

Art Activities as the Collective Interview with Ade Darmawan

Hattori Hiroyuki, Ade Darmawan

Over the course of coming into contact with many collectives in Asia, I became interested in how they enhance their creativity by forming groups, and then make societal interventions. Ade Darmawan established the artist collective ruangrupa in 1998 and has continued to develop its activities over more than two decades. By bringing together people with different skills and ideas, ruangrupa builds a multilayered network across Jakarta, Southeast Asia, and worldwide in ways impossible for individuals to accomplish. While rooted firmly in the city of Jakarta, it accesses channels in various directions, fostering a cycle that feeds back into the members' own local region. In this interview, Ade discusses the notion of "collectivism" that ruangrupa has recently advocated.

* Excerpt from the English translation of the interview with Ade Darmawan in *Reflection on Cosmo-Eggs at the Japan Pavilion at la Biennale di Venezia 2019* published by torch press, 2020, Japan.

* The interview was translated from Japanese to English by Robert Zetzsche, and the introduction was translated by William Andrews.

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Date of interview: February 21, 2020



Members of ruangrupa
Courtesy of Jin Panji

The shortcomings of the exhibition format

Hattori Hiroyuki: What I want to ask you about today is something you've been doing for a long time: the curation of collective projects, in particular the exhibition "Condition Report: Sindikat Campursari" (2017, at Gudang Sarinah Ekosistem in Jakarta Selatan). This exhibition was part of a series called "Condition Report^[1]," organized by the Japan Foundation Asia Center in four cities in Southeast Asia: Jakarta, Manila, Kuala Lumpur, and Bangkok. In each city, a local curator and a curator from Japan worked together to create and co-curate an exhibition. You took part in the Jakarta edition, whereas I was the Japanese curator for the Kuala Lumpur exhibition. Together with your team in Jakarta, following the idea of "collectivism" you created works in the form of a collectives that involved the curators and the participating artists. After surveying the activities of collectives in Indonesia's largest cities, you brought together groups and individuals who share in the idea of collective creation and made a project focused on the production process. It was a series of practices as if you created the very processes of realizing the project—as if the exhibition itself could work as nothing else but a part of the project.

1. A three-year collaborative project aiming to help young curators gain experience and create networks. Following workshops and discussions, the participating 21 curators from nine countries were divided into four groups that each implemented a large-scale exhibition in a different city. The following year, the young curators who participated in the collaborative exhibitions used their experiences to realize new exhibitions held in various regions. (For more information: The Japan Foundation Asia Center—Condition Report <https://jfac.jp/culture/projects/condition-report>).

After “Condition Report” finished, the Japan Foundation Asia Center published a Curators’ Book with essays by each participating curator. In your essay, you wrote that it is nearly impossible to transfer the entirety of experiences and events of collective processes into the space of an exhibition, given the complexity involved. You also wrote that it is not possible for such exhibitions to realize actual collective works, and that they instead become mere introductions of the collective’s activities or serve as an archive of related artifacts^[2]. I became curious if you were actually able to realize collective works as part of the “Sindikrat Campursari” project.

2. Ade Darmawan, “Curating, Collective, and Conversation, *The Japan Foundation Asia Center Art Studeis Vol.4 Curators’Book “Condition Report: Shifting Perspective in Asia”* (Tokyo: The Japan Foundation Asia Center, 2018) p.58

“Cosmo-Eggs”, a project I’ve helped create and realize in the form of a collective, has something in common with “Sindikrat Campursari.” The project placed an artist, a composer, an anthropologist, and an architect (as well as myself as the curator) in the form of a temporary collective. After passing the competition stage of the Venice Biennale, we spent a year researching and field-working, realizing the exhibition after countless conversations. The processes of the project were extremely important. However, we did not introduce the processes themselves at all in the exhibition, which is a multi-layered installation that focuses on the experience of the audience. Instead, we treated the exhibition catalogue as a kind of blueprint of the project and assembled it using almost all the materials and processes that went into the creation of the project. If you follow the processes collected in the book, you will be able to re-experience the exhibition. In other words, we made an open-source record of the exhibition and materialized its processes in the form of the book.

The catalogue for “Sindikrat Campursari” records everything in the form of a diary—from the project’s beginning to the processes of forming a team, as well as records about when and where each artists and collective did their research and the processes involved in realizing the exhibition. I see some overlap in our formats as well as our values.



