

A Radical Collective Takes Over One of the World's Biggest Art Shows

Ruangrupa, an Indonesian group of collaborators, turns social experiences into art. How will they leave their mark on Documenta, which unfolds over 100 days?

By Samanth Subramanian
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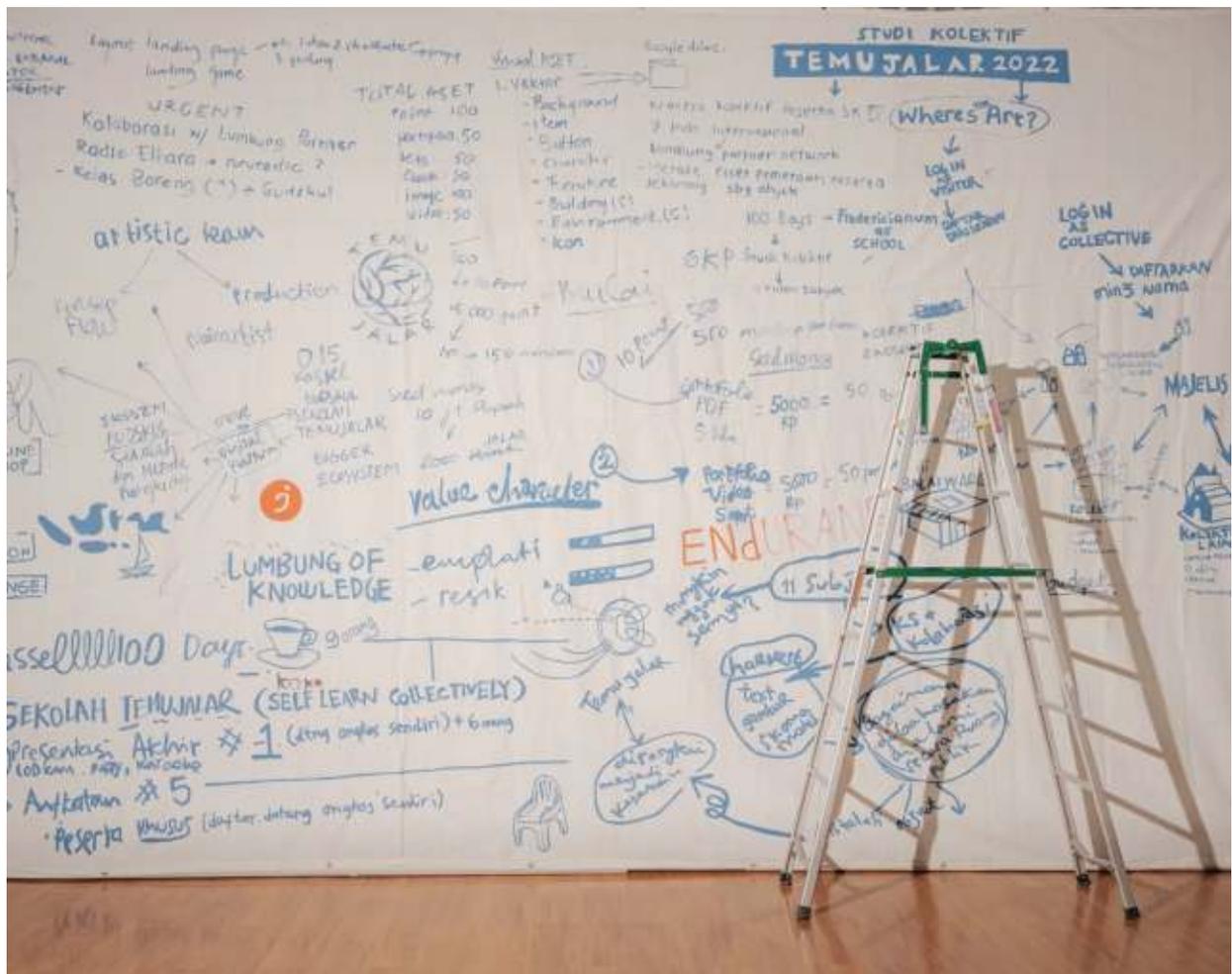
For four out of every five years, Kassel is a relatively humdrum town. Its population of 217,796 inhabits a central German valley, hundreds of miles from Berlin or Munich. Its parks and palaces are Teutonic-prim. People eat their lunchtime kebabs on a plaza opposite the squat, sober Fridericianum, one of Europe's oldest public art museums. The local football team, KSV Hessen Kassel, languishes in the fourth tier of the German league. But on the half-decade, when Kassel hosts Documenta, arguably the world's largest exhibition of contemporary art, nearly a million visitors pour in over 100 summer days. The Fridericianum is the nucleus, but Documenta annexes the entire town — shops, gardens, warehouses, streets — leaving relics behind. A wanderer may be art-struck without warning. Once, walking by the Fulda River, I encountered a Claes Oldenburg sculpture, from a Documenta in 1982: a tremendous blue pickax planted bit-first into the soil.

