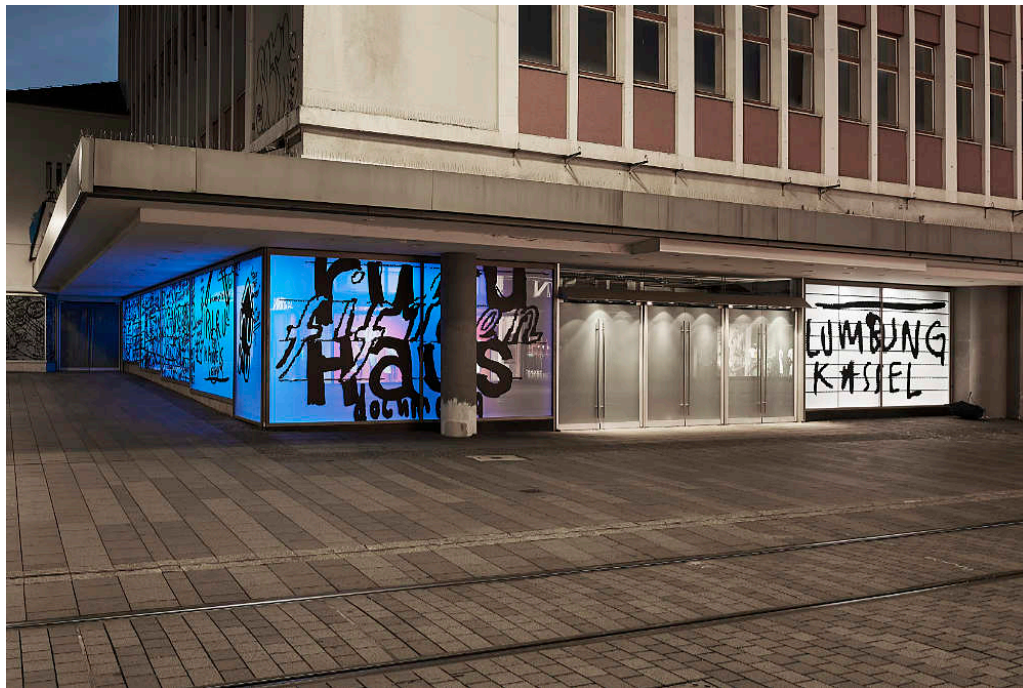


# Pushing against the roof of the world: ruangrupa's prospects for documenta fifteen

Geronimo Cristóbal



documenta and Museum Fridericianum: ruuHaus, photo courtesy of Nicolas Wefers

A concern in many texts of Indonesian mythology is the need to raise the sky. This appears in myths from elsewhere, too, but the forms they take are not as extreme as in Indonesian stories, in which heaven and Earth are so closely jammed together that even spears are knocked down in mid-flight after hitting the ceiling of the skies. Invoking the gods, who had until then always remained seated, the people called upon one of them to stand up and lift it higher.

That the sky should be such a persistent problem in Southeast Asian mythology is informative. The pillars of houses, tiny snails and worms, and even deities, are all depicted as pushing up a low heaven over an inhabited Earth. And after that, life in the world began to look a lot like we know it today. The reasons for this differ, but it is almost as though, on one level or another, many Southeast Asians tended to think of the world as a kind of shell that needed prying open. One last push or pull and the world was ready for action. This theme of raising the sky in order for society to

grow and function is part of a larger mythology in which humans and animals try to help each other – or, alternatively, trick each other. Such stories offer a way to think through the issues and problems that beset the community.

When I learnt of the appointment of **ruangrupa** as artistic directors of documenta fifteen (to be held between 18 June and 25 September 2022 in Kassel, Germany), the story of a people and their households raising up the sky came to mind, not least because the artist collective had just made history by becoming the first Asians – and the first collective – to be chosen as artistic directors of one of the most eminent exhibitions of contemporary art in the world. Mythology offers a way to understand the implications of a Southeast Asian group organising such a touchstone event in contemporary art. George McT Kahin wrote with great resolve in his Introduction to Benedict Anderson's *Mythology and the Tolerance of the Javanese* (1965) that 'anyone interested in contemporary Indonesia, its organization and social and political articulation... comes to realize that in order to achieve any real depth of understanding for these phenomena, it is first necessary to appreciate the enduring and frequently manifest residuum of traditional, pre-Western culture'.<sup>1</sup> This is certainly true with respect to **ruangrupa**, whose collective nature and esteemed stature has affected how the whole of Indonesian art is perceived.



