



# The Ruangrupa's Collective Curatorial Practice at Documenta Fifteen

Angga Wijaya

Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia  
anggawjy89@gmail.com

**Abstract.** In the last two decades, working collectively has become a trend in art creation, not only in the production of artworks but also in curation practices. This research focuses on the collective curatorial practice of Ruangrupa at Documenta Fifteen. Ruangrupa is an artist collective founded in 2000 in Jakarta. Ruangrupa was appointed as curator for the 15<sup>th</sup> Documenta international contemporary art exhibition in biennale format that is held every five years at Kassel, Germany. Ruangrupa used the idea of Lumbung as a mechanism for managing and sharing common resources. The method used in this research is descriptive-qualitative. The theory used is Curatorial Studies and Art Collective to analyze the curation practice. The research concludes that the curatorial practice carried out by Ruangrupa has decentralized the role of the curator. As curator, Ruangrupa works with collective values that have been practiced for a long time. Collective curatorial practice carried out by artist collectives is something new for Documenta's operational system and a new phenomenon in curatorial studies.

**Keywords:** Curatorial Studies, Artist Collective, Collective Curating, Ruangrupa, Lumbung, Documenta.

## 1. Introduction

The independent professionalism of curators continues to develop along with the growth of contemporary arts infrastructure as part of the industry. Especially the emergence of large-scale international exhibitions such as Biennales and Art Fairs, which have encouraged the emergence of a culture of curation. [4] The curator becomes a figure who is privileged to be a superstar. Curating has become a very important and well-established profession in global art, which is supported by the capitalist economic model through the process of categorization and institutionalization of art. As the quantity of large-scale international exhibitions increases, curators emerge as important agents who know no geographical boundaries. The curators became nomadic individuals who crossed borders. Ralph Rugoff terms curators as jet-set flaneurs, who have privileged access and can move from one region to another, from one biennale to another, to work on their curatorial practice. [3]

The curator's dominance is considered an exclusive individual protagonist. Excessive curatorial autonomy in exhibitions has also drawn criticism. In some cases, the dominance of the curator makes the artwork an illustration of the theme of an exhibition, which is philosophical and distant from the public. Jean Baudrillard explains that the term "curating" is a level of power and the curator becomes the center of the exhibition. [2] Based on the phenomenon of the curator as the center of the exhibition, curation practices are re-evaluated. A variety of more inclusive curation approaches are emerging. Curatorial practice is becoming more collaborative, for example, collaborative practices carried out between artists and curators, collaboration between a group of curators, collaboration between a group of artists, or the intersection of several other roles with the aim of developing exhibitions together. Terry Smith maps the phenomenon of curatorial practice as a variety of contemporary curating, with various terms such as collective curating, collaborative curating, cooperative curating, and the like. [5]

Ruangrupa uses its curatorial practice with a collaborative and collective approach. At Documenta Fifteen, Ruangrupa puts its collective curatorial practice with the idea of Lumbung. Ruangrupa applies Lumbung not as a slogan, rhetoric, or theme, which is usually the center where works and artists react to them. Lumbung exists as a mechanism for managing and sharing common resources with values that are then put into practice as a whole in the artistic articulation and organizing process of Documenta Fifteen, which aims to learn from each other, network, and mutually strengthen the ecosystem.

Ruangrupa has made history for the first time as a Documenta curator from Asia, and for the first time, the Documenta exhibition was led by an artist collective. Ruangrupa was selected by a selection committee consisting of important figures in the global art world. Documenta is a contemporary art exhibition with a biennale format that is held every five years. Documenta is one of the most important biennales in the world and always attracts the attention of the international art world. Documenta is considered to have played a major role in taking discourse on art in a new direction. The discourse and discussion dynamics in each Documenta reflect and challenge society's expectations about art.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology used in this research is descriptive with a qualitative analytical approach. With qualitative research, this research will start with data produced and collected in the field, then utilize the chosen theory as explanatory material, and end with a hypothesis. The aim of this methodology is to explain and analyze the curatorial practices of the Ruangrupa collective and the critical reception of the organization of Documenta Fifteen.

