

Artist Collectives in The Post-1998 Indonesia: Resurgence, or a Turn (?)

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Abstract

In the last two decades, the implementation of some international art projects, exhibitions and festivals in Indonesia are inseparable with the emergence of artist collectives. Even though they live and work in different cities, they carry out some similar strategies, namely by providing physical space to gather and organize various activities, as well as collaborating and building extensive network with other artists and institution at home and abroad. Their activities not only encourage the development of new kinds of artistic practice such as video and media arts, but also specific mediation patterns in which artists activate their curatorial agencies through exhibitions or festivals. This article attempts to map the existence of group artists in Indonesia who were born and active after 1998 until now. By providing a typological sketch of the collectives, this article links this phenomenon to the formation of the contemporary art world and the social, political and economic changes that took place after the political Reform in Indonesia. This article concludes that some of the collectives have actually continued a spirit of collectivism inherited from the past. While some others also contribute to a new turn that changes the direction of contemporary Indonesian contemporary art in the 21st century.

Keywords: *artist-collective, artist-run-space, artist-curator, collective turn, Indonesian contemporary art*

1 Background

In the last twenty years, one of the new phenomena that has stood out in the contemporary art scene in Indonesia is the emergence of artist groups founded by and consisted of young artists. Several terms have been used by a number of authors to refer to these groups, including “artist-group”, “artist-run-initiative”, “artist-run-space”, “artist-collective”, etc. Although each term has a specific definition, they are often interchanged. Its use in many Indonesian writings seems to indicate that this symptom is parallel with bigger phenomenon in other parts of the world at about the same time. As Grant Kester argued, the proliferation of artist group in the 21st century is undoubtedly a global phenomenon [1].

Artists who come together and unite to form groups, associations, or other types of collective ties are actually a phenomenon that is as old as the practice of art itself. Despite having a long history rooted in the guild model in Europe, new type of artistic affiliation have only been discussed in connection with a number of key developments manifested in the birth of works, manifestos, movements and artistic styles in modern art, at least in the early 20th century. The launch of a statement, or manifesto, of an artistic movement are the most common avant-garde gesture.

History has shown how artists can get together more easily on the basis of common artistic styles (for example, Futurism in 1914, or Dada, 1918). However, during this time, the myth of individual genius artists is still strong, and tends to continue to strengthen, driven by the need for the art field to produce star figures [2].

Only in the mid-20th century, some artists groups or collectives who championed collaborative working model to deconstruct the concept of single authorship, changed this pattern [3]. This last trend, for example, can be seen the EAT (Experiment in Art and Technology, founded 1967), Art and Language (1968), or in the collaboration between Marina Abramovic and Ulay (1976-1988) and Gilbert and George (1967). In more recent times, the presence of some groups like Superflex, The Propeller Group, DIS, Elmgreen and Dragset, Eva and Franco Mattes in major blockbuster and museum exhibitions become the dominant tendencies that characterizes collaboration as the symptoms of global contemporary art.

This article follows the conclusions of Charles Green [3] who identifies the emergence of collaborative art projects as a transition from modernism to postmodernism, and Maria Lind [4] who proposes the term 'collective autonomy' as a motive for artistic practice that decentralizes the position of individual artists in the neoliberal economic system. In this article, the emergence of Indonesian artist-collective is discussed as a phenomenon of contemporary art that demands analysis in a specific sociological context. Certainly, the emergence of Indonesian artist-collectives cannot be separated from the social, political and cultural contexts of the society in which they exist.

2 Artist Collectives in Indonesia: A Glimpse of History

In the Indonesian context, the birth of modern art is also synonymous with the collectivism reflected in the many activities of artist groups. From a historical perspective, it can be said that the formation of an artist groups or collectives in Indonesia is generally based on at least four leitmotif. Firstly, that any artists have a common need for a shared space or physical facility to produce their works; secondly, there is also a need to unite with other artist, to form an affiliation, or to establish an organization on the basis of common interests, world-views or certain socio-cultural backgrounds; thirdly, that they need to exhibit together or organize other activities that support the arts, and; fourth, artists need to state their viewpoint, artistic manifesto together to gain stronger reception and validation. Notably, some groups of artist were formed on the basis of two, three or four motives all at once.

