Article

Global Art Collectives and Exhibition Making †

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Abstract: Art collectives come into existence for many reasons, whether to collaborate on art making or to generate a space for contemporary art outside of the established channels of exhibition and the art market. These efforts have been captured in recent exhibitions such as The Ungovernables, organized by the New Museum in 2012; Six Lines of Flight, which was launched at SFMOMA in 2013; and Cosmopolis I, organized by the Centre Pompidou in 2017. Artist collectives have received some scholarly attention, primarily as producers of artworks, but their exhibition-making practices have not been explored. Some of the collectives included in these exhibitions have also been very involved in exhibition making themselves. The Indonesian art collective ruangrupa was selected to curate the 2022 edition of *documenta*. This selection emerges not only from their participation in international biennials and their own exhibition practice in Jakarta—including the organization of regular exhibitions, workshops and film screenings at their compound—but also more ambitions events such as *Jakarta 32 °C*, a festival of contemporary art and media (2004–2014), or *O.K.* Video (2006–2018). Another group, the Raqs Media Collective, based in Delhi, curated the Shanghai Bienniale in 2016 and the Yokohama Trienniale in 2020. This paper will connect the local and the global through an examination of art collectives' community-based work in their own cities, and the way it translates into global art events.

Keywords: contemporary art; biennials; curating; Global South; globalization

1. Introduction

> Another point of agreement consists in the fact that the majority of these shows [biennials] emphasize the internationalist nature of cultural and artistic production. This is not a question of sharing a unified vision, rather of considering international as a term literally in dispute, capable of being interpreted specifically in highly diverse ways. (Basualdo 2006, p. 56)

This study seeks to open up new territory in our understanding of the transnational dynamics in the art world by addressing the recent selection of art collectives from the Global South (Raqs Media Collective and ruangrupa) to curate major international biennial/triennial/quintennial exhibitions (Shanghai Biennale, Yokohama Triennale, and documenta). This paper will explore some of the underlying assumptions of global art exhibitions, how uneven geographical development in the art world is manifest there, and whether the mechanisms of the art world can challenge the power structures that it subtends. This epigraph from Carlos Basualdo, who participated as a co-curator of both documenta and the Venice Biennale early in the 21st century, underlines the central dynamics to be explored in this essay: how biennial exhibitions place the internationalism of cultural production in dispute, and how that might be interpreted by curatorial collectives from formerly colonized countries.

There are many social, political and economic structures at play in the global art world, and they are not self-evident. Much of the writing on international contemporary art and exhibitions seeks to unpack the implicit complexities and inequalities that result from

globalization and the legacy of colonialism that marked an earlier era of global relations. The central question here is: What does it represent to put an art collective from India or Indonesia in charge of a global biennial? To this end, this analysis will take on a series of issues that have emerged from the literature on biennials in the 21st century, in particular, the way that internationalism—now generally approached as globalization—emerges in these conversations. Then, the study will turn to an examination of the trajectories of Raqs Media Collective and ruangrupa as curators of exhibitions and biennials in their own localities and abroad.

2. Literature Review

Basualdo's essay 'The Unstable Institution', cited in the epigraph, turns from internationalism to globalization, which he characterizes as "a period of progressive integration on a world level, although not decentralization" (Basualdo 2006, p. 57). Many others have waded into the complexities of internationalism and globalization in order to make sense of the dynamics of global biennials. While most authors see the cultural politics of globalization being negotiated through international biennials, only a handful perceive this dynamic as a means of overturning normative structures, whether in the world at large or in the art world. These authors—Mosquero (2010, 2011), Weiss (2011) and Niemojewski Living Lumbung: The Shared Spaces of Art and Life, Rafal (2010) among them—have employed the Havana Biennial as a means to demonstrate the permeable nature of the dispute that Basualdo identifies in internationalist projects, as this biennial set itself apart from the global art world by attempting to bring visibility to under-recognized artists working in Latin America, the Caribbean, and eventually Africa and Asia (Weiss 2011). More common are the many writers on biennials who position globalization as an external economic project to which cultural globalism responds. Caroline Jones is exemplary of this trend. Coining the term "critical globalism", she notes:

> Globalism is positioned in this study as an aesthetic response to economic, technological, and cultural processes of globalization; my account specifically privileges the critical mode ... Culture can stake a claim on a seemingly smaller part of the discursive territory, then use that Archimedean lever to dislodge the entire stacked debate (Jones 2016, p. xiii, emphasis in original).

In an earlier essay not focused on biennials, Jones goes further in terms of identifying how this process works: "these multiple aesthetic globalisms are both the surfactants that produce us as subjects for globalization and also the textures that give us the consciousness to resist it more pernicious homogenizations. In the most effective art of today, the analytics and strategies of globalism form an already existing set of practices" (Jones 2010, p. 134). The historical example she employs to demonstrate such a set of practices is the transnational artist Helio Oiticica, who was from Brazil, but self-exiled during the dictatorship of the 1960–1970s, and is active in both Europe and the US.

In many respects, Okwui Enwezor's radical vision of mega-exhibitions and spectatorship is structurally similar. In his essay 'Mega-Exhibitions and the antinomies of a transnational global form', he concludes: "The gap between the spectacle and the carnivalesque is the space, I believe, where certain exhibition practices, as models of resistance against the deep de-personalization and acculturation of global capitalism, recapture a new logic for the dissemination and reception of contemporary visual culture today" (Enwezor 2010, p. 444). While Enwezor situates curatorial—as opposed to artistic—practices as central, he identifies these as the most forceful potential responses to the problems of globalization. This vision of a counter-hegemonic biennial is not shared by all (e.g., Baker 2010) because cultural globalization is often assumed not to be inclusive of difference but actually to be a form of Western hegemony; truth be told, many of the artistic and curatorial participants in biennials held around the world are similar to those featured in European biennials.

This point is underlined by Yacouba Konaté in a chapter of a book on the Senegalese biennial Dak'Art. He wrote: "One important function of Dak'Art is thus to integrate it into the distribution circuits of so-called global art, which tends to mean Western art"

(Konaté 2010, p. 121). Konaté's (and others) assertion of Western hegemony in the contemporary art world suggests that there is a discursive aspect to Western culture and geography which was previously explored by Stuart Hall in his essay 'The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power', originally published in 1992. He noted that "We have to use shorthand generalizations like 'West' and 'Western,' but we need to remember that they represent very complex ideas and have no simple or single meaning . . . 'the West' is as much an idea as a fact of geography" (Hall 2019, p. 142). Though the idea of the "West" was developed historically in Western Europe through an internal dynamic, it has developed in relation to a global geography of colonization and the spread of its power around the world. Power and discourse here mean that the "West"—no longer confined to Europe geographically, and best represented by the G-7[1]—dominates other parts of the world, now known as the Global South, through a dynamic process of making meaning of the foreign lands which it conquered and profits from. In this formulation, the Global South is the post-colonial non-West, but the borders are not so easy to define. The problem is that it is not a consistent category and, even geographically-speaking, it defies categorization because many of the countries this term refers to are in the Northern hemisphere, and others that do not belong, like Australia and New Zealand, are very far south indeed.