Empirical data were collected over forty days in Kassel, Germany, at the Documenta Fifteen event. The data collected in this research was obtained through data collection techniques consisting of:

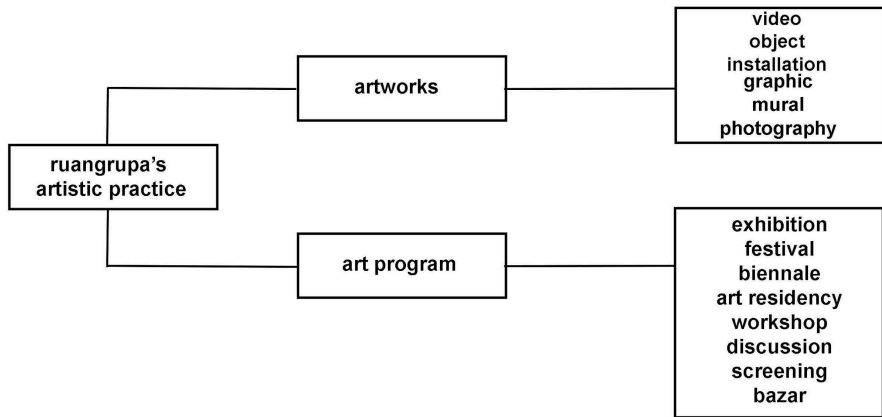
1. A literature study in the form of a collection of writings, images, and sound recordings or images (video) related to the main research object. The author accessed it through desktop research obtained on the internet and databases owned by Ruangrupa and the Documenta Archive. The main data sources are obtained from catalogs, books, theses, journals, articles, and mass media coverage related to research objects.
2. Interviews with resource persons, namely Ruangrupa members, work teams, and artists involved. The results of the interviews were used to support the completeness of the data that had been obtained previously.
3. Observations were carried out during Documenta Fifteen; researchers were in Kassel for forty days, from June 28 to August 8, 2022.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Ruangrupa's Artistic Practice

Ruangrupa is an artist collective founded in 2000 by a group of artists in Jakarta. At the beginning of its establishment, Ruangrupa was known as an artist-run space or alternative space. Space here is understood physically and conceptually as a place where artists come together to build arts spaces with independent infrastructure and organize artistic activities freely, without state or market intervention. Ruangrupa provide support for young artists from different disciplines to interact, work together, and collaborate.

Based on the activities that have been carried out by Ruangrupa for more than 20 years, Ruangrupa's artistic practices include making artworks and organizing art programs. Artists collectives such as Ruangrupa are not only limited to producing artistic works but also making themselves have a strong social function through art programs. In making artworks, Ruangrupa as an artist who produces works of art such as videos, photography, graphics, objects, and art installations that are displayed in the exhibition space. Meanwhile, in organizing art programs, Ruangrupa as an organizer that organizes various art programs for the public, which are held regularly in the form of exhibitions, festivals, biennales, art residencies, workshops, discussions, video/film screenings, and bazaars.



**Fig 1.** Ruangrupa's Artistic Practice Concept Map

Art programs carried out collectively are considered artistic practice as well, beyond the symbolic or representational aspects of art. Through organizing this art program, Ruangrupa carries out its curatorial strategies and practices in various aspects, such as selecting themes or issues as a curatorial framework, selecting artists or participants, creating exhibition designs, and so on. The experiences inherited from this process form the basis of Ruangrupa's curatorial practice at Documenta Fifteen.

### 3.2. Genealogy of Lumbung

Lumbung is a place where rice produced by the community is stored as a shared resource for the future. In Documenta Fifteen, Lumbung is interpreted as a mechanism for managing and sharing common resources. Ruangrupa sees that the majority of global economic infrastructure comes from former colonial countries, and it is no coincidence that they still control most of the global resources today. Ruangrupa offers Documenta to transform itself into a more just and contemporary institution, becoming a reference model for other institutions around the world that are currently trying to decolonize their respective old modes of operation. For Ruangrupa, this process was like installing a new operating system into Documenta, which previously had its own curatorial and event traditions.

