

Master Thesis

From Conviviality to Methodology: 'Nongkrong' as Alternative Organisational Approach and Artistic Process in Ruangrupa's Practice.



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Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this dissertation is an original piece of work, written by myself alone. Any information and ideas from other sources are acknowledged fully in the text and notes.

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Signature

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Introduction

In February 2019, Sabine Schormann, general director of documenta and the Museum Fridericianum, Kassel (Germany) announced that the International Finding Committee unanimously nominated Indonesian artists' collective ruangrupa as the artistic director of documenta fifteen, which takes place from June to September 2022 in Kassel.¹ It is the first time in the history of documenta that an artist collective emerging from South East Asia curates the event's artistic direction.² As claimed in documenta's official press release, the reason behind this decision is to promote local commitment and participation through ruangrupa's community-based strategic approach, which also appeals to a non-art audience, being potentially relevant for Kassel and the international community.³ The collective, founded in 2000 in Jakarta (Indonesia), range from a core group of nine members to an enlarged group of over thirty members with different backgrounds and expertise. Ruangrupa significantly explores exchange processes and collective memories concerning urban and public spaces through a multidisciplinary research-based practice.⁴ Their projects are intertwined with community engagement, and strengthen connections with the context in which the work is produced.⁵ Ruangrupa are also involved in pedagogical initiatives; in 2018, they opened Gudskul, an alternative space to promote, share, and experience knowledge through communal learning.⁶ In addition to the artistic, cultural, and educational initiatives organised in (and for) Jakarta, ruangrupa also participated in several international projects, strengthening their network of 'friends', pivotal to their development and initiatives.⁷

¹ DOCUMENTA-FIFTEEN WEBSITE, 'ruangrupa Selected as Artistic Direction of documenta 15 For the First Time an Artist Collective Curates the International Art Exhibition'.

² Ratelle 2020.

³ DOCUMENTA-FIFTEEN WEBSITE, 'ruangrupa Selected as Artistic Direction of documenta 15 For the First Time an Artist Collective Curates the International Art Exhibition'.

⁴ Alphen 2015.

⁵ Ratelle 2020.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Smits 2018.

For documenta fifteen, ruangrupa proposed the concept of ‘lumbung’ as curatorial practice. Directly translatable as ‘rice barn’, lumbung “is a collective pot or accumulation system used in rural areas of Indonesia, where crops produced by a community are stored as a future shared common resource and distributed according to jointly determined criteria.”⁸ It relates to the concept of redistribution, communal life, and common sharing as possible sustainable practices for the society.⁹ Furthermore, it serves as a common field where to make new alliances and build mutual dialogues with “other cosmologies.”¹⁰ In this regard, in 2021, ruangrupa started the series of online conversations ‘lumbung calling’, inviting several contributors to discuss with ruangrupa’s member Mirwan Andan and artist Jumana Emil Abboud — hosts of the meetings — the lumbung values and how they resonate in transnational contexts. Concerning documenta’s organisation, lumbung consists of several international members — among which artists’ collectives, no-profit art organisations, festivals, and factories — that will share their interdisciplinary knowledge through various initiatives within documenta fifteen’s framework and beyond following ruangrupa’s aim to create “a globally oriented, cooperative, interdisciplinary art and culture platform that will remain effective beyond the 100 days of documenta fifteen.”¹¹ Furthermore, ruangrupa has also announced five ‘allies’ or ‘friends’ forming documenta fifteen artistic team who will collaborate to plan and execute the event.¹²

The idea of expanding documenta’s scope, venues and geographies developed through time, progressively leading the renowned Western-centric event to evolve towards new cultural narratives and transnational trajectories, exploring contemporary developments in arts and culture from postcolonial perspectives. Editions such as documenta 11 (2002) directed by Okwui Enwezor, who shared his role with six co-curators and organised a series of

⁸ UNIVERSES WEBSITE, ‘Lumbung’.

⁹ DOCUMENTA FIFTEEN 2021.

¹⁰ SMAKGENT 2021.

¹¹ UNIVERSES WEBSITE, ‘Lumbung’, §1.

¹² Brown 2020.

events the year prior to the exhibition in five localities across the globe (particularly Vienna, Austria, New Delhi, India, Saint Lucia, Island of Saint Lucia, and Lagos, Nigeria), create an antecedent to ruangrupa's appointment and curatorial interest. However, what is innovative compared to documenta's previous editions, is that ruangrupa want to create a global platform of shared sources and relations lasting through time, envisioning a project for at least two to five years after the end of the exhibition. A question that can arise in this regard is how can this planetary model based on relations be concretely reached, monitored in the long-term, and what does this imply?

The lumbung project recalls the discourse initiated by art historian Claire Bishop on how social sciences can measure the relationships or social transformations produced by social oriented art.¹³ In her essay 'Former West: Art as Project in the Early 1990s', part of the volume *Artificial Hells* (2012), Bishop argues that the use of the term 'project' in relation to the art vocabulary emerged around 1993 when a new format of site-specific exhibitions marked the rise the so-called 'social turn' in Western European and North-American art scene.¹⁴ These exhibitions "marked the transition from site-specificity as a matter of tailored formal arrangement to the project of embedding the artist in the social field."¹⁵ Particularly addressing three initiatives held in 1993 — Project Unité (Marseille, France), Sonsbeek '93 (Arnhem, the Netherlands), and Culture in Action (Chicago, US) — Bishop highlights curators' reluctance in labelling their projects as 'social'; indicating a dominant conservatism in the artworld and the lack of vocabulary to refer to a new art form "not reducible to activism or community art."¹⁶ However, the rise of *Relational Aesthetics*, theorised by curator Nicolas Bourriaud in the mid-1990s, brought the term 'sociability' to new life.¹⁷ The so-called relational artists experimented with new exhibition formats, creating events to produce social relations and "collective elaboration of

¹³ BAK basis voor actuele kunst 2019.

¹⁴ Bishop 2012, p. 195.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

meaning.”¹⁸ The hybrid format and duration of these events considerably changed the beholders’ perception of the art spaces and artworks, encouraging participation and interactions.

The approach towards gathering and togetherness fostered by relational artists recalls ruangrupa’s attitude towards conviviality, pivotal to their organisational and artistic practice. However, contrary to ruangrupa’s projects, relational art remained almost exclusively relegated to art venues, consequently operating a selection in terms of audience and forming relationships. Furthermore, despite the interest in social relationships, relational artists did not show particular interest in addressing socio-political issues through their projects, making a clear difference with ruangrupa’s aims. In addition to that, Bishop observed that the quality of the relationships produced during relational projects has never been investigated.¹⁹ It can be argued that this claim implies that value, to be so, has to be measurable, an arduous task for socially engaged art practises and art historical methodologies. Nonetheless, it reflects the danger of the art market’s profit orientation, exploiting artistic and cultural production.²⁰

Two days after ruangrupa’s appointment, the art critic and writer Kolja Reichert expressed in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Magazine* his scepticism toward the appointment of ruangrupa as artistic director of documenta fifteen. He claimed that “the fact that in 2016 [ruangrupa] curated the Sonsbeek art festival in Arnhem, the Netherlands, somehow didn’t get through to us; perhaps because ruangrupa do not produce transportable symbols, but rather look at the location to see what the people need.”²¹ Although substantial arguments do not support Reichert’s scepticism, it nonetheless invites some thoughts, particularly regarding a certain nostalgia for an object-oriented artistic production in opposition to an open-ended, project-based and socially oriented artistic practice. Ruangrupa’s curatorial strategies and artistic approaches

¹⁸ Bourriaud 2002, p.15.

¹⁹ Bishop 2004, p.62.

²⁰ Ozgun 2013.

²¹ Reichert 2019.

gravitate around workshops, encounters, or simple conversation to facilitate the interactions with the communities.²² Through structuring their projects on the Indonesian concept and custom of 'nongkrong', ruangrupa provide an infrastructure for artistic and cultural practices overcoming the white cube logic and entering the urban and social stratus.

Translated as 'talking', 'hanging out' and 'showing that you care for others without expecting anything in return', nongkrong is a non-productive practice that emerged in Indonesia as a political act during the New Order regime (1966-1998) gradually becoming a feature of artist collectives born from the period known as Reformasi (post-1998).²³ Practising nongkrong has led ruangrupa to strengthen their relations with local and international 'friends', progressively creating a transnational network of local ecosystems rooted in mutual dialogue and collaboration. Nevertheless, it can be considered at the very base of their formation, organisational structure, and projects. This collective practice reflects ruangrupa's interest in using a system of implicit and explicit values of Indonesian society in their artistic and curatorial practice aiming to dismantle systems of power, injustices, and unbalanced hierarchies.

Through time, nongkrong organically evolved in its structure following ruangrupa's development and interventions worldwide, being translated to international contexts and networks. Through the analysis of *The Apartment Project for Urban and Residential Environments* (2003), Arts Collaboratory Assembly Indonesia (2014), SONSBECK '16: transACTION (2016) and the curatorial concept of lumbung for documenta fifteen (2022), this thesis attempts to give insight into the evolution of nongkrong from a convivial practice to an artistic process and organisational method organically developing into the more structured practice of lumbung aiming at encouraging social betterment and transnational cohesion. Following these considerations, the main research question of this thesis is the following: How does nongkrong, as an alternative organisational approach and artistic process, shape ruangrupa's practice

²² Berghuis 2012.

²³ Ratelle 2020.

navigating through Western European biennials and fostering long-term transnational and intercultural relations? Three sub-questions will underpin the research question. Firstly, what does 'alternative' mean when it comes to ruangrupa's artistic and curatorial practice and how does this relate to the concept of nongkrong? Secondly, how can nongkrong foster open, non-hierarchical modes of collaboration? Lastly, how does nongkrong enquire about post-colonial notions of relationality?

To contextualise the socio-political and artistic panorama from which ruangrupa emerged, the first chapter discusses some development in Indonesian contemporary art during the New Order. The first section mainly focuses on a new avant-garde movement that pursued collective artistic practices reflecting on art's social functions and impact, initiating a solid alignment between Indonesian art, socio-political criticism, societal transformation, and community-based projects. These artistic practices are considered fundamental for bringing contemporary art to further development in the 2000s; therefore, they create the antecedent to the discussion introduced in the second section, revolving around artist collectives emerging post-Suharto. This section enquires about the lack of art infrastructure in modern Indonesia and the notion of 'alternative' concerning contemporary art spaces, both essential to ruangrupa's foundation and developments.²⁴

The second chapter introduces ruangrupa, firstly giving an overview of their early projects, interests, and aims, focussing on the notions of 'ecosystem' and 'infrastructure' valuable to unpacking their artistic and curatorial approach. Consequently, it discusses three projects, held both locally and internationally, aiming to contextualise their practice and outlining the focus on informal

²⁴ As social psychologist Risa Permanadeli argues, the issue of modernisation in Indonesia does not follow a linear path (from tradition to modernity) as in the West. On the contrary, modernisation is intended as the process of reappropriation of traditions, customs, habits, and local values dating back before colonialism to preserve and defend local communities' identity. Modernisation fostered collective cultural values to change social paths. Through cooperation, also known as 'gotong royong', communities have structured a resource distribution and ecosphere preservation system, "helping each other, without having to be asked for" (Pasteruk 2020, p. 339). Although such systems of social coexistence are forced to vanish due to the increase in capitalist development, young generations are currently rethinking and reappropriating these concepts. See Permanadeli 2019; Pasteruk 2020.

gatherings and making 'friends' that will be later framed in theory. The first project to be investigated is *The Apartment Project for Urban and Residential Environment* (2003), held in Jakarta, which addressed the impact of gentrification on traditional Javanese houses' architecture and how it affects residents' behaviours and social relations. The second is *Arts Collaboratory Assembly: Indonesia* (2014), a series of workshops and conferences organised in Jakarta, Jatiwangi, and Yogyakarta in collaboration with KUNCI Study Forum & Collective (Yogyakarta, Indonesia), Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons (Utrecht, the Netherlands), Stichting Doen (Amsterdam, the Netherlands), and Hivos (Leiden, the Netherlands), focused on extensive discussions, networking, and collaborative activities fostering participation free of formal hierarchies. This section introduces the concepts of 'translocality' and 'transnationality', which foster interconnection processes among places and communities distant in time and space. The last analysed project is SONSBECK '16: *transACTION* (2016), held in Arnhem (The Netherlands). This section mainly focuses on the *ruru huis* — modelled on the *ruru* house in South Jakarta — as a communal place for hanging out and engaging in conversations that *ruangrupa* progressively translated to international contexts, eventually establishing it in Kassel for documenta fifteen.

The third chapter broadens the reflection on *ruangrupa*'s collaborative artistic and curatorial practices and deepens the knowledge of essential concepts that shape their projects. The first section enquires about the notion of 'relation' concerning *ruangrupa* from a postcolonial perspective, investigating the transition from individuality to the plurality of relations with others ultimately addressed as 'world community'. In this section, I argue that *ruangrupa*'s projects find a receptiveness in European and North American lineages of artistic practices from the mid-1990s, particularly Relational Aesthetics. By taking as examples Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free)* at the 303 Gallery, New York (1992), and *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)* at the Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne (1996), I outline the main similarities and differences between *ruangrupa* and relational art aims. The second section focuses on the

concept of nongkrong as a strategy to move out of the authorship-ownership individuality, going towards plural modes of collaboration. In this section, nongkrong is read in light of the notion of conversational art with which it shares the purpose of shifting the relation between artist and audience towards a relational paradigm. Furthermore, I argue that nongkrong can be considered at the core of ruangrupa's organisation and art practice. Considering this claim, I apply nongkrong as a key-reading to discuss the projects presented in chapter two, providing them with a focus on discussions' potential as a relational infrastructure. The last section introduces the practice of lumbung as the curatorial strategy for documenta fifteen. This section enquires about lumbung as the organic development of nongkrong, envisioning an alternative lifestyle rooted in relationality and sustainability, aiming to dismantle oppressive power structures and produce social changes. In this section, lumbung is analysed in light of theories on commonism as a belief system proposing new forms and practices of shared living.

Instead of setting forth an a priori theoretical framework to display my analysis, I structure a mode of inquiry intertwining theories and practices into a mutual relation, gradually assembling a toolkit allowing the reader to approach the discussed projects through conceptual contributions derived from different disciplines. This development organically leads to the conclusion in which I finally answer the main research question: How does nongkrong, as an alternative organisational approach and artistic process, shape ruangrupa's practice navigating through Western European biennials and fostering long-term transnational and intercultural relations?

This thesis' research process encountered some difficulties. Firstly, although Indonesian contemporary art is well established in the global art discourse, it is relatively little investigated in European higher education in arts and culture. According to art historian Leonor Veiga, one of the reasons behind this educational lack is that "as an area of study, Southeast Asia is relatively

new, dating approximately to the 1950s.”²⁵ According to artist, art critic and curator Jim Supangkat’s, art produced in non-democratic nations or under dictatorial governments is rarely included in international survey art books and exhibitions.²⁶ In particular, Indonesian art has not been addressed during my art historical training. Therefore, I approached researching this topic filling an educational gap as best as possible. Additionally, scarce secondary academic literature regarding ruangrupa is currently available, while other sources are not accessible in terms of language. For these and other reasons, I felt the need to establish methodological lines of inquiry wherein social agents would not be treated as ‘objects’ of study but rather as subjects of thought and knowledge. Accordingly, I decided to recuperate the lived experience of nongkrong by engaging in informal conversations with participants in the projects investigated in chapter two. It turned out to be extremely important to the overall research, for the information my interlocutors shared helped me collect memories and effects these projects have had on their organisers and participants. Lastly, despite this thesis’ attempts to counterbalance Western European/North American theories by proposing postcolonial reflections, it is essential to acknowledge the degree to which relations of knowledge/power traverse my research. As a Western European university student, I am in a position of privilege with respect to forms of informal knowledge exchanges and community struggles addressed by ruangrupa. Nevertheless, this thesis aims to overcome these power structures through mutual learning that ruangrupa apply in their projects and social relations at large.

²⁵ Veiga 2018, p.6.

²⁶ Ibid.

CHAPTER 1

Artist Collectives as Alternative Spaces in Indonesia

1.1 Developments in Indonesian Contemporary Art between the 1970s and the 1990s

During the last three decades, the Indonesian contemporary art scene has undergone a significant transformation. Art practices have progressively grown into the global communication system expanding to international economic and cultural networks.²⁷ In line with the growing interest by the international art world, Indonesian contemporary artists had the opportunity to participate in international events, unveiling the fact that Indonesian art had been ignored by international art circles for a long time.²⁸ In fact, despite the proliferation of international art exhibitions from the 1990s aiming to decentralise the major art centres outside Western European and North American metropolises, it is arguable that contemporary art often omits narratives from “contexts perceived as non-conducive to the open expression of an individual subjectivity.”²⁹ Contemporary Southeast Asian art in general, and Indonesian art in particular, constitute an example of these considerations, challenging the international art historical discourse being produced by a region characterised by countries with different colonial pasts, religious practices, languages, cultural backgrounds, and dictatorial regimes.³⁰ In fact, the Indonesian art panorama is vibrant and varied. Each region has a particular visual language resulting from diverse conditions, religious values, and traditions, eventually constituting a pluralism of artistic expressions.³¹ Among the possible causes of such a dismissal, art historian Leonor Veiga supposes that the global art world didn’t immediately recognise contemporary Southeast Asian art practices as such, perceiving them

²⁷ Hujatnikajennong 2012.

²⁸ Turner 1993.

²⁹ Kee 2011, p. 272.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Suardana 2019.

as political activism.³² In this regard, art critic and curator Patrick D. Flores claims that, under the New Order, visual art was a powerful tool in Indonesia, becoming a historical “vehicle of popular empowerment” to the point that in the mid-1990s, it contributed to accelerating local political changes.³³ Indonesian contemporary artists denounced genocide, censorship, and oppression happened under the New Order, expressing their discontent through an intrinsic relationality linked to community building, mutual collaboration, and knowledge exchange.³⁴

The New Order (1966-1998) was a dictatorial regime that emerged in Indonesia after an attempted coup d'état in 1965, for which the Indonesian communist party was accounted responsible.³⁵ This event was followed by large-scale killings over several months, targeting indiscriminately communist party members, leftists, and people of Chinese descent in line with the primary aim of General Suharto — the new head of state — to create a unique national identity by homogenising the Indonesian regional differences through the adoption of Javanese constructs and a centralised bureaucratic administration.³⁶ Suharto's ‘politics-of-order’ was seen as a solution to instability and an effective way to pursue capitalist development, also opening to foreign private investments.³⁷ Indeed, during Suharto's regime, Indonesia experienced a rapid economic growth followed by intensive urbanisation of several areas of the region, and growth of an emergent middle class.³⁸ However, the extreme discriminatory policies and repressive measures adopted during New Order's three decades, generated an increasing discontent among the people.

To create a strengthened Indonesian identity, Suharto incentivised Javacentrism through promoting non-figurative and traditional arts in opposition to the socially-oriented movements that emerged during his predecessor

³² Veiga 2018.

³³ Flores 2013, p. 273.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ BRITANNICA WEBSITE, ‘Indonesia from the coup to the end of the New Order’.

³⁶ Flores 2013.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Lanzi 2011.

Sukarno's government (1950-1965).³⁹ Suharto's protectionist policies produced tension both on the international art market and in the local art scene, leading to the foundation of a new avant-garde movement that pursued new artistic practices reflecting on art's social functions and impact.⁴⁰ Particularly three artists' initiatives from the 1970s received great attention for having challenged the status quo of the dominant decorative art: the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GRSBI) — or New Art Movement — the Desember Hitam — or Black December — and the Kepribadian Apa (PIPA) — or What Identity. These groups fostered experimental art practices, focussing on interdisciplinarity, and merging several mediums to enhance the concept over the form. Installation became the main visual language used by these artists, who also used objects from everyday life to create a bond with their local audience.⁴¹ According to Supangkat, one of the former members of the GRSBI, these groups introduced contemporary art in Indonesia, merging different artistic strategies and addressing social issues amidst a non-democratic condition.⁴²

The GRSBI initiated a strong alignment between Indonesian art, socio-political criticism, societal transformation, and community-based projects.⁴³ In its manifesto, the group openly rejected traditional Javanese art, declaring their research-oriented artistic attitude overcoming the standard categories of visual art.⁴⁴ The GRSBI enhanced the development of a local artistic response to the international art tendencies, embracing features of Dada, Conceptual, and Pop art to overcome school's conservatism.⁴⁵ In 1975, the group organised the exhibition *Pameran Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia 75 (Indonesia New Visual Art Exhibition 75)* at Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM), Jakarta.⁴⁶ The TIM, which hosted the first Jakarta Biennial of Painting in 1974, was the only place housing

³⁹ Veiga 2018.

⁴⁰ Flores 2011.

⁴¹ Kent 2016.

⁴² Supangkat 2015.

⁴³ Valjakka 2020.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Veiga 2018.

⁴⁶ Archives of GERAKAN SENI RUPA BARU INDONESIA (Indonesian New Art Movement).

exhibitions in Jakarta at that time.⁴⁷ According to art critic Sanento Yuliman, the eleven artists displayed in the exhibition — coming from Bandung, Jakarta, and Yogyakarta — broke with the former generation of Indonesian artists, playing with new medium and everyday objects, which resulted in a new artistic experience.⁴⁸ As an example, Supangkat's sculpture *Ken Dedes* (Fig.1) combined the head of a traditional Javanese sculpture portraying Ken Dedes, the first queen of Singhasari, Java, with the body of a bare-chested woman in unzipped pants.⁴⁹ According to Veiga, the fact that Supangkat put together a symbol of classic culture and a body of a provocative contemporary woman, denotes the transitional states that art was undertaking in the 1970s, challenging local traditions and opening to international art discourses.⁵⁰

Although the GRSBI was officially dismantled in 1979, some of its members continued collaborating until 1987. Meanwhile, the Bandung art scene, already influenced by Supangkat anti-formalism, saw the emergence of the *jeprut* performances, happenings realised by an interdisciplinary group of visual artists, theatre actors, poets, and musicians, spontaneously intervening in public sites and local communities.⁵¹ The term '*jeprut*' comes from an onomatopoeic West Javanese word indicating "a break that occurs as a result of tension."⁵² Although *jeprut* performers openly linked their actions to international art movements such as Fluxus and Dada, the spontaneity of their interventions undertaken in crowded places, often being not publicised, marked a clear difference with their Western counterparts.⁵³ Spontaneity and informal gatherings were used as artistic strategies and to counter Suharto's measures against dissent and suspicious crimes, often leading artists and activists to be arrested, prosecuted, or murdered.⁵⁴ Merging theatre and installation art, *jeprut* performances included prominent artists such as Arahmaiani and Tisna

⁴⁷ Jakarta Biennale, 'History'.

⁴⁸ Archives of GERAKAN SENI RUPA BARU INDONESIA (Indonesian New Art Movement).

⁴⁹ Reichle 2007.

⁵⁰ Veiga 2018, p. 138.

⁵¹ Kent 2016.

⁵² Ibid., p. 80.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Sanjaya who, together with artists such as FX Harsono and Moelyono, are among the most prolific practitioners of participatory art in Indonesia. Veiga labels the artists following this line of enquiry as ‘cultural citizenship’ to underline their inclination to give voice to community concerns.⁵⁵ Through their work, these artists explore social issues such as poverty, injustice, oppression, and power abuses resulting from the government’s mismanagement.⁵⁶ In this light, the work of Arahmaiani appears particularly interesting, fostering a contribution for the betterment of the community of Sundanese ethnicity from West Java by addressing issues related to globalisation, gender, and geopolitical Islam.⁵⁷

Despite the increased development of contemporary art, Indonesia had lacked a contemporary art space until 1988, when artists Nindityo Adipurnomo and Mella Jaarsma founded the Rumah Seni Cemeti — or Cemeti Art House in Yogyakarta. The gallery soon became pivotal for emerging artists and the development of the contemporary art discourse both locally and internationally, drawing increased attention towards the Indonesian artistic panorama.⁵⁸ As scholar Susan Helen Ingham posits, Cemeti can be considered as an “alternative exhibition space” outside the circuit of commercial galleries or the art establishment.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, it was pivotal to the distribution of contemporary Indonesian art to several countries among which Japan, Germany, the Netherlands, Latin America, becoming the most effective infrastructure supporting contemporary art in the 1990s.⁶⁰

In 1995 Nindityo and Mella also founded the Yayasan Seni Cemeti — or the Cemeti Art Foundation — “a combination of an arts council, a library and a research centre, and a meeting place for those interested or involved in contemporary art.”⁶¹ The same year, Rumah Seni Cemeti in collaboration with the Gate Foundation — an Amsterdam-based nonprofit organisation —

⁵⁵ Veiga 2018.

⁵⁶ Supangkat 2005.

⁵⁷ Zineng 2008.

⁵⁸ Clark 2005.

⁵⁹ Ingham 2007.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

organised an exhibition to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Indonesian independence. The exhibition, titled *Orientasi (Orientation)*, showed five Dutch artists in Jakarta in 1995 and five Indonesian artists in Leiden (The Netherlands) the following year.⁶² According to Supangkat, the exhibition was attempting to challenge the assumption of contemporary art as a Western prerogative. Nevertheless, it received several critiques for giving the stage to the former coloniser of Indonesia, enhancing the Westernisation of the arts.⁶³ By contrast, The *Non-Aligned Nations Contemporary Art Exhibition* (GNB Exhibition) held in Jakarta in 1995 along with the seminar *Unity in Diversity in International Art* — was highly criticised for being anti-West, and for politicising visual art.⁶⁴ By fostering the Indonesian motto “Unity in diversity”, the exhibition and the seminar aimed to promote mutual collaboration among the Non Aligned Movement nations, using visual arts to address social issues in different geographical contexts.⁶⁵ Participating countries included Bangladesh, Chile, China, Egypt, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Syria, Philippines, Senegal.⁶⁶ However, the exhibition was accused of being a government project and, consequently, related to corruption and censorship policies.⁶⁷

The 1990s witnessed an increased repression and political violence against protest movements. Furthermore, Suharto’s government was increasingly portrayed as corrupt, damaging Jakarta’s and Indonesia’s image.⁶⁸ This socio-political panorama was further exacerbated by the 1997 monetary

⁶² Ingham 2007.

⁶³ Kent 2016.

⁶⁴ Supangkat undated.