The room designed by ruangrupa for documenta fifteen in the Neue Galerie in Kassel  
photo courtesy of Ingo Arendt and KUNSTFORUM International

<sup>1</sup> Benedict R O'G Anderson, *Mythology and the Tolerance of the Javanese*, Modern Indonesia Project, Southeast Asia Program, Dept of Asian Studies at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1965, p iii

<sup>2</sup> This was at the 'Curate Your Context: Methods on and of Curating' conference, Institut national d'histoire de l'art, Paris, 16

The legacies of tradition help to explain some of the nuances of the Southeast Asian art scene. They make the Indonesian approach to contemporary art much more understandable by giving us a sense of their worldview. When **ruangrupa** formed in 2000, the six founders (Ade Darmawan, Hafiz Rancaljale, Ronny Augustinus, Oky Arfie Hutabarat, Lilia Nursita and Rithmi Widanarko) were just out of art school. Their first project was finding a space to work, but they soon realised that commercial spaces were too expensive. Instead, they rented a house and transformed it into an art venue. So their first exhibitions were mostly staged in domestic settings, in living rooms and bathrooms, while bedrooms were made into offices and screening rooms. The group moved several times until 2018, when they finally acquired a space that they bought along with other art collectives.

In a conference lecture entitled ‘Connecting, not claiming’, delivered at the Institut national d’histoire de l’art in Paris in November 2019,<sup>2</sup> **ruangrupa**’s Farid Rakun told curatorial practice graduate students that the group is employing a method of collecting ideas for a documenta that continuously unfolds in time and space, ‘without clear beginnings or endings’. Months after their announcement as artistic directors, a pamphlet entitled ‘Wessen Freiheit’<sup>3</sup> (Whose Freedom), and subtitled ‘ruangrupa: Lumbung’, was published by the Vereinigung bildender KünstlerInnen Wiener Secession. The document lays out Rakun’s ideas along with an assessment of the group’s past projects. An abridged version appears on documenta fifteen website’s News section.<sup>4</sup>

The Indonesian word *Lumbung* refers to a rice barn, which functions in a similar way to a social insurance system. It is ‘a collective pot or accumulation system... where crops produced by a community are stored as a future shared common resource’.<sup>5</sup> The Lumbung is not just an economic arrangement but also a specific type of architecture. In the island of Bali, the Lumbung is located in the centre of the village, which gives a sense of the vitality of its function in the traditional agrarian culture and as a symbol of institutional prestige. Some background on the Lumbung concept is worth noting here. The idea originates from Austronesian cultures, where the house is a microcosm of the universe as a whole. To raise the roof of the Lumbung means to open up to the Upper World that exists beyond the original structure, where the floor corresponds to the Middle World inhabited by living beings and the space beneath the house, the Under World, is

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<sup>2</sup> This was at the ‘Curate Your Context: Methods on and of Curating’ conference, Institut national d’histoire de l’art, Paris, 16 November 2019 <https://arthist.net/archive/21981>

<sup>3</sup> ‘Wessen Freiheit,’ Vereinigung bildender KünstlerInnen Wiener Secession, November 2019, [www.secession.at/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/ruangrupa\\_lubung.pdf](http://www.secession.at/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/ruangrupa_lubung.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See [www.documenta.de/en/documenta-fifteen/#news](http://www.documenta.de/en/documenta-fifteen/#news)

<sup>5</sup> ‘lumbung: Short concept by ruangrupa for documenta 15’, *Universes in Universe*, June 2020, <https://universes.art/en/documenta/2022/short-concept>

inhabited by the dead. The archaeologist Leo Aoi Hosoya points out that in the Lumbung, rice, which is believed to be a gift from the gods, is stored on the roof.<sup>6</sup>

There appears to be a disconnect between **ruangrupa**'s mythological thinking about the Lumbung and mainstream curatorial practice. Examining their statements regarding their appointment, it can be observed that the group's strategies do not reflect the goals that the European organisers have projected in their press releases. Omissions such as the Occupy movement being an inspiration, and calls to horizontalise art world power brokers and re-evaluate motivations behind the foreign funding of contemporary art projects are notable.

