

## **Editorial/ Reformatting Documenta with lumbung Formula: documenta fifteen**

<https://curatography.org/8-0-en/>

By Sandy Hsiu-chih Lo

Since the early 1990s, various significant biennial and triennial exhibitions and other art events held regularly around the world have begun to play a pivotal role in redefining contemporary art. The Documenta, held every five years in Kassel, Germany, is one of the most research-oriented super exhibitions that explore different approaches to understanding the development of contemporary art, which are different from the art-historical focus on artists and artworks of the past. The “documenta 5” (1972), curated by Harald Szeemann, established the legitimate status of the curator as author. “Documenta 11”(2002), directed by Okwui Enwezor with its four discursive platforms, took place in different locations worldwide before its physical exhibition in Kassel and formed a decentralized “post-colonial constellation” with the network connection of the five platforms. It focuses on discussing various issues other than art and opens up a global political perspective on art exhibitions.

“documenta 15”, held last year and directed by the Indonesian group ruangrupa, proposed a curatorial concept based on the spirit of lumbung, which means granary in Indonesian. In fact, there are similar traditional buildings used to store grain and seeds and associated with the meanings of resource-sharing and crisis prevention in many cultures. ‘Extended Living Room: Space and Conversation’, a conversation between ruangrupa members Ade Darmawan and Mirwan Andan, in Cartography Issue 2 “Curators’ Living Rooms,” discussed how to employ traditional local knowledge like lumbung and collaborative practice in a “chit-chat and hanging out” (nongkrong) way, thereby art and life can rebuild their intimate relationship without reducing each other. ‘The Documents 15 and the Concept of Lumbung’ in Issue 6 “The Beginning of Curating” published diverse drawings drawn by members of rangrupa. To sum up, lumbung regards the collective as a group that lives and works together, practice as a way to do things and solve problems, and the relationship network as a circle of friends. Distributed in several main exhibition areas in Kassel, 14 lumbung members have gathered a group of friends to live and work together, creating a colorful and fragrant

atmosphere for a harvest feast that stimulates all five senses. Compared with the collection of readers and exhibition catalog with a solid academic nature published by Documenta 11, lumbung's publications, mainly graphic books, storybooks, and magazines, are easy to understand and readable.

Lumbung, derived from Indonesia's local experience and knowledge system, is a prologue to developing different stories of struggling for survival, fighting for life, and creating art with happiness, anger, sorrow, and joy. Artists have built various living and working spaces in Kassel, such as kitchens, bars, living rooms, dormitories, vegetable gardens, gardens, childcare centers, studios, libraries, conference areas, exhibition halls, etc., which are intended to recall the cognition of various sensory experiences in the methodologies of production of knowledge and problem-solving. With its colorful, aromatic, and tasty formula, lumbung reformats the paradigm of documenta through pluriverse cosmologies and epistemologies. It challenges the rational thinking of mainstream epistemology and the visual hegemony of mainstream art epistemology and opens up the possibility of a flourishing development of multiple and alternative epistemologies. At the same time, it re-imagines a new look for public space.

Putra Hidayatullah's 'Harvesting and a Single Story of lumbung' emphasizes from a harvester's perspective, that thinking about which voices are excluded and who is deprived of rights is the truly critical issue when documenta 15 is reduced to a single narrative of anti-Semitism. After all, interweaving a world space with ethical, political, and aesthetic significance is only possible when diverse individual stories have been told and different knowledge systems have been produced based on a variety of local experiences.

Jiradej Meemala and Pornpilai Meemalai's 'The politics in Ramayana / Ramakien in documenta fifteen: Decoding the power of the Thai ruling class' interprets critically different Thai versions of Ramakien developed from the Indian epic Ramayana and decodes its hierarchical cosmology, which is used as a political tool for fabricating Thailand's collective imagination and social consciousness by the monarch and ruling elites. In addition, it takes Baan Noorg Art and Culture Cooperative's collaborative project "Churning Milk: the Rituals of Things" as an example of elaborating within a new context the possibility of recreating political conditions in contemporary Thai society.

Hsiang-pin Wu's 'Malaise of Commons: On the Quality of the Relationships in documenta 15' introduces the collective creation mode and global network of ruangrupa since its establishment. It applies the relationship structure and internal tension formed around friendship and community to speculate on the texture of relationships and the varieties of political energy. Additionally, it responds to anti-Semitic controversy with "the boomerang effect."

Three articles propose different narratives of documenta 15 from the perspectives of a harvester, lumbung member, and researcher. Lumbung as a project continues after the 100-day event in Kassel. This pluriverse network is still actively hyperlinking. It creates a space of the world where all kinds of cosmologies and epistemologies can speak equally, and different individuals can express themselves freely.

## Harvesting and a Single Story of Lumbung

<https://curatography.org/8-1-en/>

by Putra Hidayatullah

In a public session at the kickstart of the day, with harvesters at the *ruruhaus* in Kassel, Germany, in September 2022, I received an identical question about the experience of being a harvester in *documenta fifteen*. What constitutes harvesting? From the pattern of questions, I realized the need for people to summarize our experience into a concept. I personally prefer to leave this as an experimental practice that needs to grow. Additionally, I thought of inviting the audience to define themselves, or even contribute their thoughts to the definition of the story, based on the practices we had gone through, instead of locking in a concept of what constitutes harvesting (which might lead to the exclusion of what is not harvesting).

In several conversations, the term harvest has often referred to artistic recordings of discussions and meetings in several contexts. Harvesters listen to, reflect on, and depict this process from their own perspectives, through various forms, and artistic practices. Harvesting can be seen as a way of collective writing that enables continuous collective learning, derived from different sensory experiences.<sup>1</sup> Yet, over time, especially by trying to digest what happened in Kassel related to the polemic in *documenta fifteen*, I began to realize that harvesting is not just a form of summarizing knowledge gained from the process, but also presents a variety of perspectives in looking at art practices and the narratives informing them. It can also be another stepping point for reflecting on art practices, in order to invite further discussion or tell a 'different' story.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://lumbung.space/timeline/>



*Open Discussion with Harvesters at Kickstart of the Day in ruruhaus, Kassel, September 2022. Taken by Lotte*

As harvesters, my colleague Abdul Dube and I practiced remotely through Zoom for two years during the pandemic (2020-2022). I was based in Banda Aceh and Abdul was an artist based in Copenhagen. We participated in Lumbung assembly meetings with various art collectives. We observed how stories and ideas travel across continents. Over a hundred participants met virtually in the so-called Majelis Akbar. It was a regular gathering wherein all artists, collectives, working groups, and artistic teams gathered for conversations, debate, and exchanging ideas. Each collective also presented their backgrounds, practices, and challenges, as well as their plans for engaging with *documenta fifteen*, respectively.

The earlier invited collective was named Lumbung inter-lokal. This concept of inter-lokal, rather than international, creates a trajectory beyond the binary of global north and global south, which, arguably, might lead to a new exclusion towards common experiences globally. When examined, some of the same patterns and dynamics occurred in either, or in both areas.

Among these tendencies is that collectives emerge as ethical and aesthetic responses to the social contexts in which they have grown. Some collectives are coincidentally seen to be related to each other, such as the Campo Adentro Inland collective in Spain, which is engaged in the issue of land that is identical to the concerns of the Jatiwangi Art Factory

in West Java and also Mas Arte Mas Accion in Columbia. In addition, some of what I can reflect on is the tendency to see such alternative forms of education as the main step toward a response to institutionalized education that is top-down, whereby there are a powerful few who decide what to learn, which is not necessarily in line with the needs of the community. This could be seen between the related issues concerning Off Biennale in Budapest, Wajukuu in Kenya, and the same issue with Gudskul in Jakarta.

“We have many people with many realities,” Abdul once said. The Majelis has been important in terms of knowledge production. It's for sharing, exchanging, and finding some common ground, thus enabling those involved to work collectively. Also, it was a bridge that led me to learn and understand what was hidden and happening in different parts of the world, with discourses that escaped the mainstream narrative.

Most are reflections of the collectives on their practices, as well as on ideas for experimentation. For example, when Kabila, one of the participants in the Majelis Akbar, mentioned the issue of knowledge as a response to conventional models:

*How people can discuss, can find different ways of producing knowledge. In the library, we have knowledge but all come from outside. How can we find knowledge from our practices? Also, it is not only to translate but also to transcreate.*

...

