

ruangrupa

What Could Be 'Art to Come'

Thomas J Berghuis

CONTEMPORARY ART

The world of contemporary art is crossing an important junction – in terms of time, place, space and, perhaps most of all, in terms of its multiple experiences. The overpasses and underpasses of this junction are indicated by the disposition of modernity, the diminishing power of post-modernity, and, more recently, by the proposition of contemporaneity, as realised through the desire to construct heuristics through which to provide an art historical analysis of contemporary art.¹ Further signposts on the junction of contemporary art have focused on 'global art', 'world art', and 'trans-national experiences' of art and culture.² These discourses offer the artworld multiple ways to portray how contemporary art is no longer confined to cultural-historical centres mainly situated in Europe and North America, but can now assert its grip anywhere in the world, and at any given time.

'The world needs art, and art needs the world' – this seems to be the current leitmotiv. Less clear, however, is what kind of art the world actually needs. Perhaps art simply needs a world of its own making. These days the artworld seems to have become no less momentous than the culture and ethos responsible for its existence. Art has become a way of life, styles become routines, techniques become devices, and concepts mere formula. Recently, the artworld has even suggested that it can in fact create worlds of its own. There is an urgent need to draw attention to the multiplicity of sites, practices and discourses upon which the basis of contemporary art is founded. The constant stream of contemporary art produced by artists around the world in turn generates variations that confront these centralised discourses.

This necessitates the constant creation of new incentives intended to foster some type of art historical awareness able to correspond to new discourses of contemporary art as well as the production of a real, alternative future for contemporary art in places such as Indonesia. Perhaps these incentives can generate new impulses through which to examine

1. See Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009

2. Some recent examples include James Elkins, *Is Art History Global?*, Routledge, New York and London, 2006; Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme, eds, *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2008; and Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, eds, *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, Museums*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, Germany, 2009

3. This article draws from the notion of 'art to come' in reference to Jacques Derrida's treatise on the concept of *à venir*, as it was first proposed by Terry Smith in his 2001 lecture at the Power Institute, University of Sydney; see Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?: Contemporary Art, Contemporaneity, and Art to Come*, Critical Issues series, vol 6, Artspace, Sydney, 2001; and again used in Smith's introduction essay for Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, eds, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2008, which followed a symposium organised by Smith on 'Modernity ≠ Contemporaneity: Antinomies of Art and Culture After the Twentieth Century', held at the University of Pittsburgh in 2004
4. Here one can also follow the comments by Derrida in the opening sequence of the documentary film *Derrida* by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering, released in 2002 by Zeitgeist Films
5. Besides looking at the contributions in Smith et al, eds, *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, 2008, the recent book by Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009, also presents an inherent canonisation (albeit pluralistic) in exploring what is foreseeable about contemporary art. On the role of alternative types of canonisation in art, see also Anna Brzyski, ed, *Partisan Canons*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2007
6. As became clear to me when working on a study of performance art in China which, when I started my research in 1999 had remained largely unnoticed in art historical studies of

the question, 'what is contemporary art?' Or, rather: 'what could *be* art to come?'³

In proposing 'contemporaneity' through which to consider contemporary art, Terry Smith refers further to Jacques Derrida's concept of *à venir*, used in order to draw attention to the arrival of sudden, unpredictable and multiple events that constitute a real (potential) future beyond the existent (foreseeable) future.⁴ When linked to the condition of contemporary art in terms of the proposition of a possible 'art to come' and linked to Smith's proposed concept of 'contemporaneity', Derrida's notion of *à venir* requires careful deliberation of where the unpredictability of contemporary art would actually come from.

Subsequent studies by art historians, curators and thinkers involved in discussing contemporaneity tend to cite examples of institutions, markets, canons, artists and artworks that already exist. In this way, these studies can be used to predict only a foreseeable future for art, rather than a possible 'other' future.⁵ Merely locating the 'other' in terms of extending the conventional centres of modern art in Europe and North America by drawing on broader global, international and transnational examples of artworks and artists is insufficient for contemporaneity to become the link through which to realise the imperative embodied in the idea of an 'art to come'.

It is therefore necessary to extend the question of contemporaneity beyond discussions of global art, world art and transnational experiences of art and culture – what is crucial now is the act of *making worlds out of art*, as well as *art out of this world*. For contemporary art to confront the essential unpredictability of its future, the proposition of contemporaneity must transcend any type of historical validation or historicity. In order to distinguish itself from the historical proposition of modernity, contemporaneity will need to be grounded upon a methodology able to sustain an unremitting uncertainty in terms of its initiation and application rather than being perceived as itself a definitive idea presumed capable of answering the question 'what is contemporary art?'