The group sees itself as a 'collective of collectives', and has already organised exhibitions for the three biggest biennales: São Paulo, Gwangju and Venice. One of the most interesting initiatives in their profile is a grassroots education project called Gudskul that is remarkable for having reached a wide audience and for the development of online classrooms, prefiguring the Zoom sessions now prevalent in the Covid-19 pandemic. The group has been criticised for an alleged ignorance of the history of documenta, but Ade Darmawan reminds critics that documenta started as an exhibition in the industrial town of Kassel in 1955 to bring Germany back into a dialogue with the rest of the world after World War II. As Darmawan notes, the founding director Arnold Bode's aim in that first documenta was to 'reveal the roots of contemporary art in all areas'. Sharing Bode's vision, Darmawan has commented: '...why shouldn't we focus documenta 15 on today's injuries, especially ones rooted in colonialism, capitalism, or patriarchal structures'.<sup>7</sup>

The thicket of misconceptions about **ruangrupa** and their vision for documenta fifteen affords us a glimpse into a developing conversation about what Darmawan describes as undiscovered expressions and artistic practices, and how the collective has taken on the epic task of organising documenta under the allegory of the raised roofs of the Lumbung in an effort to call upon the whole world to take heed and bear witness.

I have identified two keywords that come up in the collective's notes of their plans for documenta fifteen: *Lumbung* and *Koperasi*. As a preliminary critique, I compare these concepts to the idea of *Revolusi*, and look at how, despite their compatibility, this word is never used or is avoided in the context of Indonesian contemporary art. In what follows, I trace how the task of translating (read: diluting and sublimating) these concepts haunts the Indonesian collective's curatorial function.

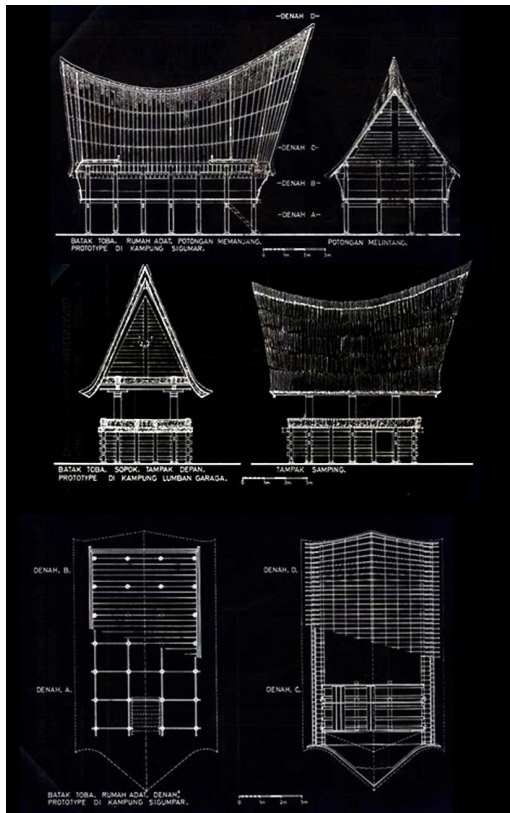
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<sup>6</sup> See Leo Aoi Hosoya, 'Traditional Raised-Floor Granary and Rice Production Cycle in Bali: Past, Present, and Future of Balinese Agriculture', IntechOpen.com, 2016, DOI 10.5772/62643 [www.intechopen.com/books/alternative-crops-and-cropping-systems/traditional-raised-floor-granary-and-rice-production-cycle-in-bali-past-present-and-future-of-baline](http://www.intechopen.com/books/alternative-crops-and-cropping-systems/traditional-raised-floor-granary-and-rice-production-cycle-in-bali-past-present-and-future-of-baline)

<sup>7</sup> See 'Indonesian Artist Collective Ruangrupa to Curate Documenta's 15th Edition,' *Frieze*, 22 February 2019, [www.frieze.com/article/indonesian-artist-collective-ruangrupa-curate-documentas-15th-edition](http://www.frieze.com/article/indonesian-artist-collective-ruangrupa-curate-documentas-15th-edition)