*In the end, it is not about dividing, but finding a conversation. How they deal with the ecosystem and locality. What they can bring back that is meaningful for the locals. We try to learn and see this as different species that work differently.*

Also, at this juncture, I experienced how the meanings and roles of art are revisited and questioned. For instance, how art that is oriented toward the final output as an object is challenged to become a process-based form that is not solely object-based. It can be a form of collaboration and thus represent other intangibles that are locally anchored. For instance, as reflected by the collective, Campo Adentro Inland, in Spain:

*We talk about a new role for the arts that's different from globalized contemporary art.*

*For inland, it tries to contribute to the local context in Kassel. To create a balance of what we are doing in our context. To have meaningful relationships. to create companionship. We're also trying to learn from indigenous to be reconnected with the land.*

These conversations in the Majelis Akbars showed how the roles of art, knowledge, and community are intertwined. Abdul and I, as well as several other harvesters, tried to capture those realities and ideas that intersect between aesthetics, ethics, and socio-political issues that are so complex and remain relevant to further study. It is at this juncture that harvesting plays a role as a different approach toward experiments and process-based knowledge.

## **Polemics**

"The world is bigger than Europe. It is very important we hear from other parts of the world about the world," said Ute Meta Bauer, one of the members of the selection committee for documenta fifteen, at Goethe Institute Jakarta, in 2019. This idea has shown some associations with what was later presented in the Lumbung process, through different Majelises. Yet, this effort is not without challenges. Long before the opening started, an accusation began from a WordPress blog proclaiming itself as the "Alliance against Anti-Semitism Kassel," with the tagline, "There Is No Anti-Zionism Without Anti-Semitism."<sup>2</sup> Some artists and artistic teams were therefore being accused of anti-Semitism.<sup>2</sup> The main culmination of this polemical critique was during the opening, when Taring Padi's work, entitled *People's Justice*, contained images of the Mossad and the CIA, which were considered to have been involved in the historical processes where the artwork had originated, especially in relation to the context of violence and the dictatorship in Indonesia (1965-1998).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/467337/anti-semitism-accusations-against-documenta-a-scandal-about-a-rumor>

A different meaning in the artwork, however, emerged when it was located in the context of Germany, with its dark history of the Holocaust. The atrocities conducted by Adolf Hitler against the Jews decades ago were driven by the idea of German superiority, and this antisemitic ideology has left a deep guilt within the German people. It later left a moral imperative prescribing that the state of Israel should not be criticized. The polemic continued and was welcomed by politicians and even debated in Parliament. This then made the artists feel that *documenta fifteen* had been instrumentalized as a political playground. The tensions continued, with the framing by the Germany mainstream media that *documenta fifteen* carried the same ideology that had prevailed during Hitler's time, by purveying antisemitic overtones.

What is missing from the narrative is, however, the complexity of the Lumbung practices and also the issues faced by the world communities, which have become narrowed down to just the Israel and Palestine conflict being fraught with anti-Semitism. Seeing this simplification, I am reminded of Stuart Hall's proposition that there is always a reduction in every representation. In this case, it is important to examine whose voices are heard, whose voices are excluded, and who may be empowered or disempowered by a certain story. For a moment, my mind was reminded too of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, when she eloquently explained the dangers of a single story:

the consequence of the single story is that it robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult and it emphasizes that we are different rather than how similar we are. ...

The single story creates a stereotype and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete, they make one story become the only story.

### **Roles of harvesting**

Reflecting on the polemic, I went back through the story notes from the assemblies and saw the discrepancy between what was told in single stories and what had happened



during the public reception process. At this point, I also realized the role of harvesting. Besides helping to see the history of progress, it also bears witness to what is being talked about, what knowledge exists. Harvesting is not only preventing knowledge from disappearing, but becomes a way to listen to multiple voices and views other than mainstream and authoritative institutional voices.



*Documenta fifteen Harvesters and the Artistic Team in Conversation, Sandershaus, Kassel, September 2022.  
Taken by Marilia*

As is common, there is a contestation of power that is sometimes uneven in the presence of certain narratives in the public sphere. Institutions and/or mainstream media with the power they have can determine what sort of angles concerning what kind of story may be presented to the public. In other words, there is control over the narrative, which also could institutionally later be recorded in the form of an archive. In this case, harvesting, with its various mediums and forms, becomes alternatively useful for creating balance in the story.

Many stories and knowledge are abstracted from the experiences of collectives from different parts of the globe. There is then developed a space for reflecting back on ethical and aesthetic meanings in today's world. I think it's worth opening ourselves to broad and different narratives because a single story always reduces reality. In the word of Chimamanda, "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispose and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity. When we reject the

single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.” [ ]

## **Author**

Putra Hidayatullah was born in Aceh, Indonesia, in 1988. He is a teacher, art curator, and storyteller – and one of the harvesters for documenta fifteen. Both the stories and his curatorial ideas focus on issues of space, violence, and memory

In 2014, representing Tikar Pandan collective, he held an exhibition entitled Debris of War at Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM) Jakarta, in collaboration with ruangrupa and the Jakarta Arts Council (DKJ). A year later he was one of the curators of the Jakarta Biennial 2015. By the end of 2019, he became the curator for an exhibition entitled The Hallway of Memory organized by KontraS (Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence). Two years later, he was involved as one of the curators for the exhibition Present Continuous at Museum MACAN (Modern and Contemporary Art in Nusantara), Jakarta.

Putra also writes essays and short stories. One of his latest short stories Kebun Jagal (Butcher’s Garden) was selected by KontraS to be published in an anthology with 15 young Indonesian writers entitled Berita Kehilangan (News of Loss). He completed his study in Contemporary Art and Art Theory of Asia and Africa at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. Currently he is teaching at the University UIN Ar-Raniry in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, with a focus on art history. In 2022, together with several university students, he established Sajan, a platform for sharing resources related to the issue of space, art, and visual culture.

## **The politics in the Ramayana / Ramakien in documenta fifteen: Decoding the power of the Thai ruling class**

<https://curatography.org/8-2-en/>

By Jiandyin ((Jiradej Meemalai and Pornpilai Meemalai))

Translated by Palin Anusinha

This essay's objective is to discuss the academic concepts that reveal the historical and literary realities that are tightly entwined into one powerful rope, suspending the foundational ideas, beliefs, and emotions produced by the Thai nation-state, a social construct established by the ruling class since the Rattanakosin period that remains to this day. These realities also explain why the modern concept of the nation-state has been misconstrued as something long pre-existing the modern period. Decoding the power of Thailand's ruling class requires a range of methodologies, including metaphor analysis by Susan Koch and Stanley Deetz, literary interpretation by Lajos N. Egri, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's psychoanalytic theory on the politics of desire, Julia Kristeva's critical theory on language, and even Norman Fairclough's theory of the power of language. These critical strategies will aid us in understanding the 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' pressures in the Ramayana, also known as the 'Ramakien' in its Thai version (Jantima Angkapanichkit, 2011: 4).

For documenta fifteen, an international exhibition of contemporary art held every 5 years in Kassel, Germany, from 18 June to 25 September 2022, Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, an artist collective from Ratchaburi province, Thailand, presented *Churning Milk: the Rituals of Things (2022)*. A collaborative and participatory art project, the work stems from a research project into a range of interrelated mediums, including literature, oral storytelling, and folklore, in order to create a contemporary piece combining live performance and film. It seeks to demonstrate how meanings of a story change when they are presented in various forms of media; in this case, the characters in the Ramakien combined with other text and re-situated in a multimedia installation. **Size 14.00 x 12.00 x 1.20 m. Include: 85" LCD monitors, VDO 3 channel full HD B/W and color, 13 min, sound, speakers, mixer, fluorescent light tubes, balasts, color,**

prepared motor, steel, inflatable air-object, spray paint, skateboard mini ramp, Nang Yai\*, live piece performances\*, skateboard donation drive, series of workshops and events.



Churning Milk: the Rituals of Things, Baan Noorg, installation view, Documenta Halle, 2022.

Photo by Nicolas Wefers.

Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture selected 'Churning the ocean of the Milk' as its primary text, a momentous scene of the Devas (gods) and Asuras (beasts) working together to obtain the Amrit, the elixir of immortality. This event depicts a horizontal collaboration, as opposed to other war scenes wherein there is a vertical, cosmic hierarchy between the Devas and Asuras, with the former above and the latter below, in hell. Eventually, Narayana of the Devas devises a cunning ruse to obtain the Amrit from the Asuras' chief, Ravana. While the story tries to justify the Devas' deceptive means, their political and governing powers are undeniably obvious.

When we critically decode the Ramayana, also known as the Ramakien in its Thai language version, we see how certain politics or systems of governance are being perpetuated, how the modern nation-state produces its own desire while suppressing that of the people. Anyone who refuses to adopt these desires will be vilified or labeled as 'ungrateful' to the nation. But what lies behind most people's willingness to reject their personal desires in favour of the nation's, or to accept the so-called 'collective memories'

force-fed by society? This is a question we have yet to answer and that requires further debate.