Research for “Sindiklat Campursari”(2016)

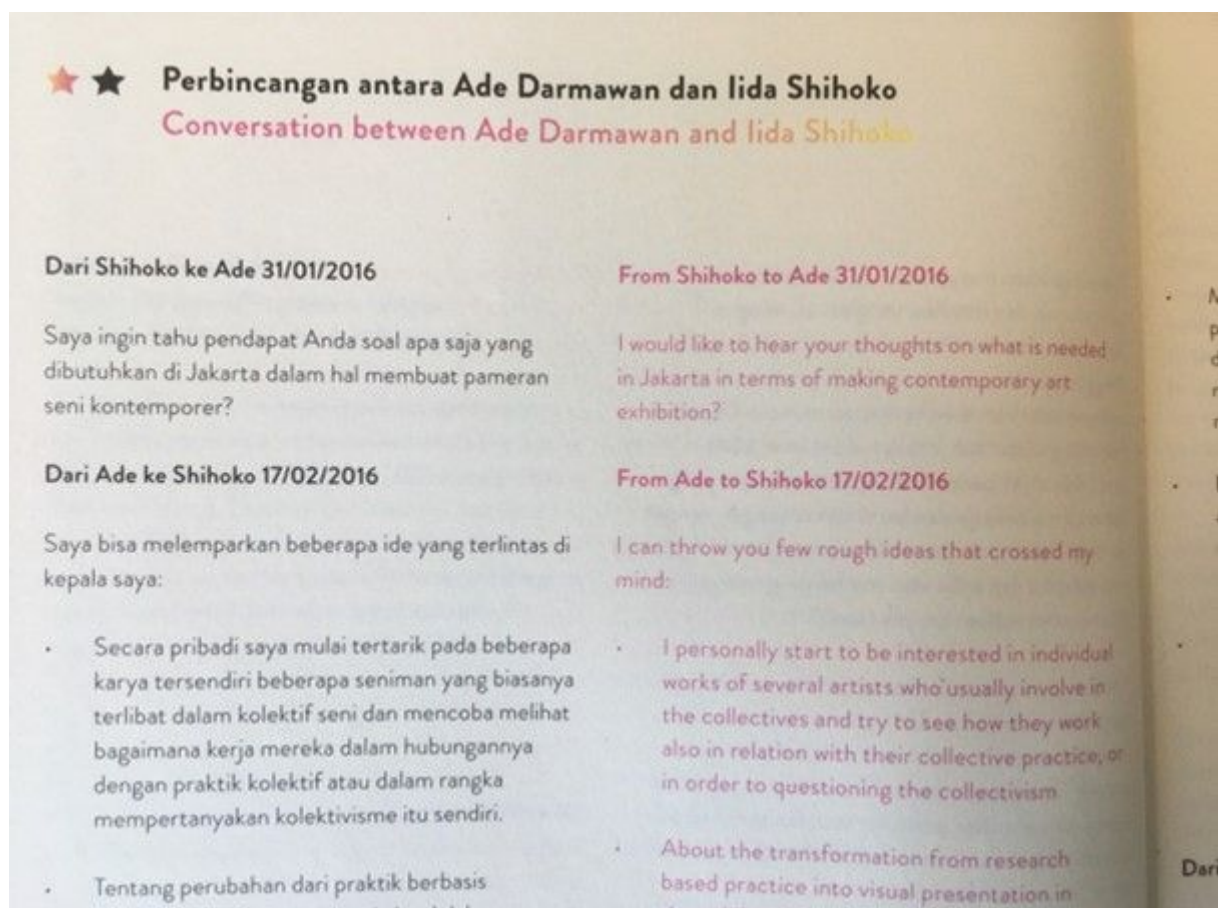
Ade Darmawan: I was thinking about the many aspects that go into curating a collective at the time. It mostly concerned ruangrupa—I thought about the challenges involved in transferring, or translating, the practices of the collective into an exhibition.

There’s something that I struggle with in curatorial practice and creating an exhibition. It’s the fact that much is lost when you show collective practice in some form as an exhibition. Say we were going to create an exhibition. Let’s use the Jatiwangi Art Factory^[3] as an example. They engage with various communities to develop projects and already employ very complex forms of artistic practice. Even compared to the production of exhibitions, they’re very complex. But once you translate that into an exhibition, the experiences, the atmosphere, the sensations and sensualities, the smells and sounds, the context and the complexities that were part of the process—all of that disappears. When the activities of ruangrupa, the Jatiwangi Art Factory, or any other collective are turned into an exhibition, you tend to end up with a mere reduction. As a result, the exhibition becomes a representation of the practice, which means losing many interesting things. When doing “Sindiklat Campursari,” I thought about what could be done to turn the exhibition itself into a conversation. In this way, I thought, the functional, sensual, and spatial contexts could perhaps be saved. I wondered how an exhibition could become presentation instead of mere representation.

