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Social-Engaged Art in Indonesia: Many in One, Nurturing Diversity & Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

This research applies the perspective of art practitioners, builds a description based on the motivations and goals that arise from the collective rather than approaching a case study through the ideas of art that were formed in 2010 and below, and relates it to the concept of “Unity in Diversity”. This research method is guided by the question: How did “many, but one” emerge in the practice of social arts and who benefits? This paper summarizes research findings with three case studies of art collectives in three rural-urban areas in Indonesia. In this paper, researchers try to provide a perspective on how cultural promotion programs have an impact on community movements outside the big cities.

Keywords: social-engaged art; art collective; cultural diversity

ABSTRAK

Social-Engaged Art in Indonesia: Many in One, Nurturing Diversity & Inclusion.

Penelitian ini menerapkan perspektif praktisi seni, membangun deskripsi berdasarkan motivasi dan tujuan yang ditimbulkan dari kolektif daripada mendekati studi kasus melalui gagasan seni yang terbentuk pada tahun 2010 ke bawah, dan mengaitkan dengan konsep “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika”. Metode penelitian dipandu oleh pertanyaan: Bagaimana “banyak, namun satu” muncul dalam praktik seni sosial di Indonesia? Makalah ini merangkum temuan penelitian dengan tiga studi kasus kolektif seni di tiga daerah rural-urban di Indonesia. Dalam makalah ini peneliti mencoba memberikan perspektif akan bagaimana program pemajuan kebudayaan memberikan pengaruh pada pergerakan komunitas di luar kota-kota besar.

Kata kunci: *social-engaged art*; kolektif seni; keragaman budaya

Introduction

Contemporary art discourses have coined various names for art activities that are interlinked with social transformation processes, including: co-art, community activism, socially engaged art, art in community, community-based art, dialogical art, socially cooperative art, relational art/aesthetics, co-creational art, and participatory art (Lämmli 2016).¹ Depending on their users, these terms are sometimes used interchangeably and at

others are informed by particular conceptions or understandings of particular interest groups.

On May 2022, the three collectives presented in the research exhibition titled “*Socially Engaged Art in Post-Colonial Hong Kong and Southeast Asia*” in Hongkong Baptist University, they are *Gubuak Kopi (Solok, West Sumatera)*, *Festival Film Bahari (Cirebon, West Java)* and *Forum Sudut Pandang (Palu, Central Sulawesi)*, that focus on ecological issues and safeguarding intangible heritage. Their holistic and organic workflows and inclusive

procedures are comparable to the work of other socially engaged art collectives in Indonesia.

Since 1997, Indonesia has seen a continuous increase in art collectives committed to working closely with communities. There is thereby notable interplay between the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, exploration of its use for current challenges, and transformation of traditional knowledge into imaginaries and actions for a future worth living in (Kent, 2016).

Artists have addressed socio-cultural and socio-political topics and incidences in their work throughout the 20th century and received art-historical attention. Following the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, thousands of students took to the streets of Jakarta. They were enraged by Suharto's authoritarian regime, crony capitalism, and the mishandling of the economic crisis. As a result, this upheaval led in 1999 to the Era Reformasi, the return to democracy. Regarding art, on the one hand, the currency devaluation triggered an art market boom in which artists produced works on-demand, trying to keep up with requests. On the other, inequalities, formal and elitist understandings of art, classist attitudes, and top-down expertism have been subject to greater critique.

Several collectives, now internationally-renowned, emerged in the decades that followed around 1998-2006, including Cemeti Art House, Jatiwangi art Factory, KUNCI, Lifepatch, Pasir Putih, ruangrupa (documenta15's curatorial team), MES65, Visual Art Archive, and WAFT. Important values underpinning their activities are that "everyone is an artist," that "everyone is an expert," and that co-creation be done intergenerationally.

This development is particularly significant against the backdrop of the many diverse, complex settings in Indonesia captured in its national motto: "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" (Unity in Diversity). Indonesia is home to over 270 million people and is the fourth most populous country globally. It has the second largest coastline and has seen thousands of years of trading, immigration, passers-by, foreign powers, peaceful and violent encounters, and multifarious influences. As a result, Indonesia exhibits immense biological, genetic, cultural, traditional, religious, ethnic, and linguistic

diversity. There is one official language, Bahasa, and more than 700 additional languages are spoken. There are over 1,300 ethnic groups and hundreds of traditional and religious belief systems with around 87% of the population being Muslim. As of 2022, nearly 60% of the population live in urban areas. This three collectives are spreading in the rural areas in Sumatera, Java, and Sulawesi.