Pita Maha (founded in 1934, in Bali) and PERSAGI (Persatuan Ahli Gambar Indonesia or the Association of Indonesian Painters, 1937, in Jakarta) are two groups that pioneered artist collective union during the Dutch colonial era. A new development occurred in 1942, when a number of Indonesian artists, including Agus Djaja, Emiria Soenassa, S. Soedjojono, et al., joined the activities at Keimin Bunka Sidosho (Cultural Center), an organization under the propaganda bureau (Sendenbu) of the Japanese colonial government. Only during the end of the 1940s, few years after Indonesia declared its independence, Indonesian artists began to be actively involved in various activities of some official organizations. This period was marked by exhibitions initiated by artists, as well as the expansion of the role of artists as documenters of historical events, including wars, or negotiations between countries in the framework of defending Indonesian sovereignty [5].

One of the artist organizations or groups that eventually became part of the government agency was the Seniman Indonesia Muda (literally, Young Indonesian Artists, or SIM, founded in 1946). SIM

has also become a 'national model' for artists' associations, which was popularly called 'sanggar'. It was S. Sudjojono, the founder of SIM, who popularized the word 'sanggar' to describe a studio space where painters work and contemplate [6]. In *sanggar*, painters not only gather to exchange ideas, and learn from each other works. SIM artists also worked together collaboratively to produce posters or banners, and organize exhibitions that supported the nationalistic agenda [7]. Claire Holt wrote that at SIM's *sanggar*, political discussions if not indoctrination were probably as important as exercise in art [8].

The activities of *sanggar* in various cities in Indonesia were very dominant throughout the 1950s until early 1960s. Some of them are affiliated with organizations such as the leftist-leaning organization LEKRA (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, or People's Cultural Institute). Through a centralized organizational management and systematic programs, LEKRA emerged as an art organization that renewed the model of affiliation between artists and dozen units of *sanggar* that were spread out in different parts of the country [9].

By the late 1960s, the *sanggar* system of art training had gradually been replaced by education system implemented by art academies. Following the massive communist cleansing that happened after the September 30, 1965 tragedy, Indonesian New Order government depoliticized art and cultural activities. In the early New Order era, art exhibition turned into a typical urban cultural as well as commercial activity that sprung up in big cities such as Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Surabaya and Bali. Artworks, and more specifically paintings, become increasingly integral part of the needs of upper class and industrial societies. *Sanggar* gradually transformed into a mere space to 'study painting together'.

In the New Order era, the tendency among artists to form a group was still prevalent. However, the ties between members in an artist group did tend to change, as most of their affiliation were tied to mere interests of holding joint exhibitions. This tendency is exemplified in some art exhibitions attended by artists from Bandung by the name of *Sebelas Seniman Bandung* (Eleven Bandung Artists) in 1966, and *Group 18* in 1971 [10]. It is noteworthy, however, that there were also some Bandung artists who started to form a collective based on a professional and entrepreneurial affiliations. In this case, *DECENTA* group (founded 1973), in Bandung, is one of them. Different from *sanggar*, *DECENTA* is also run as a business entity—legally as *Perseroan Terbatas* (PT), or limited company—that engaged in the production of commissioned works or art projects [11]. The division of labour among its members was applied for the sake of efficiency and effectiveness.

The birth of the *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia* (Indonesian New Art Movement, or *GSRBI*) in 1975 marks the emergence of avant-gardist spirit in a collective movement. The specificity of this group lies in the motive of its members to carry a certain artistic style and manifesto, as well as in their insurgence towards the establishment art curricula in the academies. The influence of the *GSRBI*'s avant-gardism was seen in the emergence of exhibitions by other young artist group exhibition such as *Kepribadian Apa?* (What Personality?) In Yogyakarta (1977). After the *GSRBI* disbanded in 1979, a number of its exponents initiated an art project called the *Pasaraya Dunia Fantasi* (literally: Fantasy World Fair) exhibition in 1987 at Taman Ismail Marjuki, Jakarta. In the history of exhibition making in Indonesia the *Pasaraya* can be classified as an experimental model. Aside from its subversion of the language of 'high art' through eclecticism and parody, the exhibition also offered a deeper look into the realm of popular culture in Indonesia. Instead of accentuating their respective individual roles, the artists in this exhibition deliberately adopted a project work model that blurs the boundaries between art and design disciplines.

