

ArtReview Asia



Body Politics

Eisa Jocson Pinaree Sanpitak Gudskul Singapore Biennale

Gudskul



An experimental art school in Jakarta is testing how cooperative work stacks up against supercurators and other top–down models for organising the artworld

by Annie Jael Kwan



Driving south from busy central Jakarta I go in search of the Gudskul, a new educational platform with a pedagogical model that focuses on collective study and grassroots ecosystem-building, and is designed to provide an infrastructure for the contemporary art scene in Indonesia. As we leave the dusty, traffic-clogged business and tourist areas of the city, the journey's flow eases and the streets narrow and quieten. Eventually we pull up at the gantry barrier to what looks like a parking lot, where a small row of food hawkers serve clusters of quietly chatting customers.

The path opens onto a compound with a mix of architectural structures, not unlike the repurposed art warehouses of East London. Shipping containers double-stacked on the left have been modified with cutout windows and sections to accommodate preexisting trees, twisted metal staircases, posters and banners. Some are finished with rustic wood panelling and one even sports a winding bamboo curtain. Across the parking lot, on the right, stands a sprawling open-access double-storey structure, with smaller rooms and colourful alcoves within its recesses. There are clusters of liberally applied stickers featuring festival and music-label logos, such as cassette tapes, spray cans and slogans like 'propagaphic movement', 'young and useless' and the pointed 'you are exploited every day so that the money you make can sustain the ongoing exploitation of your life'. A coffee shed with bright, colourful murals squats in the middle of it all. The entire site is the Gudskul Ekosistem, its many rooms and spaces shared among different entities and the working spaces for the projects they spearhead.

It's here that I am reunited with farid rakun, a member of the art collective ruangrupa, whom I met in London a year ago, when he visited our newly formed research network, Asia-Art-Activism. ruangrupa, or 'ruru' as it is affectionately called by its members, is one of the Gudskul partners. Since 2000 the collective has sustained groundbreaking projects such as *OK Video*, an experimental media festival that has taken place within Indonesia since 2003, and *Karbon*, a quarterly art journal founded in 2000 that provides a platform for visual art analysis and its relationship to the changing socio-cultural contexts of Jakarta. Projects such as these filled a gap in the Indonesian art scene, whose main institutions (Jakarta Institute for the Arts and Indonesian Institute of the Arts, Yogyakarta) have traditionally focused on performing arts, painting and sculpture. Ruangrupa has more recently made international art headlines as a result of its appointment as artistic director of Documenta 15, set to take place in Kassel in 2022. Together with their business partners, the art-and-education collective Serrum (founded in 2006, the name derived from the Indonesian words for 'share' and 'room') and the printmaking collective Grafis Huru Hara (established in 2012), they manage the school. As Asia-Art-Activism's focus is on the exchange of knowledge, my curiosity is piqued by the ambition and depth of their artistic and pedagogical ambition when it comes to transforming art education and the contemporary art sector in Indonesia. Although, more immediately, I'm waiting for the students of the Gudskul's first graduating year, with whom I'm scheduled for a 'crit' session. As we wait, farid explains the layout of the Artist Collective Compound

(ACC), and how the Gudskul Ekosistem operates, with the different roles and functions of its partners. In 2018 ruangrupa moved to the new site from the Gudang Sarinah warehouse in south Jakarta that it had occupied previously, and where it had staged a ‘practice run’ of sorts in developing a cultural ecosystem with other artist collectives. With the many names involved in the ACC and overlapping roles in the Gudskul, it’s complicated to grasp, so farid draws me a helpful floorplan.

The left side is cheerfully named the ‘Gudside’: the container stacks are a series of rented studios occupied by artists and publishers, including the ruangrupa Documenta team. On the right lies 700sqm of jointly purchased land, which used to hold an indoor futsal court, but is now occupied by a large, double-storey open warehouse with exhibition galleries, a library, a shop and workspaces neatly allocated among the different projects. Hence the ground floor is shared by the media art festivals Jakarta 32°C, OK Video, the RURU and Serrum art galleries, Art Lab and RURU Kids, as well as RUX, the umbrella commercial arm that consists of RURU Radio (which manages karaoke and music festivals), RURU Shop for merchandise, Serrum Arthandling and the offices of Studio Seni Grafis Huru Hara. These are run as businesses that achieve their own income. The Gudskul itself technically occupies the whole mezzanine level; in practice, however, informal groups of people gather freely across the spaces, and all the equipment onsite is shared according to need.