However, the idea and mechanism of this Lumbung are not something new for Ruangrupa, which is devoted to organizing Documenta. The idea of a pre-lumbung emerged along with the founding of Ruangrupa and has been tested as a strategy for survival and sustainability throughout the journey of Ruangrupa's establishment to date. If we trace it back, the idea of this barn emerged when Ade Darmawan (one of the founders of Ruangrupa) was an artist-in-residence at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam, Netherlands, at the end of the 1990s. RAIN (Rijksakademie International Network) was formed through Rijksakademie's support for its alumni who wanted to create arts initiatives after they returned to their home countries. RAIN then became

an artist network formed to support initiatives, movements, and contemporary art practices in south-south countries, namely Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Because previously, Europe-America was the axis for funding and practice of contemporary art. South-south countries are considered a silence zone, even though there is collective-based initiative, innovation, artistic practice, and institutions. After Ade Darmawan formed Ruangrupa with other founders in 2000, Ruangrupa became part of RAIN.

In 2007, RAIN transformed into an Arts Collaboratory funded by DOEN and Hivos as a platform for sharing knowledge and resources among artist initiatives in Africa, Asia, South America, and the Middle East. The global economic crisis that hit Europe in 2010 resulted in a reduction in funding from donor agencies, so in 2013, Hivos stopped funding the Arts Collaboratory. However, Getrude Flentge, the program manager at DOEN, is working on a funding scheme that makes the Arts Collaboratory a horizontal collective funding platform. In the same effort, in 2012, Ruangrupa, together with other artist groups in Jakarta, namely Forum Lenteng and Serrum, formed a business unit division called RURU Corps. The establishment of the RURU Corps is one of their collective strategies for survival and economic sustainability, so as not to become dependent on funding from foreign donor agencies. Serrum is one that does not rely on donor institutions but implements an artistic services business as a source of funding and is legally registered as a Limited Liability Company (LLC). Through RURU Corps, the experimentation of funding models has begun to be tested cross-over.

In 2016, Ruangrupa, Forum Lenteng, and Serrum decided to work under one roof together, called the Gudang Sarinah Ekosistem, with a 3000-square-meter former goods storage building belonging to Sarinah. By leaving and shifting the space of each organization into the same workspace, various resources from each organization were stored and managed together; this is where the idea of a collective pot emerged. These resources include tangible resources such as money, space, equipment, and archives, as well as intangible resources such as ideas, programs, knowledge, energy, and time. Until 2018, Ruangrupa, Serrum, and Grafis Huru Hara, continued this art ecosystem idea in their new location in Jagakarsa, which was named Gudskul Collective Studies and Contemporary Art Ecosystem. The term collective pot was adapted into the Indonesian context to become "Lumbung" as a general model for sharing resources. Collective Pot is a general term brought by Ruangrupa through international interactions originating from Ruangrupa's involvement in the Arts Collaboratory. This Lumbung mechanism was then applied as the organizing principle of Gudskul, not only related to monetary matters but also educational and curatorial practices.



**Fig 2.** Genealogy of Lumbung Concept Map

Through the genealogy of Lumbung above, this horizontal economic system was implemented by Ruangrupa on the occasion of Documenta Fifteen by making Documenta resources a shared Lumbung for initiatives and artist collectives that tend to come from countries in the Global South, with the aim of strengthening inter-networks and collectives in the future. In its journey, the Lumbung was transformed from vertical to horizontal economic infrastructure, which was originally from donors, to become an inter-collective management.