Some commentators, including me, deem it important to draw renewed attention to the actual practices of art in relation to culture, society, politics and experiences of everyday life, thereby generating a sense of the actual event of art-making, even before it generates art historical knowledge.⁶ Important examples of the development of contemporary art, particularly over the past twenty years, can be located in the development of performance art and performance art festivals, including those in Asia.⁷ Further attention can also be paid to the development of artist collectives, especially across Southeast Asia where artists' collectives and artist-run initiatives play an important part in the development of contemporary art.

This article pays special attention to the Jakarta-based artists' collective *ruangrupa*, which celebrated its tenth anniversary between December 2010 and January 2011 under the theme 'Expanding the Space and the Public' (*Merentang ruang dan publik*). The anniversary was marked by a series of exhibitions and public art programmes that were held across Jakarta.⁸ Accompanying these events is a book that uses the concept of *siasat* ('strategy') to explore notions of space and the public as activated by artists and artists' collectives working in relation to rapid changes in



Members of ruangrupa in front of the ruangrupa space in Tebet, South Jakarta, 2010, photo: courtesy ruangrupa

contemporary Chinese art. See Thomas J Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, Timezone 8, Hong Kong, 2006

7. This was argued in my recent article for *Perspectives with the Asia Art Archive* in Hong Kong, which in turn sparked a discussion with performance artists in Asia that drew attention to a broad range of perspectives on the development of performance art in Asia. See Thomas J Berghuis, 'Art into Action: Performance Art Festivals in Asia', published in the 'Perspectives' section of *Dialogue*, AAA's *Monthly Newsletter*, October 2010, <http://www.aaa.org.hk>, accessed December 2010

the social, political and cultural landscapes across urban centres in Asia, as well as in Australia and the Middle East.⁹

This article contends that these events offer a welcome alternative to current discussions on the nature of contemporary art, including contemporary art in Indonesia. These include alternatives to somewhat recurrent discourses of Indonesian contemporary art by the longstanding curator and former artist Jim Supangkat, whose role in the contemporary Indonesian artworld spans over thirty years, since the late 1970s. In 2010, Supangkat incorporated somewhat contested notions of 'contemporaneity' and 'global contemporary art' in the curation for two exhibitions that were focused on a select number of artists and art practices, and further featured close links to the ranking of artists in the art market. These included the '2010 Indonesian Art Awards' (IAA 2010) held in Jakarta in June, followed by the exhibition 'Contemporaneity: Contemporary Art of Indonesia' that opened in July 2010 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Shanghai (MoCA Shanghai).¹⁰

Supangkat first started to use the term 'contemporary art' in the context of the development of Indonesian art in 1993, and linking it retrospectively to the birth of the New Art Movement (Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru) in Indonesia during the mid-1970s in which he himself played an important role. For Supangkat, the New Art Movement became 'the



Installation shots of *Pengetahuan (Knowledge)* at the 'Ruru.zip' exhibition, ruangrupa in collaboration with the Indonesian Visual Art Archive (IVAA), part of the Decompression #10 festival marking ruangrupa's 10th anniversary, Indonesian National Gallery, 28 December 2010–18 January 2011, photos: courtesy ruangrupa



Installation shots of *Pengetahuan (Knowledge)* at the 'Ruru.zip' exhibition, ruangrupa in collaboration with the Indonesian Visual Art Archive (IVAA), part of the Decompression #10 festival marking ruangrupa's 10th anniversary, Indonesian National Gallery, 28 December 2010–18 January 2011, photos: courtesy ruangrupa

8. For detailed information on ruangrupa and its tenth anniversary, see: <http://www.ruangrupa.org>
9. Ardi Yunanto, Arief Ash Shiddiq and Thomas Berghuis, eds, *Siasat: Merentang ruang dan public/Strategy: Expanding the Space and the Public*, Ruangrupa, Jakarta, 2011
10. For a critical analysis of the 2010 Indonesian Art Awards, see Agung Hutjatnikajennong, 'Indonesian Art Award 2010: Contemporaneity in the Indonesian Context', *C-Arts: Asian Art and Culture*, Issue 15, August 2010. Also available online through <http://www.c-artsmag.com/home/index.php>, accessed September 2010. The following discussion will focus on the curatorial work Jim Supangkat produced for the catalogue of the 2010 exhibition in Shanghai, 'Indonesia in Contemporary Art Discourses' in Biljana Ciric, ed, *Contemporaneity: Contemporary Art of Indonesia*, MoCA Shanghai, Shanghai, 2010, pp 18–43.
11. The distinct use of 'contemporary art' came during the Ninth Jakarta Biennale, curated by Jim Supangkat and organised by the Jakarta Art Council and the Taman Ismail Marzuki arts centre from December 1993 to January 1994. In 1993 Supangkat had begun to associate the beginning of 'contemporary art' in Indonesia with the New Art Movement. See Jim Supangkat, 'Indonesia Report', *ArtAsiaPacific*, Sample Issue, June 1993, pp 20–24; as well as in Jim Supangkat, 'De twee vormen van Indonesische kunst'/'The two forms of Indonesian Art' in Els van der Plas et al, eds, *Indonesische moderne kunst/Indonesian modern art: Indonesian painting since 1945*, Gate Foundation, Amsterdam, 1993, pp 73–80

