



The democratization of knowledge and curiosity through *gotong-royong* art by Grace Samboh

Seni kerja sama—or, literally, the art of working together. That is the title I gave to the exhibition held at the end of HackteriaLab 2014 - Yogyakarta. The initial reason for this had been simple. First of all, this it was not an exhibition especially dedicated for media art—much less new media—which is how people often take such practices to be. The review on the exhibition, written by the curator Hendro Wiyanto on the weekly news magazine of *Tempo* also takes a similar path: It is the practice of media art in collaboration with other disciplines.¹ Second, I'm invariably annoyed by the term 'collaboration', which is often affixed at, or used to refer to, the current art practices done by more than one person—especially ones involving other disciplines than art, or involving non-art people who are often referred to with the generic term of

'the public'. Now I am forced to explain my made-up term of *kerja sama* to avoid adding to the confusion regarding the misuse of terms that are often adopted without any further thought about their equivalent in the Indonesian language and in the practices of art in this country.² I suspect, however, that there is no way for us to correctly translate '*seni kerja sama*'. Or, if there is a way to do it, it would be accompanied with quite a bit of explanation.

Almost six months after the exhibition, I was asked to present again parts of it in the form of an exhibition under the theme of activism, collectivism. Writing this essay has forced me to revisit the idea of '*seni kerja sama*' or 'the art of working together'. I was reminded of a part of President Soekarno's speech rousing

the Indonesian people to develop the country and the nation: "*Gotong-royong* is a communal labour, a shared toil, a common struggle to help one another. The common contribution for the common good, the sweat of all for the happiness of all."³

Terminologies

There are some terms that are often used in the realm of art to discuss about art-related activities involving more than one person. In 1996, curator Nicolas Bourriaud introduced a term for artistic practices that use as their points of departure the relations between humans and their social contexts; i.e. relational aesthetic. Bourriaud lays the emphasis on the artist's point of departure. Bourriaud argues that the issue of the relations between humans and their social context can take place theoretically (only as a philosophical basis) or as the practices of art itself (as the steps or structure applied in the realisation of the work).⁴ He first introduced this term in his curatorial essay for the exhibition with Carsten Höller, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Jorge Pardo, Liam Gillick, Maurizio Cattelan, Miltos Manetas, Philippe Parreno, Pierre Huyghe, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Vanessa Beecroft.

One of the most prominent terms within the contemporary political awareness—one which helps construct the characters of new generations in a range of disciplines, from art, software development, to social and political activism—has been: Collaboration. Artistic work done by more than one person is called collaboration. Artistic work done alongside people from other disciplines is called

collaboration. Artistic work done alongside non-art people (or those whom we often call 'the public', 'the community', etcetera) is called collaboration. Within the context of contemporary art and visual culture from the year 2000 onward, the academician Irit Rogoff has helped construct the discourse of collaboration.⁵ She elaborates on the different efforts involving other people (or other disciplines) by comparing them with cooperation.⁶ Rogoff perceives collaborative efforts as being quite organic in nature. They rely on ideas, the problems at hand and the work itself, not on who is doing what.

Let us now return to the issue of terminology. Lately, one often refers to the term of 'participatory art' in discussions about art activities involving other people. In an article published in *Artforum* (2006) the art historian Claire Bishop initiated the discourse about such activities.⁷ She begins her article by quoting the artist Dan Graham: "All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that's more social, more collaborative, and more real than art." Bishop thinks that people today are often more concerned about *how* a work is done rather than *what* the result is. She constructs the argument about participatory art using social changes as its basis, which she believes often put artists in a tight corner with the issue of ethics in the context of the exploitation of subject matters. In her book, *Artificial Hells* (2012), Bishop elaborates on the issue of participatory art, starting from the needs of the state or the capital for the involvement of the "public" in artistic practices. (We can, on another occasion, have a debate on who the "public" is—that

is why I'm using the quotation marks.) The needs of the state is implemented through the disbursement of funds for the activities of (what they consider as) public art, in which the level of public involvement is measurable.