There is also another type of artist affiliation that is very specific to Indonesian context. In

Yogyakarta, there are at least two artist groups formed on the basis of ethnic ties of their members, namely Sakato (a group of Minangkabau ethnic artists, founded in 1995) and Sanggar Dewata Indonesia (SDI, a group of Balinese descents, founded in 1970). According to Katherine Bruhn [12], the collectivism of Sakato, actually inherited a sanggar system that tended to be nationalistic in its historical narrative construction—it is a ‘contemporary sanggar’. However, it is interesting that the group were formed precisely based on the values of ethnicity of its member. As a communal unit, an ethnic group is sometimes placed as the subservience of national entity. This kind of communality is indeed very typical in the context of Indonesian urban and metropolitan societies, such as Yogyakarta or Jakarta, where ethnic origins or cultural background are important ties for migrant people, including for artists who wish to pursue their careers in Java.

3 Mapping Indonesian Contemporary Artist Collectives

Following the radical changes that took place after the 1998 political Reform, along with the symptoms of ‘internationalization’ and the increasingly rapid globalization of information, the role of artist collectives seemed to mark a new turn that helped change the direction of Indonesian contemporary art in the 21st century. Following the fall of the New Order regime, the government control over freedom of opinion and expression gradually relaxed. The internet boom in the 2000s was also another major factor that pushed young artists to be more active in networking with institutions or organizations abroad. Their activities tend to be diverse and are not limited to the artistic practice alone. The strengthening of social, economic, and political networks in the global art scene has made some of the collectives less dependent on the local art market system.

Based on field works and archive studies, this research has attempted to make an inventory and mapping of artist collectives that were born from 1998 to the present day in Indonesia. The inventory brings to conclusion that the number of artist collectives in in the 2000s in Indonesia increased very rapidly. However, for various reasons, not all of them can survive and last long. Some of the Indonesian artist collectives that are still active since 1998 until today is listed as follows:

Table 1. Art Collectives

No	Established	Name of Collective	City	Founder(s) and/or Key Member(s)
1	1998	Taring Padi	Yogyakarta	Aris Prabowo, Yusuf Baik, Tony Volunteero, et.al.
2	1999	Tanah Indie	Makassar	Anwar Rahman Jimpe, Mirwan Andan, et.al.
3	1999	House of Natural Fiber	Yogyakarta	Venzha Christiawan, Irene Agrivine, et.al.
4	1999	KUNCI Cultural Studies Forum & Collective	Yogyakarta	Antariksa, Brigitta Isabella, Ferdiansyah Thajib, Nuraini Juliastuti, Syafiatudina, et.al.
5	1999	Ambari	Bandung	Ismet Zainal Effendi, Jalu Trisapta, et.al.
6	2000	Ruangrupa	Jakarta	Ade Darmawan, Hafiz, Ronny Agustinus, Oky Arfie Hutabarat, Lilia Nursita, Rithmi, et.al.
7	2001	Studio Grafis Minggiran	Yogyakarta	Malcolm Smith, Prihatmoko Moki, et.al.
8	2002	Komunitas Ruang MES 56	Yogyakarta	Angki Purbandono, Wimo Ambala Bayang, Akiq W., Fe Hung, et.al.