The Gudskul puts its money where its mouth is, with committed investment in its students. It runs one yearlong intensive programme and 25 short courses. The short courses have become popular with students, attracting almost 300 enrolments in its first year, with a cost of 1.5 million rupiah per course. Thirteen students participated in the inaugural one-year programme, which costs 15 million rupiah per student. However, five students who are nominated by artist partners are given a scholarship (fees waived), and others are enrolled on a ‘pay what you can’ basis. Direct income from the Gudskul could only cover approximately 30 percent of its costs; the remaining 70 percent is supplemented by the commercial income earned by RUX, Serrum and Grafis Huru Hara.

This investment is committed and generous. Gudskul explains their shared concept of the *lumbung*, which is the name of both an agricultural village tradition and the architectural structure of the barns in which farmers store the surplus from their harvests. Conventionally, such structures are two-storey, with the upper level (supported on stilts) used for storage and the ground level a shared common space, often used for village meetings and celebrations. The *lumbung* is the village hearth that nurtures gathering communal bodies while safeguarding their survival and futures. In particular, ruangrupa describes the *lumbung* as central to their curatorial mode of working, and essential to their long-term artistic aspirations.

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As a working protocol, the aim is to bring together more voices without trying to either control or police them. Instead of an overarching theme, it is this model that will drive ruangrupa’s curatorial methodology for Documenta. Displacing the currently prevalent role of the supercurator in the international artworld, the centrality of cooperative work will allow the exhibition to take on questions of how collaboration and solidarity, and thinking about sustainability and the redistribution of resources, might impact other locales globally, and more particularly those outside the usual ‘art capitals’. The aim is to redress inequality: as Ade Darmawan, one of ruangrupa’s founders, acknowledges, “Activism is in our nature”.

JJ Adibrata is one of Serrum’s team and one of 11 subject coordinators at Gudskul. Coordinators take on the role that might in other places be designated ‘teacher’ – farid and Darmawan are among them – and collectively they take more of a mentoring and colearning approach with the students. Now JJ rounds up the inaugural graduating class of 13 students that had undertaken the Gudskul one-year intensive programme, and over the next few hours the students share their final-project portfolios in an informal crit. The range of projects embraces multiple disciplines and formats: for example, an alternative publishing network that champions zines and other independent publications; a framework project that links the artistic networks of smaller cities in Indonesia; an archive exhibition; a social kitchen; and a community play-space for mothers and children. The projects link the students’ personal interests with a concern for providing benefits to their associated communities or their local cities. More importantly, these projects are more than mere concepts – students have been encouraged to consider how to

realise the projects in relation to feasibility, partnerships and production. Indeed, quite a few were ready to launch, perhaps after graduation.

I ask how the students are assessed and if it might be possible for any of them to fail. The Gudskul team acknowledges that the criterion for assessment has been challenging to conceive, but they are not interested in the conventional markers of success or failure. Instead, they are engaged with process, and whether the project and training experience proves satisfying for the student after a year. If not, they suggest, then perhaps it is they who have failed the student.