In Indonesian, "*kerja sama*"—which literally means "working together"—is quite a neutral term as it is not used in the general context of art. The issue of translation, however, then becomes quite problematic. In English, "*kerja sama*" can be translated either as "collaboration" or "cooperation". The latter is closely related with the realm of economics; the first, with the realm of art in general. The choice of using "collaboration" for this term gives rise to a problem when we consider Rogoff's explanation: "collaboration for the sake of collaboration".⁸ I am not trying to prove that this is a wrong premise; only, in the practices of life—and of art—that I see around me, in this country, this is virtually impossible. To be able to explain it in simple terms, I quote the words of the senior composer and clarinettist Suka Hardjana, "If we talk about the relationship between art and the public, whether it is art within the public or art for the public, we are confused precisely when we study art using the Western perspective. This is not to say that the West is wrong; rather, our approach has perhaps been inherently different. [...] Our mistake is that we are just mimicking, wanting to construct something that one calls 'ars nova' or 'art', making art that is separate from its context. By this I mean that the art that is separated from the public, from rituals, from social intercourse. We become alienated. That kind of art does not actually exist here. Art here is invariably related

with the social context, religious context, or any kind of context.” Phenomenologically, then, the context is the public. It is therefore not an independent art.”⁹

I chose to write “*kerja sama* art”—the art of working together—as the subtitle for the exhibition of HackteriaLab 2014 because it is more appropriate, more suitable considering how the work had been executed. However, as I write this essay and think about how to translate it, I change my mind. I think “collaboration” is the direct and appropriate translation for “*kerja sama*”. It is true that the term “*kerja sama*” is free from the values inherent in the term of collaboration, whether as a method or objective. Therefore, it is actually useless to adopt the term “collaboration”—but this is for another discussion. “*Gotong-royong*” becomes an interesting and logical term for me to use to replace the term of “*kerja sama*” that I have previously used—especially considering the cultural meaning inherent in the term, as elaborated by the Indonesian expert and anthropologist Clifford Geertz: “An enormous inventory of highly specific and often quite intricate institutions for effecting the cooperation in work, politics, and personal relations alike, vaguely gathered under culturally charged and fairly well indefinable value-images—*rukun* (‘mutual adjustment’), *gotong-royong* (‘joint bearing of burdens’), *tolong-menolong* (‘reciprocal assistance’)—governs social interaction with a force as sovereign as it is subdued.”¹⁰

Gotong-royong art

Gotong-royong art is not a genre. It is a method, an approach, or even a series of processes that do not need to end immediately. It has no single objective, much less tangible and measurable ones.

Gotong-royong art can be executed using any kind of medium and has at least three criteria. First, the emphasis on the idea rather than the roles of those who are involved. Say, for example, residents in a neighbourhood decide

that they need a better road. They set a target to finish fixing the road in a month. Rather than hiring men to install paving blocks, they decide to chip in to procure the materials and to do the work as a part of the neighbourhood watch. After calculating and considering the resources they have, the residents agree on installing a set minimum of paving blocks per day.

What about the residents who are unable to take part in the neighbourhood-watch round? What about the residents who have no inkling whatsoever about construction work and materials? There will invariably be a way out. Those who cannot take part in the neighbourhood watch would, say, contribute a larger amount of funds. Those who are used to dealing with construction work would serve as supervisors in the mixing, processing and distribution of the materials. Those who do not have a clue about construction work would take the role of the workers installing the paving blocks. Those who cannot do manual work would prepare food and beverage for the workers, et cetera. The emphasis here is on the construction of a better road in the area, and not the roles taken to bring about the idea.

Second, the tendency for a *gotong-royong* effort to have an organic structure (it is not important who leads; all roles are important).

Can we not appoint as the initiator or the motivator the one who first introduced the issue of the need for a better road? Yes, of course we can. Unlike debates of high-brow art, however, the ownership of the idea is a non-issue in *gotong-royong* art, as the idea is essentially derived from a common need.

Art, in the Indonesian society, invariably begins from social needs—starting from the art of sculpting for making temple reliefs, on to the art of singing done to recite praises or stories in *wayang*. It is essentially difficult, therefore, to apply the perspective of formalism as the point of departure, or even as a general tendency in the practices of art Indonesia. Formalism can be used to measure the (artistic and) intrinsic

quality of an art work, but it cannot be used to measure the extrinsic value of the work. The extrinsic quality is always immediately related to the function of the art work in the society. What is thus the use of an art work?