Social-Engaged Arts in Indonesia: Art Collectives Practices

Working with art in collaborative and socio-cultural settings is not a new phenomenon but evident across the globe and throughout human history (Finkelpeter, 2013). Socially engaged art has become more important in recent decades (Belfiore, 2021). The literature on socially engaged art often draws attention to its increased occurrence in the USA and UK from the 1960s and 1970s onwards (see e.g., Kester, 1998; Lacy, 1995). However, we should not confuse reflections on those realities that are written about from a regional perspective and within a particular thought tradition with particular realities. Merely because some initiatives have not yet been written about, or are not known in academic art circles, does not mean socially engaged art practice does not exist worldwide, let alone for much longer (see for example Kent, 2016). When I researched the many socially engaged art initiatives in Hong Kong a few years ago, I was puzzled that some members of the so-called "international art scene" residing in Hong Kong, knew little to nothing about these diverse and very active socially engaged art initiatives.

In Asia, socially engaged art has been increasingly acknowledged as a change agent and transformer of socio-cultural environments. The role of art in society has been the topic of several exhibitions and biennales, including *Negotiating the Future: 2017 Asian Art Biennial*, also biennales in some cities in Indonesia, capital city and outside, Jakarta Biennale, Jogja Biennale, also Makassar Biennale in Sulawesi (Al-Khudhairi et al., 2017), which brought collaborative works by hundred artists/collectives from different countries that bringing different problem and approach of art.

One example of social engaged art in Asian Art Biennale 2017 exhibition featured Jatiwangi art Factory, an art collective based on Java, Indonesia, which conceived a Farming Investment Package and organised an investor meeting at the Asian Art Biennale. Their work grew out of the Warga Dusun Wates⁴ project in the Majalengka district on Java. Centered on land disputes, it aims to create “great bargaining leverage in negotiations” with the Indonesian military and government through farming experiments, locally produced goods, and community bonding.

Methodology

We approached research on these collectives through art practitioner and global studies paradigms and with a particular interest in reciprocal relationships between collectives, communities, and policy-makers. Based on these criteria, we selected Festival Film Bahari, Gubuak Kopi, and Forum Sudut Pandang: the collectives i) focus on ecological issues and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, ii) were formed in the last decade or so, iii) are based on three different large islands, iv) do arts-based and transdisciplinary work, and v) can be contacted within the available time window (some collectives work in remote places and are not easily reached).

The research timeline between March 2021 until March 2022 including select the three collectives, conducted desk research and interviews (in Bahasa, translated into English), and collaborative article writing between two author in Jatiwangi Indonesia and Zurich, Switzerland. The research source by interview are Kemala Asthika, founder of Festival Film Bahari; Albert Rahman Putra, founder of Gubuak Kopi; and Taufiqurrahman, founder of Forum Sudut Pandang.

Discussion

1. Gubuak Kopi (Solok, West Sumatera)

Gubuak Kopi (Solok, West Sumatra) is a non-profit cultural studies and development organisation that has been gradually developing

since 2011. Gubuak Kopi translates to “Coffee Hut,” a space to meet, spend time together, chat, and discuss. It started with a group of artist friends about ten people, who collected information on local traditions. They had just completed their artist education and were discussing the downsides of living in Solok, which caused many young people to move away to the capital, Jakarta. They also realised that through their education they were heavily influenced by Java-centric narratives and knew little about their local cultures. For this reason, they began exploring their hometown and documenting local traditions, crafts, and food. Gradually, Gubuak Kopi developed into the organisation it is today.

Gubuak Kopi, together with community members, runs various projects documenting local traditions rooted in agriculture. The collective organises collaborations with professionals (artists, writers, and researchers) and citizens. It provides art and media training to youth and students to increase media literacy. Becoming increasingly important is the work it does with community leaders and with policy-making activities, such as involving local



Figure 1. Presentation of Gubuak Kopi, Bakureh Project.



Figure 2. Bakureh Project with mothers community in Solok, West Sumatera. Gubuak Kopi.

government on their forum and exhibition. Gubuak Kopi has also developed local media and archiving systems on their cultural knowledge and invites artists for residencies to work with the data collected in way to preserve.

On view at the research exhibition *Socially Engaged Art in Post-Colonial Hong Kong and Southeast Asia* in Hongkong Baptist University, Gubuak Kopi present a recipe and mind-map from the “Bakureh” project, which explores the cultural value of “gotong royong” (joint) cooking. Although gotong royong is a nationwide concept, “Bakureh” looks into the local specificities of passing on knowledge and organising cooking together. Professionals and community members document the variety of food and dishes, related activities, philosophies, and values.

2. Festival Film Bahari (Cirebon, West Java, Indonesia)

The Festival Film Bahari (Cirebon, Java) held its first festival screening in 2018, following previous engagements with village communities beginning in 2016. Bahari translates to “nautical.” The idea of a festival was seeded when Kemala Asthika (35), a filmmaker and English teacher, was hanging out (“nongkrong”) with filmmaking friends. Although she grew up in one of the neighbouring villages, she and her friends found they new little about the life, traditions, histories, and challenges of coastal life. Moreover, national media coverage

of the region was limited to crime. Adding to the dark memory of the village that caused by poor economy and education, the war back in 2000 when stones were thrown and arrows shot between village, which left traumatic marks on the community and bad stigma on the region for a long time. To bring the trust of the village became the idea for Festival Film Bahari grew, contributing to creation of identity, as well as a more positive perception of the region and its maritime cultures.