Keywords: politics, Ramakien, King of the gods, Thai-ness

### **The Ramakien: The roles appropriated by the ruling class**

The Ramayana, a well-known Indian epic, is a story that is believed to have circulated in the Jambudvipa region for thousands of years. Maharishi Valmiki was the first person to author this epic 2,400 years ago, when he arranged the Ramayana into 24,000 shlockas in Sanskrit.

The Ramayana epic has been widely appropriated, retold, and circulated throughout many regions in Asia, cementing itself as a common ground of Southeast Asian culture. Different versions of the epic started to emerge as the text traversed through multiple regions and authors.



The Ramayana and the Ramakien, the Thai version of the Ramayana epic

Image via: <https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramayana>  
<https://www.thaiticketmajor.com/performance/khon-hanuman-kid-2020.html>

In 1922, Periyar E.V. Ramaswami, a scholar from south India, interpreted the Ramayana as follows: Rama represents the northern culture, the Sanskrit culture, that invaded south India. He goes on to say that the Ramayana is likely based on a true story, making it an attempt on the part of literature to discredit Tamil identity and culture. Furthermore, in its representation of the conflict between these two ethnic groups and cultural traditions that are prevalent across India, he argues that the Ramayana is one of the precursory texts that gave rise to the Aryan and Dravidian conflict.

On the other hand, Emeritus Professor Dr. Madan Lal Goel, a political science scholar from the University of West Florida, argues that the Aryan invasion never actually happened. He explains that the Aryans and indigenous peoples lived in harmony, their cultures and ethnicities have always coexisted with one another. The archeological findings of ancient Aryan culture from Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro found no evidence that indicate an Aryan invasion. Many scholars have also argued that Aryan is a culture, rather than a race.

The Thai language version of the Ramayana epic is known as the 'Ramakien'. It became a highly influential text regarding politics, systems of governance, arts, culture, and religion. Even the words 'Rama' or 'Ramathibodi' have always been a prefix of the names of countless Thai monarchs of the Rattanakosin era, implying a link to Rama, an incarnation of the gods Vishnu and Narayana who, in accordance with Vaishnavism, was sent to defeat the Asuras and aid humanity.

From beginning to end, Ramakien is a seamless literary work in terms of language and storyline. King Rama I of Thailand's version of the Ramakien was lauded by Phya Anuman Rajadhon, a Thai scholar and linguist also known by the pseudonym 'Sathien Koset', as being exquisitely crafted in verse. It became one of the most influential literary works that are deeply entwined with the Thai culture and way of life. Ramakien has also been adapted and staged as a royal play, Nang Yai, and Khon, within the palace walls. During King Rama II's reign, a new version was written specifically for the stage, which meant that it only included the portions from the original text that were considered to be best for performance.



The King Rama I's version of Ramakien, the King Rama IV's version of Ramakien

During King Rama IV's reign, the king composed another version of the Ramakien and selected the scenes that only corresponded to his own personal history, namely from 'Phra Ram Deon Dong', a scene which literally translates to 'Lord Rama in the Forest'. According to Santi Phakdikham, the plot, which shows Rama spending 14 years in the forest before returning to the capital of Ayuthaya, is rich with significant details pertaining to the king's life. Although this play version of the Ramakien is not a lengthy one, it is packed with political nuances and symbols (Santi Phakdikham, 2022).

During Rama VI's reign, the king drew upon Valmiki's version and composed a new version of the Ramakien that sends a "political message" amidst the impending threat to the country's absolute monarchy at the time (Arthitaya Charuchida, 2012: 151-152). The result is a literary tool for instilling nationalist sentiment and faith in the divine-like monarchy (Saowanit Chunlawong, 2003: 66).

Surapong Sotanasathien notes in his political reading of Ramakien that there is a limit to interpreting the text, unless it is read alongside other works from other disciplines and their socio-political contexts (Surapong Sotanasathien, 1983: 16). Reading the Ramakien in view of its matrix of intertextuality requires understanding those respective contexts, he adds.



The literal translation of the Thai title, the 'Ramakien,' explicitly states that the text is composed in 'honour' of 'Rama'. All of the scenes in the Ramakien revolve around Rama's majesty and might, since he is the deity Narayana's avatar, echoing a belief that has persisted throughout the Suvarnabhumi region that the monarch is an avatar of the gods. The Ramakien, therefore, is a perfect text for glorifying the monarchy, especially in the Thai context whereby the Ramakien established itself as the state's version of morality literature, that places the power of the monarchy at the centre of the universe.

Rather than being a text that merely grounds its readers within their cultural reality, the Ramakien encourages that readers should imagine an honourable and majestic king. Chetana Nagavajara's reading of the Ramakien (Chetana Nagavajara, 1978: 55-56), thus demonstrates how the text employs symbols of 'goodness' to convey the Buddhist concept of Dharma, and how the character of Rama is the representation of King Rama I, the first king of the Chakri dynasty.

In fact, the political agenda behind said version of the Ramakien was very successful in consolidating power and reverence to the monarchy. King Rama I purposefully composed his version of the Ramakien during the inauguration of a new kingdom, the transitional period when the new ruling class were legitimising themselves and justifying the persecutions of their opponents, specifically the execution of the old nobility (Supawit Thavornbut, 1999).

King Rama I's version of the Ramakien purposefully abides by the cosmic law that assigns a rightful place for all things. It is a Thai worldview that operates on a hierarchical order whereby inequality is a given state of the universe, just like how it is in the human world, wherein individuals are assigned a class as determined by their birth and social status, hence the belief that the monarch is of a higher birth than others (Chawalnan Jansap, 2020: 45).

The Thai worldview, which is based on Buddhist and Hindu beliefs, organises the universe in such a hierarchical fashion. The result is structural inequality pillared by the law of karma and destiny.

The character of Rama in King Rama I's version of the Ramakien represents the powerful and virtuous ruling class. This version of the epic was written with the intention of promoting domestic stability, portraying political identities, regulating society, and

indoctrinating certain values that lead the people to think that the king possessed the God-given right to be crowned.

More importantly, this particular version of the Ramakien intimates the 3 concepts in political science: firstly, social theory and political philosophy; secondly, a revolutionary purge (similar to how purging historical records can legitimise the ruling elite, hence purging the Ramayana promises the same); and thirdly, a media or political tool for indoctrinating moral values and cultural ideas to society.

Politicians in India often refer to Rama, particularly those from the right-wing BJP or pro-Hindu parties. Likewise, Prayut Chan-o-cha, the prime minister of Thailand, has stated in his response to a poll conducted by the opposition in parliament on 17 February 2022, that his entry into parliament can be likened to the Ramakien, with him playing Rama and the opposition playing Ravana. It is a known fact that Ravana must die, he added.

By elevating himself and vilifying others by likening them to Ravana, Prayut's own moral integrity was called into question. In fact, Rama has many flaws in his character. Reunruthai Sajjapan states that, although Rama is Narayana's avatar, he possesses many mortal shortcomings and always depends on Lakshmana, the monkey army, and Pipek, during battle.

According to Periyar E.V. Ramaswami's interpretation, Ravana is a Brahman caste member who is educated and philosophical. He is not an ordinary lay person; rather, he is Aryan in culture and holds the rank of Tamil royalty. While Rama stands for the deity and a utopian worldview, Ravana represents the reality of the human world, which is full of good and bad, passion and desire, weaknesses and strengths (Prapas Pengpum, 2001).

The concept of the Dhammaraja, or Righteous King, and the ritual of coronation are crucial to political legitimacy in Thai society. King Rama I, the first king of the Chakri dynasty, prioritised such rituals of legitimising himself and consolidating the authority he endowed upon himself as king (Sombat Janwong, 2004). During the transition period between kingdoms, it was necessary for the king to retain the belief system from the Ayuthaya period into the Rattanakosin period, especially the various rituals that served to legitimise his 'kingship'. For example, the Brahman ritual of coronation that elevated

his status from a commoner to a monarch and affirmed the country's stability under his reign (Saowanit Chunlawong, 2001: 74).



"Royal Coronation" ceremony: Image via [https://www.silpa-mag.com/history/article\\_30706](https://www.silpa-mag.com/history/article_30706)

This particular version of the Ramakien, as well as the character of Rama, have successfully been translated from 'caste literature' in Brahmanism to 'ideological literature' and 'political literature' by the Thai ruling class (Chawarin Khammakeaw, Warawat Sriyaphai, Boonyong Ketthet and Charuwan Benjathikul, 2021: 78). This dynamic, in our view, has had a profound influence on the practice of royal functions to this day.