Other scholars take a more radical perspective on the demise of geographical and geopolitical distinctions, arguing that these two domains have fully interpenetrated in a climate of globalization. As Nikos Papastergiadis has argued:

> The South and the North have interpenetrated each other to such an extent that it may no longer be possible to discretely celebrate creativity in the former and critique the latter as the source of oppression . . . As the ideological and regional distinctions collapse and blur, the relational value of this imbrication has become more layered, and the heading of each of these oppositional categories has also come to an end. The South is in the North and vice-versa. (Papastergiadis 2017, n.p.)

Articulating associations of the power of the North and the creativity of the South that he traces back to Gramsci, Papastergiadis here disavows the division between North and South. While the author is unquestionably correct to assert that the "relational value of this imbrication becomes more layered", those layers, as Hall reminds us, are built on a dynamic of inequality that is historically formed and quite persistent on the whole. The distinctions have collapsed and blurred, which is why the associations are no longer fixed, and it is important to examine each case for its particularities.

This is a topic that has been taken on by other writers on biennials. As Gardner and Green have asserted in an article on biennials titled 'South as Method': "To smooth out the South is actually to misrepresent it capacity to jam the traffic of contemporary art" (Gardner and Green 2014, p. 35). They elaborate on a segment of the 2012 Shanghai Biennial focused on the Bandung conference of 1955, organized by Agung Hujatnika and Charles Esche. This experience, and the censorship of one of the planned art projects, lead the authors to conclude: "It provided an important reminder that such inspirations are not only about dialogue and collaboration, but also about friction, about rubbing authorities the wrong way, about disruption, from which something constructive can potentially emerge" (Gardner and Green 2014, p. 28). While the valorization of a shared anti-colonial position in 1955 can be developed as source material of a global biennial in the 21st century, the results may be as messy as the original conference was. The point Gardner and Green drive home is that biennials will continue to negotiate the political, economic and social dimensions of the present despite whatever utopic intentions the organizers bring to the project.

Most importantly, as Gardner and Green's work (Gardner and Green 2014; Green and Gardner 2016) has shown, the mostly postcolonial countries that we now refer to as the (Global) South have their own histories of generating biennials as a means of cultural exchange, many of which were initiated under the non-aligned movement. The arrival of the Havana Biennial is not the beginning of the counter proposal to Western biennials, but something more like its culmination (Gardner and Green 2014, p. 28). Furthermore, as

Greek curator Marina Fokidis asks: "What is the notion of a 'common postcolonial heritage' in an era of thriving neo-colonialism, triggered by the global economy?" (Fokidis 2014, pp. 93–94).

The dynamic question of who benefits from increasing global interconnectedness is evoked by Okwui Enwezor's concept of "antinomies", in which cultural legitimation is debated among distinct groups, to the extent that various cultures debate which is dominant, and which developments are essential to our self-understanding of culture (Enwezor 2010, p. 436). If there are competing Western and Southern models of international biennials, how is it possible to identify to whom any innovation in global culture belongs? If biennials are gathering artists from all corners of the globe, which artists are the influencers and which are the influenced? Studying the history of biennials and other world exhibitions can be a useful, if not definitive, guide (Bennett 1988; Smith et al. 2008; Green and Gardner 2016; Jones 2016), but the real challenge is to locate the points of intersection between various models of locality and the global. This is what Basualdo referred to as internationalism in dispute.

In a previous article, I attempted to cast some light on the complex geography of the contemporary biennial issue through the geospatial analysis of participating artists (Zarobell 2021). This study illustrates geographical diversity of international biennials without resolving the fundamental issue, namely who decides what the global art world means. Conceptually, one of the best methods to address the merging of artists from G-7 countries and the Global South in biennials may be to embrace hybridity as a model, as Bhabha (1994) and others have proposed. This model suggests a way out of the impasse presented by Okwezor's antinomies because no state or cultural expression represents an untainted manifestation of identity, such that all of the artists are both local (bringing a particular notion of culture to their practice) and global (borrowing from other producers and art works from other places). The weakness of this model is that it does not account for the persistence of unequal power dynamics under globalization. Furthermore, exclusivity means that serious limitations exist for entering the biennial structure—as both artist and curator—whether in Venice, Kassel, Shanghai or Dakar. Most artists or curators cannot hope to operate in this domain. Another set of challenges to be explored here is the notion of the individual artist (or curator) and the model that this proposes for how culture comes to be absorbed and understood by its viewers or readers.

Since the advent of Romanticism, artists have been associated with the idea of genius, namely a unique capacity of certain rare individuals to absorb the complexity of the world and, through recourse to their unique gifts and talents, deliver a powerful expression in their chosen art form. This concept of exceptionalism is so deeply rooted in art discourse that it is difficult to identify examples; however, in modern art, this idea is linked to the avant-garde because a genius makes art outside of the conventions of their own time period and thus prepares the way for future developments. However, this idea was also critiqued by modern artists who wanted to absorb and reflect their own moment in time. Not all artists are alike, and so it is the individual characteristics that define their works that are the focus of art history and art criticism as well.

The notion of an art collective is not new, and dates back to the nineteenth century. While many artist clubs and groups formed outside of the academy, a collective has generally been thought to have a critical perspective on the current state of the art world. The most famous artist collective in the history of art is probably the Impressionists, a group of artists who organized their own independent exhibitions under the rubric of the *Société Anonyme des Artistes, Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs, etc.* (Anonymous Society of Artists, Painters, Sculptors, Engravers, etc.). The lesson is that being outside of the established art system, they felt that they needed to found their own organization in order to provide a viable alternative. In some sense, forming a collective is a way of responding to the market by attempting to build a viable alternative to it for mutual support among the artists involved.