⁶⁵ Delcour 2018. To better contextualise the GNB exhibition’s aims, it is essential to stress that in 1955, the city of Bandung (Indonesia), hosted the Asian-African Conference in which several heads of states from Asian and African descent discussed urgent questions of the time among which were the consequences of decolonization and the state of economic underdevelopment of newly formed states. This conference is commonly considered as the starting point for the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), formalised in 1961 in Belgrade (Serbia), standing for the stance of its member states during the Cold War as being non-aligned with either the Western or the Eastern bloc. One of the movement’s main goals was, and still is, giving voice to the Global South, representing its interests internationally, and enhancing unity and solidarity between the developing countries, in dialogue with the traditionally powerful ones.

⁶⁶ PACITAABAD WEBSITE, ‘Contemporary Art of the Non-Aligned Countries’.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Schulte Nordholt and van Klinken 2007.

crisis which, according to historians Henk Schulte Nordholt and Geert van Klinken, made the regime collapse within nine months.⁶⁹ Various religious groups, military officers, and entrepreneurs who had initially supported the New Order, gradually lost their access to the sources of wealth, losing their loyalty to the president.⁷⁰ In May 1998, discontent poured out into the streets, with massive protests. After the killing of four University student protesters in western Jakarta, protests became massive across the country, supported by the GOLKAR party and the military, asking for Suharto's resignation.⁷¹ Student organisations occupied the Parliament building for several days during the week before Suharto's resignation, eventually happening on 21st May.⁷² Conventionally, it flagged the beginning of the so-called Reformasi (Reformation) that, according to many theorists, led Indonesia to a democratic government in which society played a prominent role.⁷³

Although Reformasi was initially turbulent, the democratic reform and social changes enhanced political and economic stability, bringing relevant changes in all fields of society. The socio-political and economic transformations resulting from the end of Suharto's regime in 1998 led to Indonesia's internationalisation and several international NGOs in the region.⁷⁴ Although this increasingly transnational cultural environment stimulated unprecedented artistic developments, artists still lacked government financial support.⁷⁵ Despite the overall socio-political and cultural developments, it was hard for contemporary art to create impact in an art infrastructure still strongly influenced by the art market.⁷⁶ Some artists, including Moelyono, Semsar Siahaan, Tisna Sanjaya and Dadang Christanto, joined NGOs to create a support network for advocating lower classes rights and producing social changes. However, these artists ended up not implementing their artistic

⁶⁹ Schulte Nordholt and van Klinken 2007.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Smith 2003.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Schulte Nordholt and van Klinken 2007, p. 1.

⁷⁴ Valjakka 2020.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Supangkat 2005.

agenda, becoming almost exclusively political in their interventions.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the 1990s also saw the birth of reconfigured art infrastructures and spaces by artist collectives and counterculture movements fallen under the umbrella term 'alternative'.⁷⁸ Artist collectives renewed their interest in urban, social, and cultural policies, fostering community building through collaboration and solidarity.⁷⁹ Their works dismantled dominant representations, criticising emerging political power structures but in a less openly political approach.⁸⁰ To Supangkat, these artists were responsible for bringing contemporary art to further development in the 2000s.⁸¹

1.2 Defining 'Alternative'

The complex socio-political panorama in Indonesia post-Suharto, characterised by social instabilities and conflicts, shaped the realities of artists and citizens alike. Contemporary art gradually opened to transnational trajectories, witnessing the increase of artistic experimentation by artist collectives intertwining cultural production with urbanisation, critical pedagogy, and activism.⁸² However, although the period known as Reformasi witnessed significant developments in the contemporary art field, there was still a 'localist' cultural policy, enhancing the preservation of authentic Indonesian culture against its internationalisation, and producing unequal access to resources and networks.⁸³ These challenges impacted new generations of artists, adding urgency to the questions of autonomy and sustainability of the art. Several countercultural initiatives established themselves across Indonesia outside the official art infrastructure, resulting in self-sustained art collectives interested in socio-political issues.⁸⁴ As in post-Suharto Indonesia collective meetings were

⁷⁷ Supangkat 2005.

⁷⁸ Juliastuti 2012, § 3.

⁷⁹ Valjakka 2020.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Supangkat 2005.

⁸² Juliastuti 2012, § 3.

⁸³ Valjakka 2020, p. 133.

⁸⁴ Ingham 2007.

no longer considered subversive, artist collectives revolved around informal collaborations and communal solidarity, leading networking becoming essential to strengthen collaborative practices. Although the tendency to gather has become predominantly from the 2000s onwards, resulting in what art critic and curator Hendro Wiyanto called a shift towards collectivism, artist collectives have had a long history in the development of Indonesian modern art.⁸⁵

Traditionally, in Java, Bali, and Timor-Leste, artistic education and apprentice processes occurred in the so-called 'sanggar', informal learning environments where artists work collectively without a rigid division of tasks.⁸⁶ Within the sanggar, "artists lived, worked, debated and created in the one space, often around the teachings of a senior figure within the collective."⁸⁷ Although the establishment of art schools in the late 1940s aimed to replace them, centralising — and easily controlling — the artistic discourse within institutions, the sanggar remained in place, underlining the bond between artists and community as pivotal to the Indonesian contemporary art scene.⁸⁸ Reviving the sanggar tradition, and pursuing socially engaged art practices, artists often collaborated to create their own exhibitions and discuss the possibilities of challenging traditional modes of representation, broadening their possibilities to reflect the multifaceted socio-political realities of the time and offering an alternative to them.⁸⁹ During Suharto's regime, many sanggar were forced to disband as they were considered subversive, often being associated to communist ideas.⁹⁰ Collective leisure activities such as informal gatherings were also banned, creating an historic precedent to the understanding of contemporary art collectives' proliferation.⁹¹

Although after Suharto's demise the art panorama increasingly became international and open to experimentation, the government still failed in

⁸⁵ Nurul Aini et. al. 2021, § 2.

⁸⁶ Veiga 2018.

⁸⁷ Kent 2016, p. 64.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Flores 2013.

⁹⁰ Dahl 2016, § 1.

⁹¹ AKADEMIE VAN KUNSTEN LEZING 2022.

supporting contemporary art with public fundings; as a consequence, artists' collectives were forced to support themselves through self-organised funding activities.⁹² Texts on these initiatives often refer to them as 'alternative', emphasising the importance of innovation and independence as pivotal to Indonesian non-institutional art infrastructure. According to Nuraini Juliastuti, researcher and co-founder of Kunci Study Forum & Collective in Yogyakarta, the concept of 'alternative' is essential to understand post-1998 Indonesian art and society at large.⁹³ Juliastuti claims that the term 'alternative' emerged from Suharto's New Order, standing for an open opposition to the authorities.⁹⁴ Additionally, when associated with art, the term signalled spaces that challenged traditional art institutions.⁹⁵ Similarly, Ingham claims that the term 'alternative' was used to describe non conforming art expressions and art spaces that were not financed by the government or commercial institutions, opposing the aesthetic preferences of the commercial art market during Suharto regime.⁹⁶ In line with Ingham, Veiga defines as 'alternative art spaces' underground circles of artists and curators that opposed commercial art galleries by showing conceptually-oriented works pivotal to the internationalisation of the Indonesian contemporary art scene.⁹⁷ These self-run institutions often resulted from the formalisation of a circle of 'friends' previously repressed under the New Order.⁹⁸ According to visual artist Reinaart Vanhoe, an 'alternative space' is an underground platform "of or for a group of friends or like-minded people" in which artists and others are organised in a supportive structure working closely with the community and producing original artworks.⁹⁹

The term 'alternative' emerged in Europe and North America in the 1960s, particularly from the hippie counter-cultural movement that reunited young people from the middle class dissatisfied with the consensus culture and aiming

⁹² AKADEMIE VAN KUNSTEN LEZING 2022.

⁹³ Juliastuti 2012, § 1.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ingham 2007.

⁹⁷ Veiga 2018.

⁹⁸ Lütticken 2021.

⁹⁹ Vanhoe 2016, p. 91.

to distance themselves from it by adopting an alternative lifestyle.¹⁰⁰ From the decline of the hippie movement, the punk rock music scene borrowed the term 'alternative' in the 1980s. This scene went beyond music, fostering cultural practices of resistance to structures of power through DIY (do it yourself) organisational and counter-information activities fostered by young people.¹⁰¹ The private sphere turned into the collective interest in politics and commitment to social change, fostering self-sustained activities rooted in networking such as printing zines, t-shirts and playing in alternative venues.¹⁰²

In Western modern art discourse, 'alternative' was initially associated with innovations and experimentations of avant-garde movements, considered estranged from institutionalised art forms.¹⁰³ However, theoretical discourses on avant-gardism often focused on artistic strategies rather than on social practices revolving around communities' needs.¹⁰⁴ In the volume, *Alternative art New York 1965-1985: a "cultural politics"* (2002), artist and curator Julie Ault defines as 'alternative art spaces' those artist-run anti-institutional organisations aiming to fill a particular void, addressing artists and audience needs.¹⁰⁵ Analysing artist-run galleries in San Francisco in the 1970s, art historian and curator Batia Sharon claimed that alternative art spaces are characterised by being rooted in forming mutual support networks, providing facilities for artists interested in exhibiting their work outside commercial galleries.¹⁰⁶ Self-running and self-sufficient spaces, often born from the squat subculture, proliferated across Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, strongly relating to politically and socially engaged contemporary art practices.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁰ STUDY WEBSITE 2021.

¹⁰¹ Mattson 2001.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Burger 1984.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ault 2002.

¹⁰⁶ Sharon 1979.

¹⁰⁷ Squatting is a vast phenomenon that has been widely analysed and discussed in different fields, leading to divergent interpretations. It was born as fundamental opposition to capitalist logics and dynamics, being included in the so-called New Social Movements (NSMs), informal organisations whose structure is rooted in networking and horizontal decision-making processes, where participants aim for social changes. NSMs merged activists' and cultural objectives, aiming at producing social changes. Squatting resulted in a great variety of projects across thousands of European cities, taking

Self-organisation and self-sufficiency were also pivotal to the birth of alternative art spaces in Indonesia, where, according to Veiga and art critic Mikke Susanto, Galeri Cemeti was among the first. Cemeti emerged from the lack of government infrastructures for contemporary art as a ‘ruang seni rupa’ (an art space) where to display the experimental artworks of Jaarsma, Adipurnomo (Cemeti’s founders) and their friends.¹⁰⁸ Rather than be governed by sales, Cemeti operated as an alternative space to commercial galleries, fostering a debate on contemporary art through exhibiting multimedia artworks.¹⁰⁹ The gallery gradually became influential both in Indonesia and internationally, fostering the dialogue with overseas currents and concepts and strengthening the position of Indonesian contemporary art within the global art discourse.¹¹⁰ Parallely to dialoguing with international institutions and artists, Galeri Cemeti – established in a traditional Javanese house – also fostered site specific projects, community based exhibitions, meetings, workshops and performances involving local artists, writers, and activists.¹¹¹ This could be read in line with what scholar Susannah Karelse – recalling curator Muhammad Abe’s theories – terms ‘locally embedded’ when it comes to contemporary Indonesian art, engaging both with the urban space and communities’ life.¹¹²

According to Veiga, Cemeti offered room for expression to radical contemporary practices conveying solid political messages, as for the art of Arahmaiani, that had little attention in Indonesia while getting exposed overseas, in line with what Supangkat named art developed ‘in exile’.¹¹³ Furthermore, Cemeti fostered an international network. In this light, the Yayasan Seni Cemeti (or Cemeti Art Foundation) founded in 1995 by Nindityo

diversity as the starting point. Therefore, it is not possible to enclose it in one fixed interpretation or model. However, several squat projects revolved around art and music initiatives. For instance, in Amsterdam (the Netherlands), the Paradiso club was started by a squatting action in 1967. In Italy, several cultural centres, such as the Forte Prenestino in Rome, Leoncavallo in Milan, or Pedro in Padova, were self-run squatted social centres. See Calhoun 1993; Pruijt 2013; Carlisi 2018.

¹⁰⁸ REFORMASIART undated.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Karelse 2016.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Veiga 2018.

and Mella, further strengthened the cross-relation between local and international artists, becoming a “subsystem of art infrastructure.”¹¹⁴

Between 1999 and 2002 the foundation supported several Indonesian artists (among which Agus Suwage and Agung Kurniawan) to organise the travelling exhibition *AWAS! (Beware!)* which was shown in Germany, the Netherlands, Japan, and Australia.¹¹⁵ The exhibition was particularly significant because its organisational structure entirely relied on Indonesian artists who collaborated with international institutions.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, the event underlined the importance of self-managed alternative spaces as pivotal to developing the Indonesian contemporary art scene in the 1990s.¹¹⁷ Lastly, being managed and co-curated by several artists, one can argue that *AWAS!* also shed light on the figure of artist-curator as emerging from the mid-1990s Indonesian alternative art scene.

AWAS! showed fourteen contemporary artists who examined socio-political and economic changes in Indonesian society after Suharto’s resignation through multimedia artworks reflecting on social wounds within the framework of “contemporary-ness” as defined by art historian Farah Wardani.¹¹⁸ The involved artists echoed the historical art movements from the 1970s, such as GSRB and Desember Hitam, putting youth to the forefront and using the street language of “teasing, taunting and irony” for T-shirts and bold cartoon-like posters.¹¹⁹ Each exhibiting gallery had a colourful set-up recalling aspects of contemporary Indonesian life. Among the installations, artist Agus Suwage erected a military tent that symbolised Jakarta’s military oppression during the Reformasi combining it with dozens of soft-porn images from movies and journals on the inside.¹²⁰ The artwork, titled *Pressure and Pleasure* (Fig.2),

¹¹⁴ Ingham 2007, p. 95.

¹¹⁵ Supriyanto 2013.

¹¹⁶ As claimed in Ingham 2007, p. 283, the European presentation of *AWAS!* was coordinated by Walter Spies Gesellschaft Deutschland in collaboration with Forum Ludwig für Internationale Kunst Aachen, Prüss and Ochs Gallery/Asian Fine Arts Berlin and Alexandra Kuss.

¹¹⁷ Ingham 2007.

¹¹⁸ Wardani 2002, § 10.

¹¹⁹ Ingham 2007.

¹²⁰ Seeto et. al. 2019.

satirically commented on the situation right after the Reformasi, addressing power imbalance and social trauma.¹²¹ Suwage's work can be read in light of what scholar Melani Budianta terms 'emergency activism' as central to post-1998 cultural activities.¹²²

Socio-political activism and public engagement was also central to the practice of artist collective Taring Padi (literally meaning Rice Fang), founded in 1998 Yogyakarta, where they squatted the old seat of the Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI or Indonesian Institute of the Arts) using classrooms as studios, gallery spaces, and living spaces where cooking and sharing food with students and international visitors.¹²³ Through socially oriented and collaborative practices the collective aimed to represent the lower classes' struggle and promote anti-militarism, anti-capitalism and anti-feudalism.¹²⁴ As an artistic output, Taring Padi primarily created posters, flyers, murals, street theatre, punk rock and techno concerts.¹²⁵ However, due to their political stances, members of the collective were attacked from right wing and fundamentalist groups as being communists.¹²⁶

As ruangrupa's member Farid Rakun claims, communism is still considered a taboo and a social trauma in Indonesia.¹²⁷ In this regard, writer and artist Geronimo Cristóbal wrote that artists still have to "mask their beliefs in terms that are acceptable to a conservative public."¹²⁸ However, according to Veiga, after Indonesia's independence (2002), artists started to openly critiqued politics, being welcomed by less suspicion from the public.¹²⁹ Taring Padi's initiatives created an expanded network both locally — connecting the cities of Jakarta, Bandung, and Malang — and internationally — participating in the Gang Festival in Sydney in 2006 — providing an interesting example of

¹²¹ Ingham 2007.

¹²² Juliastuti 2012, § 5.

¹²³ Ingham 2007.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Seeto et. al. 2019.

¹²⁶ Ingham 2007.

¹²⁷ Cristóbal 2020.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

¹²⁹ Veiga 2018, p. 128.

alternative art and curatorial networks of the 1990s.¹³⁰

As a consequence of the brutalities committed by the military forces during the Reformasi, discussions around feminism, social equality, identity politics, and decolonial theories emerged from the art field, being increasingly contaminated by new media, the mushrooming of alternative art spaces, and new international networks arising from globalisation.¹³¹ Moving forward to the XXI century, younger artists increasingly favoured interdisciplinarity, socialising, and ‘having fun’ to approach socio/political oriented art practices, increasingly blurring the boundaries between disciplines.¹³² Within this panorama, an interesting example is KUNCI Study Forum & Collective, a self-organised initiative founded in 1999 in Yogyakarta as a cultural studies collective which foster interdisciplinarity and knowledge exchange through publications, encounters, research, and artistic intervention in community spaces.¹³³ Through experimenting with the intersection between theory and practice, the collective aimed to empower Indonesian citizens’ critical thinking reflecting what Aaron Seeto, Director of Museum MACAN, called the “spirit of counter-culture and experimentation and the emergence of new critical voices and ideas that were not present in established art spaces.”¹³⁴ Furthermore, KUNCI’s members, among which Syafiatudina, “question the meaning of contemporary art spaces in a horizontal, participatory way” in which the interconnection between artists and community is fundamental.¹³⁵ It is art about “reciprocity.”¹³⁶

This idea of community-based art is embedded with the concept of ‘kolaborasi’ (collaboration), which Karelse describes as essential for Indonesian self-organised alternative spaces in terms of financial support and as an ethos helping to find “alternative mode of contemporary art practice.”¹³⁷ Furthermore, kolaborasi can be seen as a supportive concept to foster the mutual dialogue

¹³⁰ Ingham 2007.

¹³¹ Seeto et. al. 2019.

¹³² Karelse 2016.

¹³³ GOETHE WEBSITE § 2.

¹³⁴ Seeto et. al. 2019.

¹³⁵ Karelse 2016, p. 31.

¹³⁶ Ibid. p. 32.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

with international initiatives as for the multimedia exhibition *Made in Commons* (2013) co-organised by KUNCI and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (The Netherlands), aiming at promoting ideas of shared distributions and relevance beyond the market value as “alternative to the mainstream market paradigm.”¹³⁸

The examples described in this subchapter are very limited if compared to the numerous initiatives mushrooming in Indonesia from the 1990s referred to as ‘alternative’. However, they can help in unpacking and broadening the perspective on the concept of ‘alternative’ which is also often attributed to *ruangrupa* in terms of art practice and organisation. Keeping this notion in mind, the following chapter will introduce *ruangrupa*, its characteristics, structure, artistic and curatorial practice, and it will analyse three projects held both in Jakarta and internationally focussing on the role of informal gatherings as pivotal to their curatorial and art practice.

¹³⁸ STEDELIJK WEBSITE 2013 § 3.

CHAPTER 2

Ruangrupa: Collective of Collectives

2.1 ‘Make Friends, Not Art!’ Introducing Ruangrupa

Ruangrupa — whose name derives from the Indonesian words for space, “ruang”, and visualisation/form, “rupa” — was founded in Jakarta in 2000 by Ade Darmawan, Hafiz Rancaljale, Ronny Augustinus, Oky Arfie Hutabarat, Lilia Nursita, and Rithmi Widanarko.¹³⁹ The collective emerged from the wave of interest in the potential societal impact of art characteristic of post-Suharto Indonesia, benefiting from the period of sociopolitical and cultural transformation and freedom of expression under the Reformasi.¹⁴⁰ It gradually grew into a non-profit organisation now counting more than thirty members interested in visual art as a tool to investigate socio-political and cultural conditions locally and internationally.¹⁴¹ Although the initial formation of ruangrupa consisted mainly of visual artists, the collective was later joined by architects, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians (Fig.3)¹⁴²

As Rakun claims, ruangrupa started to work from the perspective of urban youth culture focussing on the urban context of Jakarta.¹⁴³ To define their practice, developed in accordance with the ecosystem they live in and its needs, Vanhoe coined the term “gLEAP”, meaning globally Locally Embedded Art Practice.¹⁴⁴ In opposition to artistic approaches emerging from Western neo-liberal countries where artists’ critical stances are taken distantly from the contexts or issues addressed, ruangrupa analyse and react to the context they investigate from its inner structure. Among their first projects they held a market, to closely research on Jakarta’s social dynamics, and *Jakarta Habitus Publik*

¹³⁹ Andan, 2011.

¹⁴⁰ Berghuis 2021.

¹⁴¹ Juliastuti 2012.

¹⁴² Andan 2011.

¹⁴³ FRAME CONTEMPORARY ART FINLAND 2021.

¹⁴⁴ Vanhoe 2016, p. 9.

(2001), an event addressing the loss of public space in the urban environment of Jakarta through site-specific artworks and performances held by fifty artists from Jakarta, Bandung, and Yogyakarta (Fig.4).¹⁴⁵ The event clashed against the government's prohibition of holding art activities in the public space, emphasising imbalanced power structures and the importance of collaboration and participation in art.¹⁴⁶ As claimed by ruangrupa's member Ade Darmawan, working by intersecting visual arts and the city's infrastructure offers ruangrupa the possibility to analyse the inhabitants' potential to develop creative and social capacities.¹⁴⁷

Since their first initiatives, ruangrupa appear rooted in the notion of 'relasi' (relation), 'koneksi' (connection), and 'kolaborasi' (collaboration) as connected to the practice of informal gathering and networking, progressively becoming a strategy or activism model later applied to transnational events.¹⁴⁸ As ruangrupa's member Mirwan Andan claims, "up to today ruangrupa has kept developing not only as a space of visual art practice and research but also as a place in which various forms of urban activism intersect."¹⁴⁹ By crossing boundaries between theory and practice in arts and culture, ruangrupa fostered supportive and innovative joint-projects, shifting the attention from individual authorship towards social processes, shared knowledge, and ethical values.¹⁵⁰ As claimed by Andan, networking has been essential to ruangrupa to build awareness about Jakarta and its social concerns both regionally and internationally.¹⁵¹ Describing Southeast Asian "network paradigm", Flores talks about "a gathering that is premised on nonalignment", where 'nonalignment' not only refers to these countries' inclusion in the Non Aligned Movement but also the network paradigm's features, slipping away "from boundaries expected in

¹⁴⁵ Couvee 2015.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Juliastuti 2021, § 3.

¹⁴⁸ Vanhoe 2016.

¹⁴⁹ Andan 2011, p. 592.

¹⁵⁰ Smits 2018, p. 41.

¹⁵¹ Andan 2011.

more regimented and specialized art worlds and mingles multiple tendencies or modalities of intervention.”¹⁵²

Similarly to other artist collectives, and due to the lack of art institutions and financial support for the arts, ruangrupa initially established their art space into a rented house in South Jakarta called the ‘ruru house’, each room of which had a specific function, ranging from artist studios, to an art gallery, and a library (Fig.5).¹⁵³ Through informal gatherings and conversations, the house — open 24/7 — fostered values like friendship and mutual support, creating an ‘ecosystem’ that gradually affected “local and international identities.”¹⁵⁴ Ruangrupa encouraged the joint participation from visitors, institutional partners, and community members, all falling under the label “friends” in line with the motto “make friendship, not art” which mirrors their informal and horizontal organisational structure.¹⁵⁵

Ruangrupa’s members do not always have a clear overview of their role or function; however, they all have their area of expertise which is directed towards a shared direction.¹⁵⁶ Although the collective officially has an artistic director, a manager, an accountant and so on, their structure is very loose, open, and constantly evolving, considering each member equally valuable and essential in determining the developments of the collective’s projects.¹⁵⁷ Vanhoe, who collaborated with ruangrupa on several occasions, labelled it as “generous structure” providing an open-minded network supporting each other’s — whether collective or individual — goal.¹⁵⁸ Ruangrupa describe their practice as ‘horizontal organisation’ involving multiple parties in building a site for ongoing ideas, communal ways of living, and new grounds for alternative forms of knowledge exchange.¹⁵⁹ This structure results in a shared public space used by

¹⁵² Flores 2011, p. 275-276.

¹⁵³ Cristóbal 2020.

¹⁵⁴ Ratelle 2020, p. 2.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Vanhoe 2016, p. 34.

¹⁵⁷ SMAKGENT 2021.

¹⁵⁸ Vanhoe 2016, p. 33.

¹⁵⁹ Juliastuti 2012.

non-art people of various backgrounds, further underlining ruangrupa's generosity and interest in education.¹⁶⁰

Ruangrupa started documenting their initiatives through *Karbon*, a journal published in Indonesian and English enhancing critical analyses on the interconnections between visual art and the Indonesian socio-political and cultural context (Fig.6).¹⁶¹ From 2000 to 2007, the journal was sent free of charge to cultural centres outside of Java.¹⁶² From 2009, the printed version made room for the online edition featuring articles on arts and culture in and beyond Jakarta, gradually expanding ruangrupa's network.¹⁶³ From 2003 to 2017 ruangrupa, in collaboration with the Galeri Nasional Indonesia, organised *OK. Video*, an international video art festival taking place biennially which was considered the largest media festival of Southeast Asia.¹⁶⁴ The initiative aimed to showcase developments in video art, reflecting on its potential as a medium through which to question sociopolitical and cultural issues and to create an open discussion between the artists and the audience.¹⁶⁵ As for videos' popularity as an every-day-use medium, the festival produced a remarkable engagement for the viewers, reaching a wider public, and involving a large network of participants from all over the world.¹⁶⁶

According to Vanhoe, ruangrupa understand video as a "social medium" or "a place."¹⁶⁷ To support his argument, Vanhoe brings the example of the 2007 edition of *OK. Video Militia* in which local communities were provided with cameras to film their daily occurrences, histories, and narratives, challenging conventional audio-visual language and aesthetic (Fig.7).¹⁶⁸ The collective played with the meaning of the term 'militia' which means either to arm a group of people in an armed movement or to empower civilians and mobilise them in

¹⁶⁰ Von Osten 2016.

¹⁶¹ Wiyanto 2005.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Berghuis 2011.

¹⁶⁴ Ratelle 2020.

¹⁶⁵ RUANGRUPA WEBSITE '2003 OK. Video – 1st Jakarta Video Art Festival'.

¹⁶⁶ Ratelle 2020.