If you're tempted to be pleased by the pickax — to regard it as a fine interplay of public art and public life — ruangrupa, an artists' collective from Indonesia, will gladly disillusion you. Ruangrupa is directing the 15th edition of Documenta, which opens this month. Throughout its 22-year history, the group has spurned the ideal of art as object. The pickax may be outdoors, but a formal gap still separates artifact from audience. In Indonesian, the words ruang and rupa mean "room" and "form," so the group's mashed-up name prizes not product but process: the physical space in which people collaborate, things take shape and art is made.

To describe ruangrupa as an "artists' collective" is a well-established shorthand but perhaps a misleading one. Not every ruangrupan is a conventional artist; one worked as a journalist, another trained as an ecologist, a third is an academic. The collective has no defined membership beyond a core of 10 people, and these 10 — architects, printmakers, a performance artist — don't work with one another to create what we typically recognize as art. It's not just that they don't create tangible objects, they don't even create intangible experiences of the kind, say, the artist Tino Sehgal does when he trains people to converse as pretend-docents with museumgoers. In fact, Ruangrupa has staged a solo show in a gallery only once, two decades ago.

'It's like they were taking revenge on this mythical space, trying to hurt it.'

Instead of collaborating to make art, ruangrupa propagates the art of collaboration. It's a collective that teaches collectivity. For its projects, ruangrupa solicits accomplices: artists, of course, but also those otherwise stranded on the art world's margins, like slum residents or factory workers. Out of these social relations and communal feeling, Ruangrupa coaxes an aesthetic. The artistic value of silk-screening T-shirts, cladding a neighborhood in murals or turning out zines lies in how decisions are collectively made — the process of determining which designs work best on which fabric, how high the murals should be, what texts to publish. Authorship ceases to matter. "Even opening up a coffee shop can be an artistic practice," Ade Darmawan, one of ruangrupa's founders, says. He was, perhaps, channeling Joseph Beuys, the German conceptual artist who once said, "The act of peeling a potato can be a work of art if it is a conscious act."



A mural for Documenta being prepared at Gudskul in Jakarta. Muhammad Fadli for The New York Times

“Where’s the art?” is a question that dogs ruangrupa, but it can be particularly vexing when asked of ruangrupa as curators, which is what they are at Documenta. In 2018, Documenta gathered a committee of eight to find its next director. Documenta’s directors have always been professional curators, with big theoretical ideas. But several of the committee members knew ruangrupa well, and one suggested — “with a look of, I don’t know, worry or uncertainty,” Darmawan recalled — that they apply. A year later, after two rounds of elimination, Darmawan and two others flew to Germany to pitch the committee in person. In a chilly, converted church in Kassel, they explained their concept: the *lumbung*, the common rice store traditionally found in Indonesian villages, built and shared by everyone. They wanted Documenta to be a *lumbung*, treating artists as partners and creating resources that would live on beyond the show. The committee was intrigued, Darmawan said; Documenta revels in being bold, in spotlighting the most important ideas in contemporary art. Nonetheless, the questions the audience asked betrayed a “Where’s the art?” kind of mystification. So you’re going to bring a lot of farmers here? So there won’t really be an exhibition?

The 20th century brims with collectives turning their backs on the elite art market or, in Asia, Africa and Latin America, collectives that never knew that market in the first place. The French filmmaker Guy Debord, who helped start an avant-garde group called the Situationist International in 1957, was the dean of this school of thought, decrying the visual arts as spectacles degraded by capitalism and urging artists to work at renewing social relations. Even at previous Documentas, several artists have inhabited the zone between exhibit and collective practice. In 2002, the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn moved into a Kassel housing complex and enlisted other residents to construct shacks that served as a snack bar, a library, a TV studio and venues for workshops. Two Documentas later, Theaster Gates, a sculptor and urban planner from Chicago, restored a derelict Kassel hotel, bringing material and builders from his home city and hosting panels and concerts there. What makes ruangrupa radical, says Alexander Supartono, a historian of Indonesian art, is the sheer scope of the group’s collectivity: “It infuses their entire lives.”