Many artists since then have taken the collective idea much further, not only organizing exhibitions but also working together to make art with collective authorship (Kester 2011). In an article they penned on collectives and collectivity, Raqs Media Collective explained an essential aspect of their practice as follows:

> We are sometimes asked who does what in the collective, and the simple answer is that we do not believe in a formal division of labour, or in the individual ownership of ideas. It was to resist the particularly deathly alienation of creative work in the media industry based on a fetish of 'individual' labour that we forged a collective practice that guaranteed our creative autonomy. (Raqs Media Collective n.d., p. 3)

The critique of current media culture is evident here, as well as capitalism, but the prize of founding a collective and pursuing their art practice as such is creative autonomy. Members of ruangrupa have also discussed the significance of collectives. Ade Darmawan, one of the founding members of ruangrupa, acted as one of the curators of *Fixer*, featuring twenty-one alternative art spaces and groups from throughout Indonesia in 2010. He noted, in the introduction, that there are two shared tendencies among Indonesian art collectives in the 21st century that set them apart from earlier movements: they make artistic work collaboratively as an artistic statement, and they have a more significant public awareness because they manage exhibitions, websites, public education and the rest (Darmawan 2010, p. 18). In a more recent interview, ruangrupa spoke as a collective in response to questions from Nikos Papastergiadis. When asked about the traditional notions that inform their collective practice, they discussed many but concluded in the following way:

> In sum, we are drawing on ideas that bring people together in conversation rather than force them into authoritative processes. Conversations meander, and decisions spring forth. We reduce individual control and ownership. We share power and authority, as well as respecting silence and absence. Ideas emerge organically without clear intellectual ownership. It is a collage: thousands of pieces of ideas come together ... (Papastergiadis 2021, n.p.)

In this articulation, what is at stake in a collective practice of more than twenty years comes to the fore: overcoming ideas such as control and ownership is one of the central goals of the collective. The notion of sharing ideas through conversation demonstrates their focus on the present, not on an innovation that will drive art or society into the future through the unique skills of a genius, or the marketing savvy of an entrepreneur.

The unequal distribution of resources around the world is paralleled by an unequal development of art institutions and the means to establish them. While the market is based on individual actors who secure "brand recognition", the idea of the collective is to pool resources to generate alternatives to the vagaries of the market, and also to generate new cultures in postcolonial contexts. While the art market has incorporated a wide variety of international artists into its roster (and many of those have relocated as a result), the recent popularity of art collectives from the Global South represents a wider range of alternatives currently being employed as a mechanism of inclusion and diversification in the art world. These efforts have been captured in recent exhibitions such as The Ungovernables, organized by the New Museum in 2012; Six Lines of Flight, which was launched at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2013; and Cosmopolis I, organized by the Centre Pompidou in 2017. The selection of Raqs Media Collective and ruangrupa to curate major international biennials represents a continuation of this emergent interest, and demands an inquiry into the evolution of global biennials.

3. Discussion

How does a biennial operate differently when curated by a collective from the Global South, and how is it possible to characterize the respective strategies of these collectives? It makes a statement to turn over a Western exhibition apparatus to a group of artists from postcolonial countries who have not been represented well in these exhibitions heretofore.

The expectation is that their exhibition program will be different, and that it will therefore provide the biennial with the diversity that is the hallmark of cultural achievement in the current era, but it is not enough to simply turn over the keys to the castle if all of the rules will remain the same. Despite a rich debate on internationalism and globalization, and the power dynamics that follow from them, real alternatives can only be manifested by questioning the apparatus of the biennial itself and coming to distinct conclusions about the nature of the event and how it will unfold. In order to achieve meaningful diversity, everything about the exhibition has to be put up for grabs and reconsidered. Furthermore, the participants have to be willing to encounter and overcome their expectations about how an art exhibition looks and works, as well as what one considers art to be. It is in this spirit that Raqs Media Collective and ruangrupa have approached the curation of international biennials.

The consideration of the ways in which a biennial operates differently when directed by art collectives from the Global South will demand an investigation of prior biennials (Shanghai, Yokohama) and another (documenta fifteen) currently in development. If the location of origin of these collectives is significant, it should be registered in the way that they translate their local practice of curating and art making (developed in the urban domains of the Global South) into a transnational arena. Delhi and Jakarta, where Raqs and ruangrupa are based, are megacities which are hubs in a sphere of economic globalization (Sassen 2001; Douglass et al. 2011), yet they each have a particular character which is distinct from the locations where these biennials were organized. Furthermore, the particularity of their sites of operations signals global inclusivity among the biennials that have selected these art collectives as curators. In other words, by selecting art collectives from Delhi and Jakarta as curators of exhibitions in Japan and Germany, these exhibitions assert that they are not focused only on curators trained and educated in G-7 countries, i.e., centers of economic and political power, but also that they seek to present alternative models of exhibition making.

Looking at the history of art-making and curation among these two collectives will allow the reader to evaluate how they have translated localized practices in the cities of the Global South to global practices in a domain of high-profile international exhibitions. Using the questions stated above as a guide, the next section of the paper will examine exhibition-making practices developed by Raqs and ruangrupa both at home and abroad. While it is tempting to situate this as a progression—they developed a local exhibition practice that then became global when they were asked to curate biennials—the story is not so clear; the local is always implicated in the global, and vice versa.

3.1. Raqs Media Collective

Raqs Media Collective began in 1992, which is to say that the three individuals who comprise Raqs—Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta—began to collaborate to make works, projects, and writing at that time. This collective of three started to work with two scholars at the Center for Studies of Developing Societies—Ravi Vasudevan and Ravi Sundarum—under the organization Sarai in 2000, focusing their attention on issues of media, urban life and the public domain. Sarai built a research program and published a series of Readers, as well as organizing a visiting fellows program. In the years from 2009–2013, this was conducted under the rubric of "City as Studio", and fellowships lasted nine months, but the last 6-8 weeks were spent in residence in Delhi. While the participants were under no obligation to produce anything for the public, Sarai organized a series of public events; these featured the fellows and other interlocutors from Delhi, making performances, showing works of visual art, and reading writings that were also published in a series of catalogues (*City as Studio* 1, 2, and 3). In a sense, this was Raqs' entry into the domain of curation under the rubric of the Sarai fellows program, which was designed around urban experience in Delhi. However, it was not the same as curating an exhibition, and while the collective played the role of co-organizers, Raqs' first curatorial opportunity was actually the co-curation of *Manifesta 7* in Bolzano, Italy in 2008.

Manifesta, which bills itself as "the European Nomadic Biennial", is an unlikely place for a collective from the Global South to begin their curatorial journey. The first question is why the biennial would select Raqs as a curator when they (1) were from India and (2) had little experience in this domain? On the one hand, one can point to this decade as a moment when artists began to be empowered as curators by exhibitions like Manifesta, as well as in institutions. The new demands of artists who had been given the role of curator, whether in an institutional or a biennial context, required them to play an alternative, if adjacent role. Artists who pursue a research practice and present images and texts as their works, as Raqs does, do not operate on different principles from curators. However, the practice of selecting artists to participate is perhaps the fundamental activity that marks them as curators. What is more, to conceive of the frame of a project and to find the right artists that will elaborate their concept is crucial. Raqs' ability to conceptualize the many intersecting elements of a project is connected to the reason that they were selected to curate Manifesta in the first place. Apparently, the organizers were impressed by a presentation Raqs gave in 2006 in Stuttgart in a conference 'On Difference', where they presented their concept 'Building Sight' (Bagchi 2021). The piece challenges its listeners to examine thinking about the city "brick by brick". They explain, with puns, their unique inquiry into urban imaginaries:

> A building site is a place where people bring things with which they will construct something. Building sight is an island of design inlaid into the surface of this construction. 'Building Sight' brings together a number of different visions in order to provoke new conversations about the making and unmaking of cities. (Raqs Media Collective 2006, n.p.)