¹⁶⁷ Vanhoe 2016, p. 57.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 58.

order to produce social changes.¹⁶⁹ The event showed the one hundred twenty videos filmed by individuals from within the communities as a unique installation travelling to thirteen venues located in various Javanese cities, blurring the separation between artist and audience and providing an archive of oral history.¹⁷⁰ According to Vanhoe, the medium of video can be considered as “a place” as it “was used to bring people together”; similarly, he defines ruangrupa as “a platform” being rooted in networking and making connections with local communities and international groups.¹⁷¹ As ruangrupa’s member Daniella Fitria Praptono claimed in a 2019 interview, ruangrupa “love getting together” and exploring issues collectively.¹⁷²

In 2004 ruangrupa, together with students from various universities — who later named themselves Komplotan Jakarta 32° — initiated Jakarta 32°C, an art event held biennially aiming to develop “an alternative method for the local infrastructure of art education” and “reshaping the idea of art in the public space” (Fig.8).¹⁷³ The forum also aims to strengthen the relationship between students, particularly in Jakarta, fostering discussions on visual arts in relation to public space and social issues.¹⁷⁴ Through exhibitions, informal workshops, discussions, experimental writing, and curatorial activities, students engaged with the public space of Jakarta interacting with the local communities and the official representatives of the city.¹⁷⁵ Ruangrupa co-organise workshops and co-select with a jury composed of students the artworks to display in the exhibition, underlining the collaborative and non-hierarchical organisation of the event.¹⁷⁶

Although held biennially, Jakarta 32° differs from the Jakarta Biennial for several reasons.¹⁷⁷ Firstly, unlike the Jakarta Biennial, Jakarta 32° — in line with

¹⁶⁹ ASIA ART ARCHIVE WEBSITE, ‘OK. Video MILITIA: 3rd Jakarta International Video Festival 2007’.

¹⁷⁰ Vanhoe 2016.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 51, 58.

¹⁷² GOETHE INSTITUT-INDONESIA 2019.

¹⁷³ Couvee 2015, p. 23.

¹⁷⁴ RUANGRUPA WEBSITE, ‘Jakarta 32°C’.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Since 1993, the Jakarta Biennial (formerly known as the Biennial of Painting), at the time curated by Supangkat, expanded on experimentation in arts against its initial conservative background. However, in the 1996 and 1998 editions, the Biennial re-focused on painting, unveiling a certain

ruangrupa's interests and goals — focuses on local and urban cultures that are not usually the visual art field domain, intervening in the public space or alternative art spaces instead of established art institutions. Furthermore, Jakarta 32° is co-organised by students and displays students' artworks, instead of promoting the individual success of well-known artists and targeting a specific audience outside the forum as the Jakarta Biennial aimed to. Lastly, Jakarta 32°, in line with ruangrupa's interest in alternative pedagogy, creates an unconventional educational platform for art students, encouraging long-lasting networking and collaboration. However, against its conservative background, since 2009 the Jakarta Biennial began to be interested in challenging aesthetic tendencies through investigating the city space as a locus of dynamic exchanges, characterised by complex social, cultural, and political phenomena.¹⁷⁸ In 2015 and 2017, members from ruangrupa were invited to collaborate in the organisation of the Jakarta Biennial, which was eventually held at Gudang Sarinah Ecosystem (GSE), a cultural platform in South Jakarta established by ruangrupa in 2015 and shared with several artist collectives to foster cross-disciplinarity, network building, collaboration, and mutual support.¹⁷⁹ As Rakun claims, being involved in such an event has been helpful for ruangrupa to frame their curatorial practice from within an art institution, learning how to stage an exhibition on a biennial standard and “parasitising” the institution itself.¹⁸⁰

As it appears clear from the projects briefly discussed so far, in ruangrupa's practice, artistic approach and curatorial method are hardly identifiable as separate. Although the discussion on the figure of the ‘artist-curator’ is not new and still ongoing in the West, Indonesia marks a different

degree of resistance to innovation. Due to political circumstances post-Suharto, the Biennial was suspended until 2006 when it was organised at Taman Ismail Marzuki consisting of three expositions: “Beyond”, “Milestone”, and “The Others”.

See JAKARTA BIENNALE WEBSITE.

¹⁷⁸ BIENNIAL FOUNDATION WEBSITE 2015.

¹⁷⁹ RUANGRUPA WEBSITE, ‘About’.

¹⁸⁰ FRAME CONTEMPORARY ART FINLAND 2021.

case.¹⁸¹ To Indonesia, curating has been pivotal to overcoming the artists' intense struggle resulting from the oppressive environment of Suharto's regime.¹⁸² Ruangrupa — as other artist collectives emerged from the Reformasi — used curatorial strategies to create spaces where to exchange knowledge and display art outside the market strategies.¹⁸³ As Rakun claims, Indonesian art academies do not provide formal training in curatorial practice and art history; therefore, there is no clear distinction between artist and curator; the latter, indeed, is considered a relatively new phenomenon emerging from the 1990s, often confused with the figure of the event coordinator.¹⁸⁴

Ruangrupa became curators out of necessity, learning it “by doing it as part of [their] artistic practice.”¹⁸⁵ ‘Whether it is called curating or not, it depends on how people understand it. [...] For us, the words “artist” or “curator” are just labels, and these are very fluid.’¹⁸⁶ As art historian Elena Filipovic claims in outlining the history of the artist as curator (bringing examples not necessarily Western-centric), this figure is responsible for challenging the potential of the exhibition format, sometimes even unmaking it, inviting the audience to reconsider “what an artwork and an exhibition are — or could be.”¹⁸⁷ This notion can apply to ruangrupa, whose curatorial and artistic practice ranges from concerts, markets, comics, journals, long-lasting projects, pushing the question of whether or not something is considered ‘art’ to the point of disinterest.

¹⁸¹ Artists approached curatorial strategies already in the twentieth century. For instance, Marcel Duchamp anticipated what art historian Dorothea von Hantelmann called ‘the curatorial paradigm’ as the understanding of the exhibition space as a means through which to question the artwork and the institution. From interventions in the art space of conceptual artists in the late 1960s, to participatory practices undertaken by art in the 1990s through the so-called ‘discursive exhibition’, the figure of the artist-curator has increasingly gained ground, questioning the limits of the artwork and the exhibition’s status. See Filipovic 2017.

¹⁸² Teh 2012.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ SMAKGENT 2021.

¹⁸⁵ Bruch 2020.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. Although Rakun talks about blurred boundaries between the two disciplines, Jim Supangkat is considered among the first in the 1990s to borrow the Western concept of independent curator and combine it with Indonesian traditions. Trained as an artist, Supangkat gradually affirmed himself as an art historian and curator, working either with (and within) alternative art spaces and established art institutions. See chapter 1.2.

¹⁸⁷ Filipovic 2017, p. 13.

Projects such as OK Video, Jakarta 32°C, and Karbon Journal seem to have created the foundation for developing new ones such as ArtLab (2008) a public laboratory promoting interdisciplinary research through networking and discussions, *RRREC Fest* (2010), an annual public music festival, and RURU Kids (2015), an alternative educational platform for children and teenagers.¹⁸⁸ All these platforms are freely accessible from artists and the general public, particularly reaching out to young people who can approach them to engage in multidisciplinary research and art experimentation.¹⁸⁹ In 2018, ruangrupa together with Serrum and Graphic Huru Hara — two Jakarta-based collectives — bought a warehouse in South Jakarta aiming to encourage a communal organisational model where all resources are equally accessed and shared.¹⁹⁰ The platform, named Gudskul: Collective Studies and Ecosystems of Contemporary Art, developed the project of ‘collective of collectives’ initiated in 2015 in GSE, now including various projects such as ArtLab, RURUradio, Jakarta 32°C, RURU Kids, RURU Shop, Karbon Journal, and RURU gallery.¹⁹¹ As Rakun claims, Gudskul created an inter-local infrastructure shared with the members of Gudskul ecosystems and the international communities (Fig.9).¹⁹²

Since the 1990s the concept of ‘ecosystem’ — originated from biology — has been used as a metaphor in several fields among which is contemporary art.¹⁹³ While the analytical research on outlining the evolution of the term and its employment in artistic practices deserves a paper of its own, the definition of ‘art ecosystem’ as fostered by platforms exploring issues in arts policy (such as Creatiquity), can be particularly relevant to the account of this discussion. As acknowledged by these platforms, (healthy) ‘art ecosystems’ focus on collective well-being and equal resource sharing obtained through shifting the focus from art institutions to the people, becoming the ecosystem’s infrastructure.¹⁹⁴ To

¹⁸⁸ Smits 2018.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ RUANGRUPA WEBSITE, ‘About’.

¹⁹¹ Ratelle 2020, p. 3.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Valjakka 2020.

¹⁹⁴ CREATEQUITY WEBSITE.

ruangrupa, the concept of ‘ecosystem’ similarly refers to a shared system of resources, knowledge, and artistic approaches fostering self-sustainability.¹⁹⁵ This concept, together with the practice of ‘lumbung’ as a communal infrastructure of shared values and organisational principles incrementing communities’ long-term well-being, led ruangrupa to establish GSE which organisational model later evolved in Gudskul. As ruangrupa is in constant regeneration and active relation to their surroundings, the ecosystem created around the practice of lumbung has been exported to the international context of documenta fifteen.

As for ‘ecosystem’, also the term ‘infrastructure’ needs some unpacking in this context to better understand ruangrupa’s practice. As pointed out by urbanist AbdouMaliq Simone, the use of the term ‘infrastructure’ migrated from the common understanding of basic systems of facilities consenting society to function effectively to the system of intersections and collaborative practices among people.¹⁹⁶ Taking the case of Johannesburg’s inner city as a main reference, Simone proposes the notion of ‘people as infrastructure’ as “the ability of residents to engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and [collaborative] practices” in an “economy of perception” overcoming fixed “spatial, residential, economic, and transactional positions.”¹⁹⁷ These dynamic human interconnections and interactions create a platform for various activities and alternative modes of production, fostering social encounters across different parties’ objectives and needs.¹⁹⁸ Simone’s notion — part of a broader reflection on how Johannesburg’s population negotiates and reconstructs the social space of the inner city through socio-economical collaboration — can help understand ruangrupa’s shared infrastructure rooted in collaborative practices and self-sustained activities connecting several artist collectives with individuals and communities from Jakarta’s urban area. Emerging from Jakarta’s complex socio-political and diverse cultural context,

¹⁹⁵ Valjakka 2020.

¹⁹⁶ Simone 2004.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 408.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Gudskul exemplifies a system based on ‘people as infrastructure’, sharing facilities and goods, creating a common place from which to expand an alternative and sustainable mode of collaboration.

Ruangrupa’s infrastructure gradually became nomadic, expanding geographically across international communities. In this light, the concept of ‘people as infrastructure’ can be implemented by political theorist Angela Mitropoulos’ notion of infrastructure as interconnected with “movement and relation.”¹⁹⁹ To Mitropoulos, the ‘infrastructure’ is a system of “networks, platforms, architecture, sewage, road, bridge, logistics, communications, topology, diagnostic systems, algorithms, assemblages, diagrams, buildings, and flows” irreducibly connected to the relations “that make worlds.”²⁰⁰ Is about “how worlds are made, how forms of life are sustained and made viable.”²⁰¹ This notion can be read in light of ruangrupa’s focus on values like mutual support, friendship, and generosity, which anchors ruangrupa’s structure in long-lasting relationships that ensured them expanding their networks.

To analyse ruangrupa’s initiatives of the past twenty-two years is particularly challenging considering their quantity (according to ruangrupa’s former member Dimas Jayasrana, from 2001 to 2005, ruangrupa organised monthly artist-in-residence programs opened to local and international artists at the ruru house) and the limitations in the length of this thesis.²⁰² Furthermore, ruangrupa also participated in numerous international events among which Biennials in Gwangju, South-Korea (2002), Istanbul, Turkey (2005), Singapore (2011), Brisbane, Australia (2012), São Paulo, Brasil (2014), and Nagoya, Japan (2016), and worked in many different places around the world, progressively gaining international recognition and expanding their networks. However, as claimed by Sonsbeek’s archive coordinator Petra Smits, “ruangrupa’s practices are always somehow connected to Jakarta” whose daily

¹⁹⁹ Mitropoulos 2012, p. 117.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² D. Jayasrana, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 18 February 2022.

life, socio-political changes, and atmosphere are essential to understanding “what ruangrupa is and how it exactly operates.”²⁰³

2.2 The Apartment Project for Urban and Residential Environments

Texts and commentaries on Jakarta habitually emphasise the city’s chaotic character of immense complexity and diversity, the locus for the activities of millions of people from multiple ethnicities, religions, and cultural groups. As the capital of one of the world’s largest population countries, in 2010, Jakarta was the second largest megacity in the world.²⁰⁴ The architectural styles also mirror the city’s diversification in the urban space, testifying to the city’s rapidly changing urban situation, particularly in the postcolonial era.²⁰⁵ Jakarta’s urban area consists of a combination of modern and kampung cities.²⁰⁶ The term ‘kampung’ stands for the traditional Indonesian rural settlements within the urban setting.²⁰⁷ Their history traces back to pre-colonial times, and heterogeneous communities characterise them with a strong identity and often traditional values.²⁰⁸ Due to their high population density, informal settings, absence of basic infrastructures, and lower-class enclaves, kampungs are often seen negatively in urban development.²⁰⁹

However, kampung are part of Jakarta’s dynamic life, following its developments and evolution, and can be seen as learning places “for surviving in urban space.”²¹⁰ Their high population density (inner-city kampung are estimated to have one hundred thousand inhabitants per square kilometre) results in a unique set-up where semiprivate, private, and public spaces are highly interconnected.²¹¹ In most Indonesian urban kampung, houses don’t

²⁰³ Smits 2018, p. 47;55.

²⁰⁴ Muramatsu, McGee and Mori 2021.

²⁰⁵ Helmond and Michiels 2007.

²⁰⁶ Rukmana 2008, p. 99.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Hutama 2016.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Lathif & Ghosh 2020, p. 487.

²¹¹ Ibid.

have an outer wall or a front yard delimiting the private space.²¹² The over build-up density left no space to separate one house from the house next to it, fostering community togetherness and a shift in space for socialisations, identified for instance, in alleys.²¹³

During the Sukarno era (1945-1966), constant fluxes of migrants from all over the country led to Jakarta's rapid urbanisation and suburbanisation.²¹⁴ During this time, several migrants and kampung's residents moved to the periphery of Jakarta, which offered increasing infrastructures and facilities for its residents.²¹⁵ At the same time, European architectural styles were adopted in the planning of Jakarta's core area, particularly in housing for the middle-upper classes.²¹⁶ During the 1980s, the industrial and economic growth enhanced by Suharto's government led to the rapid mushrooming of industrial areas and the privatisation of several public spaces in favour of constructing commercial buildings and skyscrapers.²¹⁷ The urban landscape shifted from low-rise to high-rise buildings; consequently, society itself shifted to a more complex system of relationships.²¹⁸ The increase in population and migrations fostered by globalisation resulted in hybrid urban areas around factories.²¹⁹ Furthermore, after the economic crisis of 1997 and the fall of Suharto in 1998, multinational corporations contributed to shaping Jakarta's topography by building foreign franchise restaurants and shopping malls that have almost become the city's new landmarks.²²⁰ The shift in the urban landscape mirrored the rising in social inequality, highlighting how architecture functions as an expression of and a method for constituting power and violence.²²¹ Socially and culturally, Jakarta's inhabitants' lives are "connected and related to the ground

²¹² Lathif & Ghosh 2020.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Rukmana 2008.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Hujatnikajennong 2007.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Helmond and Michiels 2007, p. 9.

²¹⁹ Nurliani 2002.

²²⁰ Hujatnikajennong 2007.

²²¹ Kusno 2007.

(earth).”²²² Therefore, the shift towards high-rise architecture fostered citizens’ habits and behaviour changes.²²³

The sociopolitical, cultural, and economic values of Jakarta have considerably shaped ruangrupa’s approaches and initiatives. As Darmawan claims, as an artist, it is impossible to escape Jakarta’s overwhelming environment; the only possible thing to do is to engage with it and find alternatives for what it lacks.²²⁴ Working in mutual dialogue with the local communities, being interested in urban and public space-related issues, ruangrupa’s projects have extensively engaged with and responded to Jakarta’s urban reality. One of the first initiatives of ruangrupa was *The Apartment Project for Urban and Residential Environments* (2003). The project aimed to raise questions on societal issues and create awareness in the community through networking and collaboration.²²⁵ The starting point for *The Apartment Project* was the consideration of the shift in Jakarta urban architecture toward the apartment model.²²⁶ On the one hand, the exploding population created an increased demand for tall buildings.²²⁷ In this light, rearranging pre-existing architectural models to more compact housing structures aimed to provide housing to many citizens struggling with finding a place to stay.²²⁸ However, according to ruangrupa, modern urban design guidelines failed to consider the socio-political and cultural implications of this model, mainly how it affects socialisation and creates elitism.²²⁹ Furthermore, the government’s interest in building apartments in kampung areas is often to raise the price of the land rather than redevelop slums’ areas.²³⁰

Through interviews and gatherings, *The Apartment Project* aimed to investigate the transition from living in low-rise buildings to living in tall buildings

²²² RUANGRUPA WEBSITE, ‘Apartment Project’ § 1.

²²³ Kusno 2007, p. 19.

²²⁴ THE POWER OF CULTURE WEBSITE 2009.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ RUANGRUPA WEBSITE, ‘Apartment Project’.

²²⁷ Adi 2011.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ RUANGRUPA WEBSITE, ‘Apartment Project’.

²³⁰ Ibid.

and analyse the role of houses as social spaces within community life.²³¹ Ruangrupa rented two apartments in which they invited seven participants to live for a month, divided into two groups.²³² Ruangrupa asked both groups to research, document, and react to the two apartment complexes through multimedia, eventually sharing their investigations in a final collective presentation.²³³

The first group was composed by visual artist Dimas Jayasrana (at that time, head of ruangrupa's research and documentation department), visual artist, video director, and musician Henry Foundation, ruangrupa's member Reza Afisina, graphic designer Teresa Stok, and artist Tomoko Take (at the time, residence student at Rijksakademie, Amsterdam).²³⁴ The group was assigned to an apartment located in a luxury complex of fifteen highrise towers called Taman Rasuna, equipped with all kinds of facilities such as restaurants, swimming pool, landscaped gardens, sporting areas, and cultural centres.²³⁵ Taman Rasuna towers over the adjacent kampung area, separated from it by a high wall and barbed wires.²³⁶ Initially, ruangrupa's idea was for the group to spend the entire month without leaving the apartment.²³⁷ However, after the first twelve days spent in complete isolation, the participants asked this 'rule' to be changed, eventually accessing the terrace, the swimming pool, and other common areas.²³⁸

The second group consisted of visual artist, actor, and director Anggun Priambodo, and artist Arjan van Helmond (then residence student at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam) who were assigned to a flat located in a "lower class apartment block [...] built as a social housing after a slum area burned down" called Rumah Susun Benhil.²³⁹ Contrary to the group living in Taman

²³¹ RUANGRUPA WEBSITE, 'Apartment Project'.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ D. Jayasrana, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 18 February 2022.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Helmond and Michiels 2007, p. 57.

²³⁶ DOCUMENTATIONS WEBSITE 2011.

²³⁷ D. Jayasrana, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 18 February 2022.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid.

Rasuna, Priambodo and van Helmond had no restrictions concerning interacting with the space outside their flat.²⁴⁰ As claimed by Priambodo, the two groups experienced completely different situations. While Taman Rasuna is located in the Kuningan area, South Jakarta, one of the biggest strategic business areas of the city, Rumah Susun Benhil stands in a kampung area in Central Jakarta.²⁴¹ The inhabitants of the two apartment complexes are significantly different per typology and customs. While Taman Rasuna is inhabited by foreigners, and employees working in Jakarta during the week eventually going to their houses outside the city during the weekends, Rumah Susun Benhil is inhabited by former kampungs' dwellers who inhabited the land before the gentrification.²⁴²

Rumah Susun are multi-storied buildings combining private residential units and shared areas initially built to support the verticalisation of urban development and redevelop slum areas with high population density.²⁴³ In reality, the government's redevelopment strategies often fail in improving Rumah Susun areas, eventually remaining slums.²⁴⁴ At the time of *The Apartment Project*, Rumah Susun Benhil was characterised by criminality, prostitution, and illegal shops.²⁴⁵ However, as Priambodo claims, the overall atmosphere was highly welcoming and warm, making him feel at home, and making it easy for him and van Helmond to engage in conversations and gather with residents.²⁴⁶ On the contrary, the group staying at the Rasuna Apartemen struggled to interact with residents, having almost no connections with the neighbours, eventually experiencing a new way of intending social connections.²⁴⁷

As Jayasrana claims, for a person like him born and raised in a kampung, it was pretty uncomfortable to experience that shift in paradigm both in social

²⁴⁰ A. Priambodo, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 16 February 2022.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Sukanti 2011, p. 16.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ A. Priambodo, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 16 February 2022.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ D. Jayasrana, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 18 February 2022.

relations and in experiencing the sight and the soundscape from an apartment above the twentieth floor.²⁴⁸ To him, the overall experience was that of loneliness and exile.²⁴⁹ The group living in Rumah Susun Benhil, interact with people daily, hanging out in the apartment's hallways, in local shops, and small restaurants in the kampung's living rooms.²⁵⁰ In urban kampung, public spaces such as alleys, small shops, taverns, and public baths are socially relevant for their function to supply the basic needs of the dwellers and strengthen the community ties through social interactions.²⁵¹ On the contrary, the architectural structure of Taman Rasuna in combination with its inhabitants' lifestyle, foster individualism and the use of the apartment as a transit space.²⁵²

The idea of the apartment as a transit space also emerged in van Helmond's interviews to both apartments' inhabitants. Helped by ruangrupa's member Indra Ameng who translated questions and answers, van Helmond interviewed fifteen people from both apartments, asking them to think about the idea of "feeling at home" and draw their former house in a process of memories' reconstruction.²⁵³ By using drawing as means of conversation, instead of as means of artistic production, van Helmond investigated architecture not only as a construction of space but also as a construction of meaning.²⁵⁴ The residents of the two apartment complexes reacted differently to the invitation to do interviews. While Rumah Susun Benhil's residents were open and generous, willing to participate in the project, the residents of Taman Rasuna were difficult to approach, as they did not want to be bothered.²⁵⁵ In both cases, what emerged from the interviews was a clear difference between the concepts of 'home' and 'house.' Although in Indonesian, differently from English, the word denoting the two concepts in only one, 'rasuna', in almost all interviews, the two concepts emerged as clearly distinct. The 'home' was identified with the family

²⁴⁸ D. Jayasrana, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 18 February 2022.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ A. Priambodo, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 16 February 2022.

²⁵¹ Utama 2016.

²⁵² D. Jayasrana, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 18 February 2022.

²⁵³ Helmond and Michiels 2007.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ A. van Helmond, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 3 March 2022.

house (therefore, the interviewees' former residence), a warm place related to sentiments of safety and affection.²⁵⁶ In contrast, the 'house' was identified with the current apartment described as being either a symbol of autonomy and independence or a transition place related to working necessities.²⁵⁷

As van Helmond acknowledges, as a Dutch citizen, his position was distant from the one of the interviewees, as well as the understanding of the project itself.²⁵⁸ However, what ruangrupa aimed to investigate with this project was precisely how people (and foreigners, in this case) adapt to Jakarta's apartment spaces through the lens of socialising and engaging with the local communities; fostering the understanding — both from local and international perspectives — of architecture as integral part of the community structure and functioning.²⁵⁹ As van Helmond claims, participating in this project opened his work and perspective as a Dutch artist to new possibilities and ways of understanding factors that connect people regardless of their differences in backgrounds, political or social class driven by the question "What is it that we share?"²⁶⁰ What emerges from his interviews is that no matter whether the interviewees lived in the Taman Rasuna or in Rumah Susun Benhil, the shift towards high-rise buildings has impacted their understanding and sense of place.

The term 'sense of place' indicates how "a person's perceptions of a place affect their experience, relationships, emotions, and meanings attached to a place."²⁶¹ It is influenced by psychological and physical elements stimulating people's engagement with the place.²⁶² In environmental psychology, the sense of place refers to a person's experience in a setting with particular physical and social elements where individual and collective values can affect social and cognitive behaviour.²⁶³ In architecture, the sense of place relates to distinctive

²⁵⁶ Helmond and Michiels 2007.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ RUANGRUPA WEBSITE, 'Apartment Project'.

²⁶⁰ A. van Helmond, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 3 March 2022.

²⁶¹ Nugroho, Zhang 2022, p. 2.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Hashemnezhad, Heidari, Hoseini 2013.

features distinguishing a space from another.²⁶⁴ The sense of place is crucial in creating psychological bonds and emotional attachment with places, and its investigation is particularly relevant in developing countries whose landscapes are going through rapid changes.²⁶⁵ Particular identities, lifestyles, relations emerged from particular spaces which ‘representation’, in philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre’s terms, pin down inseparable relations between those places, identities, and actions.²⁶⁶

Research conducted in 2016 in Yogyakarta revealed that the sense of place in Indonesian urban kampungs “is created by the interplays of daily activities in dwellers in the outdoor space, the configuration of space, and dweller’s perception of the place and the social value of the community [...] that manifest in activity-space practices.”²⁶⁷ As in most Indonesian urban kampungs, most of the spaces are shared with the community as spaces for socialisation and interaction; these features appear particularly relevant in shaping the sense of place in urban kampungs’ inhabitants.²⁶⁸ In line with this study, it is arguable that the verticalisation of Jakarta’s housing has impacted and modified the dwellers’ sense of place and how they engage in community’s practices and functioning.

Priambodo and Jayasrana investigated and documented through photographs and video the shift in architectural features and physical configuration of the space in Rumah Susun Benhil and Taman Rasuna. While Priambodo was more interested in documenting architectural details such as windows and doors to underline how these elements were impersonal in comparison to kampungs (Fig.10), in Jayasrana’s video titled *Please Come to My Dream, I Want to Hurt You* (2014), the artist visually contraposes the desolated images of Taman Rasuna with the lively shots of kampung’s alleys

²⁶⁴ Nugroho, Zhang 2022.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Lefebvre 1976.

²⁶⁷ Hutama 2016.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

(Fig.11).²⁶⁹ Jayasrana's video captures the two worlds separated by a narrow hole in a wall dividing the silent luxurious side of modernity from the urban sprawl, rubbish dumps, and noisy gatherings of kampungs. This paradox in Jakarta's urban development was among the interests of ruangrupa's investigation. At the end of *The Apartment Project*, each group held a presentation at their apartment to collectively discuss and evaluate their investigations and findings (Fig.12).²⁷⁰ Although the project aimed to investigate the impact of the apartment model on local communities' life and activities, according to Priambodo, its major pitfall was that the artists' presentations were not shared with the local communities.²⁷¹ In this light, *The Apartment Project* can be seen as self-referential. However, considering ruangrupa's interest in conducting interdisciplinary research, evaluation, and reflection on the urban environment, sense of belongings, and city politics, *The Apartment Project* was propaedeutical for later investigations expanding on the social meaning of space through networking and visual arts' tools.

