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ruangrupa: mapping a collective biography

On a recent visit to ruangrupa, I needed to check my emails and was offered an office space in a converted bathtub, typical of the collective's inclusive approach to reframing definitions of form and function. Collected over a number of meetings in both Indonesia and Australia, and several email conversations, this paper draws together the thoughts of three of ruangrupa's creators, Reza 'Asung' Afinisa, Ade Darmawan and Hafiz, who offer their perspectives on their relationship to art, technology, the city, decentralisation, and global networks.

Ruangrupa was founded in 2000 by a group of artists in Jakarta determined to challenge and inspire the relationships between art and politics by claiming both their own physical vicinity and theoretical discourse. After the 'creative uprisings' of the 90s, they identified a lack of space in Indonesia for artists who wanted to collaborate with the public, unmediated by political parties or art dealers. A vacuity in criticism became apparent, which neither an excitable *Reformasi* media nor an eager international art world could fill. While many artist run spaces surfaced at that time across Indonesia (and continue to do so), ruangrupa have arguably done more than any other group to dissolve the boundaries of fine art debates, broadening discussions to include image-based research, networking, event organising, intercultural exchange and other practices essential to developing a critique on a local context enmeshed with global connections.

So what do they do? For ruangrupa, art is not only about images and exhibitions. It is project-based and should integrate media and public education with cultural events that are interesting, popular and progressive. 'In the few years that ruangrupa has been working,' says Hafiz, 'there is a problem that has become very chronic in Jakarta, how do we read art? Art is seen as a product here. Ruangrupa tries another alternative that is about art becoming a social event. Because we think this is how art can be realised, how it can function.' One of the most well known of these ruangrupa events is the Ok.Video Festival.

Ok.Video

Ok.Video was established as Jakarta's biannual International Video Festival in 2003. At that time, ruangrupa identified the increasing use of audio-visual technology as a potential starting point for critical collective learning in Indonesia. More diverse sectors of Indonesian society, from fine arts students in the cities to wedding planners in villages, were beginning to gain access to audio-visual technology. Digital video cameras were becoming cheaper, self-built computers and pirated software enabling DIY edit suites, and a wide networks for VCD distribution was developing. Ruangrupa designed a festival framework, hoping to encourage critical thinking by bringing together the different ways people were producing and viewing video content.

There has been enthusiastic international response to the initiative in each of its two-year cycles. Amongst many other overseas outlets, the first festival compilation was screened in Australia at 'This Is Not Art' in Newcastle. The second collection, from the 2005 festival, was incorporated into the Gang Festival screening program the subsequent year. And the 2007 festival, titled '*Militia! Saatnya Bergerak!*' (Militia! It's Time To Act!), which I will focus on here, has been made available to an International audience through collaboration with EngageMedia.

Hafiz, the artistic director of Ok.Video, is direct in his intentions. In calling people to arms, he means giving them the opportunity to use a video (camera) to challenge the hegemony of the audio-visual language. 'The term *militia*,' he says, 'means to arm a group of people in a movement, to alter and seize power ... in an organised, well planned manner and mobilize them for the sake of change.' He stresses that while the mobilisation may begin on an individual level, it has to happen 'horizontally,' within all of us.

In Jakarta, the 'reality' of the local context has a number of possible forms: 'gated communities' modeled on the American suburban dream, thirty storey apartment blocks, *kontrakan* shanty towns on the outskirts, and student boarding houses to name a few. And 'local' also means infinitely different things across

Indonesia, particularly as regional autonomy appears to shift people's focus back to their own ethnic identities in an apparent cultural decentralisation. Ruangrupa in part sees itself as an agent of this change. 'People are thinking more about *their* local,' says Ade, 'and this awareness challenges them to think more independently and organise amongst themselves. Especially in Indonesia, where we are still fighting modernity as a concept, a dream, and an illusion.'

Harnessing this fight against modernity, authority and homogeneity, ruangrupa ran video workshops in 2007 in fifteen locations across Indonesia, working in collaboration with a range of independent media groups and art communities. Asung, the workshop coordinator, and his team encouraged participants to use video as a tool to analyse their own local contexts, to ask new questions about familiar surroundings and situations. Through discussion, they then developed strategies to present these questions using the medium of video.

Ade confirms that this approach to art as a tool is a foundation of the ruangrupa philosophy and is applied across all of their projects. He says the aim of their art is '...not necessarily to transfer the message directly but to reflect and analyse identity, history etcetera, that's when it does something.' Art, he says is useful when it helps us to identify ourselves as individuals and collectives in a hyper-capitalist world, '...cause we're all born to be good consumers and followers.'

The workshops also consisted of pre-prepared knowledge 'modules', including an introduction to the history of video and its relevance to the socio-political and cultural situations, a background to Ok.Video, and basic coverage of technical aspects and simple editing processes. These stand-alone modules could be flexibly presented in different sequences, depending on the background knowledge of participants.

In Padang, West Sumatra, I had the opportunity to observe one of these workshops, run by Hafiz, and produced in collaboration with Belanak art community. Gathered in a local computer rental shop, participants spilled out on to the street, eager to be part of the ruangrupa plan for local empowerment.

The results of these workshops, more than one hundred short videos, formed the first part of the Ok program, VIDEO IN, located at the *Galeri Nasional Indonesia* (GNI). The idea was to map the developments of not only artists, but media groups, and art-culture communities in various Indonesian regions. Also included were a selection of international video works from twenty-seven countries, chosen according to how they either recorded or spoke critically about parallel social-cultural issues in different parts of the globe. Or in other words, how they would inform the Jakarta audience. The choice of the GNI as a gallery was a deliberate attempt to broaden that audience.

