi soldiers entered the Netherlands and a historic battle took place. The constellation of life-size figures and objects, created with specific imagery, inevitably makes the intersections of personal and collective memory into a polemic, ambiguous, contradictory, and overlapping experience. Additionally, it presents another perspective on the dynamics of Western history and politics from my personal side, having grown up in Indonesia with the dynamics of postcolonial politics.