No	Established	Name of Collective	City	Founder(s) and/or Key Member(s)
9	2002	Kelompok Seni Rupa Belanak	Padang	Anton Raiz Makoginta, et.al.
10	2002	Common Room Network Foundation	Bandung	Gustaff Hariman Iskandar, Reina Wulansari, et.al.
11	2003	AstoneA	Bandung	Muhamad Akbar, Andri Mochamad, Erwin Windupranata, Mufti Priyanka
12	2003	Forum Lenteng	Jakarta	Hafis Rancajale, Otty Widasari, Andang Kelana, et.al.
13	2004	Kolektif Hysteria	Semarang	Adin, Purna Cipta, Arif Hadinata, et.al.
14	2005	Jatiwangi Art Factory	Jatiwangi	Arief Yudi Rahman, Loranita Theo, Ginggi Syarief Hasyim, Deden Imanudin, Ketut Aminudin, et.al.
15	2006	TROMARAMA	Bandung	Feby Babyrose, Ruddy Hatumena, Herbert Hans
16	2006	KetjilBergerak	Yogyakarta	Vani dan Greg Sindana
17	2009	SURVIVE!Garage	Yogyakarta	Bayu Widodo, et.al.
18	2011	Gerilya Artist Collective	Bandung	Wibi Triadi, Zico Albaiquni, Aliansyah Caniago, et.al.
19	2011	Ace House Collective	Yogyakarta	Hendra Harsono, Uji Hahan Handoko, Gintani Swastika, et.al.
20	2013	Neo-Pita Maha	Denpasar	Mahendra Yasa, Kemal Ezedine, Ketut Moniarta, et.al.
21	2015	NU-Abstract	Denpasar	I Made Agus Saputra, I Putu Bonuz Sudiana, Kemalezedine, Ketut Moniarta, Mahendra Yasa.
22	2015	Buka Warung	Jakarta	Gesyada Annisa Namora Siregar, et.al.
23	2015	Omnispace	Bandung	Arum Tresnaningtyas, Dayuputri, Chabib Duta Hapsoro, Erwin Windu Pranata, Meicy Sitorus, et.al.

Even though the artist collectives belong to the same wave and become a marker of a new phenomenon of the 2000s period, it will be inaccurate to generalize them into a single category. It should be underlined that not all of the artist collectives manage their own physical spaces. Not all of them work collaboratively. Many of the artists still display their respective works as an individual practice when exhibiting on behalf of the group. Although some of them gather together to carry out new artistic practices (such as video, new media, performance art, etc.), some of them still practice a type of art that is considered to be 'conventional'. Only a few of these groups have developed their organizational structures in a formal or professional manner. Most of them still tend to maintain fluidity and communality among their members. Only a handful of groups formalize their organizational status, for example by establishing a foundation or other form of legal entity.

It is interesting to note how the emergence of artist collectives in Indonesia after 1998 is not a separate phenomenon from a broader trend in Southeast Asia. It can even be said that the emergence of artist-run-space is a phenomenon that gives distinct characteristics to the contemporary art of the region in the early 2000s. In the Philippine, for example, collectives such as Surrounded By Water (founded 1998), Big Sky Mind in Manila (1999) and Green Papaya (2000) were born around the same period. A number of artist-run-spaces have also sprung up in other parts of

the region. Rumah Air Panas in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (1997); Plastique Kinetic Worms in Singapore (1998); Nha San Collective in Hanoi (1998), represent only a fraction of the larger phenomenon. Similarly, not all of these spaces can survive to this day due to lack of financial constraints.

In the midst of social and political transition following the 1997 economic crisis in Southeast Asia, the presence of young artist collectives who founded and managed physical spaces marked an emergence of a new generation of artists who refuse to rely on established art systems. Hence also, the term 'alternative space' has also often been pinned on them. Most of the founders and staffs are practicing artists. But their activities often encompass the border between art-making and curating, being the locus for production and mediation of art at the same time. In addition to their particular focus on the development of distinct artistic medium, style, idiom or thought, the establishment of the space, eventually became the most recognizable 'manifesto'.

Throughout the 2000s decade, it could generally be said that artist collectives in Indonesia were engaged in a wider spectrum of activities. Not only working on art projects, producing works collaboratively and individually or exhibiting together, artist collective such as ruangrupa in Jakarta and the House of Natural Fiber in Yogyakarta, for example, take the roles as initiator and organizer / curator / manager for regular exhibitions or international festivals. In line with the opening up of the paradigm of 'contemporary art', their DIY (do-it-yourself) activities also increasingly accommodated diversity of ideas, mediums, artistic creation and presentation models that are different from what their predecessor did. Collaboration with practitioners in other arts field and sciences have been prevalent in their practices.