Looking now at the catalogue they eventually produced—the *Manifesta 7 Companion*: *The Rest of Now,* edited by Rana Dasgupta—one can perceive the way in which their ideas were manifested in the exhibition not only through their selection of artists but also an introduction, a text/image collage that stands in as their essay, *Ave Oblivio [Hail Oblivion]* (Dasgupta 2008). This piece is a story of the rise and fall of a city in twelve short chapters, written in their signature ironic, quasi-informative style, and it is not different in any fundamental way from the writings the collective produced as artists. Here again, the theme of the making and unmaking of cities is central, and the artists and authors who also participate in the making of the catalogue underline the complexity and violence of this process. While Raqs' essay is schematic and punchy, more elaborate descriptions emerge from the works reproduced (and seen at the various sites where the event was staged). The most important element in this record of the event is the conversation that emerged from the interaction of these projects in the exhibition. In this sense, the curating strategy can be seen to allow the artists selected and the works they made to participate in constructing meaning in the exhibition. This is similar to what Panos Kopatsiaris describes as "discursive exhibitions". He explains that "The self-reflective, open and dialogical form, now hegemonic in biennials, is inseparably bound up with questions of engagement that draw on post-colonial, minority and anti-capitalist critique brought about through the rhetoric of experimentation, interdisciplinarity and flexible forms" (Kopatsiaris 2017, p. 41).

In other words, Raqs began their career as curators within an established tradition of biennial curation elaborated by Kopatsiaris, and Caroline Jones before him (2016). However, their "discursive" approach transcends the thematic dimension that has been outlined by these authors, among others. One important dimension of their work as curators here is their approach to time, which is a recurring dynamic in the projects Raqs develops. As outlined in a 2009 article they wrote for *E-flux Journal* 'Earthworms Dancing: Notes for a Biennial in Slow Motion', a gesture of radical inclusion structures their understanding of contemporaneity, or the moment in time that a biennial seeks to represent. Concerning the design of biennials, they write: "Any attempt to design structures (however permanent or provisional they may be) that seek to express or contain contemporaneity would be incomplete if it were not (also) to be attentive or accommodative towards realities that are not necessarily explicit or manifest" (Raqs Media Collective 2009, n.p.). Biennials that

seek to fashion contemporaneity are, by necessity, limited, and thus can only gesture to the plurality of works, meanings and effects of the moment that are not included in the show but are part of contemporary life nonetheless. Such a philosophy suggests that the biennial makes the contemporary world tangible and not, reminding the reader of the countless contemporaneities that are not present. This changes the imaginary register of the biennial, and suggests that they were negotiating internationalism as Basualdo described. However, it does not fundamentally change who is involved and, while it may suggest other ways to participate, it ultimately leaves participation unchanged.

In their collaboration with Sarai, Raqs participated in the curation of the first iteration of *City as Studio* in 2010. Here, a very different process was elaborated in relation to the participants. Instead of a biennial, this project existed under the rubric of a visiting fellow program in Delhi with an institutional center at the Center for the Study of Developing Societies. The difference is that the group of fellows worked individually and met collectively for seven months before coming to Delhi and engaging the spaces of the city. As its title suggests, the goal was to shift the terrain of contemporary cultural practice from a private reserve to a public space. In a Situationist spirit, meaning-making would happen collectively in the street. Rather than staging exhibitions, the various writers, performers and artists had the opportunity to curate an existing program that Sarai had begun the previous year, EXB (Extraterrestrial Basement), which was designed for multidisciplinary practice and interactive programs. The form of participation in these contexts was quite open ended, but was intimately connected to the city of Delhi. As the catalogue of the *City as Studio 1* describes it: "The engagement between 'practitioner' and 'audience' was not necessarily determined by the 'object' or a 'work'. Rather it produced a dialogue, it tentatively explored, it searched for form and found language for intermediary stages of producing" (Sarai 2011, p. 25). The visiting fellow format anchored this process in the city of Delhi, and the goal was not for participating artists to develop projects apart from the dynamics of the city itself but to collaborate with the particular aspects of city life they experienced there. This understanding of process within an exhibition format is distinct from what happens at most biennials, where the artists, organizers and the press converge for a day at the opening and then abandon the space to the "viewers" and a series of educational programs that generally continue during the run of the show.

The EXB events (Figure 1) were one-offs, and you had to be there to see them. However, if one was there, the choices for how to engage were multiple, and not institutionally scripted. This is something like a Happening in the parlance of late-modern art, in which the engagement of the audience is the point of the work, and their interventions in the context of the event are what provides the character to the project as whole. This should be read as a development in exhibition practice because the "show" is multi-authored, and the "creator/s" becomes more of an instigator than a producer. The goal is a process, not a work. Likewise, in the context of an urban public studio in Delhi, these creatives are retreating to the basement to make connections to other worlds (the extraterrestrial dimension).

How does this experience change Raqs' approach to curation when they would be asked to return to the domain of large-scale biennials for the Shanghai Biennale of 2016 and the Yokohama Triennale of 2020? Needless to say, these events—staged in different countries at distinct institutions, one of which that took place during a global pandemic—yielded distinct results. In both, Raqs selected a group of global artists to participate, and collaborated with other curators to realize a sited institutional exhibition, but Raqs inserted programs into each of these projects that sought to extend and reshape the domain of expertise and participation that would challenge the notional logic of the biennial as it was manifested in these iterations. This is an additional prerogative of a curator which is distinct from an artist participating in a biennial. While artists may be invited to join in both the contribution of work to and participation in an event, and while they have the liberty to organize their contributions as they wish, only curators are able to develop and execute a parallel educational program. While these procedures would not have fundamentally

altered the dynamic of the biennial, the way in which they interacted with other dimensions of the biennial Raqs organized generated a more open form for the emergence of accidents and adjacencies within this exhibition format. One of the linking threads here is the new means through which they re-imagined the site of the biennial itself.

Figure 1. Sarai, *Extraterrestrial Basement*, Delhi, 2010. Image courtesy Shamsher Ali.