But to exhibit a project like Ok.Video only at the National Gallery, a space already reserved for art, would have been a sign of impotence for ruangrupa. In Jakarta, a vast city with a population that is said to swell by more than two million people during the day, rethinking presentation is integral to a project that intends to engage a precarious public. The second part of the Ok program, VIDEO OUT, reclaimed functional spaces such as offices, cafes, malls, and train stations. Video makers were invited to consider the character of the space, along with the specific 'publics' that inhabit them. 'A presentation space has its own character and history,' says Hafiz. 'Therefore, the video makers were asked to focus on the concept of a local space as the beginning of a creative process.' For Hafiz, limitations placed on artistic practice are inextricably linked to space and theoretical challenges. This is where he sees the potential of audio-visual media, which, he says, can become 'a departure point in developing questions regarding social, political, and cultural issues'. In this sense, art has social and cultural functions whose 'products' are truth, reality, and 'the making of our own history'.

further afield

In Sydney, on my own turf, I catch up with Asung on a bus to the southwest suburb of Canley Vale. He has been brought here as a representative of ruangrupa by the Centre for Contemporary Art and Politics at the College of Fine Arts/UNSW for a satellite event of the Sydney Biennale. He speaks confidently in flawless English, unfazed by his whirlwind traveling (he has just come from a residency in India) or the contradictions of the global art scene. So if ruangrupa aims to facilitate production of the local, how does it translate to a global audience? Or are their efforts towards a new discourse really just an application of global rhetoric on local visual culture?

For Asung, art networks are one way to tackle that paradox of local and global visions. His 'neighbourhood' is a dynamic, relative and complex set of spaces, and he is always looking closer as well as further, maintaining Jakarta as his point of reference. 'Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind within all the big issues of collaborative initiatives,' he says, 'is to generate and encourage new visions of global networking by starting with the closest and smallest possibilities of having relations, especially in our own neighbourhoods ... this means going to the closest public audiences.'

Ruangrupa, who receive a stream of international invitations for residencies, collaborations, and exhibitions, try to filter out exchanges that are little more than publicity projects. 'Big events, like Biennales are always trying to catch the latest developments.' Ade says. 'Local initiatives are sprouting everywhere in the

world in the last ten years – in southern countries for example – as the reaction towards the hegemonic western scheme. These events themselves can be positive as another forum to meet and exchange and spread thoughts, but it easily becomes like a trend as well, when the exchanges are actually not really happening.’

And looking to the global South is a priority in the process of decentralising what Ade calls the ‘art scene’. Asung agrees with the strategy and adds a personal note. ‘I find that the more I travel and compare, the relationships of Asia and the Pacific are much more interesting than going far up north (to Europe)’. But forming durable relationships between artist collectives is not straightforward. Asung says it requires organisation (including someone in charge of communications), technology (software and hardware), and support (from a funding body or a supportive economy), but also a conceptual shift. ‘Any system is going to look ‘durable’ if there is continuity, but actually, it is very difficult for every artist to be ‘established’ or have durable links.’ So part of that shift is about a strong collective structure, which in many cases, Indonesian arts communities have already developed, out of necessity.

‘In a physical way, a collective structure will outdo any other forms. As a basic foundation it is strong, and for artists within that structure, there is more impetus for collaborative work because that is the immediate environment and the ‘expected’ behaviour. But working together in a collective also has to be considered a fluid process. It is very natural, like the way of a swarm, liquid and rhizomes. An artist should be aware of adaptation and become very adaptive. This is not about surviving as an individual, although it can be thought of as individual development. It is about collective work. We are going to succeed in making a source of information and research that is managed and directed around learning collectively.’

And *ruangrupa* as a collective has undeniably been adaptive in their approach to not only video, but internet technology. Their cheeky website offers a flashing ‘*Selamat datang*’ (Welcome) to a post-industrial labor island surveyed by a circling helicopter. Inside is information on their philosophy, their current projects, and a complete archive of the art criticism journal *Karbon*, which they have been publishing and distributing across Indonesia since 2003. Ade confirms that technology enables connection to a global network possible but warns that the networks formed have to be about ‘culture first’ and directed by a ‘user’ rather than a ‘consumer’ approach. ‘I don’t think technology is entirely democratic of course, but it is a necessary part of our practice. This media (internet) is fast and in a short time has changed how people think and act towards many things ... I think it’s important to use it as a tool. While other media are already occupied by greater interests.’

more changes ahead

As ruangrupa starts organising for the next cycle of Ok.Video, international residencies and *Karbon* publications, we can be sure to see a lot more from them. Their ideas, Ade promises ‘will negotiate their relationship to the art system by themselves’. If anyone is reluctant to put Jakarta on the map, ruangrupa is sure to make their own map, collectively researching their local *kampung*, the mushrooming consumer spaces, the transit zones of their contradicted city, their place in Asia, and in the wider world. With their quintessentially ‘Jakarta’ approach to local events and global networking, ruangrupa is a necessary antidote to the pressure towards one ‘universal’ model of cultural production.

ruangrupa.org

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This article was compiled from the following correspondences with the author:

Ade and Asung, 20/7/07 (in person, Jakarta); Asung, 18/6/08 (in person, Sydney); Hafiz 28/3/08 (email); Ade 7/04/08 (email)