## Lumbung



Left: Toba Batak traditional house prototype floor and elevation plans, Sigumpar village, North Sumatra, Indonesia

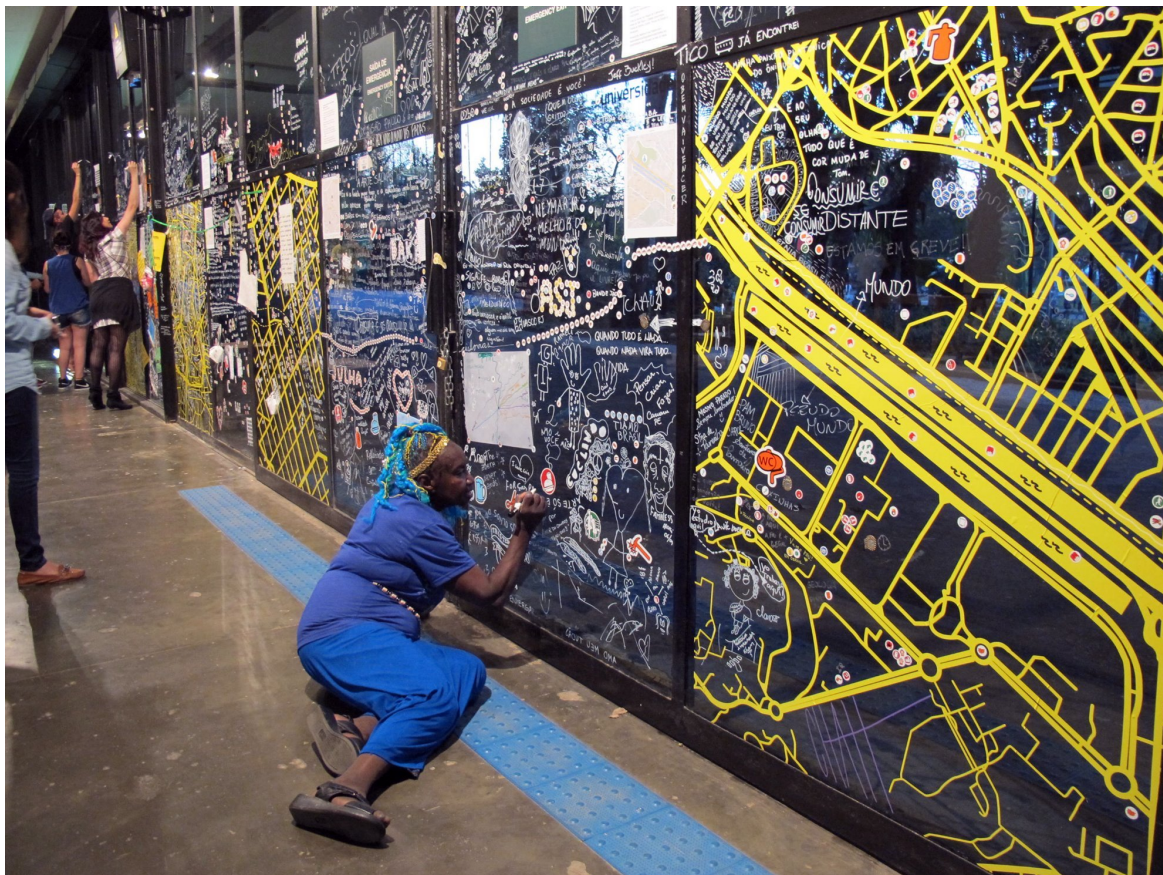
Right: Rice barn at the traditional Sasak village Desa Sade, Lombok, Indonesia, photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Like the construction of Lumbung, the collective have stated that they ‘seek to learn from their accumulation of collective experiences in directly practicing institutional building as an artistic form’.<sup>8</sup> Thus, they have proposed not a set idea for a documenta exhibition but a model for imagining, experimenting and executing Koperasi, a model of economy. While the concepts Lumbung and Koperasi are easily conflated, the group’s Viennese position paper does provide a distinction: Lumbung is the model of governance for resource management, and Koperasi is the result or goal of the entire exercise. There is no bias towards a specific form or expression or call to action. Instead, the interaction in the Lumbung results in the formation of a community, a Koperasi, that activates socially engaged art. The statements the collective have issued in this document seem like great ideas designed to feed press releases, but without specific examples of what a collaboration looks like, they sound vague, a bit of a bluff.