The Shanghai Biennale was curated with an "infra-curatorial" structure, as described by Bagchi (2021), meaning there was an enmeshed curatorial model with six authors whose processes overlapped. This model was carried over from Sarai, but the fundamental innovation here is that the "curator" is not singular, a big name managing a team of functionaries, but multiple and collective. This is important because authorial voice is interactive in this context, and ownership and authority are set aside. The project's title *Why Not Ask Again?* is not a theme so much as a strategy to enlist practitioners; in the "Blueprint" for the exhibition, Xiang Liping, the Power Station of Art's project director, describes it this way:

In the PSA exhibition space (Figure 2), the huge question mark that serves as a primary visual reference, the admission tickets with questions randomly printed on them, the volunteers circulating with questions printed on their T-shirts, and the curatorial guidebook *Blueprint*, collectively offer people the scripts to questions, maps of the exhibition and clues to new thinking. (Power Station of Art et al. 2016a, p. 5).

Figure 2. *Why Not Ask Again?* Shanghai Biennial, 2016. Image courtesy Power Station of Art.

It is altogether likely that no biennial has ever staged the process of questioning so prominently to its audience, which is remarkable because the art audience in Shanghai is quite distinct from one that would be found in Europe or in Delhi. Though Shanghai is a world-class megacity and the very image of the contemporary metropolis that China projects to the world, the domain of contemporary art that the biennial represents is new there, and many museum visitors are not acquainted with recent developments in contemporary art or exhibition making. In the People's Republic of China, where museums are primarily government-funded, the public does not expect to be told to interrogate what they see and read, such that this is something of a radical gesture at the level of the exhibition, and at the level of the site itself. This innovation is joined by two other provocative dimensions of the biennial, "51 Personae" and "Theory Opera".

51 Personae was a series of staged conversations about the city with urban denizens and non-experts on art or urbanization. Taking place outside of the museum, the participants were asked to meet in various spaces around Shanghai, where they would hear about urban change—the past, present, and future—from folks who inhabit the city and know it

intimately. These conversations were curated by Chen Yun through recourse to a mutual aid society she had previously founded (Power Station of Art et al. 2016b). The goal of taking participants out into the city to experience its complexities from the perspective of primarily working-class interlocutors was to expand the experience of the biennial visitor, and to expand the voices of authority on urban life. Furthermore, drawing on their experience curating "City as Studio" in Delhi, 51 Personae anchored the global reach of the biennial themes in the particularities of the city of Shanghai. The experience of urban cacophony is a method that Raqs returned to and employed abroad. Theory Opera, on the other hand, brought together two elite domains that do not often intersect, the academic study of "theory" and the performance of opera. While the focus on theory has been an important aspect of the making and interpretation of contemporary art in an era when conceptual art has gained prominence, opera is another realm entirely. Its sophistication and the complexity of the form—whether considering the Chinese or Western versions—makes it accessible only to enthusiasts who devote themselves to its pursuit. By generating a program in which theorists would have to perform their ideas for an audience, Raqs forces the purveyors of complexity in thought to ground their ideas in an iterative performance for a general audience (as opposed to an academic conference, for example). While this amplifies the significance of theory to the development and execution of the biennial, it also has the effect of bringing it down to earth, because its proponents must demonstrate its significance through a live performance.

The Yokohama Triennale of 2020 presented something of a limit case, as it was staged during a global pandemic that shut down most of the world's borders and prevented the fundamental goals of a global biennial from being realized, namely bringing artists and curators together from around the world, and embedding them in the local context in Yokohama. While there were, as one might expect, many online programs as part of the biennial, there was an actual exhibit which was viewed by the local audience. According to Kuraya Mika, the Executive Chairperson of the Organizing Committee of the Triennale, "Raqs, with their attitude of questioning much that been considered essential, set about unraveling everything from curator privilege, overemphasis on the physical exhibition, Eurocentrism, and anthropomorphism" (Yokohama Trienniale 2020, p. 13). All of this, it is noted, took place before the pandemic interrupted the planning of the show.

The device that Raqs used for this biennial was the "Episōdo", a series of online programs that extended the frame of the show spatially and temporally (taking place before the opening and after the closing of the exhibition itself). These episōdos were all collaborative, and involved a number of artists working in a variety of media, including sound and language (e.g., poetry). Each one had a theme and purpose, but they served as devices for the curators to distribute their authority to the participating artists, who conceived of their own contributions within the context of the whole program. In other words, the curators did not pick specific "pieces" for the artists to show, but opened up the space for them to develop their ideas within this context and make their own connections to the overall biennial. This aspect of dividing the curatorial role means that the artist has the agency in terms of how to relate to the audience, which is not spatially fixed (in a building) but instead fixed in time. The audience is no longer local (in the sense that they do not need to be in Yokohama), but they are now dispersed across the geography of the internet. Other innovations were necessary here—the online walkthrough of the exhibition with the curators meeting on the internet to "see" the exhibition works in person, for example—but the decision to "make the museum building disappear" through an installation around the facade by the installation artist Ivana Franke is a completely original collaboration between curators, artist and institution that owes nothing to the global state of emergency (Figure 3). In general, it is possible to see this exhibition as an extension of the dynamics that Raqs had developed in their preceding curatorial efforts, such as a collaborative framework, highlighting urban experience, engaging the visitors to overcome their expectations, and de-centering the role of the curator.
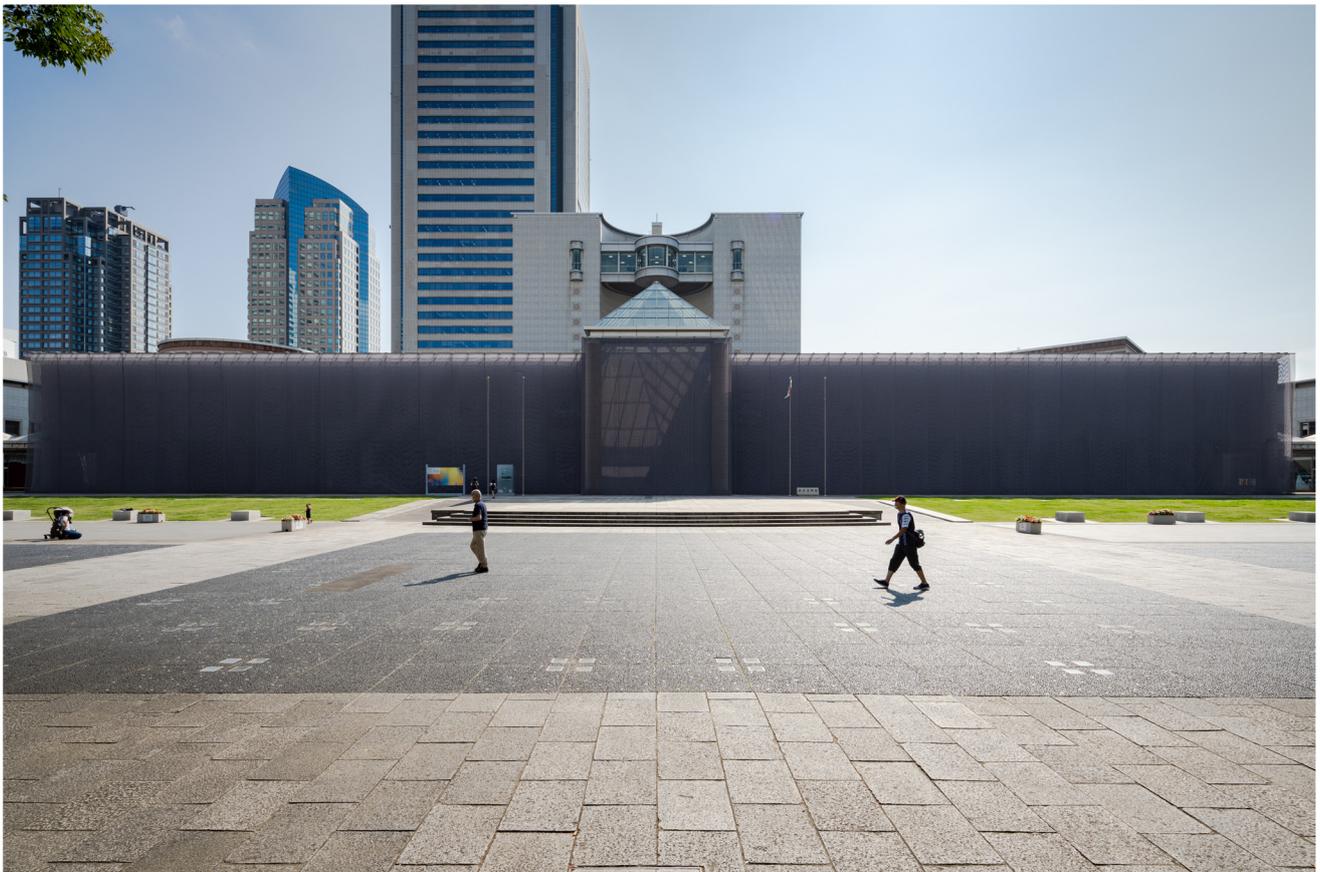
Figure 3. Ivanka Franke, *Resonance of the Unforeseen*, 2020, Yokohama Triennale. Image courtesy of the Yokohama Triennale.