pioneer in introducing contemporary art principles' by stimulating the production of installation art practices that challenged the 'very definition of art' (*seni rupa*) in Indonesia, which until then had been dominated by the medium of painting and sculpture.¹¹ Supangkat began further to discuss concepts of 'multiculturalism' and 'multimodernism' in Indonesian art, as we find in his 1996 catalogue essay for the exhibition 'Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia', held at the Asia Society Galleries in New York.¹² Supangkat questioned the general lack of comprehension regarding forms of modernism other than those developed in Europe and America, and advocated how 'modernism outside the mainstream is based in pluralism'.¹³

In many ways, these earlier discussions on 'contemporary art' and 'multimodernism' received a new casting in the recent advocacy of 'global contemporary art' by Supangkat that seeks to 'reiterate[s]/reaffirm[s] diversity' by stressing the 'development of contemporary art outside of Europe and the United States' and the (now habitual) reference to the 'emergence of contemporary art in Indonesia' with the birth of the New Art Movement in the 1970s.¹⁴ In a further twist, Supangkat challenges the proposed discourse of 'contemporaneity' by drawing renewed attention to what he states is the need for 'a consciousness of local art history'.¹⁵ Supangkat's reading of the discussions surrounding the proposed condition of 'contemporaneity' by Smith thus fails to look at its proposition beyond the discourse of 'modernity', and hence his current proposition of a 'global contemporary art' fails to move beyond previous discussions of a local art history that were developed within the condition of looking for a multimodernism. Supangkat's 'consciousness of local art history' starts to show gaps in recognising the significant development of contemporary art in Indonesia, beyond the incessant reference to the New Art Movement which comes to serve as a benchmark for discussing even some of the most recent developments in contemporary Indonesian Art – many of which remain unidentified.¹⁶ This poses clear problems when the contemporary artworld becomes largely reliant on gathering information on 'local' and 'global' connections between art histories from these types of exhibitions and their accompanying catalogue publications.

It is important to note how the recent heuristics in providing an art historical analysis of contemporary art by Terry Smith in the study of 'What is Contemporary Art?' essentially becomes focused on the 'institutionalised network through which the art of today presents itself', and hence positioned through a 'show and tell' that gives priority to 'direct encounter with art and its situations of occurrence' for a large part in 'contemporary museums, galleries, biennales, auction sales, art fairs, magazines, television programs, and Web sites'.¹⁷ As such, this particular discussion of contemporary art incorporated a methodology that always risks critique on what it chooses to show and what it does not show, or what it is not able to show or tell about the nature of contemporary art today. This includes discourses that seek constant repositioning of attention to the 'consciousness of local art history' in an attempt to reaffirm the (cultural) diversity of global contemporary art, such as in the case of the recurring discourse of contemporary art in Indonesia by Jim Supangkat.

More important would be to argue that the proposed discourse of contemporary art, thus far, leaves open the quest for a deepening of the

12. See Jim Supangkat, 'Multiculturalism/Multimodernism', in Apinan Poshyananda et al, *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia*, Asia Society Galleries, New York, 1996, pp 70–81
13. *Ibid.*, p 77
14. See Jim Supangkat, 'Indonesia in Contemporary Art Discourse' in Ciric, *op cit*, pp 23 and 28
15. *Ibid.*, p 34
16. Some examples of these practices are raised in the curatorial essay by Biljana Ciric for the catalogue of the 2010 exhibition of 'Contemporary Indonesian Art' in Shanghai, and include (brief) references to the development of new media, as well as to more recent examples of artists' collectives and artist-run initiatives that are being described as 'self-organising entities that provide 'new models for exchange'. See Biljana Ciric, 'Individuals as Medium: New Models of Mondialite', in Ciric, *op cit*, pp 44–52
17. Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* *op cit*, p 241
18. See Ardi Yunanto, ed, *Fixer: Exhibition of Alternative Spaces and Art Groups in Indonesia*, North Art Space, Jakarta, 2010. A list of participating collectives, including links to their web profiles, can also be found on the website of the Yogyakarta-based new media art laboratory House of Natural Fiber, <http://www.natural-fiber.com>, accessed December 2010
19. Besides Ade Darmawan, 'Fixer' involved the curatorial input of Rifky Effendy, former curator of Cemara 6 Gallery in Jakarta (until 2009) and a well-known curator and writer on contemporary Indonesian art, currently based in Bandung