In fact, the project recalls the collective exhibition *Vertical Villages* (2013) co-organised by ruangrupa and Australian artist Keg De Souza at the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney (Australia), as part of the 15th Jakarta Biennial (Fig.13).²⁷² The exhibition aimed to investigate how temporary migrant students live in high-density and multiple occupancy housing, perceive and interact with domestic and communal spaces, eventually adapting to Sydney's urban environment.²⁷³ As Sydney experienced a dramatic change in residential architecture, shifting from low to medium and high-density housing, the project aimed to investigate students' feeling of displacement and how globalisation affects the experience of and integration within the urban space.²⁷⁴ To do so, ruangrupa and De Souza asked students to identify their common routes in

²⁶⁹ The date of Jayasrana's video refers to the publication date on Youtube. The footage used in the videos were shot at the time of *The Apartment Project*. See DIMAS JAYASRANA 2014.

²⁷⁰ A. Priambodo, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 16 February 2022.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² KEGDESOUZA WEBSITE.

²⁷³ Ratelle 2020.

²⁷⁴ KEGDESOUZA WEBSITE.

Sydney, personal belongings, and forms of correspondence, all converging in creating relational maps, eventually incorporating them in the exhibition.²⁷⁵ Furthermore, the exhibition features several parties held by the students in the 4A's groundfloor to expand the exhibition space to a shared space for [local] communities.²⁷⁶ *The Apartment Project* and *Vertical Villages* share several similarities. Firstly, both initiatives include international participants, fostering the idea of informal gathering as pivotal to ruangrupa's methodology, communities' togetherness, and alternative art methodology. Furthermore, both initiatives enquire about the notion and meaning of space through visual arts, investigating how a space can be symptomatic of social inequalities, shift in social interactions, and communities' functioning.

The investigation of urban space has been fundamental to ruangrupa's last projects. From an initial phase mainly oriented towards the sociopolitical reality of Jakarta and its gap in contemporary art spaces, ruangrupa gradually participated in international events, strengthening their position in the cultural field, becoming a reliable player.²⁷⁷ Reports from 2016 have shown that ruangrupa participate in approximately ninety networks, ranging from collaboration with Jakarta's universities to the participation in the British Art Council and the global platform RAIN Artists' Initiatives Network.²⁷⁸ The establishment of long-term sharing networks led the collective to develop the practice of 'lumbung' as communal resource building for documenta fifteen, bringing together community-based art organisations — mainly from the Global South — fostering connections between local and global ecosystems. Although the lumbung practice and strategy will be later discussed in chapter three, what is important to stress at this stage, is how the process leading to lumbung consolidated through time, resulting from ruangrupa's research on social practices fostering networking as intertwined with visual art. In this light, the relation with the Arts Collaboratory network has been fundamental.

²⁷⁵ Ratelle 2020.

²⁷⁶ KEGDESOUZA WEBSITE.

²⁷⁷ Vanhoe 2016.

²⁷⁸ Smits 2018.

Arts Collaboratory is a “translocal ecosystem” of nonprofit organisations focussing on the transformational power of collaborative art practices intertwined with community wellbeing.²⁷⁹ As a self-governing structure, Arts Collaboratory fosters collaborative projects among artists, artists collectives, communities, and activists.²⁸⁰ Similarly to ruangrupa, Arts Collaboratory’s initiatives focus on assemblies, encounters, and conversations addressing timely topics and proposing alternative solutions. For its principles and values — together with the friendship with some of its members — ruangrupa selected Arts Collaboratory as a lumbung member of documenta fifteen, further strengthening their collaboration initiated in 2014 with the assembly held in Indonesia.

2.3 Arts Collaboratory Assembly: Indonesia

In 2014 ruangrupa, in collaboration with KUNCI Study Forum & Collective (Yogyakarta, Indonesia), Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons (Utrecht, the Netherlands), Stichting Doen (Amsterdam, the Netherlands), and Hivos (Leiden, the Netherlands), co-organised *Arts Collaboratory Assembly: Indonesia*; a week-long series of meetings, workshops, and public talks held in Jakarta, Jatiwangi, and Yogyakarta.²⁸¹ The initiative aimed to bring together all the participating organisations of the Arts Collaboratory network to discuss several topics among which “crisis and post-crisis sites, alternative pedagogies, urban intervention, re-writing histories of organisations, ethics & aesthetics, commons, and developing curatorial tools.”²⁸² Arts Collaboratory is an initiative founded in 2007 by Dutch institutions Stichting DOEN and Hivos, later joined by Mondriaan Fund, now consisting of twenty-five community-based arts organisations working on transnational projects to create social change and sustainability through collaborative and collective art practices.²⁸³ These art

²⁷⁹ ARTSCOLLABORATORY WEBSITE.

²⁸⁰ DOCUMENTA-FIFTEEN WEBSITE, ‘Arts Collaboratory’.

²⁸¹ ARTSCOLLABORATORY-ASSEMBLY WEBSITE, ‘Assembly Indonesia’.

²⁸² Ibid., § 2.

²⁸³ Arts Collaboratory Network.

organisations, primarily located in non-aligned countries, were often born from the lack of cultural spaces in their cities; therefore, they share “home-like” settings, functioning as places of gathering and sharing knowledge with their local ecosystems.²⁸⁴ In Lütticken’s words, these organisations could be described as “alter-institutional.”²⁸⁵ Through putting together collectives of artists, activists, and cultural practitioners, Arts Collaboratory established local ecosystems where values like “friendship, trust, care, commitment to openness and radical imagination” concur to create awareness about environmental, socio-political and cultural issues.²⁸⁶ Although the network’s organisations focus on locally embedded projects, they are communally interested in community struggles and challenges, organising shared initiatives such as residency exchanges, collective research groups, and annual assemblies hosted rotationally by the network’s members.²⁸⁷

In Arts Collaboratory, the terms ‘transnational’ and ‘trans-local’ are used as synonyms to define the participant organisations. Theories of transnational processes emerged in the 1990s from the necessity to conceptualise the increasingly blurred concepts of nationhood and citizenship generated by globalisation.²⁸⁸ As a spatial term, transnationalism is often associated with studies on migration, investigating how migratory processes foster social relations and practices that transcend geographical and socio-political borders, becoming incorporated into “new forms of identities emerging within transnational spaces.”²⁸⁹ Sociologists and anthropologists were primarily concerned with “processes of de-territorialisation and notions of spatially unbounded communities” as related to transnational processes.²⁹⁰ According to philosopher Homi K. Bhabha, in cultural studies, transnational processes deal with the idea of a nation’s reconfiguration and socio-cultural displacement.²⁹¹

²⁸⁴ Duffy 2020, p. 27.

²⁸⁵ Lütticken 2021, §6.

²⁸⁶ Arts Collaboratory A NETWORK FOR VISUAL ARTS & SOCIAL INNOVATION, 2016, p. 36.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Szanton Blanc, Basch, Glick Schiller 1995.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 684.

²⁹⁰ Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013, p. 2.

²⁹¹ Bhabha 2004.

As claimed by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, the prefix ‘trans-’ refers to delocalised identities instead of indicating the residence in a specific territory.²⁹² However, several scholars ultimately agreed upon claiming that the transnational is highly embedded in the local.²⁹³

Since the mid-1990s, scholars of transnationalism such as geographer David Ley increasingly focused their research on localised phenomena of internal migration, shifting the discourse towards local notions and dynamics of transnationalism.²⁹⁴ In this regard, more importance was given to people and their relationships, focussing on new forms of networking and connectedness. Sociologist Thomas Faist spoke about ‘transnational communities’ as communities sharing solidarity and collective identity, for instance diasporic groups.²⁹⁵ However, other researchers such as human geographer Katie Willis and social scientist Brenda Yeoh expanded on this meaning by considering as ‘transnational communities’ communities manifesting some form of shared identity.²⁹⁶ Authors dealing with the concept of translocality often base their writings on transnational approaches’ related theories.²⁹⁷ Translocality identifies the relationship between different places, and communities, overcoming the limitations of nationalist historiographies and fostering a non-Eurocentric understanding of global history as constituted by processes of entanglement and interconnectedness.²⁹⁸

Following Appadurai’s notion of ‘locality’ as primarily relational and contextual rather than spatial, translocality revolves around notions of migration, mobility, multiple forms of spatial connectedness, networking, place, and knowledge exchange.²⁹⁹ In this light, translocality applies to the organisations within Arts Collaboratory at large, among which ruangrupa, being embedded in their local context while simultaneously sharing concerns, goals,

²⁹² Appadurai 1996.

²⁹³ Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Willis & Yeoh 2004.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Freitag and von Oppen 2010.

²⁹⁹ Appadurai 1996, Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013.

and struggles with a larger transnational ecosystem. In line with Arts Collaboratory's aims, ruangrupa's porous structure enhances togetherness and mutual care between the collective's members and the communities they work for and within, creating a shared sense of solidarity. Furthermore, ruangrupa share with Arts Collaboratory the attitude towards collaborative projects connecting local to global ecosystems.

After several preparatory meetings held in Colombia in 2012, all core participants from the Arts Collaboratory network met in 2014 in Indonesia for the first time to set up the steps towards their self-determination and future developments.³⁰⁰ The organisations participating in the Assembly were Al-Ma'mal (Jerusalem, Palestina), Art Group 705 (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan), Ashkal Awan (Beirut, Lebanon), Casa Tres Patios (Medellin, Colombia), Cráter Invertido (Mexico city, Mexico), Doul'art (Douala, Cameroon), Kër Thiossane (Dakar, Senegal), Kiosko (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia), Lugar a Dudas (Cali, Colombia), Nubuke Foundation (Accra, Ghana), Picha (Lumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo), Plathoedro (Medellin, Colombia), Riwaq (Ramallah, Palestine), Teor/ética (San José, Costa Rica), Theertha (Colombo, Sri Lanka), Vansa (Johannesburg, South Africa), and ruangrupa.³⁰¹ Multidisciplinarity, collaboration, and networking are used by these organisations to broaden the reflection on contemporary artistic practises and generate shared spaces of knowledge exchange. Creating social cohesion towards open and interactive platforms is also common to the associate participants to the Assembly Indonesia; 32° East (Kampala, Uganda), Centre Soleil d'Afrique (Bamako, Mali), Darb 1718 (Old Cairo, Egypt), KUNCI Study Forum & Collective (Yogyakarta, Indonesia), and Más Arte Más Acción (Colombia). The hosts of the Assembly were ruangrupa and KUNCI whose friendship-oriented attitude fostered an inclusive atmosphere and insightful program.

³⁰⁰ Arts Collaboratory A NETWORK FOR VISUAL ARTS & SOCIAL INNOVATION 2016.

³⁰¹ Choi, Flentge, Waite 2014.

The Assembly consisted of various working groups reflecting on topics related to institutional practises, organisational structures, and funding, following the participants' suggestions and concerns. The general aim was to work collectively towards a greater common welfare, building shared knowledge among the participants, strengthening existing projects, and creating consensus on new ones.³⁰² Participants could take part in (at least) two working groups, each one addressing a specific theme, eventually reporting all the group's findings in the final plenary session. The Assembly opened with a collective exhibition set up at ruangrupa's headquarter, introducing KUNCI and ruangrupa, and lunch at ruangrupa's location. In the afternoon, ruangrupa guided the Assembly's participants to visit some of Jakarta's artist-run spaces in line with the site visits to several artist collectives in Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Jatiwangi foreseen by the program. The general aim of these site visits was to encourage the exchange of ideas between local and international organisations and introduce them to the alternative Indonesian contemporary art scene in various Javanese regions.³⁰³

The artist collectives included in the program were structured on networks intertwined with community engagement, providing an alternative to traditional art institutions.³⁰⁴ Furthermore, as the Arts Collaboratory's organisations, these collectives were born from the lack of contemporary art spaces and institutional funding in Indonesia, leasing old houses and transforming them into residences, studios, and galleries during the post-Reformasi era. Among them, ruangrupa organised a site visit at Jatiwangi Art Factory (JAF), in the village of Jatiwangi, West Java, considered among the primary sites for participatory art practice in Indonesia.³⁰⁵ Despite being located in a rural area, JAF focuses on the dialogue between art and technology, organising video and music festivals where the local community is invited to exchange knowledge with the artists in residence

³⁰² Choi, Flentge, Waite 2014.

³⁰³ ARTSCOLLABORATORY-ASSEMBLY WEBSITE, 'AC General Assembly in Yogyakarta, hosted by Kunci'.

³⁰⁴ Ratelle 2020.

³⁰⁵ Kent 2016, p. 137.

actively.³⁰⁶ Their engagement with the community is further strengthened by the project *Kota Terakota*, which promotes the community's well being through the research and development of the clay to create musical instruments.³⁰⁷

In 2013, ruangrupa collaborated with JAF, among the other organisations, for the festival *Gerobak Bioskop (Cinema Cart)* that was meant to return the communities the spirit of gathering together in outdoor areas during movie screenings, in line with the traditional 'layar tancap' (outdoor screening) lately obscured by the monopoly of indoor cinemas and mainstream film industry.³⁰⁸ Ruangrupa, together with designers, IT, and engineers, designed the equipment for the outdoors screening, eventually donating it to the communities that hosted the festival.³⁰⁹ Ruangrupa and JAF also collaborated in 2007 for *Workshop Video Art* and 2013 for *Video Out - MUSLIHAT OK. Video*. Furthermore, JAF has been selected by ruangrupa as a lumbung member for documenta fifteen.³¹⁰ In 2013, JAF also collaborated with Jakarta's collective Trotoart (also included in the Assembly's site visits) in a community off-site project for the 15th Jakarta Biennial, for which they transformed a site that had been used as an illegal dump into a futsal field used for children's education programs and as an outdoor sport centre for the community.³¹¹ Furthermore, both collectives participated in the exhibition *Made in Commons* (2013) at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the Netherlands, co-organised by the Stedelijk Museum and KUNCI to promote shared distributions and knowledge beyond the mainstream market values.

The mutual collaboration and joint projects among the Javanese artist collectives introduced to the Arts Collaboratory core members exemplify the organic interaction between the local communities and alternative artistic practices. Like Ana, a member from Más Arte Más Acción, pointed out during a

³⁰⁶ ARTSCOLLABORATORY-ASSEMBLY WEBSITE, 'Jatiwangi Art Factory Strategy'.

³⁰⁷ Jatiwangi is one of the main roof-tile producers in Southeast Asia; See DOCUMENTA-FIFTEEN WEBSITE, 'Jatiwangi Art Factory'.

³⁰⁸ VISIBLEPROJECT WEBSITE.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ DOCUMENTA-FIFTEEN WEBSITE, 'Jatiwangi Art Factory.'

³¹¹ Kent 2016, p. 134.

working session of the Assembly, Javanese artist collectives “talk about *inhabiting the territory* with all the actors that are part of it” despite discussing about “*negotiations*” as in individualistic art contexts.³¹² After the visit to Jatiwangi, the group travelled to Yogyakarta, welcomed by Syafiatudina from KUNCI. Site visits in Yogyakarta were planned to continue the debate on the key themes of the Assembly initiated in Jakarta and Jatiwangi. The working groups in Yogyakarta focused on organisational issues, curatorial programmes, and urban intervention concerning the public space.³¹³ After these sessions, the groups returned to Jakarta for the final plenary meeting in which all the participants discussed the groups’ findings, proposing a development plan for the Arts Collaboratory’s future. Precisely, this plan foresaw the organic re-organisation of the Arts Collaboratory website in order to give equal visibility to all the network’s organisations and promote the Arts Collaboratory activities, the creation of an online catalogue, the organisation of curatorial programs, institutional residencies, and annual research groups, and the organisation of travelling events and exhibitions.³¹⁴ In addition to that, the plan foresaw the creation of a “criticism unit” for each organisation, and the “exchange of staff for a determined period, drawing inspiration from the methodology of others.”³¹⁵ The Assembly final meeting also consisted of a collective drawing session where all the participants draw on a long scroll (Fig.14).³¹⁶

From the Assembly’s working document (2014) emerges that, aside from organising site visits to Indonesian alternative art groups and setting up the Assembly’s collective exhibition, ruangrupa’s role as one of the Assembly’s hosts was to take care of the whole logistics of the event; arranging the participants’ pick-ups from and to the airport; hosting lunches at their headquarter, organising leisure activities and informal gatherings. As ruangrupa claims, fruitful discussions and insightful ideas better develop in informal

³¹² ARTSCOLLABORATORY-ASSEMBLY WEBSITE, ‘Open Open’.

³¹³ ARTSCOLLABORATORY-ASSEMBLY WEBSITE, ‘AC General Assembly in Yogyakarta, Hosted by Kunci’.

³¹⁴ ARTSCOLLABORATORY-ASSEMBLY WEBSITE, ‘Construire Le Futur’.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ ARTSCOLLABORATORY-ASSEMBLY WEBSITE, ‘Assembly: Indonesia’.

atmospheres, such as cooking, eating together, or karaoke, instead of traditional set ups of conferences, symposiums, or meetings.³¹⁷ The knowledge shared in such informal channels and extensive discussion is rooted in networking and social relations and interactions, collaboration, and participation free of formal hierarchies. Strengthening networking (local and regional) was among the discussion topics proposed by ruangrupa for the Assembly's working groups.³¹⁸ The other topics concerned alternative forms of education and pedagogy, research as alternative curatorial practice, international mobility, and sustainability strategies. In addition to addressing ecological factors, sustainability can address cultural, socio-political and economic aspects related to infrastructure planning.

Financial sustainability is a common need, nonetheless a pressing issue for almost all the Arts Collaboratory organisations emerging from the lack of government funding and dealing with different strategies of financial self-support. In this scenario, a platform such as Arts Collaboratory can strengthen and expand the institutions' economic sustainability through direct support, valuable partnerships, and meaningful collaborations and debates. Hivos and Stitching Doen are among ruangrupa's primary sources of funding.³¹⁹ These foundations support ruangrupa because of its pivotal role in developing contemporary visual arts in Jakarta and Indonesia in general, providing social platforms to promote, share, and sustain an in-depth understanding of social and urban issues.³²⁰ In doing so, ruangrupa have created impact well beyond the parameters of their own organisations.³²¹ As claimed by Andan, for ruangrupa "art is not just for art's sake. Art comes from the people and is for the people."³²²

The atmosphere of co-existence, friendship, and trust generated by the Assembly, resulted in a core network worldwide collaborating in various

³¹⁷ Choi, Flentge, Waite 2014.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Klaver et al. 2015.

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Arts Collaboratory 2016, p. 12.

projects. For instance, on the occasion of the 31st São Paulo Biennial (2014) ruangrupa invited Arts Collaboratory colleagues to join them collaborating in informal activities revolving around the principles of alternative education, eventually sharing the discussion findings with guests among which the Biennial curators Charles Esche and Galit Eilat.³²³ All the activities led by and with ruangrupa were held in “a hybrid architectural structure” in evolution called *RURU*, established by ruangrupa during the Biennial and still ongoing (Fig.15).³²⁴ Through meetings, workshops, and spontaneous gatherings, ruangrupa connected with and investigated diverse aspects of São Paulo, creating a ‘trans-city portrait’ projecting “São Paulo back onto itself through the eyes of Jakartan artists, in dialogue with how local initiatives understand the meaning of being a collective.”³²⁵ In this light, it is arguable that São Paulo’s trans-city portrait relates to the notion of translocality, being realised by ruangrupa’s transnational perspective, tying it in spatial interconnections, networking, and sharing it with transnational ecosystems. Nevertheless, *RURU* is an example of ruangrupa’s attitude towards kolaborasi in arts. Visitors were invited to actively participate in planned activities, such as contributing to drawing a map of São Paulo on the outer wall of the installation, locally anchoring it while simultaneously developing a shared experience (Fig.16).³²⁶

This collaborative practice, experienced in several previous projects in Jakarta, has been gradually exported to international ecosystems, becoming part of a toolset used by ruangrupa to investigate cities’ urban environment and its relation to local communities’ functioning, sense of belonging, and expectations for the future. *RURU*’s ongoing project highlights ruangrupa’s interest in overcoming the imposed time limits of exhibitions, creating platforms that last in time, and enduring networks and friendships. This aim is particularly evident in documenta fifteen, whose funding concept of lumbung openly claims to solve the function of a long-lasting arts and culture platform fostering

³²³ Arts Collaboratory 2016.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ APP31BIENAL WEBSITE, ‘Ruru’.

³²⁶ Cristóbal 2020.

collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and mutual dialogue globally. The idea of creating a physical place for encounters, discussions, research, and creativity comes from the ruru house in Jakarta, which becomes a model that ruangrupa transform and translate, adapting it to different urban and social environments. Collaborative activities and strategies enacted in *RURU*, such as inviting visitors to draw a relational map of the city collectively, were earlier held in Jakarta ruru house, being later adopted in the ruru huis in Arnhem on SONSBECK '16, expanding ruangrupa's interest in researching social dynamics and collaborative practices. In 2021, ruangrupa also established the ruruHaus ('haus' is the German word for house) in Kassel, Germany, anticipating the opening of documenta fifteen in June 2022. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, the workshops and meetings on-site program has been almost null; however, ruangrupa transformed the physical gatherings into an online program of workshops and discussions, highlighting their interest in conversation as an art practice and methodology.

2.4 SONSBECK '16: *trans*ACTION

In February 2015, the Foundation Sonsbeek International announced that ruangrupa were unanimously appointed as curators of SONSBECK '16.³²⁷ It was ruangrupa's first largest collaborative exhibition in Europe.³²⁸ To ruangrupa, SONSBECK '16 was "a natural next step" in their work; an occasion to transfer and translate their curatorial and artistic approaches to a Western European context and "to speculate into the future."³²⁹ Among the reasons that led the Sonsbeek art committee to choose ruangrupa as curators of the event was their attitude towards "friendship, kinship, and community"; their organic organisation, and interest in building transversal networks and conversations between local communities and international institutions.³³⁰ As claimed in

³²⁷ Smits 2018, p. 51.

³²⁸ Ratelle 2020.

³²⁹ Linde and Stichting Sonsbeek Internationaal (Arnhem) 2016.

³³⁰ Alphen and Flentge 2015, p. 10.

SONSBEEK '16 catalogue, this edition was different from all the others, being about “the city, the people and how these people relate to art. It [was] about art for everybody.”³³¹ Sonsbeek was initiated in 1949, aiming to heal Arnhem’s inhabitants from World War Two traumas while simultaneously promoting a new vision of international art.³³² The exhibition — now held quadrennially — increasingly gained an international reputation for its focus on art in public spaces.³³³ Although it was initially very conservative, particularly focussing on modern sculptures displayed in Park Sonsbeek, it gradually expanded beyond its geographical and timing limitations.³³⁴

This process started in 1971 with Sonsbeek Buiten de Perken (‘Sonsbeek Beyond Lawn and Order’ or ‘Sonsbeek Off Limits’) curated by Wim Beeren, who

³³¹ Linde and Stichting Sonsbeek Internationaal (Arnhem) 2016.

³³² SONSBEEK 20-24 WEBSITE, ‘About’.

³³³ BIENNIALFOUNDATION WEBSITE, ‘Sonsbeek’.

³³⁴ Sonsbeek was initially meant to occur biennially; however, it occurred irregularly after the first four editions were held triennially. The first edition of 1949 is commonly considered an ‘ode to the war liberation’ and showed more than two hundred sculptures (from 1900 onwards), mostly from Dutch sculptors and a minor part from North-Western European sculptors in Park Sonsbeek. The second edition in 1952 repeated the same format, focussing more on French neo-classicist sculptors. In 1955, Sonsbeek opened to artists who “worked more expressionistically”— according to the catalogue — such as Picasso and Giacometti and included the Rietveld pavilion later “rebuilt in the sculpture garden of the Kröller-Müller Museum.” In 1958, the number of sculptures increased considerably, giving a more accurate overview of the state of European sculpture. However, the presence of sculptures from deceased artists and the predictable format arose a discussion around Sonsbeek’s organisation and aim. Some innovations characterised the fifth edition in 1966. Despite the previous editions, where the Dutch Circle of Sculptors selected the artworks, a working committee was established, including professionals from several art institutions responsible for selecting the artworks. Furthermore, the exhibition displayed sculptures from a new generation of artists working with other materials than the traditional bronze or stone. Sonsbeek ‘86 proposed an inversion of the ‘off limits’ model of Sonsbeek Buiten de Perken (1971). Curated by Saskia Bos, Sonsbeek ‘86 ‘beyond the boundaries’ focused on artworks not easily displaceable in open spaces or from artists who distance themselves from the idea of outdoor sculpture, inviting some reflections on the artworks’ artificiality and ineptitude to nature. The sculptures were placed between Park Sonsbeek (some fragile artworks were displayed in two glass pavilions) and Museum Arnhem. After Sonsbeek ‘93, it took eight years for Sonsbeek ‘01 ‘Locus Focus’ to take place. Curator Jan Hoet followed the approach of Sonsbeek ‘71 and ‘93 inviting artists to create site-specific artworks in dialogue with a given location; however, he limited the locations to three sites, particularly Sonsbeek Park, the Eusebius Church, and the Kronenburg shopping centre. For the intrinsic value of these sites, the artworks displayed shed new light on the notion of art in public spaces. Sonsbeek ‘08 was curated by Anna Tilroe whose aim was to rethink the art’s potential in modern Western societies outside the market value. For the opening, part of the artworks was carried in procession through the streets of Arnhem before being placed in Sonsbeek Park. The procession was a success, still remembered by Arnhem’s residents. After Sonsbeek ‘16 *transACTION* the exhibition shifted from 2020 to 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Sonsbeek 20→24: *Force Times Distance, On Labour and its Sonic Ecologies* focused on labour’s relations and inequalities through many perspectives, untold stories, embodied narratives, and overcoming geographic limitations. See SONSBEEK20-24 WEBSITE, ‘Previous Editions’ and following editions, and van Winkel 2012.

invited artists to create site-specific artworks in remote and unusual locations across the Netherlands.³³⁵ The aim was to investigate spatial relationships occurring between visual art and the space around it.³³⁶ Sonsbeek Buiten de Perken went far beyond a traditional exhibition, also including public workshops and discussions held in an inflated pavilion established in Park Sonsbeek.³³⁷ Although today it is widely praised, this edition of Sonsbeek was highly criticised. The main critique concerned the failure in reaching a broad audience and in making it travelling long distances to see the works outside Arnhem, although the exhibition is currently remembered mainly for emblematic works such as Robert Morris' *Observatory* at Santpoort-Velsen (Western Netherlands) or Robert Smithson's *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* near Emmen (Northeastern Netherlands).³³⁸ Against this background, curator Valerie Smith, in charge of curating Sonsbeek '93, restricted the 'off-limits' aspect of Sonsbeek Buiten de Perken to the city of Arnhem and its surroundings, inviting several artists to reflect on and react to the city and its history.³³⁹

As Smith claimed, unlike Sonsbeek '71, which investigated the spatial relation between artwork and location, the artists of Sonsbeek '93 focused on the invisible factors determining the meaning of a location.³⁴⁰ Smith aimed to confront Arnhem's social context through ambitious projects such as Irene and Christine Hohenbüchler's residency in Arnhem's prison, resulting in a co-produced series of paintings and three small pavilions to display them permanently.³⁴¹ However, both Sonsbeek 1971 and Sonsbeek '93 considered the space of the manifestation as fictional, being separated from the "real life."³⁴² In this light, artists acted as 'outside commentators' of the site, not really connecting with the local community.³⁴³ Furthermore, although the notion of

³³⁵ Rattemeyer 2010.