However, a concrete manifestation of Koperasi may be seen in **ruangrupa**’s participation at the 31st São Paulo Biennale in 2014. Working with São Paulo’s urban geography, **ruangrupa**

<sup>8</sup> ‘Wessen Freiheit,’ op cit, [www.secession.at/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/ruangrupa\\_lubung.pdf](http://www.secession.at/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/ruangrupa_lubung.pdf)

presented a hybrid architectural–sculptural structure. Describing the project, the Biennale curators commented how it reflected the diversity of both Jakarta and São Paulo, mimicking the urban sprawl that characterises the two cities.<sup>9</sup> From this earlier snapshot in São Paulo, we can imagine how the group will work with the urban texture of Kassel, making use of the existing dynamics and reflecting back to the host city. A crucial element in their planned exhibition will be their ability to identify collectives who work in the same vein and to tap into a network that connects Jakarta and Kassel to the wider world. To this end, the raised roofs of Lumbung houses offer a practical model that speaks of **ruangrupa**’s ambitions for documenta. The goal of bringing their work to a larger house with a higher roof can be discerned from observing the parallels between myth and the architecture of the Lumbung. In many ways, the Lumbung represents the Indonesian worldview that **ruangrupa** will try to export and expand to Kassel.



Visitors contribute to a map of São Paulo in **ruangrupa**’s evolving installation *RURU* (2011–ongoing) at the 31st São Paulo Biennial, 2014, photo courtesy of **ruangrupa**

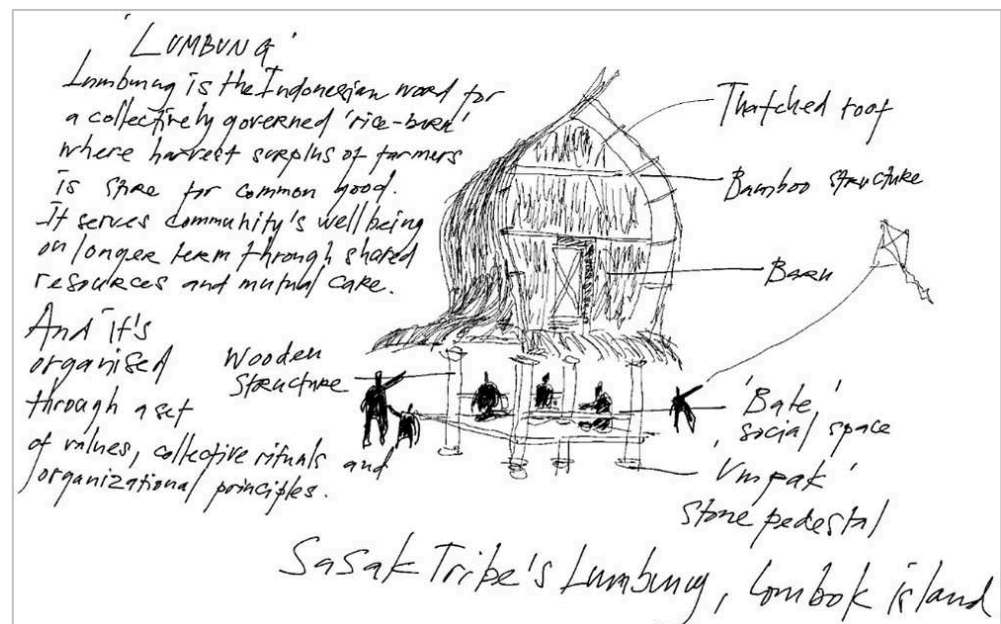
<sup>9</sup> See ‘RURU’, [www.31bienal.org](http://www.31bienal.org), 14 September 2014 [www.31bienal.org.br/pt/post/1497](http://www.31bienal.org.br/pt/post/1497)