encounter with 'contemporary art and its multiplicity of situations of occurrence'. These include the constant development of new sites and new currents in the production, dissemination and public reception of contemporary art – as well as those that are generated by artists' collectives and artist-run initiatives across the globe. As a result, questions can be raised about whether the nature of contemporary art today can be put forward by a way of 'show and tell' (or indeed, by drawing attention to what has not been shown or told). Further theoretical framing may be needed to showcase the way in which 'contemporaneity' essentially points at the improbable nature of a discursive model for contemporary art, except, perhaps, in pointing at the eventful truthfulness of contemporary art – as 'art to come'. These propositions will be analysed by reflecting on the development of the artists' collective ruangrupa over the past ten years.

RUANGRUPA

In June 2010, the Jakarta-based gallery North Art Space, located in the Ancol Dreamland Recreation Park in the northern part of the city, featured an exhibition of artists' collectives and alternative spaces from across Indonesia. Under the title 'Fixer', the exhibition lasted only ten days. It failed to draw any attention from the art press, even within Indonesia. Nevertheless, the exhibition was accompanied by a series of discussion panels, as well as a bilingual publication in both Indonesian and English, featuring no less than twenty-one artists' collectives from major cities in Java and Sumatra.¹⁸

'Fixer' was co-organised by the artist Ade Darmawan, director of ruangrupa, a well-known artists' collective founded in Jakarta in 2000.¹⁹ In many ways 'Fixer' can be seen as the start of the activities surrounding the tenth anniversary of ruangrupa by drawing attention to the important development of artists' collectives in Indonesia over the past decade, many of which have a close relationship with ruangrupa.

The initiative to develop ruangrupa came in 2000 during a series of talks by a group of artists, designers and writers in Jakarta. They included architect and designer Hafiz, writer Ronny Agustinus and Ade Darmawan. The talks that led to the founding of ruangrupa came two years after the resignation of Suharto and the end of the New Order Regime – a time of great social, political and cultural transformation in Indonesia. These talks also followed a period of growing international attention directed towards contemporary art in Asia during the 1990s in what might best be described as the 'discovery stage' of contemporary Asian art. This stage included exhibitions of new developments in Asian art organised in Europe and North America, as well as in Australia, with the founding of the Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane in 1993 as a case in point.

By the time ruangrupa was founded, Indonesia, as elsewhere across Asia and the rest of the world, had witnessed the important development of a new generation of artists exploring a multiplicity of artistic media. This exploration included the growing development of performance art, street art, photography, video art and collaborative projects, many of

20. Cemara 6 Gallery was founded in 1993 at the residence of the collector Dr Toeti Heraty N Roosseno in the district of Menteng, and consists of a gallery, a café and homestay that has become a popular residence for foreign visitors working in the arts
21. From 2006 to 2010 Kusumawijaya chaired the Jakarta Art Council, during which he worked on several projects with Ade Darmawan, who also became a member in 2006. They both put together the basis of the Jakarta Biennial of 2009, which centred on the 'arena' of the public space in Jakarta, curated by the Bandung-based curator Agung Hutjatnikajennong, the chief curator of Gallery Selasar Sunaryo art centre in Bandung
22. See <http://www.karbonjournal.org>
23. RAIN was conceived at the Rijksakademie voor Beeldende Kunst (Royal Academy of Fine Arts) in Amsterdam during the late 1990s. Ade Darmawan had been a visiting artist at the Rijksakademie from 1998 to 2000. Besides ruangrupa the initial members of the network included Los Mutantes (Mexico City, Mexico), Guías Latinas (Mexico City, Mexico), Open Circle (Mumbai, India), Centre Soleil d'Afrique (Bamako, Mali), TRAMA (Buenos Aires, Argentina) and PULSE (Durban, Afrika Selatan)
24. See Gertrude Flentge, ed, *Shifting Map: Artists' Platforms and Strategies for Cultural Diversity*, RAIN Artists' Initiatives Network and NAi Publishers, Rotterdam, 2004. The publication involved a contribution from the British-born curator Charles Esche who in 1998, together with the Canadian-born artist Mark Lewis, founded *Afterall* – a research and publishing organisation with the

which made use of workshop models in order to facilitate interactions with a broad range of communities. The founding of ruangrupa provided not only a new platform for art, but also a whole new infrastructure for a broad range of artistic and cultural practices that revolved around the desire to 'expand the space and the public' for art and culture in and beyond Jakarta.