### **Instilling 'Thainess' in the unconscious of a society of 'good people' through the Ramakien**

According to Nidhi Eoseewong, the Thai 'nation' is an imagined construct imposed by the ruling elite, which has always used the nation and 'Thainess' as a means to preserve social structures that protect their own privileges (Nidhi Eoseewong, 1999: 9-10). The rhetoric and rationales presented in the Ramakien, which are mirrored in the

absolute monarchy system, remain to this day, influencing the desires of Thai society, the social structure and culture, and making it impossible to sustainably address the problems of social and economic inequality (Thanasak Saijampa, 2014: 525).

The absolute monarchy system is maintained by a social structure that abides by the so-called cosmic law that categorises people into different classes. One of the things that produces the definitions of the Thai nation and Thainess is literature allegedly authored by the monarch or the ruling elite. According to Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari's theory of desiring-production, any desires that deviate from the ones dictated by the authority, or, in this case, by the old politics of the Thai ruling class, are ultimately suppressed in the name of 'Thainess'.

Although the Ramakien originated in India, it has been adopted and appropriated into a political weapon in order to justify Thai belief in a king of the gods, which has become a key component in consolidating the regime of absolute monarchy. 'Thainess' is a social construct of the modern Thai state, an entity which was conceived when the country was still under absolute monarchy, a system that established the social and political structures when the Rattanakosin kingdom was founded. Therefore, the 'Thainess' that emerges from the modern Thai state adheres to the rationale of absolute monarchy (Streckfuss, 2011: 58).

Although the country transitioned into democracy in 1932, class hierarchy remains, planted deep into the foundations of 'Thainess'. The desires of the people have always been manipulated, steered into those which are dictated by the ruling elite and the Thai state, benefitting largely them, despite the changing times. Interestingly, the people's desire remains fundamentally unchanged, even though the country officially moved away from absolute monarchy into a constitutional one with a democratic system of governance (Tanasak Saijampa, 2014: 525).

'Thainess' has long been perpetuated and instilled into society's unconscious, to the point where the people have misconstrued it as rooted in their own desires. People are not only unaware that such a desire was fostered by the ruling elite, or the Thai state, but they are also unaware of how rigid and narrow such a desire is (Thongchai Winichakul, 2013: 206).

'Thainess' provides 'form': a blueprint for the virtues upheld by Thai society, a code of conduct for citizens to abide. "Be loyal to the Nation, Religion, and Monarch"; "Behave yourself according to the traditions and conventions of Thai culture"; and "Preserve the Nation's independence and autonomy." Anyone who can abide by these virtues will be commended or glorified as a 'good citizen', whereas those who deviate from such codes will be vilified as 'bad citizens' or dismissed entirely from being 'Thai'.

The Thai royal nationalist history has rendered 'Nation' and 'Monarch' synonymous. As clearly written during the reign of King Rama VI, 'the love for your country entails a loyalty to the monarch'. Anyone who is disloyal to the monarch does not love his/her country. The monarch is the nation in absolute monarchy, and he plays an important role in uniting the nation into one homogeneous land (Nidhi Eoseewong, 2005: 69).

The Buddhist concept of the Righteous King sacralises the monarch's identity as *Dasavidha-rajadhamma*, or 'the ruler of the people' (Thongchai Winichakul, 2013: 13), while the Brahman concept of the king of the gods paints a portrait of the king as the avatar of Narayana, the saviour who relinquishes all suffering and brings happiness to the people, as well as the mediator of all political conflicts (Connor, 2003: 131). Together, these narratives serve to legitimise the monarch as the ruler of both the religious and secular worlds.

### **Nation, Religion, Monarch: The centre of the universe in Thai society**

Looking at the construction of Thai-ness through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari, the concepts of Nation, Religion, and Monarch work to regulate and align society's desires to those of the state. The state is capable of convincing individuals that the desires of society, which have been fed to them, are ones that they unconsciously possess. People are made to believe that their loyalty to the Nation, Religion, and Monarch comes from their own willingness, rather than it being forced upon them. They are taught that being loyal and behaving in accordance with the codes of Thai-ness is the best way to preserve these virtues in society (Thanasak Saijampa, 2014: 523).

The process of establishing the Nation, Religion, and Monarch as the fundamental pillars of Thai society, revered by its people, takes various forms. One of the most powerful tools is to fabricate 'collective memory' and perpetuate it within society's

unconsciousness through a manufactured historiography and literature. The result is 'Royal Nationalist history and literature' that writes Royal Nationalism into a historical and literary plot that depicts a nation threatened by evil, with the king, or Narayana's avatar, as its saviour. This literary genre glorifies Rama as the chief who persecutes or punishes the 'villains' through social and judicial processes. According to Natvipa Chalitanon, this type of plot is similar to the historiography in Thai historical annals, particularly those written during the Ayutthaya period and during the Early Rattanakosin period (Saowanit Chunlawong, 2001: 73).

According to Delueze and Guattari's psychoanalytic lens, structural and cultural problems in Thai society are the main reason why the Thai military state has never completely transitioned into a liberal democratic nation. People are still willing to suppress their individual desires within the framework of Thai-ness and therefore prioritise the social class hierarchy. They believe that the Thai ruling class, educated class, or economically privileged are entitled to greater rights than the poor, uneducated, farmers, or labourers.

Thai-ness, in the unconscious mind of a society of 'good people', is a rhetoric fashioned from a range of historical and literary symbols, and manipulated by the ruling elite. At the centre of this rhetoric is the reverence to the monarchy, hence it is used as one of the procedures of social mastery, wielded as bio power so as to constitute the social body, and operating as a biopolitical process that normalises such conditions of governance (Woratep Wongsuppakan, 2018: 125).

### **The Politics of the Ramayana / Ramakien in documenta fifteen**

*Churning Milk: The ritual of things (2022)*, a collaborative and participatory art project, engages with the politics of the Thai version of the Ramakien, which was composed at the beginning of the Rattanakosin period. According to Rungrot Phiromanukun, King Rama I not only composed the text, but also commissioned a mural painting of the story on the walls of the Grand Palace's terrace, which was built to mark the establishment of the new kingdom in 1782.



The Grand Palace (Wat Phra Si Rattana Satsadaram and the mural paintings  
on the wall of the balcony

Image via: <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/local/bangkok/1862134>  
<https://www.bloggang.com/m/viewdiary.php?id=morkmek&month=02-2019&date=18&group=3&gblog=360>

King Rama I's version of the Ramakien pays special attention to the idealised characteristics of Narayana's avatar and the rituals performed in the story. Its intertextuality is rooted in a multi-semiotic approach which draws on a range of mediums, such as play scripts, literature, performing arts, visual arts, and architecture. The Grand Palace thus becomes a simulation of Traibhumikatha, or the three levels of existence; its mythical elements are incorporated into the architectural features of the Grand Palace, extending its hold over society by structuring it according to the hierarchical orders of its envisioned universe (Siriphot Laomānačharōēn. 2020).

Ramakien's 'Churning of the ocean of the milk', as presented by Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture in documenta fifteen 2022, and exhibited at the Documenta Halle, is combined with the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale, *The Forest House*. The result is a heteroglossia of the various symbols present in society, conflicting power

dynamics, and competing ideologies, that addresses the question of identity through the reproduction as well as renewal of existing texts: a process of becoming.

Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture designed the space for this multimedia installation to facilitate activities-based art whereby the different elements of the work are activated through public participation. The work was live for 100 days, weaving different threads of experiences that were shared among other artworks, artists, and audiences.



Churning Milk: The rituals of things: A space of activities based art

According to John Dewey (b. 1859–1952), understanding the core idea and unique characteristics of the process manifested by an artwork is fundamental to understanding human experience and perception. How the artwork is stimulated by the artist, and how much the audience is aware of it, is part of an improvised performance: the push and pull between the material and mental environments, and their culture at large. Through their shared experience, the audience and participants can question the text, reassemble the images, and re-interpret them to create new meanings, while being aware of the work's intertextuality, and of its pretexts.





Churning Milk: the Rituals of Things (2022) A collaborative and participatory art project

Photo by Wisarut Thatthong

*Churning Milk: The rituals of things* is a textual reproduction of the Ramakien's 'Churning the ocean of the Milk', as well as other texts re-interpreted into a new text: multi-semiotic and multi-media. All of this serves to emphasise a new context, the sociopolitical conditions of present-day Thailand, in which it was created.

### **Author**

Jiandyin, collaborative interdisciplinary duo artists and curators, Pornpilai Meemalai, obtained an MA degree from School of Arts and Humanities, Royal College of Art, UK, Jiradej Meemalai, obtained an MFA degree in Sculpture from Silpakorn University, Thailand. They currently live and work in Ratchaburi, Thailand. They have been developing work that approach through artistic research, field work, genealogically layered with references to multiple sources and evidence,

forms and matters upon a wide range of disciplines and mediums, with collaboration and social engagement. Jiandyin are interested in creating space/platform or situation to analyze relationships between man and society in relation to context and history of the place and space. They delve into complex, ambiguous universal and specific issues regarding the political conflict or effect on marginalized groups which is a paradox of nation-state.