When ruangrupa was invited to direct Documenta, the world was already grappling with sustainability, authoritarianism and inequality; the pandemic made these struggles feel even sharper, forcing everyone to search for a renewed sense of local community. Broad as they were, ruangrupa’s principles hummed with sudden, fresh relevance. “It’s become obvious that we need to find ways to reconceive what we’re doing and how we’re living, and not just in terms of art,” Amar Kanwar, an Indian filmmaker who served on the committee, told me. Still, if second thoughts lingered after ruangrupa was chosen, that would have been forgivable. No collective had assembled a Documenta before. Ruangrupa’s devotion to the collaborative process and its various allergies — toward authorship, markets, ticketed shows and all the other beams and buttresses of the art world — are thoroughgoing. Ruangrupa has long believed that institutions like Documenta need gutting and renovation. Now that it has the tools and the license, what will its Documenta look like?

Trying to capture ruangrupa’s body of work is like trying to pin down smoke. A writer may convey its philosophy or evoke memories of past shows, but between events — in the lead-up to Documenta, for instance — there’s nothing to see, no giant pickaxe to describe. It helps, then, to have an anchor, a shining example of ruangrupa’s sensibility and purpose: the one time they exhibited solo in a gallery.

In 2003, a gallery in the Indonesian city Yogyakarta invited ruangrupa to design a show for its new premises. Yogyakarta, an hour’s flight east of Jakarta, is the heart of Javanese culture as well as Indonesian contemporary art, so naturally ruangrupa wanted nothing but to be subversive. For a while, Darmawan and his colleagues thought that the best way to defy expectations was to produce a stack of paintings, to play against the stereotype that they always play against stereotype. In the end, they traveled to Yogyakarta with a small set of objects they made: a zinc water fountain, an installation of oxygen canisters and a blown-up photo of teeth with a scrap of chile stuck in them.



Mg Pringgtono, the director of Gudskul, an incubator for collectivism, in Jakarta, Indonesia. Gudskul runs yearlong courses in 11 subjects to teach how collectives can work. Muhammad Fadli for The New York Times

On opening night, ruangrupa threw a rager that lasted until 4 a.m. Two hundred people turned up, mostly artists from Jakarta and Yogyakarta. The gallery laid out a buffet dinner. After a local band played, Reza Afisina, a ruangrupan, D.J.ed techno. Things got crazy; Darmawan remembers people dancing on tables, throwing food, breaking plates and scribbling on the walls. (The gallery owner swung between delight and consternation. “I don’t know what to tell my wife,” he moaned as the night escalated.) The oxygen canisters came in handy, Darmawan said. “You know, when you have a party, it gets smoky and sweaty.” In the morning, ruangrupa left the aftermath as it was: cigarette ash and scraps of dinner on the floor, shards of crockery, T-shirts hanging on chairs, the ripe-papaya tang of party sweat in the air. That was the exhibition. For 10 days, it ran under the title “*Lekker Eten Zonder Betalen*,” a Dutch-pastiche phrase that evokes Indonesia’s colonial era and means, roughly, “Free, Delicious Food.”

Not everyone appreciated it. Some artists who returned after the party angrily dismissed the idea that their detritus was art, Afisina said. “We told them: ‘You felt energetic and inspired. You met your friends. That’s the art.’” Even then, communal energy as an aesthetic wasn’t a wholly novel notion; in 1990, for instance, an artist named Rirkrit Tiravanija cooked for guests at the Paula Allen Gallery in New York, showcasing not his pad Thai but the interactions of everyone around his food. Yet to come unexpectedly upon this still-rare practice felt somewhat different, befuddling. In asking viewers to imagine what had passed, it recalled Tracey Emin’s unmade bed, which the British artist exhibited in 1998 after spending four depressive days in it. “*Lekker Eten*,” though, was created by dozens of people in spontaneous, unknowing cahoots with each other, and it changed daily, as mold prospered on surfaces and maggots propagated in the food. “Usually, every time you go back into a gallery, you see the same thing,” Afisina said.

Ruangrupa had celebrated a gallery by scoffing at the very concept of the modern gallery — its uniformity and its self-assigned importance. “If it’s in a gallery, then it’s art,” Darmawan said. “I can spit here, and it’s spit, but if I spit in that divine space, then it becomes performance art by Ade Darmawan.” Even the party’s progression — the mess, the damage, the graffiti — reflected a cathartic response to the gallery: its commands not to touch this or that, its sly manner of asking you to feel smart but making you feel stupid. At the party, Darmawan said: “They just thought, This is the time. It’s like they were taking revenge on this mythical space, trying to hurt it.”

Bad form as it may be to single out one member of a collective, Darmawan invites particular attention. He is the only one of ruangrupa’s six founders in the current core team. At 47, he is among the oldest members; the shaggy hair that he wears pulled back into a ponytail is mostly gray. Someone described him to me as ruangrupa’s chief theoretician, but he cracked up when I relayed that to him. He often laughs gustily when he recollects the past: the corny name of a music festival he once helped organize (20 Something, 20 Nothing), a cartoon he drew as a boy, a resolution to be a model student that didn’t even last a full year of college.