3.2. Ruangrupa

Ruangrupa was started in 2000, in the wake of a democratic transition in Indonesia that saw the fall of the dictator Suharto, in 1998, after a series of student protests in Jakarta and the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997. In Indonesian political history, this is the *Reformasi* period (Kusno 2013; Aspinall and Berenschot 2019), in which the postcolonial government was being remade after having been ruled by only two men in the fifty-three years since independence was declared in the wake of World War II. Many of the original members were students at the time but sought to find a space of their own, and employed the collective as a method to achieve survival and recognition. Daily life was central to their model, and they did not seek to set themselves apart as artists but sought to create a network focused on a hub, originally in a rented house, that would be the meeting point for a group of artists and others who would animate the space. There was (and is) no formal system for admission; collective governance is the guiding impulse behind their activities. Over the years, the hub has shifted, and now it is a compound, Gudskul (Figure 4), that provides a home for multiple collectives, spaces for exhibition and performance, and a school that provides lessons in everything from printmaking to street art to operating as a collective. One of the central principles of ruru (as they are known among initiates) is everyday life, making the most of this pedestrian existence, turning this into a practice, and expanding this domain into an artistic experience. Their curatorial impulses are fundamentally focused on this central goal.

Figure 4. Gudskul, 2019. Image courtesy of the author.

Because their focus is on art ideas in the urban context, and because they operate collectively, it could be said that their fundamental processes as artists in the collective are

similar to curation: they sort ideas, discuss propositions, pursue research, and eventually propose a public event, or a series of them. Indeed, ruru has been active as a curatorial collective through projects such as *OK. Video* and *Jakarta 32 °C*, which were held biannually, beginning in 2003 and 2004 respectively, as well as other projects that have happened episodically, such as ArtLab and working with the Jakarta Biennial in 2009 and during the 2010's (Ruangrupa 2021). Outside of the focus on everyday life, two of the terms from the Indonesian language (*bahasa Indonesia*) that have been used to describe their practice are "*lumbung*" and "*nongkrong*". In the interview cited with Papastergiadis, ruru defined lumbung in the following way:

> Lumbung is a traditional agrarian practice in Indonesia. It refers to the process of sharing resources. The word "lumbung" literally means "rice barn," a structure commonly used by villagers to deposit and store their surplus crops. It also functions as a space to meet, celebrate, and share appreciation for the previous harvest ... In the context of contemporary art and society, lumbung is an idea for not only mapping resources but also identifying and understanding basic needs and self-limitations, to define the resources and surpluses of each initiative/organization to be shared with others. It has informed our ideas around sustainable, self-initiated interdisciplinary spaces. It is where art meets social activism, management, and various local networks. (Papastergiadis 2021, n.p.)

In this quote, ruru lays out the fundamental conceptions of their approach to the curation of documenta fifteen, but it is clearly a model that they have always practiced as a collective. Art making and curating are fundamentally similar practices in this case. Besides lumbung and everyday life, another concept which is crucial to the collective is nongkrong, which is translated by Reinaart Vanhoe as "chatting informal conversations not focused on a specific goal ... These conversations may or may not lead to plans, which in turn may or may not end up being implemented in practice ... " (Vanhoe 2016, p. 30). This is connected to ruru's idea of networking, which is a means of establishing connections between and among people and communities, with the important difference that it is not goal-oriented, not focused on a specific outcome, but open in nature. (Centre Pompidou 2017). Like lumbung, nongkrong is a specific Indonesian cultural practice which has broad applicability in the way in which the collective chooses to operate in the art world, whether in Jakarta or abroad. How do such ideas manifest themselves in the context of organizing an exhibition? Before considering how these terms apply to documenta, it is important to see how they were first deployed in ruru's curatorial practice in Jakarta.