3. An art project in the town of Jatiwangi on the outskirts of West Java. Jatiwangi is an important center of roof tile manufacturing, and many of residents living near the art project worked in roof tile factories. The artists actively embraced this part of the local culture, and many projects were realized with the involvement of the factory workers.

I presented my plan for “Sindikata Campursari” in a meeting with all the curators who participated in “Condition Report^[4].” The documents I used for my presentation were quite unusual, I think. The slideshow consisted exclusively of the e-mail conversations I had with my co-curator, lida Shihoko [laughing]. It was just me suggesting the theme of collectivism to lida, and our back-and-forth about the project, the exhibition, and the possibilities we had.

4. Several months after Condition Report had begun, the curator duos presented plans for the exhibitions held in each city and assigned young curators to collaborate with them. This anecdote refers to the team presentation given by Ade Darmawan and lida Shihoko.



The conversation between Ade and lida excerpted from the catalogue of “Sindikata Campursari”

I think curators tend to be placed in a powerful, almost elite-like position. All the decision-making power lies with the curator. That’s why I presented the

conversation between me and my co-curator Iida Shihoko in my slides, us discussing the details of the project in a dialogue, in a flat relationship. We discussed where the project could go and what we could do, even though many things were still unknown or undecided. After that, Iida and I decided on the contents of the exhibition together with the young curators who had become part of the team. We traveled to many cities in Indonesia, not just Jakarta, we met and conversed with artists and collectives, and we shared our experiences. To tell you the truth, at that point I didn't want there to be an exhibition at all. [laughing]

New methods of conveying art

Hattori: What do you mean?

Ade: Because I didn't want to turn such conversations into an exhibition. But in the end we had to present them in the form of an exhibition regardless. I have no interest in producing exhibitions that seem as if the production of the exhibition was the goal all along. I believe an exhibition should be one of many possible forms of such translation.

I think the problem today is that the exhibition is the one method people think of when it comes to conveying art, creating artistic experiences, and sharing them with an audience. But it should not be the only method available, and I believe in the possibility of exploring other ways as well.

That is why I didn't want an exhibition as the goal for "Sindiket Campursari." But if there had to be an exhibition regardless, I thought it should be created based on what is needed to adequately translate the artistic experiences or statements. We converse and discuss a lot, but the existence of an exhibition convinces you that there is one correct form for all these elements. I don't think there is. It is possible for the audience, for the public, to experience a variety of things with different methods.

Or take a look at the exhibition catalogue—it is the same way now as it was ages ago. It is always the same. But it would be better if there were different ways available in which people could understand or experience something. For the

“Sindikat Campursari” catalogue, we decided to create something akin to a diary, in which we recorded our processes and shared our experiences.



Exhibition view of “Sindikat Campursari” (2017)

I am deeply bored by the fact that most exhibitions these days follow a standard pattern. They’re extremely cold exhibitions, with no sensuality. They lack something vital. The entire contemporary art industry has become like that. Take the Biennale as an example, and assume I’ve been invited as an artist. I arrive two days before the opening, and all the artworks are already in place. The day after the opening ceremony, I’m already on my way home. How should I put it... it is completely inhumane. It feels as if I’ve been turned into an object. I always become doubtful in those situations. Whose exhibition is it, after all? [laughing]

Everything [about the Biennale] is extremely systematic. Providing the audience with a good exhibition takes top priority, before everything else. It is exploitative of the artists. And it’s strange, too—an art show without sensuality, inhumane and good for no one. Contemporary art itself has become authoritative; it’s nothing but a hierarchical industry.

The Jakarta Biennale, in which I was involved as a director, took a form of collaboration in which the artists helped each other. As a result, the exhibitions and events of the Biennale became places of social discussion, exchange, and interaction. mixrice, two artists from South Korea, told me that South Korea used to be like this in the past, but it has all disappeared now. They almost cried when they left Jakarta – that’s how much they had been moved by this curatorial approach.

When you create a project or an exhibition with social elements, the difficulties grow as you increase the scale, of course. Interestingly, thanks to our characteristic methods, curators have begun to understand how they can invite ruangrupa. [laughing] I think the best way would be to invite us, give us a location, a site or a space, and let us work freely. That’s why I was so interested when you invited us to the Aichi Triennale in 2016^[5]. At that time, we were thinking about how we could transform the presentation into an occupation. We thought that occupation could be one possible way of presenting the existence of complex entities and platforms like events or collectives.