The tripartite organisation of a house can be seen in the centre right of this woodcut illustration from Kalimantan (date unknown) in the Ayala Museum, Manila  
photo courtesy of Lorenz Lasco

But what is this worldview? A woodcut illustration from Kalimantan offers a link in the architecture of Lumbung to the Austronesian tripartite view of the cosmos. This concept of the tripartite cosmos and their attendant symbols or gods predates the region's contact with the archipelago's earliest known migrant religions. The Lumbung, along with the traditional house-on-stilts, may be seen as a mirror of how the Southeast Asian forebears viewed the universe. What needs emphasising here is that the architecture of the Lumbung expresses, in microcosm, an understanding of the universe and the world. Pushing the roof up means expanding and accommodat-ing more forms of artistic participation, with an eye towards exchanging ideas to better the world.



ruangrupa, Lumbung drawing, image courtesy of Iswanto Hartono, 2020

## Ruangrupa's collectivism before Documenta

According to an interview with Farid Rakun,<sup>10</sup> when **ruangrupa** was just starting out the Jakarta art scene was dominated by commercial enterprise and 'there was no such thing as independent artistic space'. Since the beginning, **ruangrupa**'s focus has always been on subjects 'specific to the Indonesian context'. Much like their conceptual translation of Lumbung, they draw strength from the pliant nature of living and exhibition spaces. In 2010, they held an exhibition called 'Fixer' that brought a focus on collectives in Indonesia and their network. Rakun notes how the exhibition 'is a very important milestone in how to read collectivism in Indonesia'.<sup>11</sup> The group's members grew up at a time when for a collective or group to meet regularly was considered dangerous. The founding of **ruangrupa** came in the immediate euphoria after the ousting of President Suharto in 1998, commonly called the 'Reformasi' era. Seeing the arts as a way to enliven civic participation, the government tapped into the strength of its creative industry.

**Ruangrupa** has been known to work with people of any ideology. 'Underlining the differences', which means setting some boundaries, was something they learned through their 'interaction with our Latin American friends'.<sup>12</sup> In 2019, for example, the Cuban artist and activist Tania Bruguera delivered a lecture for **ruangrupa**'s Gudskul.<sup>13</sup> But their collaborations with international artists have also given the collective a chance to realise that 'we have different sensibilities'. Cultural differences, however, have diversified their modes of activism, which the group notes in Indonesia lacks the kind of antagonism with government seen in other parts of the world. Such antagonism is 'not the strategy that can work in our context... There's less violence'.<sup>14</sup>

Seemingly oblivious to Indonesia's historical past, Rakun says this is part of the fluidity that makes their activism more realistic. With a tinge of sarcasm, he notes that collectives, to use the language of the capitalists, are just like corporations and that corporations see us 'as their friends'. Despite their efforts to reach out across the political spectrum, Rakun and the rest of **ruangrupa** have often been red-tagged and dismissed as Communists. 'We see it as a danger... but... we don't want to retract from that kind of discussion... I can say that being a collective, being associated to communism, which is still a taboo in Indonesia up until today, to talk about communism... any public event that's labeled communist will be attacked... physical violence could happen if you

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<sup>10</sup> See Farid Rakun, interviewed by Pedro Lasch, 17 August 2015, interview, transcript and recording, Art of the MOOC: Public Art and Pedagogy: 'Ruangrupa', Duke University [www.coursera.org/lecture/public-art-pedagogy/ruangrupa-mc2nq](http://www.coursera.org/lecture/public-art-pedagogy/ruangrupa-mc2nq)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> A video recording of Tania Bruguera's lecture can be seen on the Gudskul website: [https://gudskul.art/en/video/political-timing-specific-art\\_tania-bruguera/](https://gudskul.art/en/video/political-timing-specific-art_tania-bruguera/)

<sup>14</sup> Farid Rakun, interviewed by Pedro Lasch, op cit



label anything communist. If you call someone communist on the street, that's considered to be one of the highest insults...'<sup>15</sup>

The hatred of Communism is one of the traumas that Indonesian society endures. Anyone that tries to accomplish something must mask their beliefs in terms that are acceptable to a conservative public. **Ruangrupa**'s previous projects that have used 'Koperasi' as a concept, without overtly labelling it as such, manifests a deeper undercurrent of political convictions.