Many of the activities surrounding ruangrupa over the past ten years were spawned from Jakarta, capital city of Indonesia, one of the world's largest archipelagic states. The environment of Jakarta, with an estimated population of over 9.5 million people, allowed ruangrupa to provide a better network for artists, designers and architects to develop their work in close proximity to the expansion of urban society where these practitioners could reflect directly on changes in urban culture. Ruangrupa thus became an important alternative for artists whose practices involved working closely with an ever-growing network of urban communities and urban spaces across the entire city of Jakarta that consequently expanded the physical space and audience for art well beyond the Jakarta artworld, as defined by the commercial galleries, the National Gallery of Jakarta, and the state-run cultural institution Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM).

Initial support for the foundation of ruangrupa came from twenty-five artists from Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta who participated in a fundraising exhibition held in April 2000 at Cemara 6 Gallery in southern Jakarta.²⁰ Two months later, in June 2000, ruangrupa organised a two-week workshop involving two artists' groups from Yogyakarta – Apotik Komik and Taring Padi – which were founded in 1997 and 1998 respectively. Both groups became well known for their work in mural painting, print-making and street performances across the city of Yogyakarta, and were now invited to work with communities in Jakarta and engage in a series of discussions on public art and public space.

The workshop also generated the initiative to publish *Karbon*, an annual journal publication in Indonesian and English that focused attention on topics related to the various activities of ruangrupa, starting with discussions on 'public art and art in the public', which invited contributions by the well-known artist FX Harsono, and the Jakarta-based architect and urban planner Marco Kusumawijaya.²¹ Between 2000 and 2006, seven printed editions of *Karbon* focused on the themes of public art, urban print, video art, performance art, alternative sites, audience and visual culture. Thereafter *Karbon* ceased print publication in order to make room for an online edition that was founded in 2009 and that currently features regular articles and photo journals on art and culture, in and beyond Jakarta, as well as an archive of all previous issues.²²

In June 2000, the same month as the workshop with Apotik Komik and Taring Padi, ruangrupa also became the site of the first meeting of the Rijksakademie Artist Initiative Network (RAIN), which involved seven artists' collectives from Asia, Latin America and Africa.²³ The network became an important support structure for ruangrupa, as it generated new ideas on social engagement in the arts and on 'cultural diversity' in the arts, centred on the example of these artists' collectives in different cities across the world.²⁴ These ideas were subsequently featured



Left: Anggun Priambodo, *Toko Keperluan* (Needs Store), 2010, installation and objects, part of a solo exhibition curated by Ade Darmawan. Right: Anggun Priambodo (far left wearing a sleeveless top) with the performance group in the opening, photos: courtesy the artist and ruangrupa.

University of London that focuses on contemporary art and its link to broader artistic, theoretical and social contexts

25. Following unrecorded conversations with Ade Darmawan in Jakarta in 2007 and in Sydney in 2009 where Darmawan mentioned how the participation of ruangrupa in these two Biennials, which focused on a transfer of the space and activities of ruangrupa to the space of the Biennial, became somewhat different from the actual social engagement generated by the activities of the artists' collective *ruangrupa* in Jakarta. These statements raise interesting questions of whether biennales actually allow a deepening and expanding of social engagement, or only offer temporal, formalised and somewhat superficial encounters with spaces of production that are being reconstituted in the space and artistic context of the Biennale. Further analysis of these questions surrounding the capability of the biennale context to promote social engagement would be important to consider, but clearly moves beyond the scope of this article.

in the curatorium for the Fourth Gwangju Biennial in South Korea in 2002 titled 'P.A.U.S.E.' and co-curated by Hou Hanru, Charles Esche, Sung Wan Kyung and Yong Soon Min; and during the Ninth Istanbul Biennial in Turkey in 2005, co-curated by Esche and Vasif Kortun. Both these events invited ruangrupa to participate, thereby expanding the international profile of the artists' collective, but also generating notions on how ruangrupa effectively went beyond its initial purpose as a network of activities centred on social engagement within the context of Jakarta.²⁵

Since 2003, ruangrupa has organised two major biennial events of its own in Jakarta, beginning with the founding of the OK Video – Jakarta International Video Art Festival. The Festival brings together local and international video artists in a thematic event that comprises various public locations for public screenings and public interactions with video art across the city. Ruangrupa has also organised a biennial forum titled Jakarta 32°C that invites students from different universities across Jakarta to collaborate in a two-week event featuring workshops, exhibitions and public art events. Since 2004, Jakarta 32°C has invited several hundred students and, as a result, expanded the space and public around ruangrupa as well as the collective's capacity to stimulate the activities of new generations of critically engaged artists, designers, architects, writers and other cultural practitioners.