5. ruangrupa participated in the Aichi Triennale 2016 (curated by Hattori Hiroyuki) as artists and implemented a project called *Ruru Gakko* [lit. “Ruru School”].

Hattori: International art exhibitions often ask artists to present their works in a way that embodies the exhibition’s concept or theme, or the theme integrates the artworks in some way. But on the other hand, that also means the theme and the site of the exhibition may be newly interpreted and even taken over. Is that what you mean? Could you explain the idea of occupation a little bit?

Ade: It’s like the agricultural technique of grafting. By grafting a new tree onto an old one, you create a hybrid plant. The type of occupation we have in mind does not take over the established system as is. We graft a new system onto the existing one, and this process creates something new. But we’re still in the experimental phase. [laughing]

I am actually thinking about this same thing for the upcoming documenta. At previous documentas, sculptures were often placed in public spaces [by the organizers or curators]. We are thinking about how we can plant a new system into this type of soil without ignoring the legacy we’ve inherited from the past.

Hattori: I see. Instead of ignoring or denying an existing system, you keep it alive and add something to it. This is what you mean “grafting.”

Curating collective practice

Hattori: Another thing I found very interesting about “Sindikot Campursari” is seeing curators and artists creating together, since they were usually considered as separate. I think this is related to your unique sense of problem awareness. In the Curators’ Book, you wrote about what curating collective practices means^[6]. You wrote that, in the end, it probably means “creating together.”

6. Ade Darmawan, *ibid.*, p.58.

As you said earlier, when creating in a collective, the kind of processes you go through and the conversations you have are extremely important. At the exhibition, though, they mostly become a document-like assemblage of records, and the initial liveliness and excitement of these actions are lost. The audience often views the catalogue only after everything has already finished, as some kind of produced object—as if it was a deliverable or some kind of historical document. On the other hand, curators have the desire to provide some kind of summary, or to leave a legacy. I don’t think this is compatible with creating projects as a collective. That is something I took away from reading your text. And I find it very interesting that people decided to work and create together, despite their different positions, in order to present a way of collective practice.

Ade: Yes, exactly. When presenting a project’s processes at an exhibition, they often become extremely archive-like in nature. Such archival or document-like exhibitions instantly disturb the audience’s ability to feel anything. It is because in the form of an archive or record, the original atmosphere is lost and distance from the original is created. Something I found interesting about “Sindikot Campursari” is that each artist became more open as they kept engaging in conversations. They also revealed their own shortcomings and weak spots, and I showed my respect for their artistic attitude. All the decisions people made after these conversations were very organic instead of in isolation. Neither were they

consciously designed, nor did they change from one moment to the next. That's what I found interesting about them.

Hattori: Do you think curating collective practices is actually possible? And if yes, in what way?

Ade: First, I think it is important to put the curator in a non-conventional position. The curator should not be the center of the project but like a moderator or a catalyst. The curator should make sure the conversations between members or between people inside and outside the collective go smoothly. I think it is possible if the exhibition features a presentation-like format, with collaborative and horizontal relationships, like with my projects. The structure becomes more organic, and it is easier to show its nature as a collective.

Collective practice is based on a wealth of ideals: sharing, caring, collaboration and tolerance, for example. That's why collective practice brings out so many values, ethics and morals. The fact that ethics and philosophy are also at play when collaborating with collectives is quite interesting. Let's call it ethical philosophy.

Method rather than theme

Ade: The fact that everyone's ethics form the foundation for the collective is important. There cannot be a collective without an ethical base.

Let me explain it another way. As I see it, a collective and its practices are not only of an aesthetic nature; they also include an ethical side. At the heart of the collective lie collaboration, solidarity, mutual sharing. These are not aesthetical but important, ethical values. What's truly necessary when a collective collaborates is not a theme but a method and collective values.

The format we created for "Sindikats Campursari" was a "conversation," a very Indonesian thing, really—*nongkron*^[7], sharing, caring, solidarity, lending an ear to each other's stories. The power structure is completely horizontal. You could say it's a method based on the ethics of coming together as a collective.

7. In Ade's words, nongkrong means "spending time to come together in a friendly and comfortable atmosphere with old and new friends, or in a small group brought together by space and time due to proximity of location or a common background. It means sharing stories, ideas, problems, and sometimes solutions. There is a sense of mutuality and taking care of each other in the aimless conversations involved." (from *Condition Report: Shifting Perspectives in Asia - Curators' Book*, p. 58)

Hattori: The equality and solidarity that you engage with are also themes often picked for many international art exhibitions and biennales. Artworks are picked and presented to the audience based on these themes. But what ruangrupa tries to do as an Indonesian collective clearly involves a different method. That's why I find it very interesting that you mentioned the word method.