The festival is both a producer and supporter of short films as well as an organiser of public screenings. The films are produced in intergenerational settings and focus on coastal life. These productions also serve as media training for youth and students. People from the fishing villages contribute to the content of the films and participate as protagonists. These films are then featured at the festival, alongside an (inter)national film selection, which is organised through the submission platform FilmFreeway. The local audience prefers to see the films shot in the area and gets enjoyment from knowing the characters in the films. The national and international guests join the festival at their own expense, supported by accommodation packages at village homes, which are organised by the festival team. On view at the research exhibition is a compilation of films shown at The Festival Film Bahari between 2018 and 2021, with local wisdom theme. The compilation is put together by the Festival Film Bahari team.



Figure 3. Film screening at coastal village in Cirebon.



Figure 4. Presenting young filmmaker works on site.

3. Forum Sudut Pandang (Palu, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia)

The Forum Sudut Pandang (Palu, Central Sulawesi) got started by a group of artist friends and students in 2016. Forum Sudut Pandang translates to “Point of View Forum.” They have held art exhibitions, workshops, and film screenings, and organised film production, music gigs, and community markets. In Palu, according to Taufiqurrahman, there are no art institutions, and thus activities from the Forum Sudut Pandang provide an important and much-needed gathering, sharing, and co-creation space for creatives, audiences, and visitors.

Palu is located in the Pacific’s “Ring of Fire,” the most seismically active region on the planet, and is thus prone to natural disasters. The most recent massive earthquake and tsunami to hit Palu, on September 28, 2018, took the lives of more than four thousand people and left tens of thousands without a home. In the aftermath of the disaster, the Forum Sudut Pandang joined in the post-disaster recovery process. Its arts and

cultural activities focus on working through traumatic experiences, documenting the course of events, and providing education on disaster mitigation.

The Forum Sundut Pangang produced, for example, the music album *Memorama*, which will be presented in the research exhibition. It also published a collection of stories and illustrations, discussing the experiences of 423 children who survived from Mamboro, Komodo, Loru, Sidera, Tipu, Tavaili, and Rogo. The book is titled *What We Feel During an Earthquake (Yang Kitorang Rasa Waktu Gempa)*. Currently, the collective works on archival systems to keep the stories, illustrations, and audio files accessible.

Conclusion

All three collectives were started by individuals who observed challenging socio-cultural and economic developments in their home environments: rural exodus, migration to mega-cities, detachment from the direct environment due to digital distraction and business, decreasing connection and empathy between people, natural disasters, and traumatic experiences. These individuals, together with their friends, began their collective work and consistently broadened their circle of co-creators and the various groups involved.

These collectives share an interest in intersecting traditional knowledge and values with the current challenges in their home region, and spirit of togetherness in multi-background art initiator, spirit of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*. They foster physical and mental co-creation spaces and bring together people from all walks of life. They all have expressed that what works best is to do various activities at once, that is, taking a holistic approach. These activities include artistic activities, knowledge sharing among professionals and community members, intergenerational gatherings, having fun together, education and skills training, exploring, and imagining. Bonding in this way is the most valuable outcome, as it lays the groundwork for preserving intangible heritage and projecting the future.



Figure 5. “Memorama” work on Palu’s post-earthquake site. Courtesy Rahmadiyah Tri.

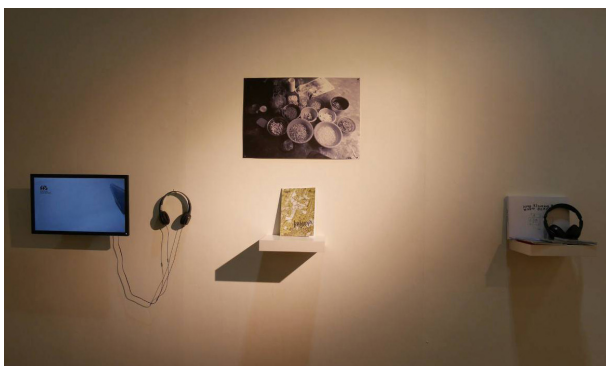


Figure 6. Exhibition of South-East Asia Project by Gubuk Kopi, Festival Film Bahari, and Forum Sudut Pandang at Hongkong Baptist University, May 2022.

Appreciation for tradition and explorative transformation, creation and development are thereby equally valued. Rediscovering and experiencing contemporary ways of doing things, becoming aware of habits and beliefs — this is fused with artistic documentation, production, imagination, and dreaming. It is, therefore, a reciprocal process: continuously interlinking tradition, co-creation, and projecting the future. This fusion is seen as a powerful creative force for building powerful impact in each hometown of the collectives.

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