The Gudskul lobby area

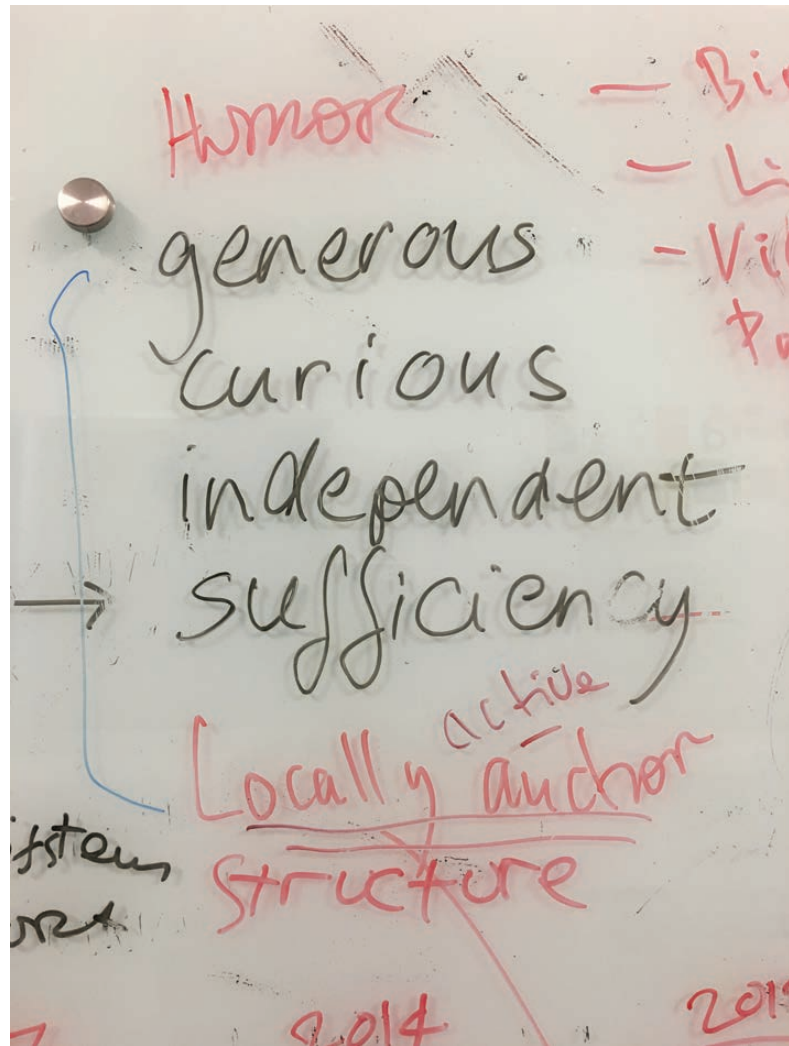
The Gudskul pedagogy marries the artistic and production approaches espoused by ruangrupa: bridging its belief in collectivity that extends to building ‘a collective of collectives’, and its focus on sustainability for legacy and long-term transformation in the Indonesian art scene. In an earlier conversation, farid had reminded me that the ‘euphoria of congregation’ is endemic to post-Suharto Indonesia: under the reign of the military dictator (which ended with Suharto’s resignation in 1998), citizens were prohibited from assembling in groups of more than five people without a government permit. Consequently, the freedom to gather for discussion and



top The Gudside container studios

above Crit session with the Gudskul.
Courtesy the Gudskul

preceding pages Ipok Icon coffee shack at the Gudskul



On the ruangrupa Documenta HQ planning board

celebration has become valued as both precious and innovative. On a more basic level, in a place in which the main art institutes remain recalcitrant when it comes to supporting experimental art disciplines such as performance, video or socially engaged or conceptual work, and where public funding for the arts is still very limited, pooling resources becomes necessary. “If you gang up with other people,” as farid says, “you can access more.”

It is difficult to pin down the exact number of people at any given time at ruangrupa, with its loose roster including many who come and go over the years, and maintain their individual practices outside at the same time. The ruru Documenta team of nine is interdisciplinary:

Ade trained as a graphic designer before developing his own curatorial and artistic practice; farid trained as an architect, and is now a lecturer and curator, and often an interlocutor with international arts institutions. In addition to

Ade and farid, the team consists of Ajeng Nurul Aini, Daniella Fitria Praptono, Indra Ameng, Iswanto Hartono, Julia Sarisetiati, Mirwan Andan and Reza Afisina – all of whom bridge different disciplines and interests across literature, research, journalism, music and individual artistic practices. Ruru’s collective approach is deeply embedded in the everyday routine of work, and here that means a shared process of decision-making, with a monthly ‘town hall’ meeting that involves every person on the acc, from the artists to the security team and the cleaners. While ruru acknowledges that this approach is tedious and ‘most inefficient’, they feel that it is necessary for the way in which it undermines the development of hierarchies and power structures

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within ruangrupa and the Gudskul ecosystem. That said, farid maintains that such an approach is more of a way of living and doing things than a dogmatic ideology, which in and of itself he would consider a wrong focus for the collective’s energy. “Horizontality was praised so many times [in the artworld], and some practise collectivity to prove that, but that’s not our interest,” he says. Instead he is keen to point out that members continue to develop individual interests, and more importantly, ruangrupa and Gudskul operate with a core team and a mode of flexibility that allows for experimentation and change when needed, and for members to come and go as necessary.

Outside the classroom, within the open section of the Gudskul

building, a long table has been elaborately laid out with food. As the ‘crit’ session ends, a ‘Cancerian Birthday Celebration’ begins. The students trot out, more visitors arrive and the gathering party cheers the Gudskul

members, including Ade, who were born under that sign. With music and feasting, the celebration carries on late into the evening. The Gudskul building, with its open lower level, not only literally resembles the *lumbung* structure but is also the centre point of this artistic village, the space in which it congregates, converses and celebrates. If, like a *lumbung*, the upper level holds surplus grain for shared future survival, then ruangrupa and its partners are pouring it into these students – the essential human resources for the long-term vitality of the Indonesian art scene. **ara**

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above Cancerian Birthday Feast

all images but one Photos: Annie Jael Kwan