It is important to note the way many of ruangrupa's activities over the past ten years can be linked to the collective's name, which combines the Indonesian term for 'a space' (*ruang*) and its (outward) 'appearance' or 'visualisation' (*rupa*); the name hence denotes a 'visual space', or rather a *visualspace* within the context of Jakarta. Merging the two terms for the visual and for space realises a close interdependence in which the appearance of an actual space generates a three-dimensional realm in which objects transpire and events occur, and whereby its (outward) appearance as a space is at once realised through visual means. Since its

founding, ruangrupa has been expanding the space and the audience for art in Jakarta, centred on the initiatives of artists, designers, architects and writers, and has also been generating visual formations that deliberately interfuse shared artistic practices with communal experiences of culture, society, politics and everyday life.

It is also important to examine the way that artists' collectives such as ruangrupa expand the pivotal role of the individual artist and his or her capacity as the presumed sole creator of an artwork by instead directing attention towards the significance of collaboration. Here collaboration refers not only to that occurring between artists, or based on exchanges between artists, curators and their audiences, but also to the production of actual joint artistic processes based on the artistic identity of the artists' collective where the artist acts more through liaison, enabling the process of making visible the collective enterprise. As Darmawan points out, 'by taking the collaborative approach... the artist [who] previously served as the centre of awareness and ideas... turns into a collaborator or mediator'.²⁶

Through its collaborative approach and focus on collective practices that involve artists, the broader community and the social environment, ruangrupa provides a good opportunity for examining how the work of these artists' collectives can help formulate a better understanding of contemporary art, as it becomes linked to a proposed discourse of contemporaneity refracted through what Terry Smith and other commentators describe as the 'antinomies of art and culture'.²⁷ These collectives provide a way of looking at shared experiences of being both in and of the same time, at the same time. One can look in particular at the ways in which many of ruangrupa's activities clearly mark the arrival of sudden, unpredictable and multiple events that can be used in arguing for a real (potential) future (*à venir*) of 'art to come'.

The unpredictable nature of contemporary art can arise from such questions regarding the expansion of space and the public as were raised during the tenth anniversary of ruangrupa in 2010–2011. More importantly, the unpredictable nature of contemporary art comes from examining the multiplicity of sites, practices and discourses that are being generated across the world – practices and discourses that expand the space and the public of contemporary art so as to encounter, touch and overlap with multiple experiences of culture, society, politics and everyday life. As these experiences generate further knowledge about our contemporary existence in relation to the world, they also construct the basis for evoking the unremitting and unpredictable nature of 'art to come', ultimately providing for a more elaborate aesthetic function for contemporary art through which to encounter the world.