OK. Video was the first international video festival to be held in Indonesia when it was initially presented in 2003 (Figure 5). For this project, ruru collaborated with the National Gallery in Jakarta in order to inaugurate the event from 7 to 20 July 2003. A total of 56 artists were presented from 19 countries, and there were four themes, along with two video workshops (one on urban space in Jakarta, and another on the medium of video itself), as well as a seminar, artist talks, and a presentation of music videos. While this effort was organized through a familiar structure of public presentations, one of the reasons for the exhibition/festival was stated as follows: "In the latest development, video art is a medium that often used by the contemporary artist in discussing sociocultur[al] problems like identity, politics, private space-public space and mass culture". (Ruangrupa 2003, n.p.). Furthermore, several international artist-led initiatives—PULSE (South Africa), VIDEO-TAGE (Hongkong), and VIDEO ART CENTER TOKYO (Japan)—were highlighted in a "Special Presentation" of which theme was urban space as seen through video.

Figure 5. Audience enjoying the works in the first *OK.Video*, Jakarta Video Art Festival, Galeri Nasional Indonesia, 2003. Courtesy of ruangrupa.

In the next iteration, in 2005, focusing on the theme "Sub/version", ruru collaborated with other artist groups in Purwokerto and Yogyakarta (both of which are in Indonesia) to produce a series of workshops on video and urban spaces which led to a special presentation of works in the exhibition, once again held at the National Gallery, but also in those other two cities. Furthermore, in their account of the festival in their archive, ruru noted: "OK.Video has also succeeded in establishing cooperative relationships with many similar organizations and festivals in the international art field" (Ruangrupa 2005, n.p.). While this international exhibition of video works was in many ways similar to events held everywhere, there are a couple of points to note here. One is that the collective, then in their third year, was able to convince the National Gallery to host this event. Up to that point, video art had not been present there, and was not part of their history of Indonesian modern and contemporary art. Being able to present this work at such a venue had a very positive effect for the video artists who presented there, but it also led the museum to pursue new trajectories of collection; indeed, there is much video art in the collection today. One of the central goals of the project was to introduce video art to new audiences, and this innovation has been significant for the history of this biennial in Jakarta.

Furthermore, the concept of lumbung is manifest in the way that they organized the exhibition. In the local context, ruru built relationships with an important institutional partner, and also with video artists and musicians. Internationally, they collaborated with other artist organizations to make presentations but also to conduct workshops to teach others how to engage urban spaces through video. Locally and globally, they gathered those who had an interest in this field and discussed with them the project and what they might like to do, rather than selecting works and presenting them. Because the field of video art was new, and because media play an important role in shaping our sociocultural understanding, it was important to open up space in this festival in order to see what

might come out of it, and not to start with a fixed idea. By the third iteration of the festival, "Militia", in 2007, the goal was explicitly focused on video as a critical medium and a tool of social empowerment for its practitioners. Moreover, the presentation had now expanded to fifteen cities and included more than 100 artists, as they collaborated across space and time. As Vanhoe has described this event, "In this festival video was used to bring people together, to allow them to be simultaneously maker and audience" (Vanhoe 2016, p. 58).

Jakarta 32 °C is a biennial event that started the following year, 2004, and was also organized at the National Gallery. According to their archive, "this event was initiated at the end of 2003 by ruangrupa and a number of students from a number of campuses who later named themselves Komplotan Jakarta 32 °C" (Ruangrupa 2009, n.p.). The goals were to gather student work from various art schools in the area together in a single exhibition, and to allow dialogue to emerge among these diverse artists. The idea was to allow mutual criticism and the "seeding of meaningful ideas among students and teachers" (Ruangrupa 2009). In such an event, one finds the traces on both lumbung and nongkrong, because the notion is to generate a gathering space for artists and teachers to exchange views; the choice of the term "seeding of meaningful ideas" is a direct extrapolation of the rice barn concept of lumbung. Furthermore, the point is not to generate professional success but to network in a less intentional way. By gathering the students and their art in one location, it is possible to promote conversations and network building between art students in the Jakarta region and between the collective and the students. Once again, this event is not meant to generate a target audience outside of the structure but is intended to appeal to and benefit the art students who participate. Taking part in this case means becoming a part of something greater and generating ideas and an audience from the pooling of resources. This is not specific to one school, one kind of art, or the generation of a market for the art works; the goal is realized in the project simply by sharing the work with potential collaborators.

A consideration of ruru's work with documenta will be incomplete because, at the time of writing, the exhibition is still six months away. Nevertheless, through conversations with members of the collective and reading the existing press releases on the exhibition, it becomes clear that documenta fifteen will be organized quite differently than any previous manifestation, and the possibility for a distinct impact is tangible. The most relevant comparison between their ideas and a previous version of documenta would be Documenta XI (2002), curated by a team of international curators led by Okwui Enwezor, originally from Nigeria. This was a tremendous step forward in terms of the decentralization of the biennial, as well as the relationship between documenta and artists/curators from the Global South. Indeed, most of the writings in the Literature Review responded to the new dynamics this exhibition introduced. However, their strategy did not reinvent biennial exhibition practice as completely. The addition of a series of "Platforms" staged with scholars and artists in locations around the world did much to dissipate the European concentration of the biennial, however, and made its conception and realization dependent upon a much wider field.

As early as their first Press announcement on their ideas for documenta fifteen, produced in June 2020, ruru was challenging the means of realizing the fundamentals of the exhibition. The formative model of the exhibition—the concept—is lumbung, and the realization of the nongkrong idea is focused on a newly-developed hub, ruruHaus (a former department store at the center of Kassel) (Figure 6). As they put it in their press release, "ruruHaus is, in short, a laboratory and a kitchen, with a radio station to resonate a multiplicity of stories" (Documenta Fifteen 2020, p. 4). The press release stresses that lumbung is not a theme but a practice, and several arts collectives are listed as collaborators already at this stage, from Mali, Indonesia, Palestine, Columbia and several European countries. In other words, Lumbung was a central means of gathering participants for this global art event, and it draws directly on their curatorial background in Jakarta, as opposed to the history of thematic or discursive biennials discussed above. Now that the full list of participants has been published, it is clear that ruru has extended their documenta network

to many more collectives and individuals around the world, but in the spirit of lumbung. As they describe their artist selection, they also put forward a process that will contribute to the formulation of their exhibition:

> Meetings in smaller and larger working groups, so-called *majelis*, are a central format in the lumbung process: "We—ruangrupa, the Artistic Team, and the fourteen lumbung members—began early on to hold regular majelis in preparation for documenta fifteen. We also invited the lumbung artists to meet in mini-majelis. Within these mini-majelis, the participants can get to know each other in the run-up to the opening and present their practice and their projects planned for documenta fifteen to each other, discuss questions or advise each other on the artistic process. By sharing resources and making decisions together in the spirit of lumbung, collective ways of working are tested within each mini-majelis". (Documenta Fifteen 2021, n.p.)