#### 4. Discussion

Curatorial practices with a collective approach or decentralizing curatorial agency are not something new in the implementation of Documenta. The three previous editions of Documenta, namely Documenta 11\_Platform 5: Exhibition, dOCUMENTA (13) and documenta 14: Learning from Athens have decentralized the curator's agency. However, it should be noted that this idea emerged from individual thoughts, such as in Documenta 11, where Okwui Enwezor, as director, chose to work with a group of curators to develop the concept and content of the exhibition he led, or in dOCUMENTA 13, where Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev recruited curator "agents" as a form of agency deployment itself.

Large-scale international exhibitions such as Documenta require a number of curators to handle large-scale exhibitions. However, a number of curators who work as a team in organizing a biennale do not necessarily automatically work collectively. Ade Darmawan, in a lecture session at the Gudskul Study Collective [1], explained the differences in curatorial practices carried out by curatorial teams and artist collectives as follows:

Curatorial teams do not automatically work collectively because, as I have seen, many team curators need scale, large events, and a large number of issues and themes. Based on my experience of being curated or seeing how the curatorial team works, or sometimes I also become a curator with other curators, what is difficult is actually a matter of territory, so usually there are five curators. These five curators will have their own list of artists, and they must be responsible for the artist of their choice. In fact, the most extreme thing at the Gwangju Biennale in the last two editions was probably done by a team curator; the result was an exhibition of each curator combined. When you entered this room, it was curator A's session with its own list of artists. So the work structure is bilateral. Usually the organizers choose five curators who they don't know, or maybe they know a little, to put them together into one team, but they have to build trust, which is very difficult. Quarrels between curators often occur with a team format like that. So about power, about power, about decision-making, in the end what happens is just territorial: you make that part, I'm part here, then they are put together in one event, and in the end the only thing that binds is space and time. The time is the same, and the space is more or less close together in one big venue or big city. So curator pavilions. The structure of a team of curators as a model can be interesting, but from the perspective of collective practice, it is not collective; there is no conversation, no exchange, no space, and no way to decide collectively.

Through Ade Darmawan's explanation of collective curatorial practice, it seems that there are different points of view regarding the term Collective Curating, as explained by Paul O'Neill, along with examples of his exhibitions, namely Manifesta and the 50th Venice Biennale. [4] As happened in Manifesta by bringing together a group of well-known curators from different locations and perspectives who often do not know each other, the exhibitions presented tend to be territorial and in the form of pavilions. The same thing happened at the 50th Venice Biennale, with 10 exhibition pavilions curated by different curators, so that it looks like an exhibition within an exhibition.

Meanwhile, artist collectives such as Ruangrupa, whose members consist of individuals, have known and worked together for a long time. Ruangrupa's curatorial practices are based on friendship and collective values that are shared together, such as trust, openness, and care. In the internal work structure, Ruangrupa uses a tactical system, which they take from the Total Football philosophy, so that each member can fill and rotate their respective roles. Ruangrupa decentralizes the role of curator through the Majelis method, an assembly meeting involving Lumbung members and Lumbung artists invited by Ruangrupa to become part of the Documenta Fifteen. Through the Majelis, decisions related to curatorial strategy and artistic practice are made jointly. Lumbung members and Lumbung artists are selected through a network of friends, like the slogan "making friends, not art" echoed by Ruangrupa.

## 5. Conclusion

This research concludes that:

1. Ruangrupa's curatorial practices are based on their experience as artists who work collectively, but the artistic practices produced by Ruangrupa are not only limited to the art objects on exhibition display but also encompass various forms of discursive, performative, participatory and collaborative art programs.
2. The idea of Lumbung emerged at the same time as Ruangrupa itself was established as a sustainable economic strategy. Lumbung ideas and mechanisms will be used as a sustainability strategy for collective networks in the Global South in the future.
3. Curatorial practice implemented by Ruangrupa at Documenta Fifteen has changed the conception of the curator as an autonomous center of ideas into a collective curatorial practice that decentralizes the curator agency through the involvement of collective, collaborative, multidimensional, and interdisciplinary work.

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