³³⁶ ARTTUBE WEBSITE 2018.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ van Winkel 2012.

³³⁹ Cameron 1993.

³⁴⁰ Smits 2018.

³⁴¹ Cameron 1993.

³⁴² Smith 1993.

³⁴³ Molesworth 1994, p. 11.

site-specificity is deeply embedded with institutional critique, much of the works in both editions of Sonsbeek didn't problematise the site, its history, inheritance, or infrastructure.³⁴⁴

SONSBEEK '16: *transACTION* shared with the previous editions the focus on Arnhem's social and historical context and the spatial reflection through site specific installations. However, ruangrupa brought these investigations forward by blurring the boundaries between life and fiction, developing what they called an 'institutional critique in action' instead of a mere curatorial concept.³⁴⁵ This can be read in line with what art historian and curator Miwon Kwon called "discursive site specificity", which developed out of institutionally critical concerns, and the artist's proximity to a place, its history, and identity, building up a "nomadic narrative" expanding towards multiple sites' projects.³⁴⁶ Practices related to this approach revolve around the concept of site as "mobilized and unfixed."³⁴⁷ Considering that, for SONSBECK '16, ruangrupa recontextualised the ruru house (discussed later in the chapter) from Jakarta to a Western European context; Kwon's definition of discursive site specificity can apply to ruangrupa's approach. However, what does not apply to ruangrupa is Kwon's idea of elaboration of discursive site-specific projects revolving exclusively around the artist's figure as "narrator-protagonist."³⁴⁸ What ruangrupa are interested in is, instead, creating an open discussion between the artists and the audience, actively involving the latter in creating the meaning of a project.

Soon after their appointment, ruangrupa made clear that SONSBECK '16 would not follow Western curatorial criteria of selection and display, being more oriented towards 'making friends' and collecting stories about Arnhem and its citizens.³⁴⁹ The focus on social interactions was in line with the exhibition theme that revolved around the notion of 'transaction' intended as any exchange that happens "between people, and between people and their surroundings" where

³⁴⁴ Molesworth 1994.

³⁴⁵ Linde and Stichting Sonsbeek Internationaal (Arnhem) 2016.

³⁴⁶ Kwon 2002, p. 51.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 184

³⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 51.

³⁴⁹ Veldkamp 2015.

“real values are expressed.”³⁵⁰ In line with ruangrupa’s context-driven approach, they first wanted to get acquainted with Arnhem’s history, collective memory, and customs before asking artists to participate in the exhibition.³⁵¹ To do so, they opened the ruru huis (‘ruru’ is the diminutive for ‘ruangrupa’, and ‘huis’ is the Dutch term for ‘house’) a communal place for meetings and interactions between residents, international artists, and visitors, initially located in Arnhem’s city centre (Fig.17).³⁵² It was accessible for one year before the opening of the leading exhibition, eventually being moved to the visitors’ centre at Park Sonsbeek for the whole duration of the event that lasted from June to September 2016.³⁵³ The ruru huis functioned as an open space for people to hang out, gather informally, and discuss urban infrastructures, their use, alternative social and economic values, and network building.³⁵⁴ It followed the model of the ruru house established by ruangrupa in South Jakarta in the early 2000s as an infrastructure to support their self-sustained practice that gradually resulted in a transnational ecosystem.³⁵⁵ Arnhem’s ruru huis was smaller than her twin in Jakarta, it fostered the same domestic and welcoming environment featuring a library, a couch, and a small kitchen used to prepare meals to share with visitors and during events.³⁵⁶ Furthermore, it hosted a huge, blank map of Arnhem, which visitors were invited to fill out to get to know each other and grasp Arnhem’s urban issues (Fig.18).³⁵⁷ Overall, the ruru huis followed ruangrupa’s motto ‘make friends, not art.’³⁵⁸

This motto underlines ruangrupa’s idea of art as a context-driven set of knowledge, competences, and networks overcoming the mere production of

³⁵⁰ Linde and Stichting Sonsbeek Internationaal (Arnhem) 2016.

³⁵¹ Smits 2018.

³⁵² In the same manner to one of their first art projects held in Jakarta to experiment alternative art-practices and research methods, ruangrupa occasionally had a stand on Arnhem’s local market. Furthermore, to get in touch with Arnhem’s citizens, they distributed stickers and postcards about Sonsbeek ‘16 and the ruru huis in cafés and taverns throughout the city, and sponsored Arnhemia, a local football team. See Linde and Stichting Sonsbeek Internationaal (Arnhem) 2016.

³⁵³ Smits 2018.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

³⁵⁵ FRAME CONTEMPORARY ART FINLAND 2021.

³⁵⁶ Smits 2018.

³⁵⁷ Veldkamp 2015.

³⁵⁸ Smits 2018.

objects, and oriented towards social interactions and exchanges. Following this line of thought, the information collected in the ruru huis created a database of “new perspectives on social issues” useful for the collectivity, future projects, and methodological developments.³⁵⁹ Furthermore, they were used by ruangrupa for selecting the artists for SONSBECK ’16 and, consequently, by the selected artists as a source of inspiration for their artworks.³⁶⁰ Most of the research was carried out by the ‘ruru buitendienst’ (the editorial team), a group of artists and researchers who investigated the notion of public space as a site for “alternative ways” of gathering and building a “community of friends” through public activities.³⁶¹ The main ones were public reading sessions to discuss the legislative document of Arnhem’s public space regulation, weekly public walks in Arnhem, a radio program and the Arnhem’s edition of *Karbon* journal.³⁶² Some members of the editorial team, such as Sanne Oorthuizen and Reinhart Vanhoe, also ran the ruru huis program of (small) exhibitions, workshops, parties, and screenings together with ruangrupa.³⁶³

Besides the ruru huis, several installations were realised in Park Sonsbeek and in Arnhem’s city centre; and the exhibition *transHISTORY: this is my truth, tell me yours* was displayed at Museum Arnhem, addressing Dutch colonial responsibilities.³⁶⁴ Operating in the Netherlands, ruangrupa had to consider Dutch colonisation in Indonesia. The exchange in opinions and ‘transactions’ with witnesses of Indonesia’s decolonisation added another layer to the relationship between ruangrupa and Arnhem’s community. The exhibition *transHISTORY* aimed to give voice to counter narratives and non-binary stories of colonisation, neglected communities, and gender violence.³⁶⁵ Among the artists invited to participate, Agung Kurniawan organised a large-scale performance titled *Remember Day Parade and After* (2016) to promote

³⁵⁹ Linde and Stichting Sonsbeek Internationaal (Arnhem) 2016.

³⁶⁰ Veldkamp 2015.

³⁶¹ BIENNIALFOUNDATION WEBSITE, ‘Sonsbeek’.

³⁶² RURUBUITENDIENST WEBSITE.

³⁶³ Peters 2016, § 3.

³⁶⁴ SONSBECK20-24 WEBSITE, ‘Previous Editions’.

³⁶⁵ Linde and Stichting Sonsbeek Internationaal (Arnhem) 2016.

awareness on Dutch colonial history of Indonesia (Fig.19); while Juul Sadée, together with thirty members of Arnhem's Mollucan community, created the installation *So*, addressing Dutch colonialism and the migration of Mollucan people to The Netherlands.³⁶⁶

Mechanisms of power imbalance and injustices were also addressed by installations in Park Sonsbeek, some of which were openly political aiming to enhance discussions on global challenges and foster social changes. Among these, *Vvestlife* (2016) by KUNSTrePUBLIK was a movable installation built from life vests shaped like a tent and functioning as a parliament for everybody from which to address the European refugee crisis (Fig.20).³⁶⁷ The installation was used for multi-disciplinary events, among which a radio interview and a fashion show, all conveying personal stories while simultaneously addressing the humanitarian crisis on the European borders, raising awareness about the refugees' status.³⁶⁸ Rob Voerman's installation, *The Exchange* (2016), aimed to increase awareness about global pollution incorporating in its structure part of the Grote Waterval (one of the largest artificial waterfalls in the Netherlands) provided with tables and chairs used for workshops, informal meetings, or to contemplate the waterfall (Fig.21).³⁶⁹ Furthermore, he created a fake value and an ad-hoc system of economic transactions to raise money for the foundation Masarang, which protects Indonesia's rainforests in a communal effort with local communities.³⁷⁰ Richard Bell's *Aboriginal Embassy* (2013) created a public space for imagining new futures and "reflecting on or retelling stories of oppression and displacement, drawing on black power politics, theatre and performance art."³⁷¹ The installation took inspiration from the Aboriginal Tent Embassy established outside Australia's national parliament in 1972 to call attention to the inequality between Aborigines and Australians which remained

³⁶⁶ Smits 2018.

³⁶⁷ VVESTLFE WEBSITE. In 2017 the installation was installed in Strasbourg, close to the European Court of Human Rights and the European Parliament.

³⁶⁸ Smits 2018.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ VISIBLEPROJEC WEBSITE, 'Embassy - Richard Bell'.

in place for forty-six years (Fig.22).³⁷² Other sculptural installations fostered social interaction and participatory activities. Among these, Louie Cordero's *Pong*, consisting of three asymmetrical colourful ping pong tables used by children and adults, and Eko Prawoto's *Bamburst* (2016), an architectural structure entirely made from bamboo having no predetermined purpose to make sure everybody had the chance to use it as they preferred.

Given ruangrupa's curatorial approach that was deeply embedded in reality, focussing on social inclusion and interaction, SONSBECK '16: *transACTION* draw back the attention to the cyclical debate about socially engaged, or participatory art (in Bishop's term) initiated in the mid-1990s and also related to Sonsbeek '93. While Smith was reluctant in labelling Sonsbeek '93 as a 'social' project, claiming that this discussion was brought to the fore after the exhibition ended, ruangrupa's approach openly recalled social practice's meaning as being related to the critique of art's institutionalisation, focussing on the "real world" instead of the artworld.³⁷³ Ruangrupa focused on social issues to be collectively explored and addressed in order to reshape human relationships. However, despite ruangrupa's attitude towards friendship and community's involvement, Arnhem's inhabitants were initially sceptical about the *ruru huis* and ruangrupa's approach because of a difference in mentality and demeanour between Indonesian and Dutch customs and habits.³⁷⁴ As artist and researcher Eef Veldkamp claimed, ruangrupa's motto (and curatorial strategy) diverged from the Dutch attitude of making art, not friends.³⁷⁵ Despite its central location, and informal set up, people were generally reluctant to step inside the *ruru huis*, particularly before the official start of SONSBECK '16.³⁷⁶ According to Smits, this can perhaps be imputed to the fact that ruangrupa and the *ruru huis* were unknown in Arnhem, and

³⁷² VISIBLEPROJEC WEBSITE, 'Embassy - Richard Bell'.

The project is still ongoing. After Sonsbeek '16, it was installed in Venice in 2019 and at the Tate Modern in 2021.

³⁷³ Thompson 2012, p. 21.

³⁷⁴ Veldkamp 2015.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Smits 2018.

lifestyles of Arnhem and Jakarta's citizens are incomparable.³⁷⁷ Furthermore, while ruangrupa's activities in Jakarta are generally organised by and attract young people, visitors in Arnhem were of all ages, some of whom may have vivid memories of previous editions; therefore being sceptical towards ruangrupa's innovative approach.³⁷⁸ Transferring ruangrupa's curatorial and artistic practice to Arnhem was challenging; however, people gradually interacted with ruangrupa and the ruruhuis, engaging in gatherings, discussion, workshops, and several events, adapting to the new context of the project.³⁷⁹ In this light, SONSBEK '16: *transACTION* can be read in line with ruangrupa's interest in researching how people adapt and react to a given context, a research process initiated in 2003 with *The Apartment Project*.

As evidenced in Chapter 2, over time, ruangrupa adapted site-specific projects created in and for Jakarta to other contexts under new circumstances without losing their impact or relevance. While initially, the findings of their investigation remained somehow enclosed among ruangrupa's network of 'friends', they have been progressively being shared with the communities involved in the inquiry. This organic development in their projects led ruangrupa to develop the ruru huis for SONSBEK '16 and the practice of lumbung for documenta fifteen, aiming at achieving long-lasting networks, discussions, and positive changes. In this regard, the next chapter will discuss ruangrupa's projects through the lens of nongkrong as a fundamental practice to contextualise ruangrupa's structure and artistic and curatorial approach. Furthermore, it will enquire about ruangrupa's practice through the notions of relationality and commonism, eventually discussing the concept of lumbung as an organic evolution of nongkrong, providing late ruangrupa's projects with more structure.

³⁷⁷ Smits 2018.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

Do it With Others

3.1 First Person Plural: on Relation, Coexistence, and Collaboration

As evidenced from the projects discussed in the previous chapter, ruangrupa's initiatives are rooted in the notions of relation and communal effort as connected to the practice of informal gathering and networking. These notions have structured ruangrupa's organisation and artistic practice to describe which Vanhoe coined the acronym 'gLEAP', meaning 'globally Locally Embedded Art Practice.' This term overcomes the labels of participatory or community art, attempting to "reconfigure the relation between the artists' everyday life/activity and their artistic production in new ways of collaborating and sharing knowledge."³⁸⁰ Artists practising gLEAP are an integral part of local communities, working in networks to "create a possible world [...] that exist alongside the centralised world."³⁸¹ By doing so, artists become interconnected to the subject of their work, promoting tangible and long-term social changes.³⁸²

As claimed by curator Nato Thompson, the call for art in life in the post-Cold War era resulted from the urgency to address social issues, reacting to the mere "two dimensional cultural production" and the alienation produced by late capitalism working towards "genuine interpersonal human relationships."³⁸³ Thompson defines these artistic practices as falling under the umbrella term of 'socially engaged art', a cultural practice ranging from visual arts to urban planning enhancing participation, and challenging power.³⁸⁴ Numerous genres and notions have been intertwined with 'social engaged art', expanding the

³⁸⁰ Vanhoe 2016.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² R. Vanhoe, Interview with the author, Amsterdam, 7 April 2022.

³⁸³ Thompson 2012, p. 21.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 19. Although the 'socially engaged art' phenomenon emerged during the post-cold war era, the research towards conviviality in the arts was investigated since the 1960s and 1970s. In his book 'Relational Aesthetics', Nicolas Bourriaud lists several examples of this art practice, including Gordon Matta Clark's restaurant *the Food*, opened in 1971, and Daniel Spoerri's *Dinner*. See Bourriaud 2002.

artwork's boundaries to urban dynamics. Among these, the notion of 'social practice' theorised by Claire Bishop as criticising art's institutionalisation taking the 'real world' as a point of departure instead of the art world, and Relational Aesthetics, theorised by Nicolas Bourriaud in the mid-1990s, as a framework to capture the open-ended artistic European art scene of that period characterised by artworks fostering viewers' interactions-relations.³⁸⁵ In my contention, specific strategies enacted by the so-called 'relational artists' resonate with some ruangrupa's artistic and curatorial practices.

According to Bourriaud, the 1990s witnessed the 'emergence of collective forms of intelligence and the "network" mode in the handling of artistic work' as a response to the widespread use of the internet and collective leisure practices in the cultural sector.³⁸⁶ This increasingly connected panorama led artists conceiving a relational approach to the exhibition format actively including the audience in their production process.³⁸⁷ As a result, relational artists focused on models of sociability produced by open-ended projects taking the form of meetings, events, and workshops, fostering conviviality among individuals or groups in what Bourriaud called 'a "friendship" culture.'³⁸⁸ According to Bishop, for their "unstable" identity, these works were often difficult to discern.³⁸⁹ These artworks encouraged art use rather than contemplation.³⁹⁰ Furthermore, relational artists often collaborated and curated each others' work in exhibitions, blurring the idea of individual authorship and the formal distinction between artist and curator.³⁹¹ In light of this notion, Relational Aesthetics unveils several

³⁸⁵ Among the other notions associated with 'socially engaged art' Thompson also cites Lars Bang Larsen's term, 'social aesthetics' and Suzanne Lacy's 'new genre public art'. See Thompson 2012.

³⁸⁶ Bourriaud 2002, p. 81.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 32.

³⁸⁹ Bishop 2004, p. 52.

³⁹⁰ As Bishop points out, the attention towards the activation of the audience traces back to theories from the 1960s, such as Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* (1962) and Roland Barthes's *Death of the Author* (1968), which have been incorporated into discourses on participation in art through happenings, Fluxus, performances and Joseph Beuys's idea of social sculpture. See Bishop 2004.

³⁹¹ Among the examples cited by Bishop, the exhibition *WHAT IF* at Moderna Museet, Stockholm (Sweden) 2000, curated by Maria Lind in collaboration with — or, to use the exhibition's text words "filtered by" — Liam Gillick. The exhibition displayed artworks by Philippe Parreno, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Jorge Pardo, and Rirkrit Tiravanija among others. See Bishop 2004 and MODERNAMUSEET WEBSITE, 'What If'.

similarities with ruangrupa's practice characterised by projects — ranging from markets to music festivals, encounters, and workshops — rooted in values of friendship and community, shifting the attention from individual authorship towards social processes and shared knowledge. Furthermore, similarly to relational artists, ruangrupa's curatorial strategies are integral to their artistic practice, inviting a reconsideration of artworks, art practitioners, and exhibition formats.

Several early works of Rirkrit Tiravanija became emblematic examples of Relational Aesthetics, fostering social interactions while simultaneously being informed by postcolonial theories and institutional critique.³⁹² Among those, I take into account particularly *Untitled (Free)* at the 303 Gallery, New York (1992), and *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)* at the Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne (1996) as creating an historical lineage with the atmosphere of conviviality and informal gatherings fostered by ruangrupa's projects, particularly the ruru house(s). In *Untitled (Free)*, Tiravanija moved all the gallery office's furniture to the exhibition space and set up cooking pots where he prepared and served Thai curry for visitors for the whole duration of the exhibition (Fig.23).³⁹³ The gallery turned into "an open house" where anyone was welcome to have a (free) meal within an informal environment where to gather with the artist and other visitors.³⁹⁴ By doing so, Tiravanija blurred the boundaries between artist, viewer, and artwork, arranging a convivial environment. Furthermore, as the artist claimed, the work aimed to criticise the role Western European and North American art institutions play in de-contextualising artefacts from their original context and the power imbalance in

³⁹² As claimed by Tiravanija, he uses postcolonial theories to dismantle institutional structures, particularly concerning conventions related to collecting, naming, and displaying non-Western artefacts. In an interview with curator Daniel Birnbaum, the artist refers explicitly to the collection of Thai artefacts at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he studied, addressing how these objects were merely aestheticised without giving any relevance to their original context. Tiravanija started to think about an art practice that could revitalise life around objects. Following this line of thought, he included cooking in his art practice with which the artist had already experimented in Toronto during the 1980s when he transformed his flat into what he called a "social kitchen" cooking Thai curry for his friends and people just hanging around. See Birnbaum and Tiravanija 2015, p. 164.

³⁹³ Bishop 2004.

³⁹⁴ Coulter-Smith & Coulter-Smith 2006, p. 172.

epistemology and cataloguing.³⁹⁵ As curator Laura Hoptman argues, at the time Tiravanija created an unknown situation for an art gallery, freeing people to interact with contemporary art in a more sociable way.³⁹⁶ In Thai culture, food is highly diversified and carries with it cultural values related to the idea of gathering, fostering a warm atmosphere within the family.³⁹⁷ As Tiravanija claimed, he grew up in Bangkok spending a considerable amount of time in his grandmother's restaurant, becoming acquainted with traditional Thai cooking recipes and sense of food.³⁹⁸ In this light, *Untitled (Free)* enhances the idea of food as having a welcoming and social function, revolving around the Thai notions of generosity and conviviality.

Similarly to Thailand, in Indonesian society, food plays a significant role in social life, carrying communities' collective knowledge and memories passed by generations as cultural heritage.³⁹⁹ Social interactions vary according to the different ways of preparing, serving, and consuming meals, reflecting a multifaceted landscape of local peculiarities and customs.⁴⁰⁰ Ruangrupa often use food in their workshops or events to create social aggregation. For instance, during Arts Collaboratory Assembly Indonesia (2014) ruangrupa held several communal dinners at the ruru house in Jakarta as an occasion to gather, discuss, and further strengthen the relationship with the Arts Collaboratory members. In October 2019 ruangrupa and the Swedish collective k.ö.k (kvinnor önskar kollektivitet – Women Desire Collectivity) organised a workshop on the notion and meanings of "Radical Care" involving students from the Stockholm Royal Institute of Art in activities at the Women's Centre in Tensta/Hjulsta, Stockholm, and a weekend-long experience in a rented common house outside Stockholm archipelago (Fig.24).⁴⁰¹ These workshops invited participants to

³⁹⁵ SPIKEARTMAGAZINE WEBSITE., 'Interview with Rirkrit Tiravanija.'

³⁹⁶ Stokes 2012.

³⁹⁷ Manakitsomboon 2019.

³⁹⁸ Rirkrit Tiravanija was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina to Thai parents. He was raised in Thailand, Ethiopia, and Canada. See Bishop 2004, and Birnbaum and Tiravanija 2015.

³⁹⁹ Situngkir, Maulana, and M. Dahlan 2015.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ The workshop also foresaw several activities and discussion groups at the Women's Centre in Tensta/Hjulsta. See KVINNOCENTERTENSTA-HJUSTLA WEBSITE, 'Reflections from the Kitchen'.

explore radical care as a collective practice fostering alliance and solidarity while expanding the notions of networking and friendship.⁴⁰² Cooking and eating collectively were acknowledged as caring practices fostering the encounter among different languages, cultures, knowledge, and stories around dishes evocating societal concerns, historical traumas, and political struggles.⁴⁰³ Furthermore, sharing a house and collectively handling daily tasks and responsibilities reflected ruangrupa's aim towards communal organisational principles, shared values and infrastructure. Food was also prepared and shared with visitors in the ruru house in Arnhem, set up for SONSBECK '16, equipped with a cooking pot used either by the editorial board running the space or artists and visitors during workshops.

The concept of the ruru house as an open space for people to hang out, build networks, and participate in ruangrupa's activities oriented towards social interactions and exchanges recalls Tiravanija's *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)*. The installation reproduced the full-scale Tiravanija's New York flat that anyone could use twenty-four hours a day for the whole duration of the exhibition, becoming a space for gathering, eating, and partying (Fig.25).⁴⁰⁴ As artist Liam Gillick claimed, "the work was used by locals as a venue, a place to hang out and somewhere to sleep."⁴⁰⁵ The installation invited considerations about the interconnection between art and life and the private and public spheres. The ruru house in South Jakarta was open twenty-four-seven, being conceived as an open space where artists, community members, and ruangrupa's friends were welcomed to participate in workshops, projects, and exhibitions, using the space and its facilities. However, contrary to *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)*, the ruru house was neither intended as a temporary project nor was set up in an art institution. It was born from the lack of financial support for the arts that led ruangrupa to develop self-sustaining strategies and rent out a house, solving the function of an alternative art space. From the ruru

⁴⁰² KVINNOCENTERTENSTA-HJUSTLA WEBSITE, 'Reflections from the Kitchen' §2.

⁴⁰³ Ibid. §1.

⁴⁰⁴ Kittelman 1996.

⁴⁰⁵ Gillick 2006, p.105.

house in Jakarta ruangrupa have developed their research-oriented art practice, held art residencies, exhibitions, presentations, actively engaging local communities in their projects.

Through time, ruangrupa expanded the concept of ruru house internationally, on SONSBECK '16 and documenta fifteen and (trans)locally through Gudskul, developing the idea of collective of collectives. In time, ruangrupa have overcome the exhibition space by entering the social and urban fabric of Jakarta, Arnhem, and Kassel, as well as strengthening transnational networks.⁴⁰⁶ On the contrary, one limitation of Relational Aesthetics in general, and Tiravanija's above mentioned artworks, in particular, was that the projects remained somewhat relegated to the art venues, operating a selection in terms of audience, audience interactions and relationships.⁴⁰⁷ Although to curator Udo Kittelman, Tiravanija's projects merged art and life, offering the experience of togetherness, the quality of the social relations produce in his works has never been investigated, redirecting the ultimate argument of Relational Aesthetics "to artistic intentionality rather than issues of reception."⁴⁰⁸ Furthermore, although analogies with Relational Aesthetics are evident in ruangrupa's focus on social interactions between people and their surroundings, ruangrupa's projects also address the values expressed in these relations. Curator Katy Siegel and philosopher Paul Mattick, among the others, argued that in *Untitled (Free)*, the audience's consumption of the meal was itself (part of) the artwork, recalling Tiravanija's interest in the art use instead of contemplation.⁴⁰⁹ This position also differs from ruangrupa in one respect: ruangrupa take as a starting point of their works the socio-political and historical context in which the work is created, collecting stories about local communities and enquiring about what they can learn from them and how to incorporate them in their research. Ruangrupa are

⁴⁰⁶ Even though, as Vanhoe posits, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the program of the ruruHaus in Kassel was almost cancelled in 2021. However, from Spring 2022, the ruruHaus is regularly open to anyone aiming to share time, ideas, or art practices with others, and it holds public events and encounters. See R. Vanhoe, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 7 April 2022.

⁴⁰⁷ Bishop 2004.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., p.62.

⁴⁰⁹ Siegel and Mattick 2004.

interested in creating a mutual dialogue with the audience, proposing alternative modes of coexistence and cooperation, or, to put in Vanhove's words, 'possible worlds' to navigate the present and build common futures.