Jiandyin were awarded a fellowship grant from the Asian Cultural Council New York in 2009 and were artists in residence at Headlands Center for the Arts, San Francisco, International Studio and Curatorial Program, New York, 2010, Treasure Hill Artist Village, Taipei, Taiwan, 2012, Civitella Ranieri center, Umbria Italy 2013. Their solo-exhibitions include Portrait [Archives of Dialogue: Seeing and Being] Gallery Seescape, Chiang Mai, Thailand, The Ontology of Gold: Magic Mountains, Cartel Artspace, Bangkok, Thailand, in 2017. Biennales and exhibitions include 2021 Jakarta Biennale, 2019 Asian Art Biennial: The stranger from beyond the Mountain and the sea, The National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Taichung, Taiwan. 2018 Kuandu Biennale: Seven Questions for Asia, Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei, Taiwan. Thailand Biennale Krabi 2018: Edge of the wonderland, Krabi, Thailand.

Jiandyin are founders of Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture in 2011, a not-to-profit artist initiative that runs Off-school art and cultural, artist in residency, curatorial, creation and interdisciplinary exchange programs for Nongpo community, Ratchaburi, Thailand and global networks. Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture recently joined the documenta fifteen, 2022, Kassel, Germany.

## Malaise of Commons: on the Quality of the Relationships in Documenta15

<https://curatography.org/8-3-en/>

By Hsiang-Pin WU

Translation by Chi-Fan LIN & Hsiang-Pin WU

In a departure from other international art exhibitions, the documenta 15 that took place in 2022 in Kassel, Germany, stood out for the discursive depth and width with which it assimilated south-eastern Asian cultural idioms as one of its salient features. It also distinguished itself in organizing the multifarious projects, performances and activities in a resource-sharing, and collaborative spirit. This ambitious and ever-growing exhibition also presented a challenge to researchers who endeavor to sketch a profile of the enormous scale and scope of its whole events and participatory projects. Other than having to delve into the complex cultural contexts of the diverse collectives, they are confronted with images, documentation and “fragmentary evidence” that “convey nothing of the affective dynamic that propel artists to make these projects and people to participate in them,” as cautioned by Clare Bishop on “researching art that engages with people and social processes.”<sup>3</sup> Especially, Researchers with limited resources are left to their own devices, sometimes with haphazard encounters as well as random interviews with savvy informants to resolve the obstacles at hand. In addition, the prevailing climate of critiquing individualism, the emphasis on horizontal organizations, and the anti-elitism tendency are liable to give rise to the cliché of binarism at the expense of pluralism. Taking into consideration all these challenges, researchers have to eventually tackle an even more intriguing conundrum: how to pose pertinent aesthetic questions, ones that are developed from the analysis of curatorial methodology, creative projects and social engagement, and ones that are free from the limit imposed by a field research based on fragmentary experiences?

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<sup>3</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London: Verso, 2012, pp. 5-6.

Let's take the "sustainability projects" in the documenta 15 as example. ruangrupa and documenta gGmbH decide together that one euro from each ticket sold goes to the public tree planting at Reinhardswald in the State of Hessen, and to the Sustainable Village Project in Indonesia.<sup>4</sup> Is this kind of support and cooperation an art practice or a praxis? Since viewers interested in the exhibition events are mostly informed of these projects from official press releases, they cannot but answer the question by looking into some sketchy information.

In International Day of Forest on March 21, 2022, Reza Afisina and Indra Ameng of ruangrupa in tandem with reforestation teams from Reinhardshagen and Baunatal planted oak trees in Reinhardswald.<sup>5</sup> In the meantime, there was a lively DJ set accompanying the planting event. But in such a way, ruangrupa's artistic and festive approach also raised questions about the redundancy of art.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the Sustainable Village Project may give rise to the same confusion. This interdisciplinary project is not just about the scientific surveys undertaken by 160 researchers for the rainforest in the village of Pematang Kabau, Indonesia,<sup>7</sup> but also launched in conjunction with the Semah Bumi Festival of Science, Nature, Society and the Arts curated by Rumah Budaya Sikukeluang in March. Nevertheless, how do viewers distinguish this art event from a

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<sup>4</sup> Other events of the sustainability projects included participating in ecology action networks in German, organizing a panel discussion and workshops on sustainability, and collaborating with local transportation. See: Documenta Fifteen, "SUSTAINABILITY," *DOCUMENTA FIFTEEN*, 2022. <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/sustainability/> (Accessed 2023/01/02).

<sup>5</sup> Before the reforesting action on the International Day of Forests, Reza and Iswanto Hartono from ruangrupa, together with Sabine Schormann, managing director of documenta and Museum Fridericianum gGmbH, Michael Gerst, director of the state agency HessenForst and Markus Ziegeler, Head of Forestry Office Reinhardshagen, have planted an avenue of oak trees representing 22 hectares of damaged forest in Reinhardswald on November 26 2021. HessenForst, "Documenta Fifteen Unterstützt Wiederbewaldung im Forstamt Reinhardshagen. Weitere Pflanzaktionen Sollen Folgen," *HessenForst*, 2021/11/29. <https://www.hessen-forst.net/post/aktuelles/eichen-fuer-den-reinhardswald/> (Accessed 2023/01/02).

<sup>6</sup> In the report of the event, the state agency HessenForst noted a doubt by participant of reforestation: "Ist das Kunst oder kann das weg?" (Is this Art or can it be thrown away?) See: HessenForst, "Unser Wald – Fit für den Klimawandel," *HessenForst*, 2021/11/29. <https://www.hessen-forst.net/unser-wald/> (Accessed 2023/01/02).

<sup>7</sup> Observing the biodiversity of tropical lowland rainforests in Sumatra for a long time, these 160 researchers from different universities in Germany and Indonesia have formed a research centre EForTS and have already carried out research projects in 2012. In addition, in collaboration with documenta 15, EForTS organized an exhibition of science and art in Forum Wissen in the University of Göttingen for the research results of the Sustainable Village Project. Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, "Research and Art Connect for Sustainability – a Cooperation Between the CRC 990 and the University of Göttingen with Documenta Fifteen," *GEORG-AUGUST-UNIVERSITÄT GÖTTINGEN*, 2022. <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/658092.html> (Accessed 2023/01/02).

mere adornment auxiliary to social engagement, even from a cultural commodity produced for the experience economy? If the art practices described here are neither adornments nor commodities, how could they explore their latent entanglement with praxis, thus, highlighting the aesthetic of the sustainability projects?

One thing is certain that through the press releases and some brief descriptions, it is rather difficult for viewers to grasp the real and complex relationships woven by music, rainforest, soil, oak trees, art works and various human and non-human actors of the project. However, the notion of "quality of the relationships," proposed by Bishop in her critique of "relational aesthetics,"<sup>8</sup> needs to be pointed out here as our central analysis approach to documenta 15. Because this notion indicates an entry into ruangrupa's art practices that create its multiple linkages to other collectives, to viewers, to media, to cultural institutions, to government agencies, and also to the diverse ecosystems. It is precisely in these complex linkages and relationships that ruangrupa unfold the aesthetic of its collective art projects. And by analyzing the aesthetic significance of its relationship quality, researchers can further bring light to the political strength inherent to the artist collective as "Institution faible" (Weak Institution),<sup>9</sup> and to their commoning force against the ecological and socio-economic crisis. Before we delve into our main topic, it is proper to trace the linkage emanation of ruangrupa.

### **The Networking Practices of ruangrupa**

Central to documenta 15 is the networking surrounding "lumbung members" and "lumbung artists" that entwined "lumbung inter-lokal," "lumbung Indonesia," and "Kassel ekosistem." Additionally, this lumbung network were extending to the participants from art market and to the independent publishers.<sup>10</sup> Taking the resource agency and institution as its axis, ruangrupa constituted the network of documenta 15 in the form of tree structure, from which radiates at each level the branch of collaborations. While unveiling the institutional linkages and the mechanism of collaboration, this networking

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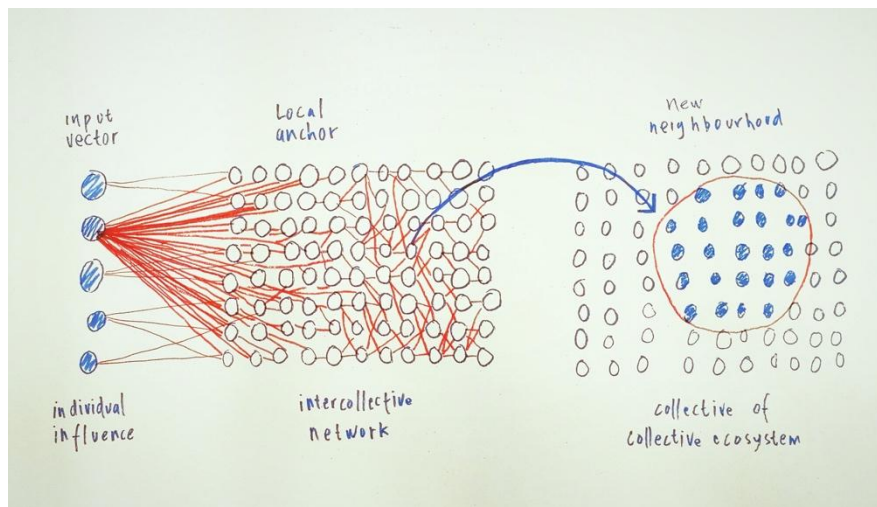
<sup>8</sup> Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October*, vol. 110, 2004, pp. 51-79.