26. Yunanto, ed, op cit, p 14

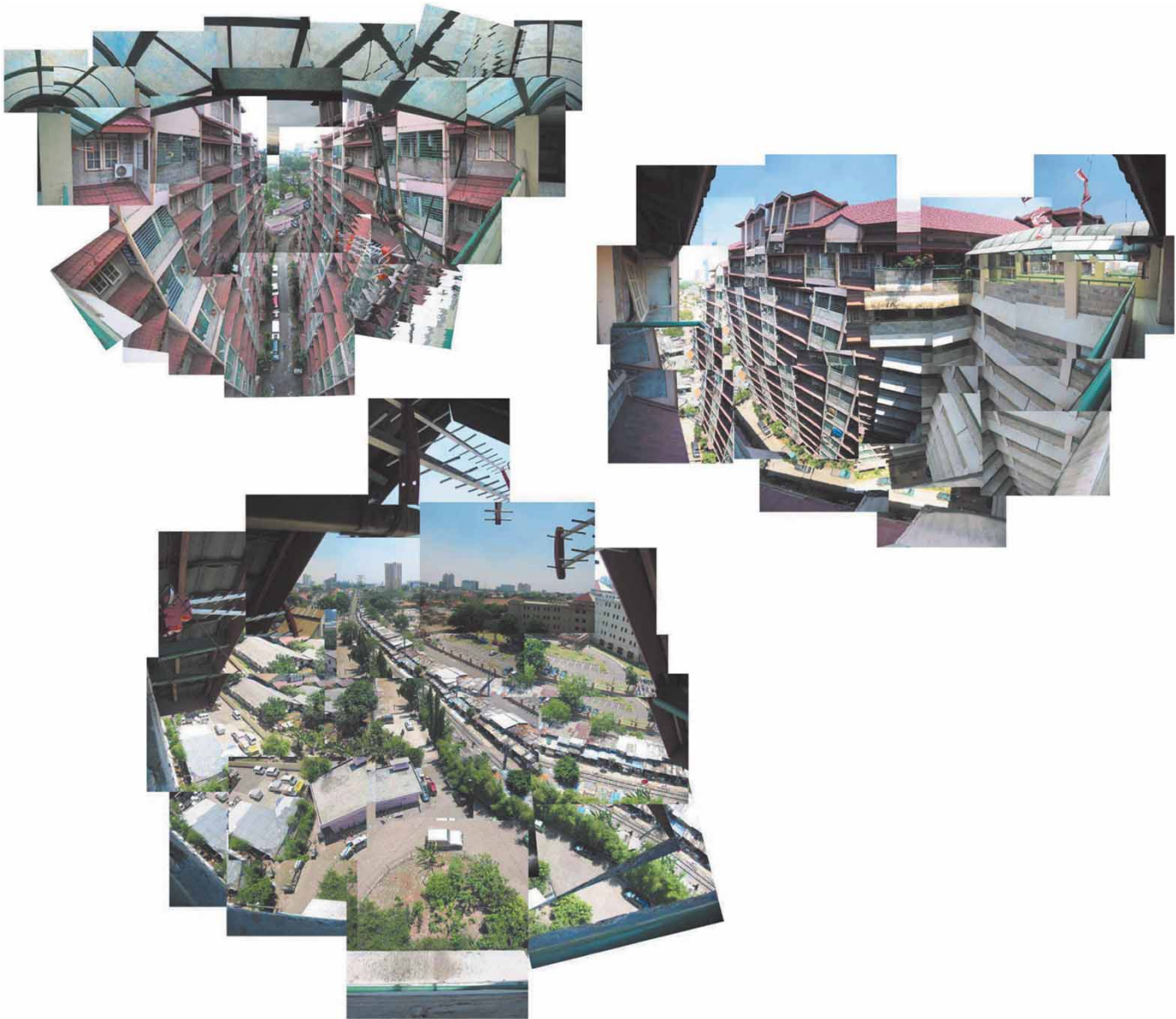
27. Raised during the previously mentioned symposium on Modernity ≠ Contemporaneity, papers from which were published in Smith, *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, op cit

28. Email correspondences with the author, July and September 2010

WHAT COULD BE 'ART TO COME'

Reflecting on the past decade of its development, Ade Darmawan states how ruangrupa essentially has become 'a platform that can transform information and experiences from daily life into knowledge'.²⁸ This statement allows artists' initiatives such as ruangrupa to provide the world with an aesthetic function, next to an artistic function.

Here it may be possible to link the multiplicity of activities organised by ruangrupa over the past ten years to a much needed extension to the discourse of ‘relational aesthetics’, which until now has remained largely focused on the examples of specific artists, their artworks and artistic platforms that arose during the course of the 1990s. This discourse, as proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud, remains focused on providing an art historical and theoretical repositioning of art’s communicative role; as Bourriaud describes it, art is ‘an activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions, and



Indra Ameng, *Space and Memory*, 2004, digital print, dimensions variable, courtesy the artist and ruangrupa

objects'.²⁹ The multiplicity of ruangrupa's activities instead offers a more complex role for 'relational aesthetics' that extends beyond the realm of art by generating a multiplicity of cultural and societal relations with the world. This, in turn, allows for a crucial repositioning of 'relational art', including what Bourriaud proposes as the necessity of examining a 'set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space'.³⁰

This becomes particularly clear when looking at the way ruangrupa has been able to expand the position of the space and the public by generating a multiplicity of collaborative practices that promote intricate relations between art, culture, society, politics and history, as well as the everyday life of the community. As a result, it can be argued that the multiplicity of activities that have been generated by ruangrupa provide for a much clearer positioning of 'relational aesthetics' as an aesthetic position, one capable of highlighting the important role of 'inter-human relations' beyond the important 'judging of artworks' mentioned by Bourriaud.

In many ways, ruangrupa may produce something more to the effect of *interferon aesthetics* – a potent antiviral aesthetic agent that responds to socio-economic, socio-political and socio-artistic infirmities. Here it would also be useful to think through the possible role of *situational ethics* in providing some type of ethical dimension to the assessment of these types of artistic, cultural and societal formations that are thought to generate new relations to the world, including in relation to the art-world. The ethical dimension is something that is missing from many of the current propositions that envelop the question of contemporaneity and its consideration of the continuous coming on of 'art to come', as well as from considerations of the communicative function of artistic processes now being discussed in terms sympathetic, or at least close, to relational aesthetics.