In light of these considerations, it is arguable that the approach toward collaboration sets forth another difference between ruangrupa's practice and Relational Aesthetics. Relational Aesthetics promoted the figure of artist-curator, who eventually became a 'star' in the international art scene, highlighting a particular idea of art as "(self-congratulatory) entertainment."⁴¹⁰ On the contrary, ruangrupa foster collaboration as an alternative way of living and working together, sharing sources and efforts in art and community for the common welfare. In this regard, I contend ruangrupa operate within the frame of DIWO (Do It With Others). The term DIWO emerged in 2006 to extend the DIY approach toward a more collaborative one.⁴¹¹ Although it was initially practised only in net collaborations, DIWO has been gradually adopted by transdisciplinary art platforms and artists to foster collaboration and emancipation in art.⁴¹² This practice invites the creation of an open system for source distribution "forming relationally aware peer enactments", blurring the boundaries between artists and curators.⁴¹³ "It is a living art, exploiting contemporary forms of digital and physical networks as a mode of open praxis, as [...] doing it with others."⁴¹⁴ Furthermore, in line with ruangrupa's interests, DIWO addresses timely issues through dialogue instead of focussing on marketable products, fighting against cultural hegemony and individual recognition in art.⁴¹⁵

Following this line of thought, ruangrupa's practice can be read in light of decolonial theorist Rolando Vázquez's concept of thinking/listening in the 'we'. This concept entails the effort to move out the individuality of the first person singular and its implication in ownership, authorship, and property, going

⁴¹⁰ Bishop 2004, p. 79.

⁴¹¹ FURTHERFIELD WEBSITE, 'DIWO - Do It With Other Resource.'

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Garret 2014.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

towards the plurality of a “relational grammar and way of thinking that is necessarily grounded in the relation with others.”⁴¹⁶ In its configuration of social changes, the ‘we’ addresses historical traumas, gender and racial injustices, and colonial differences from a decolonial perspective, acknowledging communal shared knowledge and legacy.⁴¹⁷

The case of SONSBECK ‘16 is emblematic to this account. Ruangrupa invited artists including Agung Kurniawan, and Juul Sadée, together with several members of Arnhem’s Mollucan community to give voice to counter narratives from neglected communities affected by colonisation.⁴¹⁸ Works such as Kurniawan’s performance *Remember Day Parade and After* (2016), Sadée’s installation *So* (2016), or Richard Bell’s *Aboriginal Embassy* (2013), actively address colonial responsibilities strengthen Vázquez notion of the ‘we’. Historical wounds caused by colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and racism are also addressed by documenta fifteen’s program at large and series of conversations *We need to talk! Art – Freedom – Solidarity* in particular, enquiring these complex issues in the context of arts and culture through postcolonial approaches.⁴¹⁹ Furthermore, the concept of lumbung itself and its characteristics, as evidence of a communal life marked by the spirit of collaboration, trace back to pre-modern and pre-colonial societies.⁴²⁰

In his book *Being Singular Plural* (2000), philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy emphasises that the experience of being is rooted in the singular-plural paradigm as existence occurs in being-with-others, where the term ‘others’

⁴¹⁶ Vázquez 2020, p. 23.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ R. Vanhoe, Interview with the author, Amsterdam, 7 April 2022.

⁴¹⁹ DOCUMENTA-FIFTEEN WEBSITE ‘Online Conversation Series “we need to talk”, May 8, 15, and 22 2022’. After several accusations of anti-Semitism for having involved “anti-Israeli activists” in the series of talks (and in documenta’s program at large), ruangrupa, in consultation with several participants and the artistic team, decided to suspend the series of encounters foreseen for May 2022, acknowledging that the overall climate of censorship and racist smears obstruct the cultural cooperation they aimed at bringing to Germany. The accusation has been followed by several acts of vandalism to the ruuHaus and documenta’s venue WH22 and threats at the Palestinian collective The Question of Funding. This line of attack has been followed by the accusation of anti-Semitism against the artwork *People’s Justice* (2002) by Indonesian artist collective Taring Padi which has been removed from Friedrichsplatz, Kassel. See ruangrupa 2022 and Greenberger 2022.

⁴²⁰ DOCUMENTA FIFTEEN 2021.

identifies both the vital components of the singular-plural identity and the other beings with whom to build a community.⁴²¹ Connections are vital to communities that Nancy describes as spaces of togetherness that do not flatten the plurality of singularities.⁴²² As beings exist only in relation with other beings, Nancy ultimately suggests that all beings are part of the human community.⁴²³ Similarly to Nancy, in his book *Poetics of Relation* (1997) philosopher Édouard Glissant proposes the notion of world community as rooted in the connection among all the cultures that survived colonial exploitation maintaining their cultural difference and complexities.⁴²⁴ In order to affirm a community, the individual self must let the 'we' into existence.⁴²⁵ To Glissant, the 'we' expresses a network of relations shaping the world as a whole. Therefore, Relation is a global condition in which "each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other."⁴²⁶ In such a world, cultural specificities exist in their open entanglement with one another, evolving in a multiplicity rather than in a totalitarian unity.⁴²⁷

Glissant's reflection on relationality is part of a broader discussion on the creolisation of the world as an interactive and unpredictable process of cultural exchange expanding from the Caribbean to every modern culture.⁴²⁸ By challenging many contemporary postcolonial theories, Glissant constructs an image of the slave ship used during the Atlantic trade as a "womb, a matrix" from which a new culture formed and propelled towards the Caribbean.⁴²⁹ Through the atrocity of slavery, enslaved people were put into a relatedness which consequently generated shared knowledge through who survived "the abyss" and created a new culture out of devastation.⁴³⁰ This new culture, distinguishable from others yet in constant communication and relation with

⁴²¹ Nancy 2000.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Glissant 1997.

⁴²⁵ Dash 1995, p.5.

⁴²⁶ Glissant 1997, p. 11. Glissant capitalises the term 'Relation' because it addresses the world as ontological relatedness. See also Kaiser, 2009.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Murdoch 2013.

⁴²⁹ Glissant 1997, p. 6.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

other cultures, is seen as paradigmatic of the Caribbean's open and non-hierarchical structure, which led Glissant to celebrate the archipelago "as a place of a distinct creole culture, and not merely as a site of colonial displacement."⁴³¹ Gradually in the text, Glissant proposes the idea of a world community based on cultural differences and a lasting relationship among all cultures that have survived devastation.⁴³² He expands creolisation, as the opening to pluralities of relation, to the whole world, in line with his understanding of postcolonial theories as part of a broader puzzle, requiring "a sense of how the totality can be repaired."⁴³³ In this interconnected world, Relations — deeply related to traditions — must be understood as based on the verbal phrase "donner-avec", translatable as "gives-on-and-with", where the verb 'donner' (to give) is intended in light of its meaning of generosity.⁴³⁴ Although Glissant's notion of Relation was not intended as a conceptual framework for art practices, it can arguably be used to deepen the reflection on ruangrupa's relational approach pivotal to their cultural exchange with global communities at the core of their art practice.

As a colonised country, Indonesia saw the birth of the ethnic group called Betawi from the processes of creolisation during Dutch colonialism, when Jakarta was called Batavia.⁴³⁵ The Betawi simultaneously represents numerous ethnicities and "the capacity of creating one group, one identity on the background of ethnic diversity" in line with the motto "Unity in Diversity" which will later become the core of Indonesian state ideology.⁴³⁶ In time, Betawi's culture incorporated features from both foreign and indigenous cultures, creating a shared history to which people from other ethnicities identify and feel related.⁴³⁷ In this light, it can be argued that Jakarta represents, on a local scale, that creolisation theorised by Glissant as an entanglement of cultural

⁴³¹ Radović 2007, p. 477.

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Kaiser 2009, p. 9.

⁴³⁴ Glissant 1997, p. xiv.

⁴³⁵ Knörr 2007.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

specificities evolving in a multiplicity rather than a unity. Emerging from Jakarta's cultural and socio-political reality, ruangrupa's practice is rooted in traditional customs and values, working collaboratively with local communities in daily activities, strengthening a system of relations and knowledge. Through collaboration and generosity, ruangrupa expanded the notion of 'relation' from referring to human interactions (as in the case of Relational Aesthetics) to representing a system of shared sources, knowledge, and aims, resulting in a model of communal living as in the case of Gudskul and lumbung. As a pre-modern and pre-colonial system for storing agricultural products, the concept of lumbung as the curatorial strategy for documenta fifteen broadened its artistic purpose by aiming to create a long-lasting shared system of material and immaterial sources for the world community, de-constructing systems of power imbalance and building greater common welfare through interrelations.⁴³⁸

Although it may sound ambitious from ruangrupa to propose the creation of an alternative way of living and administering sources out of an art manifestation such as documenta, it is interesting to notice that the project of lumbung refers to a global community. Whereas on a superficial level, ruangrupa's art practice is based on collaboration, therefore on relations with others (international guests, art institutions, non-profit organisations, community members, or students), on a deeper level, ruangrupa investigates the relations among places, histories, traditions and the local communities they work with. Through time, and particularly through the foundation of Gudskul, ruangrupa expanded their relationships beyond projects, aiming to build "a whole ecosystem in Indonesia", and now a global ecosystem rooted in long-lasting networking and sustainable practices.⁴³⁹ In this light, documenta fifteen represents a journey to extend ruangrupa's relations to a broader network, proposing alternative modes of coexistence and cooperation for a common future. In light of these considerations, ruangrupa are arguably working within the paradigm of the 'we' as theorised by Glissant and Vázquez, building a

⁴³⁸ DOCUMENTA FIFTEEN 2021.

⁴³⁹ Sanchez-Kozyreva 2021, § 4.

network of relations that shapes the world as a whole, acknowledging cultural specificities of each identity and putting them in a mutual dialogue with one another.

By fostering an art practice and a social model based on communal resources, mutual care, and collective infrastructure, ruangrupa exceed and contrast the capitalist-colonial frame, proposing alternative ways of living in line with political philosopher Chantal Mouffe's understanding of 'critical art'. Critical art "is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony" through antagonistic actions in the public space.⁴⁴⁰ To Mouffe, 'antagonism' is a characteristic of 'the political' that can emerge from any kind of relation, as being intrinsic to human attitude towards socialisation and pluralism in contrast to individualism fostered by capitalism.⁴⁴¹ Mouffe shares with philosopher Jacques Rancière the notion of the 'political' as being "created through dissensus" that, to Rancière, is practised by new forms of subjectivities reconfiguring the space in alternative ways of wording.⁴⁴² According to Mouffe, recent forms of artistic activism exemplify the antagonistic approach, challenging the sphere of consensus.⁴⁴³ This artistic activism can be oriented towards political reality, marginalised communities, or "utopian experimentations" attempting to imagine "alternative ways of living: societies or communities built around values in opposition to the ethos of late capitalism."⁴⁴⁴ Although Mouffe almost exclusively lists Western European and North American artists as examples of critical art, her reflection on critical art can arguably enquire about ruangrupa's art practice as an alternative to established orders and hegemonic projects, dissenting and reconfiguring ways of relating, practising art, and organising societies.

⁴⁴⁰ Mouffe 2008.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴⁴² Rancière and Corcoran 2010, p. 37.

⁴⁴³ Mouffe 2008, p. 12.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

From the start as an artist collective, ruangrupa have developed a long-term relational practice of living, working, and researching through conversations and networking with Jakarta's local community, gradually expanding to international networks of friends. As Rakun claims, their practice is rooted in conversations through which they exchange stories, ideas, concerns, and aims, eventually shaping their research and projects. In this light, a fundamental part of ruangrupa's history is the custom of 'nongkrong' (Indonesian for gathering/hanging out) intended as an art practice, an organisational model, and a political act. Through challenging Western European and North American aesthetic values, nongkrong questions artistic practices and ways of relating, opening a space for informal connections and sharing resources.

3.2 'Nongkrong': Hanging Out as Organisational Model and Research-Based Art Practice

Hanging out is considered an integral practice of networking and collaborations in Indonesia, constituting a vital aspect of how communities function and prosper.⁴⁴⁵ Traditionally, social life is characterised by a high sense of closeness among community members resulting from social interactions and communal activities.⁴⁴⁶ Gatherings are forums for social interactions among family members, friends, and neighbours.⁴⁴⁷ They can occur in many places — houses, schools, alleys, open areas, shops — and can be of various types — family gatherings, religious celebrations, discussions among friends.⁴⁴⁸ These activities strengthen one's attachment to the local community and living place.⁴⁴⁹ In Indonesian, 'hanging out' or 'gathering' are loosely translated by the term 'nongkrong'.⁴⁵⁰ In terms of etymology, nongkrong also signals the body's

⁴⁴⁵ Dahl 2016.

⁴⁴⁶ Susilawati 2012.

⁴⁴⁷ Lukman et al. 2015.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Alias 2013.

⁴⁵⁰ BRITISH COUNCIL MALAYSIA 2022.

squat position and a “particularly transient relationship to time.”⁴⁵¹ However, it is commonly used to indicate the social act of collectively gathering in informal conversations not necessarily leading to concrete plans.⁴⁵²

Nongkrong is a group dynamic rooted in communication and listening.⁴⁵³ As visual artist Hana Madness claims, it is “rooted in the lives of Indonesians because gathering and chatting is part of their culture.”⁴⁵⁴ Methodologies built on nongkrong acknowledge the collective thinking occurring in communal and activist spaces.⁴⁵⁵ This concept also addresses the investment of a “lot of time in human relations while not expecting anything in return.”⁴⁵⁶ However, great ideas, projects, or new forms of collaboration can be developed from the simple act of hanging out.⁴⁵⁷ As claimed by Linda Hoemar Abidin, treasurer and executive board member of Koalisi Seni, the organisation Koalisi Seni — which encourages the creation of a healthier art ecosystem in Indonesia by mediating between communities’ needs and government — was born in 2012 after several sessions of nongkrong, which engaged a group of people in valuable conversations.⁴⁵⁸ However, as an open-ended process, nongkrong is often considered a manifestation of laziness. As Rakun claims, when he was an adolescent, his father discouraged him from practising nongkrong, as this practice was considered as a waste of time.⁴⁵⁹

As Rakun posits, the concept of nongkrong changed through time, as it fell under those collaborative practices suppressed by the New Order regime when collective gatherings were considered subversive.⁴⁶⁰ General Suharto and his military forces adopted a systematic repression of all social forces, controlling every facet of life.⁴⁶¹ At that time, “it was illegal to congregate in groups of more

⁴⁵¹ Dahl 2016.

⁴⁵² Vanhoe 2016.

⁴⁵³ Dahl 2016.

⁴⁵⁴ British Council 2022, p. 11.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶ Ratelle 2020.

⁴⁵⁷ BRITISH COUNCIL MALAYSIA 2022.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ AKADEMIE VAN KUNSTEN LEZING 2022.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ Budiardjo 1986.

than five people without permission from the state.”⁴⁶² Whereas religious ceremonies were authorised, informal gatherings and artistic initiatives such as *jeprut* performances, which happened in crowded places — even if not publicised — were considered dangerous for the social order.⁴⁶³ Artists gathering collectively were often charged as guilty of creating dissent and suspicious crimes, being arrested, prosecuted, or murdered.⁴⁶⁴ Consequently, collective gatherings were used as artistic strategies to counter Suharto’s suppressive measures, standing for an open opposition to the authorities. Practising *nongkrong* became a political act on which artist collectives such as GRSBI, PIPA, and Desember Hitam based their artistic strategies that addressed socio-political issues through community-based projects. Furthermore, informal gatherings later became the foundational core of self-running institutions — often resulting from the formalisation of a circle of friends previously repressed — such as Galeri Cemeti, consequently shaping Indonesian alternative art scene.

The ban of collective leisure activities and art practices created an antecedent to the proliferation of art collectives. The freedom to explore and use public space in post-Suharto Indonesia fostered collaborative practices which strengthened community’s togetherness and art collectivism.⁴⁶⁵ Particularly in Java, artist collectives worked contextually in the environment of their communities, creating spaces bridging the gap between arts and culture and the public.⁴⁶⁶ In this light, it is interesting to note how *nongkrong* has gradually gained a dialogical and sociological space in contemporary culture, being used as a method and medium in art practices. This happened in line with the Indonesian attitude toward recasting traditional customs in conversation with art practices and developing new artistic strategies.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶² Cristóbal 2020.

⁴⁶³ Kent 2016.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ Cristóbal 2020, p. 8

⁴⁶⁶ Ratelle 2020.

⁴⁶⁷ Kent 2016.

It can be argued that the evocation of nongkrong in art dates back to the sanggar, “a traditional meeting place” where apprentices learnt from art masters in informal ways.⁴⁶⁸ Within the sanggar, debates and conversations happened contextually to the art practice, which focused on people, drawing insights from the community’s activities and issues.⁴⁶⁹ In this light, nongkrong emphasises the relationality of Indonesian artists’ practices and methodologies.⁴⁷⁰ Although many sanggars were forced to disband during the New Order, their tradition remained in place through socially engaged art practices challenging traditional modes of representation. As the tendency to gather has become predominantly from the 2000s onwards, resulting in a shift towards collectivism in Indonesian contemporary art, it can be argued that the concept of nongkrong is essential to understand post-1998 Indonesian art and society at large. Specifically, in the case of ruangrupa I contend that nongkrong lies at the base of their foundation, organisational model, and research-based art practice.

As claimed by Fitria Praptono, ruangrupa were born from a series of informal meetings between its core members after school.⁴⁷¹ These encounters and discussions progressively included more people, eventually leading to ruangrupa’s current formation.⁴⁷² In this light, it appears clear as ruangrupa’s foundation resulted from multiple sessions of nongkrong. As Jayasrana claims, “ruangrupa are nongkrong” which is also practised to build and maintain networks of friends and collaborators.⁴⁷³ Similarly, Vanhoe claims that informal gatherings and conversations are ruangrupa’s way of life.⁴⁷⁴ In this regard, it can be argued that nongkrong is also at the core of ruangrupa’s horizontal structure, which Vanhoe labelled as ‘generous.’ In his contention, “the possibility

⁴⁶⁸ Usually, when discussing sanggars, authors refer to the period under President Sukarno government (1945-67). See Vanhoe 2016, p. 32. See also Kent 2016.

⁴⁶⁹ Vanhoe 2016.

⁴⁷⁰ Dahl 2016.

⁴⁷¹ AKADEMIE VAN KUNSTEN LEZING 2022.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

⁴⁷³ D. Jayasrana, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 18 February 2022.

⁴⁷⁴ Vanhoe 2016.

of simply hanging out and engaging in informal conversation (nongkrong) can be seen as [ruangrupa's] 'continuous generous structure'.⁴⁷⁵

As Fitria Praptono claims, ruangrupa's relationship and structure are based on nongkrong through which they share personal stories, thoughts on timely topics, and food, eventually coming up with working ideas to be developed in a later stage.⁴⁷⁶ In ruangrupa's member Ajeng Nurul Aini's words, nongkrong is fundamental to ruangrupa's daily activities and working practice, organically shaping every aspect of their decision-making process.⁴⁷⁷ As all ideas are valuable in nongkrong, all the members of ruangrupa (from the cleaning crew to the director) are considered equally important in creating content.⁴⁷⁸ Therefore, nongkrong fosters a distributed leadership and horizontal organisation, involving multiple parties in building a site for ongoing ideas, communal ways of living, and new grounds for alternative forms of knowledge exchange.

Nongkrong was also the funding principle of the ruru house, established in South Jakarta in the early 2000s as an alternative art space. As other alternative art spaces, the ruru house solved the function of filling the gap in Jakarta's art infrastructure void. However, besides being a production place, it was also an informal place for meetings, fostering nongkrong between local artists, community members, and international guests.⁴⁷⁹ Being open 24/7, the ruru house was a space where to gather, fostering values like friendship and mutual support in close collaboration with the local community. Furthermore, the first ruru house was established in Komplek Garuda, a building destined to Garuda airline's employees; this way, ruangrupa could nongkrong with local and international guests, expanding their network of friends.⁴⁸⁰

Through time, the project of the ruru house evolved in the foundation of Gudskul, also stemming from the nongkrong tradition of hanging out and

⁴⁷⁵ Vanhoe 2016., p. 33.

⁴⁷⁶ AKADEMIE VAN KUNSTEN LEZING 2022.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁸ Vanhoe 2016.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

gathering in conversations. Inspired by that, on the occasion of documenta fifteen, Gudskul will hold a series of workshops, discussions, and collective activities to explore collective practices, self-sustaining activities, and cultural discourses through networking, making friends, and mutual learning called the 'nongkrong curricula.'⁴⁸¹ The participants will live together in The Fridericianum, Kassel, cooperating in daily activities strengthening their relationships and sharing knowledge.⁴⁸² In this light, it is interesting to observe how, progressively, ruangrupa has transformed nongkrong from an informal practice leading to no precise outcome, to their organisational structure, finally using it as a research tool and artistic methodology on which to found their projects. This claim can be supported by analysing under the lens of nongkrong the projects discussed in chapter two.

As previously argued in describing ruangrupa's practice, approach, and values, their main interest is researching the urban, cultural, and socio-political reality of Jakarta (interest progressively expanded internationally). To this aim, one of their first initiatives was holding a market. In Indonesia and Java in particular, (traditional) markets function as trading places and as spaces for gathering and building social relationships.⁴⁸³ Furthermore, they are characterised by friendly relationships between sellers and buyers, encouraging the exchange in dialogue and connections.⁴⁸⁴ Traditional markets also reflect social norms, belief systems, and the local environment where they are established, becoming an example of urban and social dynamics.⁴⁸⁵ Through their market's stand, ruangrupa could research Jakarta's urban and social issues by directly engaging in conversations with the market's visitors, experiencing the interrelationship between people and between people and their surroundings. As a traditional practice, nongkrong is an organic way to

⁴⁸¹ GUDSKULART WEBSITE, 'Gudskul Collective Study #5 "Sekolah Temujalar"'.
⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Aliyah, Setioko, Pradoto 2016, p. 103.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

share information and knowledge and gain insights, resulting in active cooperation and participation.

Ruangrupa used nongkrong as a research method also in the context of Arnhem's ruru huis for SONSBEK '16, which functioned as a site to collect histories of Arnhem's inhabitants and ideas for the exhibition. Besides creating social engagement and cohesion among people visiting the house, nongkrong was used as a research method to collect information about Arnhem's history, community habits, interests, and social issues, implementing ruangrupa's database for future projects and methodological developments. Furthermore, nongkrong was also used as an artistic methodology. Among the activities organised at the ruru huis, ruangrupa held a market where artists and others were 'invited to offer their produce "without expecting anything in return".'⁴⁸⁶ The expectation of 'non getting anything in return' overlaps with the concept of nongkrong (as well as the market as a site for exchanges in conversations) which, in this regard, is applied to the 'transactions' — in line with ruangrupa's exhibition concept — among people in a relational way. As Vanhoe argues, the ruru huis was run using nongkrong as an organisational method.⁴⁸⁷ To artist Anne Marjolein Pink, working with the method of nongkrong means letting go of the tendencies to control a conversation and its content, creating an informal environment where discussions flow organically through a web of associations.⁴⁸⁸ However, according to Pink, the pitfall of this method is the difficulty to make long-term plans "because the place where the conversation ends up is hard to anticipate, resulting in days where nothing really gets done and troubled with realising set goals."⁴⁸⁹

According to post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha, the unstructured character of conversation in art challenges the expectations of art knowledge and representation, shifting the relation between artist and audience towards a

⁴⁸⁶ Pink 2015, p. 97.

⁴⁸⁷ R. Vanhoe, interview with author, Amsterdam, 7 April 2022.

⁴⁸⁸ Pink 2015.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 94.

relational paradigm.⁴⁹⁰ Bhabha argues that, while the silence is implicit to the aesthetic experience of contemplating the art object, conversations are collaborative pursuits where language connects object and subject, artist and audience, challenging the art space.⁴⁹¹ ‘Conversational art’, as Bhabha calls it, challenges modern aesthetic notions, focussing on issues of marginalisation affecting local and global communities.⁴⁹² This art practice emerges from social reality’s contextual contingencies which are particularly significant to understand the artist’s role within the community and the dialogue between culture and community.⁴⁹³ In this light, nongkrong can be read as a conversational art practice, blurring the conventional distinction between subject and object, and artists and audience, enhancing collaboration and multidisciplinary in art.⁴⁹⁴ Furthermore, it can be argued that nongkrong operates within the frame of DIWO, sharing with this practice the focus on collaboration and emancipation in art through the creation of an open system for source distribution.

In line with Bhabha’s notion of conversational art, it is interesting to highlight ruangrupa’s role within the community. Ruangrupa emerged as a local artists’ initiative responding to Jakarta’s specific needs, particularly concerning the loss of its “social functions in favour of commercial activities”, for which they aimed to create a space where community members “can develop creative capacities.”⁴⁹⁵ According to a report commissioned by NWO-WOTRO Science for Global Development programmes, and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research in the Netherlands, “ruangrupa is considered a strategic organisation that has promoted progressive ideas and a network/coalition that works on strengthening cultural infrastructure” contributing to strengthening civil

⁴⁹⁰ Bhabha 1998.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Considering that people involved in conversations have different formations, cultural backgrounds, and fields of expertise, conversations are consequently shaped by different entanglements and perspectives.

⁴⁹⁵ Juliastuti 2012, § 2.

society in Indonesia.⁴⁹⁶ Connections, exchanges, and collaborations with citizens, students, artists, and young people in ruangrupa's projects are essential to examine the urban spaces, city regulations, economic laws, and their impact on social practices.⁴⁹⁷ To this account, nongkrong lies at the base of their collaboration processes, progressively developing in a more structured research method in line with ruangrupa's project-based artworks. As claimed by van Helmond, the entire structure of ruangrupa is nongkrong.⁴⁹⁸ From his perspective, ruangrupa research by hanging out, observing, and trying to blend in with the reality they are investigating.⁴⁹⁹ Their projects are characterised by much space for discussing, hanging out, getting to know each other, and getting inspired by each other's ideas in an open, non-hierarchical structure.⁵⁰⁰ Following this line of thought, nongkrong can be interpreted as a strategy helpful to reach Vázquez's concept of thinking/listening in the 'we', moving out the authorship-ownership individuality, going towards the relation with others.⁵⁰¹

In the case of *The Apartment Project* (2003), the two groups participating in the project engaged in conversations with residents to investigate how the architectural shift toward high rise buildings in Jakarta affected local communities resulting in changes in social dynamics and aggregational activities. The ways residents from Taman Rasuna and Rumah Susun Benhil engaged with the two groups by hanging out and gathering reflected the different habits and social behaviours of the two apartment complexes. Nongkrong was used as a research method implemented by visual arts to translate the research findings into a shared final presentation. On this occasion, sessions of nongkrong were organised to discuss and create awareness about the cultural implications of the apartment model and how it affects socialisation, networking, and collaboration.

⁴⁹⁶ Klaver et. al. 2015, p. 31.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁸ A. van Helmond, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 3 March 2022.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Vázquez 2020, p. 23.