Darmawan got his first solo show at age 5, when his father pinned his drawings up in their living room and asked the neighbors over for a viewing. His parents, both teachers, raised four children in east Jakarta, and Darmawan remembers how open his home was. Friends drifted in and out, extended relatives stayed for weeks or months — the cousin who came to Jakarta to study, the uncle hunting for a job. Everyone always hung out in the living room, talking and eating. His family’s house didn’t even have a front gate until very recently, Darmawan said. “Spaces weren’t defined as public or private, as they are in the West.”



Ade Darmawan (center, in orange) with the artist Tania Bruguera (left); Ayse Gulec, a member of Documenta’s artistic team (center, in black); and ruangrupa’s Farid Rakun (far right). Arne Piepke for The New York Times

His father taught him to draw, placing a toy next to the window to show how sunlight lent it highlights and shadows. When he was 14, he had a cartoon published in a national newspaper: a sketch poking gentle fun at Indonesia’s military, featuring goofy soldiers who might have been Beetle Bailey extras. After school, he studied printmaking at the Indonesia Institute of the Arts in Yogyakarta, a course burdened with the staid principles of Western realism. It reflected nothing of the city’s heritage of collective art workshops, called *sanggars*, or its recent crop of socialist artists, who built many of Jakarta’s grand leftist monuments during the two-decade rule of Sukarno, Indonesia’s first post-independence president.

Darmawan spent his time meeting other artists, and together they published zines, played gigs and griped about capitalism. (In one show, he plastered a wall with handwritten text copied from the overheated advertising copy of deodorant packaging.) These small experiments and joint projects were a reprieve from the notion that art must convey big social messages; in Indonesia, Darmawan said, earlier generations of artists felt cursed by that compulsion. In 1998, he grew still more discontented after entering a two-year artists’ residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. The facilities were excellent and the residents diverse, but they were all given their own studios and left to themselves. “It was like an office,” Darmawan said. The Rijksakademie was an exclusive space; a passer-by couldn’t just pop in to see a painting or a sculpture. “You needed a magnetic key card to get in,” he said. The practice of art seemed an asocial, even antisocial activity. It felt, he said, “restricted, elite, clinical.” He longed for the easy, fertile collaborations he’d left behind.

From Amsterdam, Darmawan watched Jakarta burn. Indonesia’s second president, Suharto, had ruled the country since Sukarno was ousted in 1967, overseeing not only a savage repression of the left but also a financial meltdown in the 1990s. Afisina, who was studying cinematography at the Jakarta Institute of Arts in those years, was so short of money that he lived in an art-school studio. In the dreadful summer of 1997, when the economy pitched into a full-blown crisis, political clashes spilled into the arts. Demonstrators fleeing the army and police burst into a dance festival, and when soldiers followed, they attacked the audience. “This was the first time we were being beaten,

and we didn't know how to deal with it," Afisina, who attended the festival, says. The next year proved both worse and better. The army shot and killed four students during a demonstration at a university, kindling unbridled riots, looting and arson. Suharto was forced to resign. When Darmawan returned in early 2000, his country was deep in *reformasi*, chasing a freer, more liberal democracy.

The founding of *ruangrupa* later that year was a recognition of the end of Suharto's stifling cultural climate — the monitoring and censoring, the curbs on dissent. But *ruangrupa* didn't necessarily set out to thumb its nose at political power. Its earliest members were from Indonesia's middle class, then just a couple of generations old, says Supartono, the art historian. As a result, *ruangrupa* was almost post-ideological in that it didn't aspire to effect sweeping political change. Rather, it wanted to be obdurately local, fixing the problems created by the commercial temper of Jakarta's art scene: the pressures to sell work, the tedium of the galleries, the deference toward Western trends. Like many cities, Jakarta had few physical spaces that could support anything new in art. *Ruangrupa's* chief order of business was to offer a *ruang*: a place for artists to meet each other, try things and fail and ignore for a while the demands and dogmas of the world outside.

One morning late in March, when I was visiting Jakarta, Darmawan asked me to meet him at a house in Tebet, a neighborhood in the heart of the city. When I arrived, he was sitting on the sidewalk, chain-smoking and shooting the breeze with a stocky young man, whose father used to fix cars on the street, when *ruangrupa* rented the house back in 2008. It was the fourth such house — or *ruruhouse*, you might say — that they occupied; the annual rent for the 1,300-odd square feet began at around 65 million rupiah (\$4,500), but when it doubled in seven years, *ruangrupa* decided to move. Today, a cafe occupies part of the ground floor, its tables and chairs distributed under a leafy bower on the veranda. The house's biggest space is a drab conference room. Darmawan and I stood there for a moment, trying to imagine it in *ruangrupa's* day: as a venue for exhibitions and late-night gigs, a meeting point, a place to steal naps. The street had changed, too, from a quiet residential lane to a congested thoroughfare. We sat in the cafe for four hours. Not a minute went by without motorcycles bawling past us.