Figure 6. Artistic Team and ruangrupa members at ruruHaus, featuring (left to right) Lara Khaldi, Iswanto Hartono, Gertrude Flentge, Mirwan Andan, Frederikke Hansen, Julia Sarisetiati, Reza Afisina, Ajeng Nurul Aini, Ade Darmawan, Indra Ameng; Kassel, 2021. Photo: Nicolas Wefers, courtesy of documenta fifteen.

This document lists a group of international artists and collectives grouped into a series of "mini-*majelis*". There are two radical departures evident here. The first is that the artists selected are primarily not individual producers; instead, the majority of the artists selected are in fact collaboratives of some sort. Ruru employed their curatorial prerogative

of selection to promote other collectives whose conception of artistic work rhymes with their own non-hierarchical practice. Furthermore, the participants are not listed by their national origin (or home) but by their time zone, many of which are not normative but invented for the occasion (such as Indochina Time and West Africa Time). Furthermore, these artistic groups are not expected to produce their works in isolation and deliver them to the exhibition fully-formed, but to meet with other partners (organized by ruru and the curatorial team), develop their ideas, and receive feedback in the mini-majelis. In other words, the curators have not fixed the exhibition contents, but set up a self-propelling system to arrive at a collectively-determined manifestation. Such a model is radical, and contributes to the dismantling of a number of the dynamics of the uneven development in the art world discussed above. While it is impossible to say what this will look like, it is clear that the process involved in arriving at the final product is unlike the way in which biennials have been curated up to this point. While it is the norm for the curatorial team to discuss, debate, and come to terms with the way their ideas of the project will manifest themselves, it is unprecedented to engage the artists in collective conversations about the nature of their contributions and how they will serve each other and the collective public that documenta fifteen will attract.

4. Conclusions

While the strategies employed at the local and global level by Raqs and ruru in their exhibition-making activities share much in common, not all manifestations of the Global South—even when they are both art collectives in the unique position of curating global exhibitions—have similar aims and strategies. One of the differences between the curatorial strategies of these two groups could be considered to be the difference between a postcolonial and a de-colonial attitude, but it is important to detail the similarities.

The similarities are numerous when we consider the way in which Raqs and ruru took on the goal of organizing an international biennial-type exhibition. The goals will be addressed below, but in terms of the exhibition organization, audience, and participation, both Raqs and ruru developed innovative strategies to expand the circle of organizers, as well as to develop a new audience for their projects and encourage wider participation and engagement with their exhibitions. Both collectives have engaged a wider team and encouraged the other members of their team to make decisions and question everything so that exhibition making becomes a give-and-take, not a top-down process. Furthermore, both have sought to expand the audience in significant ways and to encourage their engagement through participation not only in viewing the exhibition, but on location in the respective cities through various programs.

One way that they both stand apart from the traditional exhibition-making process is that they want to diversify the participants and audience beyond what other global exhibitions have attempted, and they want to open up space for unscripted interactions, like those that emerge from everyday life in their respective home cities. By engaging non-artists who have a different means of coming to terms with the geography of the city or the processes of the biennial, they have sought to produce a deeper connection between the site and festival. These processes change how the artists and the audience participate in the festival and seek to make everyone an agent in the experience of urban life. The practices developed in the context of international biennials, such as 51 Personae or the mini-majelis, also seek to transform the question of who benefits from these exhibitions and how they benefit because they open the exhibition to new perspectives and a means to question the norms of how we view a city or a work of art. Both Raqs and ruru have reconceived the benefits of association with a biennial for artists and residents attempting to generate a wider distribution mechanism, and also to introduce those who might come with certain expectations—whether artist or audience member—to new means of apprehending the significance of their own participation. The experience that the biennial engenders is conceived not as unique, powerful or universal, but as a component of everyday life, a means of making meaning in a highly complex and diverse world, which is characterized

by particularity and distinct perspectives that emerge from different activities and points of view. As Ade Darmawan explained in an email to Thomas Berghuis, ruangrupa "[is] a platform that can transform information and experiences from daily life into knowledge" (Berghuis 2011, p. 403); this description applies to both of these collectives' curatorial strategies, and this goal sets their biennials apart.

However, there remains a subtle difference between these two collectives vis-à-vis the power structures elaborated in the first half of the paper and the history of colonialism that countries from the Global South share and, in many ways, are still seeking to overcome in an era of globalization. The discourse of the West and the Rest is implicit in the art world, and the artists of India and Indonesia still have the obligation to manifest a cultural presence that is distinct from the normative model of the West. Though both Raqs and ruru consider urban experience and everyday life, and both take collective processes to be a more effective method to develop a cultural perspective than making an individual contribution, they pursue their goals with a slightly different spirit. Raqs assumes the complexity of a postcolonial model in their pursuit of the generation of a cultural expression (exhibition making) on the global stage. Power dynamics are there, but they are quite complex and mediated through a variety of forces. In their model, monoculture and diversity, similarity and difference, can only mean anything in relationship to something else; they are fundamentally relational. I term such a model "postcolonial" because it has moved beyond the centrality and marginalization of colonial power dynamics, and assumes that national self-determination is no longer a feasible project, if it ever was. Their processes focus on questioning norms and building a kind of complexity that allow a participant to see global culture in a variety of particular manifestations.[2]

Ruru, on the other hand, approaches global exhibition making as a decolonial process. While the language of decolonization is present in the West—best represented perhaps by the organization "Decolonize the Museum"—ruru takes a less confrontational approach. They generate processes that take on a life of their own and generate culture through interaction, coming together and hanging out. This does not ever look like a revolution, but it is decolonial—I would argue—because it seeks to generate an alternative culture of, by, and for the people, though without any need to address politics or economics specifically. They perceive culture as a force that is essential to people, and their resistance comes from opening doors and inviting people in. As one of the members of ruru stated in an interview about documenta, "Indonesians like to build collectives, we know how but explaining why is an issue that could be explored theoretically" (Ruangrupa 2021). As far as I can tell, Indonesians are manifesting their proper culture in the building of collectives, and it is a means that they can share, of how to overcome the limitations of neoliberal globalization and explore the real capacities everyone has to make the world a place for them. This is a process of cultural decolonization which is embedded in ruru's collective approach to the curation of documenta.

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Notes

1. The Group of Seven industrialized countries—the G-7—was informally founded by a group of Finance Ministers in 1974. Currently, it is an annual summit of the leaders of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States that considers issues of global economic and security significance.

2. In an email response, Jeebesh Bagshi explained that Raqs' own view is that they are not post-colonial in their approach but "de-postcolonial". This is one of their highly complex formulations of language, but I take it to mean that they see themselves as working to destabilize the postcolonial model of both theory and practice through their artistic and curatorial work.

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