Nongkrong can be seen as a site of potential action, a space where sharing time with friends and strengthening art's social processes.⁵⁰² In this light, nongkrong can be considered at the core of ruangrupa's concept of networking as a spontaneous, open process of building friendship through discussions, resulting in a relational infrastructure.⁵⁰³ To ruangrupa, networking is a precondition for their projects. In this light, Arts Collaboratory has considerably helped ruangrupa expand its networks internationally, sharing with ruangrupa the consideration of arts and culture as drivers of social innovation and the aim of facilitating relations among people and developing new perspectives.⁵⁰⁴ Arts Collaboratory organises annual private and public assemblies addressing historical concerns, socio-political struggles, and collaborative projects built on the notion of collectivity.⁵⁰⁵ Arts Collaboratory Assembly Indonesia, held in Jakarta in 2014, revolved almost exclusively around conversations. Whereas nongkrong follows unpredictable paths, the Assembly set several goals to be achieved through the workshops, reducing the spontaneity of the conversations. However, nongkrong was pivotal to engage with the artist collectives in Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Jatiwangi, representing those alternative art spaces based on self-organisation often established from the simple act of people spending time together.

Through its open-ended character and informality, nongkrong allows ruangrupa to design artistic strategies according to the ecosystem in which they operate, developing projects in response to territorial situations and dynamics, facilitating networking, shared knowledge, and collective memory. The artistic strategy of informal gathering and conversational art intertwined with the custom of 'gotong royong' as a system for cooperation progressively led ruangrupa developing the practice of lumbung as a metaphor and a working model for communal building and equal sharing as the funding principle of Gudskul and curatorial strategy for documenta fifteen (and beyond). As claimed by Rakun,

⁵⁰² Dahl 2016.

⁵⁰³ Juliastuti 2012.

⁵⁰⁴ Klaver et al. 2015.

⁵⁰⁵ ARTSCOLLABORATORY WEBSITE, 'Assembly' 2021.

the practice of lumbung can be seen as an evolution of nongkrong.⁵⁰⁶ Although Rakun did not elaborate on this topic, explaining why this evolution happened, it can be argued that lumbung provides the unstructured practice of nongkrong with a sustainable structure and precise goals.

By considerably growing participation in international networks and organisations, ruangrupa has gradually developed sustainable collaboration systems and financial support for them and their collaborators. As claimed by Vanhoe, from 2015, ruangrupa became more functionally organised.⁵⁰⁷ That year, ruangrupa founded Gudang Sarinah Ecosystem, a cultural platform in South Jakarta shared with other artist collectives to foster network building, collaboration in art and society, and mutual support. At this stage, a new generation of ruangrupa was starting to play a significant role within the collective.⁵⁰⁸ At the same time, the elderly members focused on strengthening the long-term developments of their projects and aims.⁵⁰⁹

GSE organically evolved in Gudskul, founded in 2018 by ruangrupa and their business partners and co-managers, the collectives Serrum and Grafis Huru Hara.⁵¹⁰ As a complex infrastructure including various projects such as ArtLab, RURUradio, Jakarta 32°C, RURU Kids, RURU Shop, Karbon Journal, and RURU gallery and being shared with other artist collectives, Gudskul required an organisational method that was less unpredictable and loose of that of nongkrong. Furthermore, the projects fostered by Gudskul link art practitioners to several cities across Indonesia aiming to provide benefits to their local communities.⁵¹¹ For these reasons, ruangrupa applied the model of lumbung as the organisational method and communal infrastructure for self-sustainability and source distribution among Gudskul members and local communities. As ruangrupa claim, before transporting lumbung to the context of documenta fifteen, they first experimented with its model in Gudskul. In light

⁵⁰⁶ AKADEMIE VAN KUNSTEN LEZING 2022.

⁵⁰⁷ Vanhoe 2016.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ Kwan 2020.

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

of this claim, it can be argued that lumbung provides Gudskul with a sustainable structure by setting precise goals that shape the mutual collaboration among its partners. From this experience, ruangrupa decided to expand the practice of lumbung to the global scale, fostering principles of communal efforts and support through the platform of documenta fifteen.

3.3 Lumbung for the World

Around 2010, ruangrupa started to develop the idea of 'lumbung' to enhance sustainability for them and their collaborators.⁵¹² 'Lumbung', directly translatable as 'rice barn' or 'granary', refers to a traditional harvest system used in Indonesian rural areas for collective storage of agricultural products, particularly rice.⁵¹³ This system is known all over Indonesia and it is identified by different ethnic languages and different architectural styles.⁵¹⁴ Despite the differences, lumbungs share a tripartite structure, composed of a foundation, a hollow body part formed by four pillars, and a saddle-shaped high roof (Fig.26).⁵¹⁵ Lumbung relates to the concept of redistribution, communal life, and common sharing as possible sustainable practices for the society, acknowledging indigenous conservation principles and techniques as valuable alternatives to late capitalist practices and values fostering individualism.⁵¹⁶ The increase in urbanisation

⁵¹² Valjakka 2020.

⁵¹³ DOCUMENTA-FIFTEEN WEBSITE, 'Lumbung'.

⁵¹⁴ DOCUMENTA FIFTEEN 2021.

⁵¹⁵ Dewi & Salain 2020.

⁵¹⁶ DOCUMENTA FIFTEEN 2021. The question of indigeneity in Indonesia is particularly complex, considering that the archipelago includes over five hundred ethnic groups and has several colonisation histories. Generally, Indonesian indigenous people are identified by the term 'adat', usually denoting ethnic native groups which occupied Indonesian territory long before the nation was established. Adat communities are self-governed groups with proper belief systems and cultures whose communal life is regulated by adat laws. According to the Indonesian Law on the Recognition and the Protection of the Indigenous People and The Indigenous Peoples' Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN), there are five main features which identify a community as adat: "to have a shared history, to own customary land, to have adat law, to possess specific property relations and inheritance/or adat artefacts, and to have a customary governance system" (Hauser-Schäublin 2013, p. 10). During Dutch colonisation, adat laws were translated into a system comprehensible to Dutch legislators and incorporated into the colonial jurisdiction of the so-called 'pluralistic law system' (1919). For this reason, after the declaration of independence in 1945, adat law was seen as simultaneously a colonial heritage and an 'Indonesian' feature. During Sukarno's government (1945-1967), the term adat gained significance as symbolising Indonesia's cultural heritage, in line with Sukarno's policy of basing society on an indigenous system of rules and practices. However, during the New Order (1967-1998), General Suharto turned adat into a

and industrialisation led to progressive disappearance of traditional lumbungs. However, this concept is being increasingly used by communities, local organisations, and art collectives to symbolise the effort to gather collective memories and cultural resources for the common benefit.⁵¹⁷ As Budianta claims, urban kampungs, as collective spaces, have adapted the concept of lumbung to the creation of a system for storing knowledge and identity building.⁵¹⁸

As a symbol of communal infrastructure, lumbung was at the core of the foundation of the Gudang Sarinah Ecosystem, which organisational model later evolved in Gudskul and ruangrupa's idea of 'collective of collectives' as an inter-local ecosystem fostering interdisciplinarity, network building, collaboration, and mutual support among Gudskul's members and international communities.⁵¹⁹ Ruangrupa gradually developed the concept of lumbung locally, nationally, and internationally, eventually selecting it as the curatorial practice for documenta fifteen. As artistic directors of the event, ruangrupa proposed the practice of lumbung to create a cross-cultural and sustainable collaboration model among global communities that can last beyond documenta's one hundred days (Fig.27).⁵²⁰ In 2021, ruangrupa initiated the online program 'lumbung calling,' a series of conversations aiming to raise awareness on the practice of sharing through discussions about the lumbung values: local anchor, humour, generosity, independence, transparency, sufficiency and regeneration.⁵²¹ The

marginalised and exclusionary concept, considering adat communities as a threat for the national order and stability. Suharto suppressed numerous adat practices, instrumentalising the concept for political reasons. Consequently, re-appropriation of indigenous practices and identities became pivotal in post-Suharto Indonesia. Thanks to AMAN's efforts, adat became the banner under which celebrating regional diversity and a socially harmonious, communalistic set of values owed by indigenous communities against the centralised state. However, Law No. 32/2004 re-subordinated adat to the central government, perpetrating indigenous' marginalisation. Remarkably, among the adat communities are the Badui in West Java, Kajang in Sulawesi, Sasak in Lombok, and Betawi in DKI Jakarta. Although each community has a specific set of values, traditions, and vernacular architecture, scholars such as Melani Budianta claim that these communities used lumbung as a place to store crops, changing in functions and architectural features according to the community of reference. See Asian Development Bank 2002; Hauser-Schäublin 2013; Salehudin 2018; van Engelenhoven 2021.

⁵¹⁷ DOCUMENTA FIFTEEN 2021.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

⁵¹⁹ Ratelle 2020.

⁵²⁰ DOCUMENTA-FIFTEEN WEBSITE, 'Lumbung'.

⁵²¹ DOCUMENTA FIFTEEN 2021.

contributors to these conversations, as Andan claims, actively produce changes on various fields, investigating the notion of lumbung from multiple perspectives, disciplines, and cultural contexts, shaping the artistic frame of documenta fifteen.⁵²² In the context of contemporary art at large, lumbung is helpful to understand the basic needs and self-limitations of organisations and define a plan to share resources with others, growing together with the surrounding community.⁵²³ “It is where art meets social activism, management, and various local networks.”⁵²⁴

In 2021, ruangrupa also opened the ruruHaus (‘Haus’ is the German word for house) in Kassel city centre, developing the concept of the ruru huis established in Arnhem one year before the opening of SONSBECK ’16 (Fig.28). Similarly to its sisters in Arnhem and Jakarta, the ruruHaus is an open space for people to gather in nongkrong, working collaboratively, sharing ideas, food, and knowledge, and from which to understand Kassel’s ecosystem.⁵²⁵ It hosts a living room, a lab, a kitchen, a print shop, a co-working area, and a radio station broadcasting the ‘lumbung radio’, an open online inter-local network of radios and audio practices operating 24/7 and streaming multiple languages, music, and stories.⁵²⁶ Due to COVID-19 restrictions, in 2021 the physical program of workshops and meetings has been wholly cancelled, and residents’ spontaneous participation and aggregation discouraged.⁵²⁷ However, from spring 2022, the ruruHaus hosts on-site events and discussions to reach Kassel’s community and international guests, anticipating the official opening of

⁵²² The contributors to the ‘lumbung calling’ program were: Melani Budianta, professor of literature and cultural studies at universitas Indonesia; Armin Salassa, organic farmer and activist; Sourabh Phadke, architect and school teacher, Gridthiya Gaweewong, curator and founder of Project 303 Bangkok, Thailand; Tania Bruguera, artist founder of Instituto de activismo Hannah Arendt (INSTAR), Cuba; Omar Imseeh Tesdell, agroecology scholar; Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh, artist; Mamou Daffé, social innovator and founder of Festival sur le Niger, Erica Malunguinho, trans-art, Black activist, and educator; Shahidul Alam, photojournalist, teacher and social activist; Arafat Sadallah, philosopher; Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev, artists; Paula Fleisner, professor of aesthetics at the Universidad de Buenos Aires; Christopher Cozier, artist. The encounters were hosted by Mirwan Andan and Jumana Emil Abboud.

⁵²³ Papastergiadis and ruangrupa 2021.

⁵²⁴ Ibid., § 4.

⁵²⁵ DOCUMENTA-FIFTEEN WEBSITE, ‘Ruruhaus’.

⁵²⁶ STATIONOFCOMMONS WEBSITE, ‘Station of Commons Play’.

⁵²⁷ R. Vanhoe, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 7 April 2022.

documenta fifteen on 18 June 2022.⁵²⁸ As Rakun and Darmawan argue, documenta fifteen focuses on timely topics such as social injustices, colonial responsibilities, late-capitalist and patriarchal structures, proposing a collaborative model to contrast those structures, produce social change, and enable people to have a different view of the world.⁵²⁹ Ruangrupa's aim for documenta fifteen can be read in light of art historian Geronimo Cristóbal concept of *lumbung* in art as a metaphor for expanding towards participative practices and "exchanging ideas to better the world."⁵³⁰

In line with their collaborative practice, ruangrupa decided to share documenta's artistic direction with five "allies" forming the artistic team assisting them in the organisation of the show.⁵³¹ Particularly, these allies are: art historian and sociologist Andrea Linnenkohl, political activist Ayşe Güle, art historian and curator Frederikke Hansen, art critic and curator Lara Khaldi, and Arts Collaboratory co-founder Gertrude Flentge. Together with ruangrupa, they have invited fourteen community-based projects sharing the values of *lumbung*, many of them from non-aligned countries, to create an international network of *lumbung* members enhancing concepts of solidarity and friendship through their organisational methods, art practices, and local commitment.⁵³² The *lumbung* members are: Fondation Festival sur le Niger (Ségou, Mali), Gudskul (Jakarta, Indonesia), INLAND (various locations, Spain), Jatiwangi art Factory (Jatiwangi, Indonesia), Question of Funding (Ramallah, Palestine), Más Arte Más Acción (Nuquí, Chocó, Colombia), OFF-Biennale (Budapest, Hungary), Trampoline House (Copenhagen, Denmark), ZK/U – Center for Art and Urbanistics (Berlin, Germany), Britto Arts Trust (Dhaka, Bangladesh), Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt (INSTAR, Havana, Cuba), Wajukuu Art Project (Nairobi, Kenya), Project Art Works (Hastings, UK), and FAFSWAG (Auckland, Aotearoa).⁵³³ They have

⁵²⁸ RURUHAUS WEBSITE.

⁵²⁹ DOCUMENTA-FIFTEEN WEBSITE, 'ruangrupa Selected as Artistic Direction of documenta 15 For the First Time an Artist Collective Curates the International Art Exhibition' 2019.

⁵³⁰ Cristóbal 2020, § 2.

⁵³¹ DOCUMENTA-FIFTEEN WEBSITE, 'Introducing the Artistic Team' 2020.

⁵³² DOCUMENTA-FIFTEEN WEBSITE, 'Asphalt Issue 1'.

⁵³³ Ibid.

developed a shared pot of material and immaterial resources, gathering in virtual assemblies to discuss the aims for years to come, in line with ruangrupa's project to create a long-lasting platform for collaboration.⁵³⁴ Furthermore, each lumbung member was provided with a budget to invite other artists and collectives, resulting in over one thousand people participating in the exhibition.⁵³⁵ In addition to the lumbung members, ruangrupa and the artistic team selected over fifty lumbung artists to feature in the exhibition, among which Reinaart Vanhoe and the Arts Collaboratory members, underlining the importance of their networks of friends with whom they have collaborated in several initiatives.⁵³⁶

By bringing together lumbung members geographically dislocated across the globe in online meetings before documenta's opening, ruangrupa overcame Kassel's geographic boundaries, implementing discourses on decentralising mainstream art centres and narratives. According to art historian Terry Smith, the tendency to build biennials and manifestations such as Manifesta or documenta around "dispersed-platforms" started between the 1980s and 1990s in line with postcolonial critique.⁵³⁷ Smith particularly refers to the third Havana Biennial (Cuba, 1989), co-curated by Gerardo Mosquera and the Centro Wifredo Lam's staff who abandoned the national pavilions setup, providing multidisciplinary workshops, seminars, and two bars for informal encounters, critically reflecting on established exhibition-making narratives.⁵³⁸ The curatorial team selected almost exclusively artists from non-aligned countries, opening to other modes of representation and exchanges along "South–South artistic axes."⁵³⁹

The third Havana Biennial had significantly influenced later events, particularly for having created — as art historians Charles Green and Anthony

⁵³⁴ DOCUMENTA-FIFTEEN WEBSITE, 'Asphalt Issue 1'.

⁵³⁵ Mitter 2022.

⁵³⁶ See the whole list at DOCUMENTA-FIFTEEN WEBSITE, 'Lumbung Members & Artists'.

⁵³⁷ Smith 2009, p.156.

⁵³⁸ Kolb, Patel, Richter 2020.

⁵³⁹ Green and Gardner 2016, p. 81.

Gardner claim — a strong network among non-aligned cultures.⁵⁴⁰ As pointed out by Veiga, all the Southern biennials have been highly influenced by the third Havana Biennial “for advancing the potential of a decentralized art world.”⁵⁴¹ However, its influence also reached Western Europe, particularly on the occasion of documenta 11 (2002), curated by Okwui Enwezor who dispersed the event across four connected “Platforms” located worldwide and shared his curatorial responsibilities with a group of six co-curators.⁵⁴² Furthermore, Enwezor developed a program of public symposiums and meetings being held in Vienna (Austria), New Delhi (India), Saint Lucia (Island of Saint Lucia) and Lagos (Nigeria) during the year preceding the exhibition, overcoming the exhibition’s limitations in time and space.⁵⁴³ Enwezor’s postcolonial curatorship decentralised the Eurocentric art system’s coordinates, unveiling the obsolescence of major art venues such as Kassel “embedded in a North Atlantic cultural defence alliance.”⁵⁴⁴ In sharing the artistic direction of documenta fifteen and creating a collaborative program among the dispersed platforms of lumbung members which started one year before the opening of the event, it can be argued that ruangrupa’s curatorial approach for documenta fifteen finds its antecedent in Enwezor’s direction of documenta 11. Furthermore, as in Enwezor’s edition, ruangrupa selected as lumbung artists numerous collaborative platforms from non-aligned countries to be featured in the exhibition.

Documenta was founded in 1955 in Kassel to recover from the atrocity of World War Two and reconnect with German’s modern art before the Third Reich.⁵⁴⁵ According to art critic and sociologist Walter Grasskamp, despite the claim of being an international manifestation, at least the first four editions of documenta (all curated by Arnold Bode) were “quite German, Eurocentric, or

⁵⁴⁰ Green and Gardner 2016.

⁵⁴¹ Veiga 2018, p. 141.

⁵⁴² Gardner and Green 2016.

⁵⁴³ Farnsworth 2020.

⁵⁴⁴ Marchart 2020, p. 26.

⁵⁴⁵ Buurman 2018.

later North Atlantic in terms of statistics and staging.”⁵⁴⁶ From the first focus on abstract art, particularly in Europe and North America, the event progressively opened to the social impact of art, hosting performances, happenings, film and video installations alongside sculptural and pictorial interventions.⁵⁴⁷ Through time, documenta broadened its scope, exploring contemporary developments in art practices and venues beyond Kassel, questioning institutional structures and organisational models.⁵⁴⁸ Enwezor’s dispersed platforms from documenta 11 were taken a step further by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, who directed documenta 13 (2012). Christov-Bakargiev not only organised events prior to the exhibition but also located the event in four sites, Kassel (Germany), Kabul (Afghanistan), Alexandria/Cairo (Egypt), and Banff (Canada), providing the event with a “locational” turn connecting local histories to global perspectives.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁶ Buurman & Richter 2017, p.2.

⁵⁴⁷ As mentioned earlier in the text, Arnold Bode curated the first four editions of documenta. His main goal was to bring the avant-garde art banned under the National Socialist regime back to Germany and its public. The first edition of documenta (1955), held at the Fridericianum, was the first modern art exhibition since the Degenerate Art show in Munich in 1937. The second edition (1959) focused almost exclusively on abstract art, displaying artists from Europe and the U.S, overlooking realist tendencies. The venues were the Fridericianum and the ruins of the Baroque Orangerie at the entrance to the Karlsaue. Documenta 3 (1964) occurred five years later, instead of four (interval of time that became the standard from 1972). Despite the neo-avant-garde movements spreading across Europe and the US at the time, the exhibition appeared still reluctant to include new trends in contemporary art, remaining anchored to painting, sculpture, and drawing. Documenta 4 (1968), the last curated by Arnold Bode, was presented under the slogan “The Youngest documenta Ever.” Despite the inclusion of Pop art, currents such as Fluxus, Happenings, and performance art were still absent from the exhibition, which caused discontent among the audience. Harald Szeemann curated documenta 5 (1972), presenting conceptual art, happenings, and performances. However, documenta five was criticised by conservatives as being “too sociological” and by leftists for being just an expression of l’art pour l’art. Documenta 6 (1977), curated by Manfred Schneckenburger, elaborated on the power of media in the contemporary world (and about art), displaying films and video installations alongside paintings, sculptural interventions, and performances. For the first time, East German artists were displayed in the exhibition. Documenta 7 (1982) was curated by Rudi Fuchs, who focused on art autonomy by displaying predominantly large-scale paintings and sculptures. (The number of conceptual artworks and performances was notably reduced). Manfred Schneckenburger curated documenta 8 (1987), re-addressing art’s sociopolitical responsibilities from a postmodern perspective by emphasising “the dissolution of a hierarchical canon of style and form in art.” Curated by Jan Hoet, documenta 9 (1992) was one of the most popular editions, enhancing nonhierarchical cooperation among the curatorial team and the selected artists creating the exhibition together. However, this edition was criticised for being Western-centric. Documenta 10 (1997) was the first edition curated by a woman, Catherine David, who focussed primarily on artists from the 1960s and 1970s, addressing political and cultural issues involving war, urban space, colonialism, and globalisation. Through the interdisciplinary character of the works displayed, and the multiple venues involved in the exhibition, documenta X expanded the field of culture of the time and engaged with the city of Kassel. See DOCUMENTA WEBSITE ‘Retrospective’. See also Amor 1997.

⁵⁴⁸ DOCUMENTA WEBSITE, ‘Retrospective’.

⁵⁴⁹ DOCUMENTA WEBSITE, ‘Documenta 13’.

The general aim of the exhibition was “healing the trauma of war through art.”⁵⁵⁰ In Kassel, documenta 13 took place in numerous locations besides the traditional main venues (the Fridericianum, the documenta-Halle, and the Neue Galerie), displaying site specific artworks exploring artistic research and forms of imagination beyond anthropomorphism and economic structures of power.⁵⁵¹

Questioning and decentralising power structures was also the aim of documenta 14 (2017), directed by Adam Szymczyk who located the event in Athens (Greece) and Kassel (Germany) to rethink issues on subjectivity and collectivity, and disrupting the status quo.⁵⁵² Despite the general aim, documenta 14 was highly criticised for providing a superficial and simplistic reading of local histories, perpetrating the role of mega-institutions.⁵⁵³ However, it followed the tendency to multiply documenta’s art venues and establish discursive interactions between curators, artists, and audiences that have gradually become central to the exhibition, resonating with ruangrupa’s artistic and curatorial practice. What marks a clear difference from the previous editions is that, for documenta fifteen, ruangrupa aim to create a global platform of mutual support and exchange that will remain effective beyond documenta’s one hundred days, creating an ecosystem for common discussions and shared practices.⁵⁵⁴

In his book, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha claims that “our culture”, identified as a practice between art and politics, present and past, is located in the “realm of the *beyond*.”⁵⁵⁵ The *beyond* is an evolving space of intervention from which to “redescribe cultural contemporaneity, [and] historic commonality” envisioning the future.⁵⁵⁶ It emerged from the need to think beyond obsolete narratives about subjectivities characterising moments of historical transformation. Culture in the *beyond* focuses on processes produced by

⁵⁵⁰ DOCUMENTA WEBSITE, ‘Documenta 13’.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵⁵² DOCUMENTA14 WEBSITE, ‘Public Programs’.

⁵⁵³ Zeffkili 2017.

⁵⁵⁴ UNIVERSES WEBSITE, ‘Documenta 2022’.

⁵⁵⁵ When referring to “our culture”, Bhabha refers to contemporary culture. See Bhabha 2004, p. 1.

⁵⁵⁶ Bhabha 2004, p. 7.

cultural hybridities and minorities' perspectives, enhancing values of solidarity and community and providing terrain for new and communal strategies to redefine identities, collaboration, and society at large.⁵⁵⁷ Bhabha's definition of culture in the *beyond* can apply to the lumbung practice envisioned for documenta fifteen.

First, as a pre-colonial indigenous practice adapted to a transnational environment, lumbung can be read in light of Bhabha's acknowledgement — in line with Martinican psychoanalyst and participant in the Algerian revolution Frantz Fanon — of indigenous practices and repressed histories as pivotal to reaching empowerment and cross-culturalism in the realm of the *beyond*.⁵⁵⁸ The lumbung practice aims to create an alternative model for collaboration and sustainability, connecting art practitioners to their local communities globally, fostering social relations and networking across different cultures and belief systems. Furthermore, in line with Bhabha's considerations on art as profoundly connected to social reality, lumbung aims to overcome obsolete narratives of (re)presentation creating a system of shared resources and mutual support, fostering values of solidarity and collaboration between art practitioners and local communities. Finally, in line with Bhabha's acknowledgement of postcoloniality as essential to rethink the idea of community, the lumbung practice aims to dismantle colonial structures of power, affirming a new collaborative dimension overcoming geographical, social, and ethnic boundaries.

In line with ruangrupa's art practice, the lumbung strategy moves from artistic individuality towards collectively building a greater common welfare. In this light, it can be assimilated to the practice of commonism as theorised by artist Nico Dockx and cultural sociologist Pascal Gielen in their book *Commonisim: A New Aesthetics of the Real* (2018). Emerging as an alternative to neoliberalist values and practices, commonism is a belief system proposing "new forms of living together" in a "heterogeneous mix of practices fusing

⁵⁵⁷ Bhabha 2004

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

economics, politics, ecology, social care and love.”⁵⁵⁹ These practices are born from organisations that aim to produce social changes not limiting themselves to protest, but also proposing “alternative social life stiles” rooted in self-organisations, sustainability, and “new social relations.”⁵⁶⁰ Commons organisations strive for real changes, not limiting their activities to the artistic domain but extending them to issues related to class struggle, ecological concerns, and postcolonial discourse.⁵⁶¹ In art, “commonig entails the co-creation of any kind of aesthetic commonality, ranging from the co-production of an exhibition by a curator and several fine artists” to relational practices engaging artists and audience.⁵⁶² At the core of these practices there is the collaboration between all the parties involved in the creation of a process leading to a common cause or interest.⁵⁶³ Commons practices stand between the social and the political, enhancing the dismantlement of hierarchies in favour of a public reasoning built through plural opinions and discourses.⁵⁶⁴

In light of these notions, it can be argued that ruangrupa progressively became a commons organisation. Rooted in self-organisation, self-sustainability, and collective practices from its beginning, ruangrupa gradually evolved into a communal ecosystem of equal redistribution of sources, shared spaces and mutual learning with the foundation of Gudskul. Furthermore, their art practice shares with commonism the interest in socio-political issues, blurring the boundaries between art and activism and actively involving the audience — a term that ruangrupa rarely use, preferring the term ‘community’ instead — in their projects. Ruangrupa’s shared direction of documenta fifteen is also in line with commons principles. Furthermore, similarly to commonism’s aims, the lumbung practice proposes an alternative lifestyle rooted in relationality and sustainability, aiming to dismantle oppressive structures of power and produce social changes.