The first *ruruhouse*, circa 2000, was small: barely 700 square feet over two floors. A few of *Ruangrupa's* founders lived there, by way of paying themselves. The *ruruhouses* frequently hosted shows by other artists. Supartono recounted a striking one, in which untrained photographers displayed images of their homes: old photos, new photos, group portraits of the neighbors, all slipped into the sleeves of cheap plastic Kodak or Fuji albums from a photo lab. Supartono recalled some enraged visitors asking: "What the hell is this? Where is the quality of the photograph? Where is the frame?" But the photos were meant to make you think about what constitutes a good photo, about how photography works "as a cultural practice of everybody — of your mom or your neighbor."



The printmaking studio at Gudskul, in Jakarta. Muhammad Fadli for The New York Times

Mostly, *ruruhouses* inspired *nongkrong* — the Indonesian word for the glorious pursuit of hanging out with people and not working. Across Indonesia, the word calls up images of men and women at little *warung* eateries, sitting on low benches or on their haunches, smoking and snacking and talking. *Nongkrong* may eventually be productive, yielding fresh thoughts or partnerships or a song. But that isn't its intention. If anything, *nongkrong* is anti-productive and anti-serious, prizing a capacious sense of companionship over any arbitrary valuation of time. Whenever Supartono stopped by a *ruruhouse* — "very chaotic, things everywhere" — he would join groups of people "talking about anything, literally anything." Artists went to a *ruruhouse* for the *nongkrong*. The art was the excuse.

This was revolutionary, not just in how the *ruruhouse* supplied what the market wouldn't but also in the way it put into casual practice some of the axioms of what's called relational art. A quick hit of theory: The French curator Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term "relational art" in 1998, describing an aesthetic born out of social ties. Rather than painted or sculpted objects, the stuff of this art is the ordinary relations between people, lifted into aesthetic consideration. The role of such work, Bourriaud wrote, is to recommend actual "ways of living and models of action." The *ruruhouses*, Supartono said, were all about relational aesthetics, because the art facilitated the socializing. *Ruangrupa* is so devoted to this idea that when it released a manifesto — "a short tactical guide," to be precise — in 2011, a section titled "Things to be considered in building up the working style" included not just "brainstorming" but also "jokes & play" and "music & alcohol & cigarettes."

'We told them: "You felt energetic and inspired. You met your friends. That's the art.'"

Even the art and events emerging from *nongkrong* carried the spirit of *nongkrong*. They were novel and collective, profoundly local, loose and irreverent. Ruangrupa paid for them by holding fund-raisers and applying for grants, never through sponsorship or other financing from the formal art market. In 2003, when ruangrupa assembled the first edition of OK. Video, a media-art festival in Indonesia, it drew thousands of people over two weeks. (Darmawan remembers that the National Gallery, where it was held, owned a few TVs but no VHS players, and its director didn't know what video art was.) For JakArt, another festival, ruangrupa secured the city's permission for an artist to put up a tent made of used clothes at the base of Monas, Jakarta's obelisk-shaped monument to the nation. "At night, the homeless began using it," Darmawan said. "The police were freaking out." Ruangrupa also started a series of workshops, known as Jakarta 32°C, that posed discrete artistic challenges to students. How would you draw if you couldn't hold a pen or pencil with your hands? (One pupil steered paper under the printing head of a seismograph to produce a sketch.) What is the tiniest artistic intervention you can make in Jakarta's old town? (Someone unrolled a red carpet in front of a derelict building and filmed pedestrians encountering it. A few avoided it; others stalked confidently over it.) These events rarely have any large, titular themes as most exhibitions do; even ruangrupa's adamant stance against the bloated commerce of art must be inferred. Global capitalism "has long been an octopus lurking in the bedroom," Mirwan Andan, a ruangrupa member, wrote in 2011, "but one needs to deal with it not only by grand projects, but rather ... with small narratives with more frequency."

The current *ruruhouse* isn't a house, exactly. In 2018, with funds from the Ford Foundation, ruangrupa, together with two other collectives, bought a patch of property in south Jakarta, just by the zoo. They rented the adjacent plot as well, and on this land, they built Gudskul, an incubator for collectivism. Gudskul runs yearlong courses in 11 subjects, not to train painters or photographers — why come here for that? — but to teach how collectives can work. One module discusses how groups can sustain themselves artistically and also financially; another surveys the history of collectives in Indonesia. This makes Gudskul sound like a niche sociology college, although it's really engaged in a project of historical restoration. All over the world but particularly in Southeast Asia, before capitalism's fierce individualism interfered, people worked in small, sustainable collectives not only to create art but also to grow crops or put up buildings. Large families, farms and guilds were all collectives; a village was a collective of collectives. Gudskul reminds its students of that traditional way of life — an approach that might have seemed conservative were it not for how countercultural it feels today.