Ultimately these propositions will have to face their own judgement. Here one can think not only of a judgement of taste enacted largely through a combination of popular consensus and market value – both of which require widespread (ie global) circulation and its authorisation (ie discourse) in order to claim some type of world-encompassing cultural capital for contemporary art – but also a moral judgement of taste, particularly as the contemporary artworld makes claims on behalf of art's capacity to engender its own worlds. Rather than becoming based on some notion of universal truth and general moral principles invoked through the search for some type of global consensus regarding cultural differences, the proposed condition of *situational ethics* contends that moral judgements of taste are contingent on their dependence on the intricate contexts and multiplicity of situations in which they are produced. These judgements thus require an awareness of cultural differences and their ability to generate cultural crossings.

In 2009, during the 'Spaces of Art' conference in Sydney, Darmawan raised 'necessity', 'experimentation' and 'survival' as important issues for developing initiatives in the context of Indonesia.³¹ 'Spaces of Art' was organised by Artspace Visual Art Centre in Association with the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (New South Wales chapter). The conference explored

29. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, 1996, first published in English translation as *Relational Aesthetics*, Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, trans, with the participation of Mathieu Copeland, Les presses du réel, Dijon, 2002, p 107

30. *Ibid*, p 113

31. Ade Darmawan, 'Complaints and relevancy', in Blair French and Reuben Keehan, eds, *Column 4: Spaces of Art: Institutional and Post-institutional Practices in Contemporary Art*, Artspace, Sydney, 2009, pp 74–78



foto di depan rumahku bareng bapakku (alm),
 ika - kakak perempuanku, Rahman - kakak tertua lelaki,
 aku yg paling kecil - berdiri, anak lelaki di sebelahku
 aku lupa siapa...
 rumah itu jarang direnovasi, tembok batu bata
 di depan rumah ~~itu~~ sampai sekarang masih sama...
 di belakang foto ini ada tulisan tangan ibuku...
 "idul adha 1977"...

ade darmawan



Anggung Priambodo, *Rusun Pejompongan (Pejompongan Housing Project)*, 2010, digital prints (3 sets), dimensions variable. Work produced after the Apartment Project for Urban and Residential Environment, organised by ruangrupa, Jakarta, October 2003, courtesy of the artist and ruangrupa

the future of art institutions in relation to contemporary art practices, with special focus on Australia and the Asia-Pacific, and became an important platform upon which to reinterpret curatorial debates on 'new institutionalism' and 'post-institutional practices', especially prominent in Europe. The conference showed clear differences in perspective between the speakers from Australia, New Zealand and Europe and those speaking from the viewpoint of running art spaces and artists' collectives in Asia. Many in the former focused mostly on surveying new types of institutional and post-institutional practices in an attempt to counterbalance large state-run institutions, often considered to be better funded but not always as critically engaged. In contrast, the invited speakers from Asia dwelt on their inherent desire and necessity to generate multiple expansions of spaces of and beyond art, and to link these expansions to the wider world. As Darmawan stated very clearly:

... most initiatives are first generated out of *necessity*, with subsequent *experimentation* to find the structure or model that best suits. This is a process of *survival*, of trying to fill in the blanks here and there sporadically as well as temporarily [my italics].³²

As the multiplicity of activities by ruangrupa over the past decade becomes reconstituted in the context of the events, exhibitions and publications surrounding its tenth anniversary, ruangrupa will eventually have to face its own existence in relation to the world. This may also be a good time to draw some type of conclusion to and affirmation of the otherwise open proposition of contemporaneity, particularly as it

32. Ibid, p 74

becomes marked by the proposition of a continuous coming to being of what could be ‘art to come’.

Eventually, and by way of some form of conclusion, contemporary art can potentially become seen as an ‘art that creates finitude’, following the French theorist Alain Badiou in his 1998 reflections on ‘Art and Philosophy’.³³ For Badiou, the problem that needs to be overcome is situated in the way the ‘work of art must be thought of as an eventual singularity, rather than as a structure’. He points out that the ‘work is not an event’ and neither is ‘a work of art a truth’. Instead, ‘the work of art is a fact of art’ and ‘a truth is an artistic procedure initiated by an event’.³⁴

These reflections on the eventful being of art can assist a better positioning of art in relation to the world. This art does not necessarily set out to making the world or the global, but rather constitutes truth for art through its ‘artistic procedure’ that commences by way of an event that is both in and of the world, thereby constituting the making of art out of the world. The truth of this contemporary art therefore could be identified in the infinite complex of works that are positioned in relation to the world, many of which now involve the role of artists’ collectives, including *ruangrupa* in Jakarta, in Indonesia, in Southeast Asia and on Planet Earth.

33. Alain Badiou, Chapter One: ‘Art and Philosophy’, in *Handbook of Inaesthetics (Petit manuel d’inesthétique)*, [1998], Alberto Toscano, trans, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2005, pp 1–15

34. Ibid

Copyright of Third Text is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.