⁵⁵⁹ Gielen 2018, pp. 82-83.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 84

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

⁵⁶² Laermans 2018, p. 137.

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

To Gielen, commonism exists in all the practices of collective sharing of resources. These resources can be material, such as goods of any sort, or immaterial, such as language, knowledge, or history.⁵⁶⁵ An example of commons practice are spontaneous conversations among people exchanging stories and ideas.⁵⁶⁶ In this light, nongkrong can be considered a commons practice, fostering informal and unregulated conversations. As Rakun claims, lumbung can be seen as an evolution of the practice of nongkrong. The two practices are deeply rooted in collaboration and relationality; however, they are based on different core principles. While nongkrong is rooted in spontaneity, leading to unexpected outcomes (or sometimes, as claimed by Pink, to no outcome at all), the practice of lumbung has a pre-fixed goal, shaping human relations, collaborations, and actions accordingly. Contrary to projects such as *The Apartment Project* or the overall atmosphere fostered by the ruru huse(s), where nongkrong was used as a practice to get close to the community and a research tool to gain information about community struggles and social issues, the practice of lumbung for documenta fifteen follows a precise development and structure on which the exhibition is built. The practice of lumbung still foresees nongkrong as an aggregation method for reuniting people in conversations, however, it follows a structured methodology which ruangrupa arguably developed through time.

From practising the model of lumbung through sharing spaces, networks, knowledge, and financial sources with other collectives and in close relationship to local communities in Gudksul, ruangrupa enlarged its purpose to the global scale by proposing it as the artistic strategy and curatorial practice for documenta fifteen, imagining a planetary model for experimenting with the values of koperasi and koneksi socially and economically. Following this line of thought, the conclusion will broaden the reflection on the notions of collaboration and how it mingles with nongkrong progressively building new

⁵⁶⁵ Gielen 2018.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid.

practicable living possibilities through its organic development into the practice of lumbung.

Conclusion

Since its foundation in 2000, ruangrupa has become a prolific platform for events in Indonesia and internationally. Born from the lack of infrastructure and funding for contemporary art in Indonesia, ruangrupa was established as an alternative art space, in line with artists' collectives from the mid-1990s, creating non-institutional art spaces rooted in self-organisation and self-sustained activities. Through their projects, ruangrupa enquire about development in visual art while fostering social transformation and alternative modes of collaboration in mutual dialogue with the ecosystems they work with. Comprehending Jakarta's social stratus, political changes, and cultural atmosphere is essential to understand who ruangrupa are and how they operate as their practice is deeply connected to Jakarta, working through intersecting visual arts, urban activism, and social change. Through time, ruangrupa strengthened their position in the cultural field, becoming a reliable player both locally and internationally, progressively becoming part of numerous networks of 'friends' and building a nomadic infrastructure.

Challenging dominant aesthetic canons, ruangrupa's projects are deeply rooted in informal gatherings and unregulated conversations going under the name of *nongkrong*. Considered a fundamental aspect of community functioning in modern Indonesia, this practice started to be used as an antagonist art strategy by new avant-garde artists during the New Order, eventually becoming the motor of collectivism in the Indonesian contemporary art scene in the mid-1990s. In this light, it can be considered an alternative artistic and organisational practice. From the first projects, such as *Jakarta Habitus Publik*, to the foundation of Gudskul, *nongkrong* has increasingly become relevant for ruangrupa's artistic practice, eventually being translated internationally to events such as SONSBEER '16 and documenta fifteen. In light of these considerations, I take the opportunity to answer the main research question this thesis poses: How does *nongkrong*, as an alternative organisational approach and artistic process, shape ruangrupa's practice

navigating through Western European biennials and fostering long-term transnational and intercultural relations?

To understand how nongkrong shapes ruangrupa's practice (intended as simultaneously artistic and curatorial as such a distinction does not apply to ruangrupa's case), it should be read in light of its function within the community dynamics and in relation to ruangrupa's structure. Nongkrong lies at the core of social interactions and communal activities in modern Indonesian society. As being characterised by psychological and physical connotations, nongkrong can arguably be considered among those practices influencing people's 'sense of place', consequently shaping collective social behaviour. Furthermore, considering the actions occurring in nongkrong (usually, a circle of 'friends' engaging in conversations while sitting in a circle, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes) it can be argued that nongkrong also affects the representation of the space, creating a site for socialisation and interaction based of human relations and exchanges.

Several artist collectives were born from nongkrong, which increasingly gained relevance in contemporary culture, being used as a strategy and medium in art practices. As an open-ended, spontaneous practice where all ideas are considered equally valuable, nongkrong is a space for sharing knowledge and insights, eventually flowing into projects (or not). Similarly to many others artist collectives, ruangrupa was established after several sessions of nongkrong happening after school between a group of friends spending time together. Ruangrupa has translated nongkrong to their organisational structure, creating a horizontal environment that fosters equality among members, distributed leadership and shared responsibilities. As Rakun claims, this model is often not efficient and slower than others; however, it represents who ruangrupa are and where they come from.⁵⁶⁷ In light of this claim, it can be argued that if nongkrong is one of the key-concepts to understanding social processes in Indonesian communities at large, and Jakarta's social stratus in

⁵⁶⁷ AKADEMIE VAN KUNSTEN LEZING 2022.

particular, it is essential to understand ruangrupa's functioning and artistic strategy alike.

"Ruangrupa are nongkrong", as Jayasrana claims; and, arguably, nongkrong shapes all ruangrupa's projects as a mode of social interactions and cohesion and a research tool used to investigate urban dynamics, social issues, and community needs. However, I argue that when it comes to ruangrupa, nongkrong is also embodied by a physical place: the ruru house. Established in a rented house in South Jakarta soon after ruangrupa's foundation as their headquarters (and changing five locations in time, before the foundation of Gudskul), the ruru house was (and still is) an open site for people to gather, get to know each other, work collectively on artistic and educational projects, fostering values like friendship and support in close collaboration with the local community. As Gintani, a member of the Indonesian artist collective Acehouse, claims, renting a house to headquarters is common among artist collectives in Indonesia.⁵⁶⁸ The relationships produced by nongkrong in these houses help strengthen the local art scenes, allowing exchanges among people and creating the potential for upcoming collaborations. Through the ruru house and the projects created from it, ruangrupa established themselves as a reliable artist collective on the local scene, gradually strengthening international networks of friends and collaborators.

In a workshop for the Berlinale Talents 2020, Andan claimed: "if you want to get into the real atmosphere of who ruangrupa are, you should hang out with us, in Indonesia."⁵⁶⁹ This claim underlines how nongkrong and the context of Jakarta (and Indonesia at large) are essential to understand who ruangrupa are and what they do. In light of this consideration, I argue that the model of the ruru house has become a transportable symbol of ruangrupa's structure, functioning, and environment, being translated to international contexts, particularly on the occasion of SONSBECK '16 (2016) and documenta fifteen (2022). The year preceding both exhibitions, ruangrupa established the ruru

⁵⁶⁸ Dahl 2016.

⁵⁶⁹ BERLINALE 2020.

house in Arnhem and Kassel. The aim was to give citizens an organic time to get to know ruangrupa, hang out with them, and engage in collective activities and discussions within the informal environment of the ruru house, which is informed by Jakarta's dynamics, customs, and history. Although established in 2021, the ruruHaus Kassel, as part of documenta fifteen program, has been closed to the public until May 2022 due to the COVID-19 restrictions. However, as Vanhoe claims, it was intended as the organic development of the ruru huis Arnhem, established on SONSBECK '16.⁵⁷⁰

Based on the model of the ruru house in Jakarta, Arnhem's ruru huis functioned as ruangrupa's headquarters. From there, ruangrupa aimed to investigate Arnhem's history and social issues, get to know its citizens, create informal gatherings among artists and the local community, and collaboratively think about projects and artworks for the exhibition. Although residents were initially reluctant to step in and engage with ruangrupa and the artistic team, the ruru huis gradually created social engagement and cohesion among visitors, showing how people adapt and react to a given context. Investing in creating social relations and knowledge exchange was in line with SONSBECK '16's theme revolving around the notion of *transACTION* as the relations occurring between people and their surroundings through which expressing real values.

As an art practice, nongkrong recalls Bhabha's notion of conversational art as a practice related to the unstructured character of conversation, which challenges aesthetics canon, shifting the relation between artist and audience towards a relational paradigm. This paradigm shows several similarities with nongkrong as creating open systems for source distribution. For these reasons, nongkrong has been fundamental for developing a transnational art ecosystem recalling Simone's notion of 'people as infrastructure', intended as a system of collaborative practices and alternative modes of production fostering social encounters across different subjectivities and needs. This notion can help understand ruangrupa's value of kolaborasi as moving out of individuality, going towards the plurality of relation. Relationality informs ruangrupa's practice

⁵⁷⁰ R. Vanhoe, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 7 April 2022.

profoundly, sharing its meaning with decolonial theories on existing in the space of the 'we' in which shared knowledge and togetherness strengthens relations across global communities. In its configuration of social changes, the 'we' addresses historical traumas, gender and racial injustices, and colonial differences, acknowledging communal shared knowledge and seeking for new ways of collaborations. Therefore, it can be useful to add a layer of meaning to the notion of kolaborasi as oriented towards a common welfare and social justice.

The practice of lumbung as the curatorial strategy for documenta fifteen can be seen as an evolution of nongkrong. Through the concept of lumbung, based on a pre-colonial and indigenous collaboration model for crops' storage, ruangrupa aim to create a shared platform for cross-cultural and sustainable collaboration among local communities worldwide. Lumbung foresees an alternative model of cooperation and sustainability, connecting art practitioners to their local communities globally, fostering social relations and networking across different cultures and belief systems. Whereas both nongkrong and lumbung foster collaboration, lumbung has a pre-fixed aim which nongkrong, as an unregulated conversational practice, does not. In this light, it can be argued that nongkrong — as solving the function of enhancing social relations and networking — constitutes the infrastructure of the lumbung method, which is being used to set forth a long-term platform for collaboration in a structured and sustainable way.

Ruangrupa have practically adopted the model of lumbung to co-exist and co-work with other artist collectives in Gudskul, which constitutes ruangrupa's first attempt to enact this common model of material and immaterial surce redistribution. However, as Rakun claims, ruangrupa cannot guarantee this model can function planetary. Furthermore, one could ask what 'planetary' means when it comes to lumbung as a shared model going beyond the documenta's one hundred days and whether this practice will remain somehow related to lumbung members and artists, eventually failing in reaching its global purpose. Another question that can arise could be whether ruangrupa's practice

runs the risk of being extracted from institutions pursuing neo-liberal mechanisms of exoticisation, becoming entangled in those mechanisms their practice is critical of. As Vanhoe claims, ruangrupa are aware of mechanisms of power informing Western art institutions they are confronting and collaborating with.⁵⁷¹ What it can be argued is that, by proposing a model which counters capitalist logic through investing unproductive time in social relations and commoning modes of living together, ruangrupa are parasitising institutions from the inside, using their platforms to spread their messages and values to a broader audience.

To conclude, it can be argued that, as a fundamental aspect of Indonesia's modern society, nongkrong has shaped ruangrupa since its foundation as an artist collective, becoming the core of its organisational structure and artistic strategy. Through the model of the ruru house, ruangrupa transported nongkrong internationally, enhancing mutual dialogue and knowledge exchange with translocal ecosystems, progressively strengthening a relational infrastructure based on shared aims and interests. As for its unpredictable structure, nongkrong fails in pursuing long-term plans, ruangrupa developed this practice into the method of lumbung, which shared structure for sources redistribution can ensure durable relationships between multicultural communities working together towards common greater welfare. Whether this model will reveal being utopist and unrealisable is yet to be investigated. However, what makes ruangrupa's contribution significant to Western European art discourse at the moment, is raising awareness on silenced histories and subjectivities, reflecting upon issues such as identity as existing in relation to others in order to create new ontologies which decenter capitalocentric visions and narratives forming common infrastructures and alternative ways of being together.

⁵⁷¹ R. Vanhoe, interview with the author, Amsterdam, 7 April 2022.

Glossary and Abbreviations

AWAS!: Beware!

Desember Hitam: Black December

DIY: Do it yourself

DIWO: Do it with others

Galeri Nasional Indonesia: The National Gallery Indonesia

Gerobak Bioskop: Cinema Cart

gLEAP: globally Locally Embedded Art Practice

GNB Exhibition: Non-Aligned Nations Contemporary Art Exhibition

GOLKAR: The Party of Functional Groups

GRSBI: Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru or New Art Movement

GSE: Gudang Sarinah Ekosistem

Huis: House

Haus: House

ISI: Institut Seni Indonesia or Indonesian Institute of the Arts

JAF: Jatiwangi Art Factory

K.ö.k: Kvinnor önskar kollektivitet or Women Desire Collectivity

Jeprut: A break that occurs because of tension

Kampung: Traditional Indonesian rural settlements within the urban setting

Kolaborasi: Collaboration

Koneksi: Connection

Layar tancap: Outdoor screening

Lumbung: Rice barn

Nongkrong: Hanging out/gather informally

Orientasi: Orientation

Pameran Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia 75: Indonesia New Visual Art Exhibition 75

PIPA: Kepribadian Apa or What Identity

Rasuna: Home/house

Reformasi: Reformation

Relasi: Relation

Ruang: Space

Rupa: Visualisation/form

Ruang seni rupa: An art space

Rumah Seni Cemeti: Cemeti Art House

Ruru: Diminutive for 'ruangrupa'

Ruru buitendienst: The editorial team

Sanggar: Traditional workshop/ studio

Sonsbeek Buiten de Perken: Sonsbeek Beyond Lawn and Order

Taring Padi: Rice Fang

TIM: Taman Ismail Marzuki

Yayasan Seni Cemeti: Cemeti Art Foundation

Illustrations



Fig. 1 Jim Supangkat, *Ken Dedes*, 1996, (artist's reconstruction from the 1975 original), mixed media, 61 x 44 x 27 cm, Collection of the National Gallery of Singapore (image courtesy: National Gallery Board, Singapore).



Fig. 2 Agus Suwage, *Pressure and Pleasure*, 1999, paint, iron construction, military tent, cinema advertisement banners, 200 x 250 x 350 cm (image courtesy: Indonesia Visual Art Archive).



Fig. 3 Ten core members of ruangrupa (image courtesy: ruangrupa).



Fig. 4 ruangrupa, installation view *Jakarta Habitus Publik*, 2001, Jakarta (image courtesy: ruangrupa).



Fig. 5 Street view of the ruru house, 2009, Jakarta (image courtesy: ruangrupa).

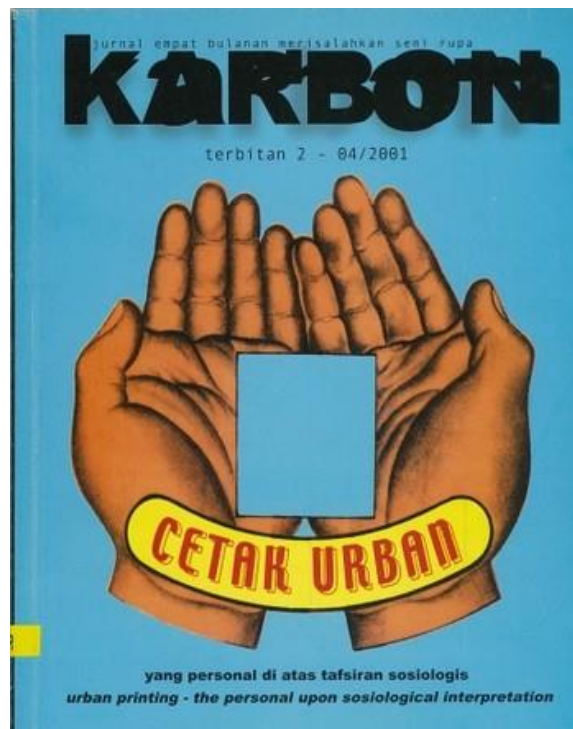


Fig. 6 ruangrupa, *Karbon Journal* n.2, *Cetak Urban* ('Urban Form'), 2001 (image courtesy: ruangrupa).



Fig. 7 ruangrupa, installation view *OK. VIDEO Militia*, 2007, Jakarta (image courtesy: ruangrupa).



Fig. 8 ruangrupa, installation view *Jakarta 32°*, 2004, Jakarta (image courtesy: ruangrupa).



Fig. 9 Street view Gudskul, 2018, Jakarta (image courtesy: ruangrupa).



Fig. 10 Anngun Priambodo, *Free Speech but Polite*, 2003, photo, dimension unknown (image courtesy: Anngun Priambodo).



Fig. 11 Capture from Dimas Jayasrana, *Please Come to My Dream, I Want to Hurt You*, 2014, 6'13".



Fig. 12 ruangrupa, *The Apartment Project for Urban and Residential Environments*, 2003, presentation at Taman Rasuna Apartemen, Jakarta (image courtesy: ruangrupa).



Fig. 13 ruangrupa and Keg De Souza, installation view *Vertical Villages*, 2013, mixed media, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney (image courtesy: ruangrupa and Keg De Souza).



Fig. 14 Final session Arts Collaboratory Assembly: Indonesia, 2014, Jakarta (image courtesy: Arts Collaboratory).



Fig. 15 ruangrupa, installation view *RURU*, 2014, mixed media, dimension unknown, São Paulo (image courtesy: ruangrupa).

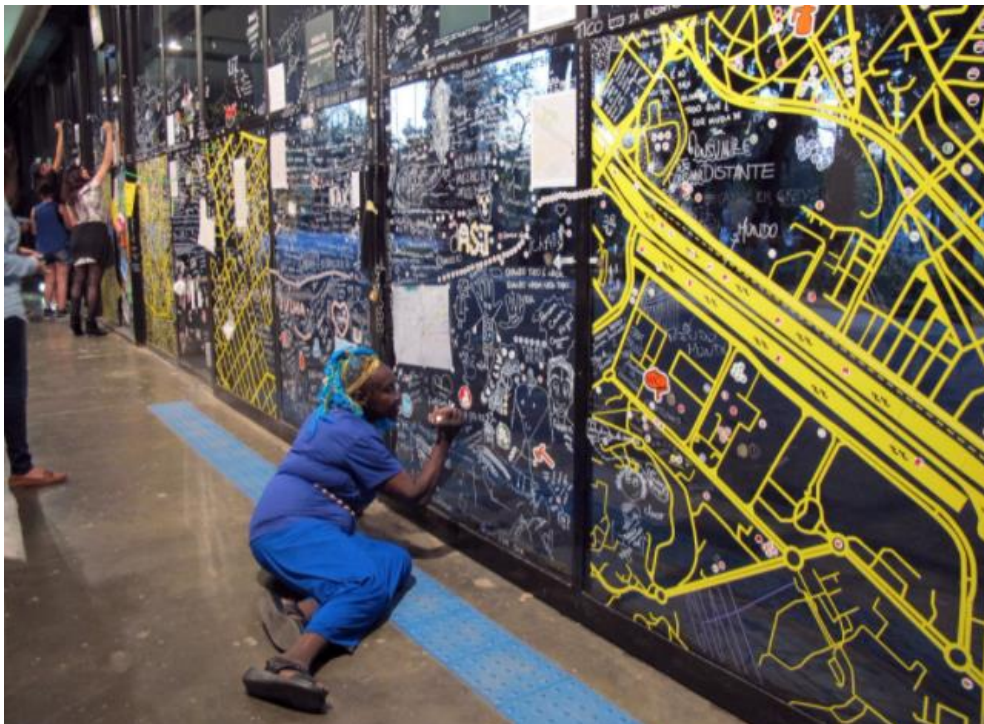


Fig. 16 ruangrupa, detail from *RURU*, São Paulo city map, 2014, mixed media, dimension unknown, São Paulo (image courtesy: ruangrupa).



Fig. 17 Street view ruru huis, 2016, SONSBEERK '16: transACTION, Arnhem (image courtesy: Sonsbeek archive).

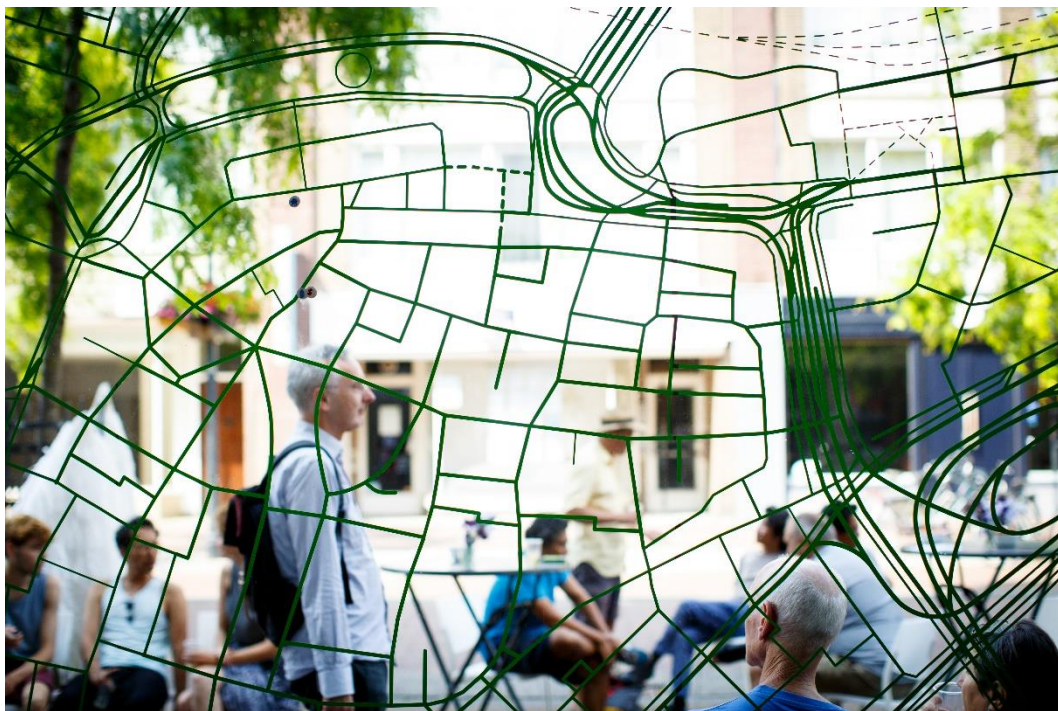


Fig. 18 Detail from the ruru huis, Arnhem's city map, 2016, mixed media. dimension unknown, SONSBEERK '16: transACTION, Arnhem (image courtesy: Sonsbeek archive).



Fig. 19 Agung Kurniawan, *Remember Day Parade and After*, 2016, SONSBEERK '16: transaction, Arnhem (image courtesy: Agung Kurniawan).



Fig. 20 KUNSTrePUBLIK, *Vvestlife*, 2016, wood, life vests, dimension unknown, SONSBEERK '16: transACTION Arnhem (image courtesy: Sonsbeek archive).



Fig. 21 Rob Voerman, *The Exchange*, 2016, wood, aluminium, coloured glass, dark Plexiglas, dimensions variable, Sonsbeek '16: transACTION Arnhem (image courtesy: Sonsbeek archive).



Fig. 22 Richard Bell, *Aboriginal Embassy*, 2013, wood, cloth, dimensions variable, Sonsbeek '16: transACTION Arnhem (image courtesy: Sonsbeek archive).



Fig. 23 Rirkrit Tiravanija, installation view *Untitled (Free)*, 1992, mixed media, 303 Gallery, New York (image courtesy: Gavin Brown's Enterprise).



Fig. 24 k.ö.k and ruangrupa, workshop on Radical Care, 2019, Women's Centre in Tensta/Hjulsta, Stockholm (image courtesy: k.ö.k).



Fig. 25 Rirkrit Tiravanija, installation view *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)*, 1996, mixed media, Kolnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, (image courtesy: Gavin Brown's Enterprise).



Fig. 26 Lumbung, Sasak village Desa Sade, Lombok (image courtesy: Wikimedia Commons).

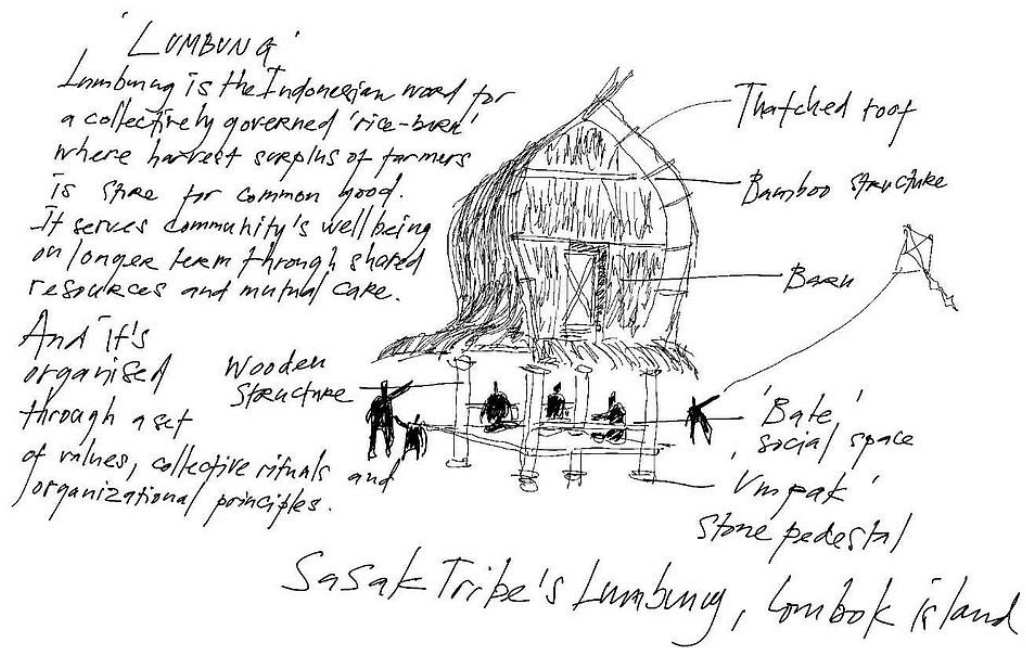


Fig. 27 Ruangrupa, lumbung drawing, 2020, dimension unknown (image courtesy: Iswanto Hartono).



Fig. 28 Street view ruuHaus, 2021, Kassel (image courtesy: Nicolas Wefers and documenta fifteen).

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