<sup>9</sup> Hsiang-Pin Wu, "The Transition from Weak Institution to 'Weak Institution'," *ARTalks*, 2018. <https://talks.taishinart.org.tw/event/talks/2018081301> (Accessed 2023/01/03).

<sup>10</sup> Such as "lumbung Kios," "lumbung Gallery," "lumbung Press" and "lumbung of Publishers."

endeavor of *ruangrupa* perfectly incorporates the mode of contemporary art production in the era of globalization.

Anne Cauquelin, the French philosopher, pointed out in 1992 that the contemporary art has assimilated into the “communication regime.”<sup>11</sup> According to her view, each participant of contemporary art is like a “node” in a communication network, capable of input, output; and is always regenerating and changing. In establishing the linkage between participants, the extensibility, multipolarity, and circularity of network are put to full force.<sup>12</sup> By extension, the more participant-nodes are interconnecting and the more dense, complex, and changeable the network becomes. Following Cauquelin’s argument, in contemporary art, the key of survival and the accumulation of capital depend on the interflow frequency among the participant-nodes and the intensity of the network connection.<sup>13</sup> It is apparent that these characteristics of the contemporary art network are not only manifest in *lumbung* practices of *documenta 15*, but also in the development of *ruangrupa*'s collective art practices since the beginning of its inauguration.



One of the mural drawings of *Nongkrong Curricula* in Fridskul. Rifandi Nugroho, Adhi Dhigelz, Rifqi Fajri, MG Pringgtono, Saleh Husein, Angga Wijaya, *Nongkrong Curricula*, ink and paint, 2022. Photo by Hsiang-Pin WU

<sup>11</sup> Anne Cauquelin, *L'Art Contemporain*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992, pp. 40-47.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47-59.

The toppling of the Suharto regime is ensued by the Era of Reformasi, when the demands for freedom of association and speech, the liberation of living space, and the concerns for public affairs come into full swing in Indonesia. Against the backdrop of social transformation, came Ade Darmawan, who just returned from Rijksakademie, along with other five artists, founded ruangrupa in 2000 with the tenet of creating an international network for public discussion and free exchange of ideas.<sup>14</sup> In the same year, ruangrupa joined RAIN (Rijksakademie Artist Initiative Network) which serves as a platform for connecting artist collectives from Latin America, Asia, and Africa in an alliance that explores non-Western approaches to arts and local knowledges.<sup>15</sup> Since then, ruangrupa has been piling up its “nodes” and networking energy through the participation of international art festivals. The experiences from Gwangju Biennial in 2002 and Istanbul Biennial in 2005 pave the way for the international networking of ruangrupa which was fully revealed in its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary event.<sup>16</sup> After the success in Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in 2012 and São Paulo Art Biennial in 2014, this thriving group made its debut as curatorial collective in Europe for SONSBEER '16 in Arnhem. It is important to point out that through several years of international network-building, ruangrupa further demonstrated its flourishing achievement in establishing a more complex and more extensive collaboration platform for documenta 15. On the home front, ruangrupa along with other artists and collectives also took a decades-long effort to create local networks which continue to have a great impact in fostering the development of Indonesia’s artworld and culture.

In response to the rise of flourishing video images and underground culture on internet, ruangrupa has since 2003 initiated the OK. VIDEO Indonesia International Media Art Festival designed to investigate the audiovisual language in relation to urban

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<sup>14</sup> Other founding members were Ronny Agustinus, Oky Arfie, Hafiz, Lilia Nursita and Rithmi Widanarko. Nuraini Juliastuti, “Ruangrupa: A Conversation on Horizontal Organisation,” *Afterall*, no. 30, 2012. <https://www.afterall.org/contributors/nuraini-juliastuti> (Accessed 2023/01/04).

<sup>15</sup> Besides ruangrupa and Rijksakademie, the initial members of RAIN included Los Mutantes (Mexico), Guias Latinas (Mexico), Open Circle (India), Centre Soleil d’Afrique (Mali), TRAMA (Argentina) and PULSE (Afrika Selatan). Thomas J. Berghuis, “RUANGRUPA: What Could Be ‘Art to Come’,” *Third Text*, vol. 25, 2011, pp. 401.

<sup>16</sup> In this special anniversary event, ruangrupa invited curators, artists and art collectives coming from different countries to participate in exhibitions, book publications and seminars. If we retrace the network of documenta 15, the participant such as Charles Esche, Reinaart Vanhoe, Sebastián Diaz Morales and Skulpturenpark/KUNSTrePUBLIK already represented important “nodes” for ruangrupa.

life and to examine the politics of images.<sup>17</sup> After eight operations, the event was suspended in 2017, yet ruangrupa has made the video art a major medium of contemporary art in Indonesia in the 2000s.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the way of merging public forum into collective art practice was introduced since 2004 in Jakarta 32°C, a biennial program that invites students to discover the social role of experimental art practices while bringing dynamics to art schools. The “nodes” constituting ruangrupa’s local network hence encompass not only the public, students, sponsors, and art institutions, but also artists and collectives from all over Indonesia. In 2010, Ade Darmawan organized a group exhibition entitled “FIXER,” which connected seventeen alternative spaces together with artist collectives. Underlining the praxis of the local initiatives, FIXER incorporate a network of mutual support communities that helps artists weather survival crisis by improving the local art infrastructure.<sup>19</sup> Since then, it is apparent that ruangrupa’s networking endeavors were moving toward the direction of “collective of collectives.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, in 2015, ruangrupa along with Grafis Huru Hara and Serrum jointly set up experimental Gudang Sarinah Ekosistem as a collective art practice of socio-economic experiment, which, in turn, evolved into Gudskul in 2018 by merging pedagogy into art practices.

### **The Predicament of Friendship-building and Commoning**

If we examine the evolution of ruangrupa in the last twenty years through the prism of Cauquelin’ “communication regime,” it vividly reflects the globalized mode of contemporary art production and its prevailing networking vehicle of festivals, forums, exhibitions, screenings, and workshops. From ruangrupa’s point of view, the networking embodies the spirit of the times in contemporary art history in Indonesia. It marks the transition of the artist collectives’ quest for freedom and independence to mutually

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<sup>17</sup> The Collective Eye ed., *The Collective Eye: In Conversation With Ruangrupa*, Berlin: DISTANZ, 2022, pp. 52-53.

<sup>18</sup> Hendro Wiyanto, “Anonymous Creativity: Activism and Collectivism,” in Ninus Andarnuswari ed., *Articulating FIXER 2021: An Appraisal of Indonesian Art Collectives in the Last Decade*, Jakarta: Yayasan Gudskul Studi Kolektif, 2021, pp. 108.

<sup>19</sup> Ardi Yunanto ed., *Pameran Ruang Alternatif & Kelompok Seni Rupa di Indonesia*, Jakarta: NORTH ART SPACE, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Mi You, “ruangrupa: a Sustainable Model for Documenta Fifteen, and After,” *Ocula Magazine*, 2022/05/22. <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/ruangrupa-sustainability-and-documenta-fifteen/> (Accessed 2023/01/08).



supportive sustainability, as well as the shift from anti-totalitarian activism to interdependent collectivism.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, Berto Tukan, a subject coordinator of Gudskul, identifies the contemporary art practices of an Indonesian art collective as a "social experiment of living together."<sup>22</sup> But after all, what kind of relationship quality does the solidarity, interdependence, and living together reveal in ruangrupa's networking practices? In an interview in 2012, Ade Darmawan mentioned that establishing a network is comparable to the idea of building an open, organic, and spontaneous friendship which also means a political act.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, if we pursue the question further, what substantive change will be effected on the political strength and affective dynamic in friendship-building when the relationship quality in contemporary art network correlates closely with the frequency and intensity of connection between participant-nodes?