The exterior of Gudskul, in Jakarta. Muhammad Fadli for The New York Times

I embarked on several days' worth of *nongkrong* in Gudskul, arriving in the midmorning quiet to sit under the breadnut trees with anyone who was up for a chat. When the collectives purchased the property, it held an indoor soccer court, so ruangrupa kept the high roof intact and built two floors of cabins within — some with drywall and glass windows, others out of shipping containers. Across a central, tree-lined passage stand more shipping containers: double-stacked, in a bright row, like a fastidious child's arrangement of Legos. By late afternoon, when Jakarta got its customary downpour, Gudskul purred with activity. Classes on Zoom. A tattoo parlor. A radio station called *rururadio*. An archivist in the compact library. A graphic-design lab. A publishing house and shop stocking Indonesian translations of world literature. Artists in their shipping-container studios. And everywhere, the sensation of slow ferment — the feeling that, as people floated through one another's orbits, they were being creatively galvanized, working all the time toward new art and new ideas. Not grand projects necessarily, as Andan said, but small, rich narratives with great frequency.

To flesh out some of these abstractions, consider ruangrupa's shows at two exhibitions: the Asia Pacific Triennial in Brisbane in 2012 and the São Paulo Biennial in 2014. This period proved to be a cusp, says Farid Rakun, an architect who joined ruangrupa in 2010. For Brisbane, ruangrupa invented an underground Indonesian rock band from the 1970s, created memorabilia and persuaded Brisbane rockers to testify to the band's influence. It was wild, engrossing work, and it delighted ruangrupa, in particular, that the ruse leaked out of the museum and into real life. "Years after that, someone showed us a blog post talking about the Kuda," Darmawan said. "I think they didn't know it was actually fiction, because it was very serious writing, talking about how the Indonesian punk scene influenced the Brisbane punk scene." But this was all still "closer to what people understand as art projects," Rakun told me. São Paulo, on the other hand, became "the first time we were staging ourselves." After that, he said, the invitations to art festivals multiplied, "boom-boom-boom-boom," and exporting ruangrupa — its exercises in collectivity — became the convention.

At São Paulo, ruangrupa planned very little and made almost nothing. Instead, Rakun said, they replicated ruangrupa's presence and methods on site. In advance of the biennial, they flew to Brazil twice to meet other collectives: graphic designers, architects and activists. "Tell us what's happening in your city," ruangrupa asked by way of research, learning in the process about the hottest karaoke songs, about São Paulo's motorcycle taxis that resemble Jakarta's *ojeks* and about a public square that an architectural collective was working to preserve. "It was their way of coming to grips with a city that was similar to Jakarta in terms of its growth and history of colonialism," Charles Esche, the curator of that biennial, said.

In their assigned space, on the ground floor of an Oscar Niemeyer building, they laid out a scaled-down *ruruhouse*: couches for *nongkrong*, a spot for *rururadio*, another for a gallery. And in this home away from home, ruangrupa struck up a dialogue between Jakarta and São Paulo. The gallery hosted works by artists from the two cities. A Paulista food cart, repurposed as a movie projector, played films from the OK. Video archive and a São Paulo collective. As a *rururadio* stand-in, ruangrupa erected a pup tent and invited people in for karaoke; they sat cross-legged on the floor and sang Portuguese, English and Indonesian songs. Esche recalled that São Paulo's ojek drivers — not ordinarily the kind of people who feel welcome at biennials — hung around the *ruruhouse*, giving rides to visitors.



Community members engaged in "nongkrong" (the Indonesian term for hanging out) by the coffee shop at Gudskul. Muhammad Fadli for The New York Times

On the long glass walls of the building, ruangrupa stenciled giant yellow street maps of São Paulo so that visitors could colonize them with their memories, pasting decals and scrawling captions next to meaningful locations. One person marked the spot in Ibirapuera Park where she made love on the grass at night. Another wrote, in Portuguese, "At the crossroads, a kiss." One note began, "I feel the wind, I run against the wind and you in the cars ..." Another picked out a sushi place. Esche was struck by the effect of it all. "I mean, people singing karaoke in a tent, in the middle of a biennial — you can imagine how it totally disrupts the idea of reception and of the silent admiration of art," Esche said. "But you also feel happy, and you start smiling. This shift is something they provoke."