Personally, I think we've reached the limits of curators writing up statements and presenting them to an audience. We'll have to find very different methodologies, or maybe create places for sharing and thinking together. I have doubts that an exhibition would be an effective method for that situation. But I still believe there is a necessity to create exhibitions.

For example, at the next documenta which you'll head as a curator, the format of the exhibition is not going to disappear either. You said earlier that "Sindiklat Campursari" could just as well have done without an exhibition, but I haven't lost my interest in the potential of exhibitions.

Ade: At the moment we're experimenting with things I've mentioned earlier - turning representation into occupation, grafting, institutional practice, and changing their models of translation. The methods of expression employed by artists are becoming more complicated, which is why I share your doubts. Many people are asking me if exhibitions are still effective, or whether the concept of the exhibition is a good fit at all.

For example, the *Ruru Gakko [Institut ruangrupa]* at the Aichi Triennale was about finding and implementing original forms of operations for educational programs by institutions like art museums in a specific community. Another phrase may be alternative institutional practice. When it comes to translating and presenting such practices, I believe publishing a book or holding a symposium would be more suitable methods than an exhibition. At the moment, many artworks exist only temporarily, not permanently, without any form of object in which to remain. I

think our challenge right now is to find ways of presenting them to the public. Perhaps it is necessary to explore forms other than the exhibition.



Ruru Gakko [Institut ruangrupa], Aichi Triennale 2016
Courtesy of Aichi Triennale Committee

ruangrupa's "collectivism"

Hattori: You also create artworks in a personal capacity, as a solo artist. Is there a clear separation between your own works and your activities with ruangrupa?

Ade: Hmm... One contributes a lot to the other. They are not distinct; there is a connection between them. The same is true for other members of ruangrupa, by the way: they have their personal side and their side as a member of the collective. The collective practices strengthen the individual practices, and vice versa.

Hattori: In short, what exactly is the “collectivism” you advocate?

Ade: It’s the ethics and values that I talked about earlier. It involves having a firm ideology, but not just ethics or morals alone—there’s an aesthetic value at play as well. A collective isn’t simply a gathering of many people; there is an ideology, a political ideal, an aesthetical ideal to it as well. Calling any group of people a “collective” isn’t going to explain much, is it? To me, “collectivism” means practice with ideals, and applying that to your day-to-day activities. You can use that structure every day.

Hattori: Will your future activities also be based on collectivism?

Ade: Yes, I think so. I’m also thinking of employing the idea of grafting that I talked about earlier. And collective resources and sharing. I think of applying these at the documenta as well, as an institutional practice.

Hattori: Small adjustments, based on the conditions, to change course in a more interesting direction, rather than enacting spectacular, revolutionary changes?

Ade: Yes, that’s right. Changing an institution requires many processes. You have to conduct various experimental trials. It isn’t something that can be done quickly. I think it’s necessary to slowly change existing methods and systems, from schools to art institutions, museums, and biennales.

Hattori: You’ve been very clear that what collectives need is an ideology and values, of an ethical as well as an aesthetic nature. To be honest, I found that surprising. I had expected that the foundation might be the nongkrong—the “hanging out with new and old friends”—that Indonesian artists like yourself often mention when talking about collectives, and I thought the collective would have a strong meaning as a place one belongs to, a place to return to.

But based on what we talked about, the fundamental aspect seems to involve activists who share an ideology and try to develop social activities as a group, and I feel that this is symbolized in the word ethics that has made several appearances today. I was reminded that, of course, there has to be something fundamental like shared ethics behind the 20 years of your continuing activities.

But I must say that upon my visit to ruangrupa's space in Jakarta, I understood the meaning of the word nongkrong. It was simply such a pleasant experience.

The strong will of the group, on one hand, and the looseness as a place to hang out and relax, on the other—you engage with a plentitude of problems and possibilities simultaneously, while accepting contradictions. With the inherent complexities that are part of being a collective, you manage to maintain fluidity and flexibility while embracing change and give shape to your ethics through your engagement in numerous projects across place and time. I'm excited to see how ruangrupa will continue expanding artistic practices through future projects like documenta, and I look forward to the little new branches that will spread from your grafting approach.



The base camp for the collectives including ruangrupa in Jakarta. Gudskul is held in this space.

Courtesy of Jin Panji

Related Keywords

ruangrupa, nongkrong