Perjovschi's drawings of the lumbung values on the columns at the main entrance of the Fridericianum. Photo by Hsiang-Pin WU

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<sup>21</sup> Indonesian curator Hendro Wiyanto points out that, from ruangrupa's point of view, the 1980s marked the transition from activism to collectivism in the Indonesian art scene. See: Wiyanto, *op. cit.* Besides, there are different perspectives on the periodization of contemporary art history in Indonesia. For example, Agung Hujatnikajennong considers the beginning of the New Order as the period when Indonesian contemporary art budded, while Supangkat indicates the art movement Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru in the 1970s as the unfolding of the contemporary art. David Teh, "Who Cares a Lot? Ruangrupa as Curatorship," *Afterall*, no. 30, 2012. <https://www.afterall.org/article/who-cares-a-lot-ruangrupa-as-curatorship> (Accessed 2023/01/10). Berghuis, *op. cit.*, pp. 397-399.

<sup>22</sup> Berto Tukan, "A Different Season on the Same Soil and Water: on the Emergence of Art Collectives," in Andarnuswari ed., *Articulating FIXER 2021*, 2021, pp. 25-26.

<sup>23</sup> Juliastuti, *op. cit.*

As Cauquelin emphasized, the contemporary art practices and works in the "communication regime" are no longer bonded with the aesthetic values and the substance of art itself.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, the reality in which contemporary art is defined today pertains rather to the production and consumption of signs within the communication network, to the quantitative value system of bureaucracy, and to the intense personal connections. That is to say, the aesthetic values that artists once believed is already dissolved in networks and substituted for images and cultural signs ready to diffuse, tweet and repost. Even though Cauquelin unveils a cruel reality of the artworld today, it does not indicate that the friendship-building in collective art practice is just the aestheticization of nepotism, and that the ideal of commoning cannot but reproduce the self-referential echo chambers. Otherwise, a slippery slope argument of this kind will pose risk of flattening the aesthetic signification that ruangrupa unfolds in documenta 15. In order not to be overwhelmed by the tendency toward trivialization and commodification of contemporary art network, researchers can further scrutinize the transmutation of friendship and commoning practices that actually took place in Kassel during one hundred days of the exhibition.

When visiting the Museum Fridericianum, viewers can hardly miss Dan Perjovschi's drawing that dressed up the columns at the main entrance in lumbung values.<sup>25</sup> Along with the Romanian artist's lively writings, the mind maps dotting the Fridskul walls and the colorful banners hung by the artist collective \*foundationClass\* in the atrium exuded some spectacular effect. While inundated by these visual signs and hashtag-like slogans, casual visitors who roamed through the various venues may easily overlook Perjovschi's contribution to local art network in Romania<sup>26</sup>, or fail to grasp the collaboration energy generated by \*foundationClass\* with the migrant communities, and the dynamic of collective knowledge-sharing wrought by Fridskul. Ideally, the aesthetic

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<sup>24</sup> Cauquelin, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-62.

<sup>25</sup> The lumbung values are "Local Anchor," "Humor," "Generosity," "Independence," "Transparency," "Sufficiency" and "Regeneration". See: A.K. Kaiza, Alvin Li, Andrew Maerkle, et al., *Documenta Fifteen Handbook*, Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2022, pp. 39.

<sup>26</sup> Regarding Perjovschi's financial support for the local art network in Romania, see: Catherine Hickley, "The Bumpy Road to a Group-Led Documenta," *The New York Times*, 2022/06/10. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/10/arts/design/documenta-ruangrupa.html> (Accessed 2023/01/12).

substance of these art practices is supposed to manifest themselves in the exhibition. Instead, the quality of the relationships and interconnections varies as it spreads out from axis to branches according to the tree structure formed by the resource distribution frame of documenta 15. Thus, the lumbung artists with whom Perjovschi frequently communicated in mini-majelises were able to develop together a close resource-sharing linkage and an intense collaboration energy. Through this kind of strong networking designed by ruangrupa, the lumbung artists and lumbung members, as the central participant-nodes, created solid interlocal connections and friendships in mutually reinforcing intensity, namely, a rich quality of relationships. By contrast, general viewers, as outer participant-nodes, may participate Gudskul's workshops or may ultimately have the chance to chat with the artists or share a bite with them in the gudkitchen ; they may also attend CAMP's talks on commoning art practices, then spend night in a DJ party at the site of Hafenstrsße 76. Viewers, artists, curators and all the lumbung participants likely mingle together in the joyful participatory phenomenon and hedonic mist of contemporary art, while the potential strength of commoning and the intensity of friendship-building are evaporated in the experience economy embedded in the prominent international exhibition such as documenta.



\*foundationClass\*'s banners in the atrium of the Fridericianum. Photo by Hsiang-Pin

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## The Inherent Tension of the Commons

Since 2019, when ruangrupa was appointed as the artistic direction of documenta 15, until its closure one hundred days later, the repercussions of the lumbung networking and activities spreading from Kassel and Indonesia, are still felt today worldwide. In three years of curatorial marathon, ruangrupa endeavors to persevere with the ideal of sustainability and reinvention of the institutional network of artworld, but not without making some compromises in its reliance on the art exhibition system. Ruangrupa admitted in the documenta 15 handbook that it is difficult to be free from the various shackles of a conventional artistic mega-event.<sup>27</sup> The curatorial team was compelled to stick to the limited time frame imposed by the budgetary constraint, to deal with the rigid bureaucracy, to operate under a stifling hierarchical system, and not to mention the underlining “communication regime” of contemporary art. As a result, ruangrupa was unable to achieve the goal of its decentralization project by simply extending the axis of venues toward the East Kassel. Moreover, the quality of the relationships that defines the aesthetic values of lumbung practices is bound to be transmuted both within the tree structure of documenta 15 and in the international contemporary art network. Therefore, it is more amenable for ruangrupa, with the artistic team, lumbung artists and lumbung members, to develop a close-knit “collective of collectives” as a network of the commons, on the one hand. On the other hand, while mostly perceiving the fleeting and fragmentary relationship quality produced by the commodified art experiences and the bureaucracy system, viewers or participants on the fringes of the lumbung network, including documenta administration staff, are unlikely prepared to engage in the commoning practices of reinventing the institutional network of contemporary art. However, it is noteworthy that by closely collaborating with neighborhood communities and artist collectives in the city, the unfolding of Kassel ekosistem at ruruHaus, and Markus Ambach's collective art project *Eine Landschaft* both managed to dismantle the division between periphery and center. Especially, with the aim of regenerating the urban landscape and local culture in a collective endeavor, these initiatives were able to further

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<sup>27</sup> A.K. Kaiza, Alvin Li, Andrew Maerkle, et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 40.

consolidate the solidarity action network and friendships between communities anchored in Kassel.<sup>28</sup>

Other than the quandary of networking structure featured in the mega art event itself, a series of allegations and controversies of antisemitism which burdened documenta 15 raises also the question about relationship quality that ruangrupa cultivated with the cultural and socio-political institutions in Germany. In particular, when the large banner *People's Justice* by the Indonesian art collective Taring Padi was displayed at Friedrichsplatz a day before the opening, the turmoil ignited by the antisemitic figures harshly challenged the friendship-building and the lumbung values of documenta 15. Undermining the aesthetic import of artworks and exhibition, the proliferation of decontextualized visual signs and populist expressions on news, social media and in the artworld revealed again the typical symptoms of contemporary art networking in the "communication regime." But most importantly, the means by which the curatorial team, artists and documenta gGmbH tackled the controversies further bring up another question – how a contemporary artist or collective negotiate their way out of the “institutional complex” by elaborating the relationship quality with various institutions? Above all, how the artist collectives unfold the aesthetics and politics of commoning