Compared to the *sanggar* model in the 1960s, or 'alternative space' in the 1990s (which was pioneered by, among others, Cemeti Art House in Yogyakarta, since 1988), artist-run-spaces in the 2000s operate within their own peculiarities. While the *sanggar* system is almost synonymous with a mere studio where artists work together to produce artwork, and while the 'alternative space' model tends to focus more on exhibition, artist-run-space of the 2000s tend to combine the two functions altogether. Groups such as Mes56 (founded in 2002) in Yogyakarta, for example, has managed a space that also functions as a residence for some of its members. More or less the same strategy was adopted by Common Room (established 2001) in Bandung and ruangrupa (established 2000) in Jakarta. The way they blend their working and living environments have resulted in the subversion of the white cube system commonly found in the commercial galleries or museums.

To see how an artist-run-space contribute to the change in the Indonesian art world's formation, ruangrupa could be discussed as an interesting prime example. When it was established, the situation in the art scene in Jakarta tended to be difficult for young artists. Commercial galleries cannot provide opportunities for young artists. Meanwhile, government galleries were considered too full of bureaucracy. So the physical space that they initiated did relate to a motive that is contextual to the real situation. Their focus on 'new mediums' such as videos, comics and art in the public space is also an attempt to break away from the mainstream tendencies. ruangrupa have run several festival-formatted activities which tend to be more open, and can attract new audiences. Cooperation with international networks have also become another strength of their projects. Relying heavily on the internet as a tool for communication, they manage to organize projects on an international scale with the support of foreign foundations and institutions.

For ruangrupa, managing or organizing a festival has also become a creative practice in itself. The festivals or exhibitions they organize have not only succeeded in dissolving boundaries, for

example: between art and pop culture, between sacred and profane public spaces, between art and non-arts, but also widening the public circle that is originally fragmented by rigid constraints. On the relevance of such approach, ruangrupa's key member Ade Darmawan writes, "The decade after 1998 was a period of euphoria for the idea of openness and a new orientation on how social, cultural and political lives should be carried out. At the same time, artists from this generation created, explored and expanded their choice of expression in a more diverse artistic forms [...]. This exploration not only formed an intersection between high art and low art that was previously separated, but also made the approach to art practice more intense and ideological. Through collaborative approach, for example, an artist's position, which was originally the centre of awareness and ideas, organically turns into a collaborator or mediator." [13]

By way of a comparison, there are also collectives who maintain a more conventional pattern in carrying out their practice. Neo-Pitamaha, for example, still relies on their cooperative networks with commercial galleries in organizing their exhibitions. While some of the members are exclusively represented by Indonesian dealers, they also depends more on the local dominant ecosystem. The same path seems to be pursued by members of other collectives such as Jendela (founded 1996) and Sakato who tend to be more reliant on the patronage of art market and collectors.

4 Conclusion

Any researches on artist-collectives that emerge in the two last decades will have to consider how global contemporary art practice has undergone a major transformation. Even though they are not totally separated from global trend, the birth of the artist-collectives in Indonesia since 2000s has also been influenced by particular situations. The political upheaval in Indonesia in 1998, which was followed by fundamental democratic reform and changes in the order of society, have also shaped a new countenance to the current art world and practice.

This research concludes that collectivism that developed among post-1998 Indonesian artists can be mapped at least into two categories. The first model is the so-called 'old collectivism', which is an artistic collectivism driven by the need to affiliate and work together as 'artists' whose main activity remains exclusive to artistic production. This type of collectivism has not shifted far from the dominant practice in the New Order era, in which identity of an artist, even though he/she is a member of a group, is still imbued with an aura of genius, autonomous creator. Hence it can be classified as more conventional when compared to the second model.

The second collectivism can be called 'new' for its attempt to extend the artist's role as merely producer. Some artist collectives who manage physical spaces and conduct regular public art activities have shown that they have awareness on the necessity to intervene the existing local art world's formation. Their efforts to enter into the realm of public mediation have made this type of collectivism both more extensive and expansive. And it is precisely a strategy that also eventually affect the existence and resilience of these groups.

5 References

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