In spirit, ruangrupa's methods feel particularly suited to Documenta, whose five-year cycle provides so much lead time that its curators are really impresarios, supervising not a mere exhibition but an emporium of the avant-garde. The works are often large in scale and teasing; sometimes, they're also maddening. Joseph Beuys planted oaks, and Lois Weinberger planted weeds. Ai Weiwei brought 1,001 Chinese citizens to Kassel and invited them to roam around: That was the work. In 2012, the art critic Jerry Saltz approached a woman at a cafe table and asked, "Are you a piece of sculpture?" Such a sculpture was in the vicinity, he knew: someone installed as a piece of living art by the artist Ryan Gander. But that person was at another table. This woman, meanwhile, asked Saltz to please step away.

The incident reminded me of "The Illogic of Kassel," a sly fable by Enrique Vila-Matas, in which Documenta invites him to sit and write in a Chinese restaurant, Dschingis Khan, while the patrons regard him as an exhibit. Vila-Matas describes his explorations of Kassel, including his encounter with a Tino Sehgal work, in which visitors walk into a dark room and feel mysterious shapes brushing past them. I giggled at this note-perfect invention. Then I discovered that, not only did Sehgal really stage this piece of theater at Documenta but also that Vila-Matas was genuinely invited to be in residence at Dschingis Khan. Later, I read a pamphlet by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the director of that Documenta in 2012, in which she mused, "Truthfully, I am not sure that the field of art will continue to exist in the 21st century."

At Documenta, ruangrupa first did what it always does: dispatch an advance guard and set up a *ruruhouse*, or *ruruHaus*, to be locally specific. Reza Afisina and the architect Iswanto Hartono moved to Kassel with their families in 2020 to liaise with Documenta's staff and lay the groundwork for the exhibition. Their *ruruHaus* occupied three floors of a former department store across the road from the Fridericianum. The usual, ruangrupa-like things happened all over the building: There were workshops and talks, a print shop and a radio station. The daily lives of Afisina and Hartono unfolded either on the parking deck, where they could smoke, or around a large table in the third-floor kitchen. Passing artists paused to chat; the Documenta team held meetings. Conversations accumulated like fluff. When I was there in September, I spotted four refrigerators in the kitchen, a corkscrew in a glass that otherwise held whiteboard markers and an electric cooker on a bookshelf. One afternoon, when we felt as if we'd talked enough, Afisina fixed us spinach fried rice.

Previous Documenta curators traversed the world to meet artists and solicit their ideas. Ruangrupa's members, grounded by Covid-19 in Jakarta and Kassel, caught Zoom fatigue instead of jet lag. To build their *lumbung* — their rice barn — ruangrupa assembled a core of 14 collectives, from countries as far-flung from one another as Cuba, Bangladesh, New Zealand, Mali and Denmark. These collectives were asked to invite other artists, who in turn invited still others, like a virtuous pyramid scheme. Then, depending on their time zone — such are the strictures of the Zoom age — the artists were sorted into nine groups called mini-majelises, from the Arabic term for "council." Ruangrupa conceived of these mini-majelises as the entire purpose of Documenta. The artists were selected for their backgrounds in collective projects, and in their mini-majelises, they decided how to collaborate with one another or whether to collaborate at all. On occasion, the process got very meta. In Kassel, I met Kiri Dalena, an activist and artist from the Philippines, who was thinking about filming the early-morning rush at a food pantry that people in her home village began during the pandemic. This was collective practice taking collective practice as its subject.



A rururadio stand-in at the 31st Bienal de Sao Paulo, Brazil in 2014 ruangrupa

Until 2017, Documenta hadn't paid artists for their work, assuming that their star would rise amply just by showing at Kassel. (It was strange, Saltz wrote in *New York magazine*, that Documenta's artists and curators assumed an "endlessly idiotic 'anti-market' stance" when the market was so tightly braided into the exhibition. This was still, he argued, "art only for the .01 percent.") Ruangrupa insisted on higher artist fees this year, running to tens of thousands of euros, but in addition, the mini-*majelis* were each given a pot of as much as 220,000 euros to spend as they wished. The artists agreed that their mini-*majelis*' pots would fund a printing press at Documenta, to publish daily bulletins and schedules. Separately, a share of Documenta's ticket sales sponsored a small arts festival in a Sumatran village. This level of autonomy felt riotous and profuse, like vegetation in an Amazonian jungle. Often I thought that ruangrupa couldn't possibly know about every single thing blooming on its watch.