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<sup>28</sup> Ambach was one of the artists invited by lumbung member ZK/U – Center for Art and Urbanistics. By connecting the protagonists living in around 11 locations in East Kassel, his project *Eine Landschaft* aimed to create a local knowledge network against the universality of global market. During the documenta 15, the artist also organized an urban trail according to which the viewers were invited to visit these protagonists and to communicate with them. On the one hand, this project revealed a clear contrast between the local knowledge growing from the right bank of Fulda River and the international discourse characterized by documenta on the left bank. On the other hand, the commoning praxis and the close connections of these local protagonists form a social and ecological resources network which has functioned outside the documenta over a period of time. For example, the self-organized organic food store MILA, the community garden Blüchergarten, and the laboratory of the urban agriculture SOLAWI Gärtnerei Fuldaaue have created together on the Fulda's floodplain a system of the community circular economy based on ecological farming, sustainable consumption and mutual aid support, which differs a lot from the mode of production of documenta. As a result, through the existing network embedded in East Kassel, Ambach's project was able to break away from the tree structure of documenta 15 while highlighting the quality of the social and ecological relationships of local communities. However, did the research activities and all the participatory programs undertaken in this project make the friendships between communities more consistent and dynamic? And by collaborating with architect Renée Tribble, will Ambach be able to develop with the inhabitants and the protagonists of East Kassel a political strength to transform the urban environment? It seems that it still takes time for the project *Eine Landschaft* to fully unfold the aesthetic of its collective art practices. EINE LANDSCHAFT, 2022. <https://eine-landschaft.de/> (Accessed 2023/01/13). Regarding the network of Kassel ekosistem organized by ruangrupa from ruruHaus, see: Documenta Fifteen, “LOCAL COOPERATIONS IN KASSEL – THE PROGRAM OF KASSEL'S EKOSISTEM AT RURUHAUS,” *DOCUMENTA FIFTEEN*, 2022.08.30. <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/press-releases/local-cooperations-in-kassel-the-program-of-kassels-ekosistem-at-ruruhaus/> (Accessed 2023/01/13).

within the institutional networks of contemporary art and society? So as not to pass over artist's potential strength of reconstituting the institutional networks of a society, it is essential here to steer clear of historical avant-garde's traditional discourse in which compliant and conservative tendency of institution is hastily pitted against the spirit of freedom and resistance of artist. If, as Ade remarked, the artist has become a "mediator" in a divided and polarized society<sup>29</sup>, she or he is meant to reflect on the divers strategies of collaborating with the institutions, thus to create a more heterogeneous quality of the relationships and a richer network.



gudkitchen behind the Fridericianum. Photo by Sandy Hsiu-Chih LO

By referring to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's political philosophy, Bishop stresses that "antagonism" is an essential element in democratic society and in relationships constituted by art practices.<sup>30</sup> Following Bishop, she points out that the relation of conflict is not only the condition for the existence of a pluralist politic, but also

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<sup>29</sup> Ade Darmawan, "Fixing the chain of the cycle of ideas," Yunanto ed., *Pameran Ruang Alternatif & Kelompok Seni Rupa di Indonesia*, 2010, pp. 14.

<sup>30</sup> Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67. Regarding the political philosophy discourse quoted by Bishop, see: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London: Verso, 1985.

the limit of the full completion of a heterogeneous community.<sup>31</sup> However, instead of enclosing herself within antagonism, Bishop further underlines the tensions and contradictions inherent to the constitution of a heterogeneous social relationships where the subjectivation of a multitude constantly takes place. Accordingly, as mediator in organizing the resistance network of oppressed dissidents, artists are able to “sustain” the inherent tension of the heterogeneous commons.<sup>32</sup> Also, Farid Rakun, in talking about anti-establishment approach of ruangrupa, reminds us that rather than getting stranded in antagonism, only by creating something differently while criticizing can we open up for changes in difficult situations.<sup>33</sup> By undertaking a networking strategy that is both hostile and friendly, critical and collaborative, the artist collectives in Indonesia today thus sustain the tension in the complex relationships with government, art institutions, funding agencies, and the public, to such extent that the collaboration platforms have the potential to constitute a pluralist ecosystem and a network of commoning. Therefore, sustaining the tension inherent to the heterogeneous commons does not mean to simply persist in a hostile relationship and social conflict. The art of sustaining the tension rather calls for the constant reinvention of subjectivity and the regeneration of diverse relationships in a confrontational and disruptive situation, in order to avert the political strength of the commons from dissolving in the deadlock of binary opposition and the tragedy of mutual destruction. From this point of view, sustaining the inherent tension of the commons is ipso facto to uphold the *creative tension within friendship*, namely, a relationship developed both by criticism and creation, and by confrontation and care. For this reason, in the face of the antisemitism controversies, it is crucial for lumbung actors and participants to elaborate the creative tension among friends which consolidates not only the relationship quality between artists and institutions, but also the political strength of collective art practices.

### **After the Boomerang Effect of Antisemitism**

In the course of the whole curatorial project of documenta 15, ruangrupa incessantly underline the practice of "lumbung." In the traditional society of Indonesia, "lumbung"

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<sup>31</sup> Bishop, *ibid.*, pp. 67.

<sup>32</sup> Bishop, *ibid.*, pp. 79.

<sup>33</sup> The Collective Eye ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 48.

designates a resource-sharing barn for grain storage; it additionally serves as a gathering place for community bonding, local knowledge transmission, as well as ethical and ecological relationships building.<sup>34</sup> In other words, "lumbung" represents a commoning platform where people sustain the tension of a complex relationship and cultivate its rich quality in constant negotiating, collaborating, and creating the multiple linkages with each other and environment. However, the commons constituted within "lumbung" are subjects to change under different social milieus and scenarios that entails differing negotiating strategies and commoning approaches to sustain its inherent tension. Accordingly, the antisemitism allegations that haunted documenta 15 and the extended antagonistic discourses surrounding the controversies made it abundantly clear that to transplant the Indonesian lumbung to German soil needed more time to weave the local networks and to develop a collective art practice meant to sustain the tension of the commons. This is not to downplay the vigorous defense of ruangrupa and all the lumbung participants for diversity, equality and freedom of expression after a series of racist attacks, questionings, and including the censorings by the Supervisory Board of documenta gGmbH. Doubtless, their statements, petitions, and some protests by withdrawing from the quintennial exhibition were all necessary. Nevertheless, while confronting the conservative art institutions, populist media hype and the reactionary politics in Germany, should the political strength and the tension of the commons revealed in lumbung's collective art practices be unilaterally crushed by the punch of disciplinary measures and the wave of hatred? If the primordial focus of ruangrupa for documenta 15 is on addressing socio-political and historical trauma from various perspectives – thus, on sustaining the creative tension of the commons,<sup>35</sup> can lumbung's practices of commoning open up an alternative way to tackle the "institutional complex" of the history and society in Germany?

Eyal Weizman, the founder of Forensic Architecture, commenting on the antisemitic figures depicted in *People's Justice*, indicates that along with years of expanding colonialism, European antisemitism has come a full circle and returned to its homeland

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<sup>34</sup> Renal Rinoza, "Lumbung: Sharing Strength, Sharing Power," in Andarnuswari ed., *Articulating FIXER 2021*, 2021, pp. 218-227.

<sup>35</sup> documenta, "ruangrupa Selected as Artistic Direction of Documenta 15," *documenta*, 2019/02/22. <https://www.documenta.de/en/news#news/2502-ruangrupa-selected-as-artistic-direction-of-documenta-15> (Accessed 2023/01/15).



"in the altered guise of an anti-colonial work of art."<sup>36</sup> This self-inflicting homecoming incident epitomizes the "boomerang effect" mentioned by Hannah Arendt and Aimé Césaire in their reflections on the Holocaust and colonialism.<sup>37</sup> As a matter of fact, the rash display of *People's Justice* was the result of an oversight<sup>38</sup>, while the boomerang effect of antisemitism and colonialism unwittingly reshaped the trauma of Indonesian and German history into a tense relationship between the collective art practices of lumbung and the institution network entangled in the complex of local socio-political conflict. Therefore, rather than improving the performance of the administration technique and risk management, the real challenge for ruangrupa in confronting the antisemitism controversies is to create a new commoning way. A way through which the lumbung commoning practice could reveal and reroute with critical awareness the "boomerang force" of the history; and a way in which ruangrupa and other artists could constantly sustain the creative tension of the commons by negotiating, collaborating with local institutions and public, as well as by rebuilding all together the manifold relationships in a society.

After documenta 15, how will lumbung commoning practice develop and expand? Will ruangrupa persevere in reinventing the institutional network of contemporary art in Kassel even in Europe? Or, will the "inter-collective expansion" of ruangrupa, as Iswanto put it, push itself towards a further self-dissolution?<sup>39</sup> So as to observing these various possible development paths of lumbung commoning practice, it is essential to keep following the pace of ruangrupa in the future.

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<sup>36</sup> Eyal Weizman, "In Kassel," *London Review of Books*, vol. 44, no. 15, 2022. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v44/n15/eyal-weizman/in-kassel?fbclid=IwAR3TNMU-49nDsvfwM-894ktudxiL7rjF-jesoBat2Y33DLOHrAs52r0vE> (Accessed 2023/01/16).

<sup>37</sup> Cited by Weizman, *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Documenta Fifteen, "RUANGRUPA AND THE ARTISTIC TEAM ON DISMANTLING 'PEOPLE'S JUSTICE,'" *DOCUMENTA FIFTEEN*, 2022.06.23. <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/ruangrupa-on-dismantling-peoples-justice-by-taring-padi/> (Accessed 2023/01/16)

<sup>39</sup> The Collective Eye ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 123.