## Revolusi



The Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) could hold mass rallies of tens of thousands of people at will, but they were crushed in a US-backed military coup d'état in 1965, image in the public domain

**Ruangrupa**'s seeming lack of subscription to any single ideology recalls a Sukarno-era manifesto produced by artists from the major cities in Java. Amanda Rath writes about how these artists came together in September 1962 to publicly call for art's autonomy from politics.<sup>16</sup> Such an

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> See Amanda Rath, 'Contextualising "Contemporary Art": Propositions of Critical Artistic Practice in *Seni Rupa Kontemporer* in Indonesia, 1973–1994', PhD dissertation, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 2011  
<https://ecommons.cornell.edu/bitstream/handle/1813/33489/akr4.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

allergic reaction to ideology from artists, however, would soon be tested by the ending of Sukarno's regime, thereafter called the 'Old Order', and the ushering in of the 'New Order' under the command of Suharto, who wrested presidential power from Sukarno in 1966. Suharto then put the nation to sleep with the massacre of Communists and communist sympathisers. As a result, Indonesia experienced the longest dictatorship in Southeast Asia, lasting almost thirty-two years until 1998 when a student uprising led to a regime change. Until that time, it was illegal to congregate in groups of more than five people without permission from the state.



The fall of Suharto in 1998 paved the way for a swathe of reforms in Indonesia, photo courtesy of Reuters

In post-Suharto Jakarta, there was finally hope to create and use public space, after the paranoia of the previous dictatorship and a moratorium on anything civic and public. Exploring this newfound freedom, **ruangrupa**'s first year was spent making a base for itself in the Indonesian capital. Darmawan saw **ruangrupa** as the bigger house that gathers forces to take on issues collectively. Their stated mission finds historical precedent in the idea of power in Javanese culture. For Benedict Anderson, power is more about collecting and gathering charmed objects rather than wielding it. Ancient royal houses used to surround themselves with magical objects to

increase their power.<sup>17</sup> In this light, the gathering of many strategies or models for activism and art is by itself already the presentation, and the place where it is happening stands to benefit from it.

While **ruangrupa's** interpretation of Lumbung is remarkable for privileging an Indonesian worldview, the group has not given the same attention to the class inequality that supports this worldview. The use of Lumbung is only a means to accumulate various strategies to engage whatever issues will be chosen by participating artists, but these issues are, for now, left undefined. The lack of a specific agenda tips the concept of Lumbung dangerously towards a conundrum, which offers a false correspondence to essentialist notions of Indonesian culture.

What is lacking in **ruangrupa's** approach is an explicit reference to the political thought of artists in the Revolusi. As stated in the Viennese version of their position paper, the concept of Lumbung can unpack notions of class-based exploitation and consciousness. Their use of Lumbung, absent of reference to any politically specific origin, makes its use in documenta part of an outsider's discourse that cannot fathom the intricacies of Indonesian cultural experience.

**Ruangrupa's** forwarding of the idea of Lumbung accomplishes an important task by challenging notions of exhibition organisation. But there is a danger in diluting indigenous ideas to accommodate the biases of the host organisation. Documenta fifteen should indeed promote a diversity of viewpoints, but **ruangrupa's** vision of cross-cultural dialogue, one based on translation of indigenous knowledge, would be more powerful with an advocacy for liberation from exploitation.

Whether critics will eventually disagree with certain aspects of their frame of thought and action, this will not invalidate documenta fifteen's promotion of diversity in contemporary art. The success of **ruangrupa's** endeavour, though, will not rest on its capacity to create a shelter for ideas and strategies but will be measured by how they carry the full weight of Indonesian political history as a means to understand the plight of all repressed peoples in the world.

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**Geronimo Cristobal** teaches courses in art history at the Fine Arts Department of the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines.

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<sup>17</sup> See 'Frameworks of Comparison: Benedict Anderson reflects on his intellectual formation', *London Review of Books*, Vol 38, No 2, 21 January 2016 [www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n02/benedict-anderson/frameworks-of-comparison](http://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n02/benedict-anderson/frameworks-of-comparison)