For Documenta, which, after all, is a relatively orthodox German bureaucracy, ruangrupa's tactics weren't always easy to absorb. One mini-*majelis* wanted to spend a share of its common pot to buy a heap of 27-euro-per-day entry tickets for the exhibition, so that it could be entirely free for one day or several. The exhibition's budget over its five years, of around 42 million euros, is half-borne by the government, with the rest coming from grants and ticket sales. So to Documenta, Farid Rakun said, the mini-*majelis*'s proposal seemed incomprehensible, "like taking money from one of its pockets and putting it in another." Sabine Schormann, the chief executive of Documenta, sometimes felt overwhelmed by the baggy character of ruangrupa's unstructured style of working, she said. "In the beginning, for us, it was like, 'How the hell will we get to any decision this way?'" she said. And yet, Documenta made progress — in part, she implied, because ruangrupa was steering, so perhaps it doesn't sanction as much anarchy as its members would have us believe. Here we were in September, nearly a full year before Documenta, Schormann said, and the list of exhibiting artists was already finalized — a rarity. It felt like a triumph. "Sometimes you think nothing has happened for a long time," she said, "but suddenly it's there."

In the spirit of *Lekker Eten*, ruangrupa's most evident subversion of Documenta will occur at the Fridericianum, the majestic seat of the exhibition, with its half-barrel rotunda and its long galleries as white as dental clinics. The building lies in the care of Fridskul, a mini-*majelis* of 11 artists and collectives. Among them is Graziela Kunsch, a Brazilian artist who has made two decades' worth of video and performance works, but who of late — ever since she had a daughter three years ago, in fact — has had babies on her mind. Last summer, Kunsch met Darmawan, Rakun and a few others on Zoom, where she explained her preoccupation with the Pikler approach: a philosophy, named after a 20th-century Hungarian pediatrician, that believes in letting toddlers play unsupervised. Ruangrupa told her that they wanted to turn the Fridericianum into "a dynamic school" for the hundred days of Documenta and that her plan for a Pikler day care would fit right in.

Over the next few months, Fridskul apportioned the ground floor: a library in the rotunda, room for Gudskul's workshops and, near the far end of one wing, Kunsch's free public day care. In concert, Fridskul's members came to some surprising, even delightful decisions. They planned, for instance, to use a common pot to pay for new handrails along staircases, installed a couple of feet off the ground, so that children can climb up and down confidently. In the Fridericianum, there will be a 16-bed dormitory for workshop participants who need a lie-down.



Members of ruangrupa and Documenta's artistic team on the parking deck of the ruruHaus in Kassel in May. Bottom row, from left: Frederikke Hansen, Ajeng Nurul Aini, Lara Khaldi, Ade Darmawan and Farid Rakun. Top row: Indra Ameng, Reza Afisina, Julia Sarisetiati, Gertrude Flentge and Iswanto Hartono. Arne Piepke for The New York Times

In Kassel, Kunsch met a woman who ran a day care, and their ideas rhymed so perfectly that they became partners in Kunsch's project. In her vivid, scrupulous fashion, she described their day care, down to its measurements: 940 square feet for play, 680 square feet for naps and diaper changes. Parents of babies up to age 3 can watch their children locomote on tatami mats or haul themselves up on their jellied legs by holding on to short, fence-like partitions. There will be a few simple objects, Kunsch said — and here, on our Zoom call, she took down from a shelf a swatch of red cloth with white polka dots that had been rolled into a tight cylinder. Nearby, Kunsch will show videos of her daughter's development and old photos taken at a residential nursery that Pikler founded in Budapest. But these familiar museum items shouldn't fool anyone, Kunsch insisted. "The day care is not an installation," she said. "It is a space of use." Kunsch and her collaborator want to host a special parents-and-babies group for Ukrainians arriving in Kassel, so that refugee families and their toddlers can meet one another. She had allocated her budget, she said, so paying for a translator would be difficult. Still, she hoped to find someone in Kassel to step in as an unexpected artistic accomplice.

The truly pioneering feat of art, though, was not her work alone, or anyone else's, but the totality of Documenta, she said. "I've done things like this before, but usually it's because I've worked with nice curators who are open to my way of doing things," Kunsch said. "This time it comes from the curators, and it's not one artist or a few artists doing things this way — it's the basis of the whole show. It's amazing that ruangrupa is even doing such a thing."

When I last spoke to Darmawan, in mid-May, he still hadn't met Kunsch in person. But she would be in Kassel soon, he said; Documenta's artists were fast descending upon the town to activate their works into their final, public forms. Like ruangrupa's other members, Darmawan was rotating through Documenta's venues every day, on foot or by tram, to watch the art take life and sometimes to participate in its creation. It sounded like the unromantic side of the process, I remarked — like a tech rehearsal in which actors mark their positions onstage and light guys fiddle with their spots. Not at all, Darmawan insisted. "This is the part when you deal with artistic decisions," he said. "You go to the venues and get a sense of the space. Artists come in and want to change things or do new things. You decide together, you discuss. For me, personally, and for ruangrupa, this phase is the best part."

Samanth Subramanian is a senior reporter at Quartz. He last wrote a feature for the magazine about two brothers in Sri Lanka who became suicide bombers.