Since the advent of the idea of 'art for arts', many have said that an art work no longer has a function in the structure of the society. It is free from didactics, morality and practical functions. Art, therefore, is considered as serving no other functions than for the development of art itself. This does not mean that art work has no use because use is not the same as function. Something can function but has no use; something that is of use, however, will certainly function. This is the **third** point of that which I consider *gotong-royong* art. **Gotong-royong art is invariably useful for all involved parties** as it starts off from a common idea, a common need.

In the HackteriaLab 2014 exhibition, all displayed objects had been made using the method of *gotong-royong* art. Some of those could, and needed to, be called art objects; others, not necessarily so. The makers deliberately performed the method of *gotong-royong* art although the term was yet to exist. You will be able to read about the story of each work on the Hackteria wiki page.¹¹ For this essay, we shall thus refer to another example. Consider the case of Jatiwangi art Factory (JaF). Yes, they have had a long journey. But let us for a moment consider the case of Jatiwangi march and pledge, taken during the Ceramics Music Festival 2012 alongside the Rampak 1001 Perkusi Genteng (or the Orchestra of 1001 Roof Tile Percussions). More than 3,000 residents of Jatiwangi Subdistrict were involved in the event—the 1,000-odd orchestra players, those who attended the event and took the pledge, and those who had prepared themselves and learned to sing the march. The procession involved the head of the subdistrict, the head of the village, and the head of the Jatiwangi Police Department, all representing the local government. Today, are there those among us

who talk about the march, the different short-film versions of the march, the content of the oath or even the musical composition played in the orchestra? No.¹²

It is clear that the idea was the most important thing in that JaF's event. The emphasis given in the execution of the march and pledge has been how the people become united to develop themselves and their environment, using their culture as the basis. Are these those among us who have ever discussed who first proposed the idea for the march and the oath? Even if there is any, would that discussion be in any way relevant to the reality that the residents of Jatiwangi have taken ownership of the march and pledge? Whoever came up with the idea of writing the march and the pledge, and of their official launching, is no longer important. What were the roles played by JaF and the head of the subdistrict? Who supervised whom? None of these serve as an important topic of discussion in its own context. Leaders are not the important issue here; neither are they something to be debated about. It was the common needs that lead the work in the preparation and execution of the Ceramics Music Festival 2012, making sure that the work immediately became of use for all those who were involved.

Curiosity as a need

Almost all of the terms I have used above immediately refer to the tension between ethics and aesthetics in the way of Jacques Rancière. For this essay, I feel the need to use as my point of departure *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1987, translated into English in 1991). This has served as an inspirational manuscript for a variety of alternative educational methods developed to this day. Rancière's premise is (deceptively) simple: In today's education, the hierarchical pattern of teacher-student must be questioned because democracy is about equality. What is equality-based education? Is it one in which the different roles of teacher and learner no longer

exist? The reality might not be as simple as it sounds. What can actually take place is perhaps the education that is based on the needs of the learner, in which the teacher acquires the role of a learning buddy. Teachers become the key source for knowledge extension; this does not mean that they must be in ownership of the knowledge.

The general need is for a change in the attitude toward experience, knowledge and scholarship. Such art travails involving many people have the same needs. Changing the way people learn, how people experience things; changing the condition in which knowledge is perceived as an expensive thing that can only be acquired in certain places or through the legitimacy of certain institutions; nurturing curiosity and eventually making experience-based knowledge the ownership of whoever that wants it. One should give an extra emphasis on the last phrase of the previous sentence: Whoever that wants it. There is a tendency that when we talk of the “democratisation” of something, it is as if everyone has the same needs for that thing. It is not like that at all. Experience-based knowledge and all debates about changes have no use whatsoever for those who have no needs for them.

The general needs would be the democratisation of curiosity. The starting point would be the condition in which experience and knowledge are a shared ownership, owned by all. It is true that scholarship institutionalises certain experiences and knowledge; curiosity and needs for experience and knowledge, however, are the rights for all, owned by all. They are not owned by a certain scholarly institution. All who is willing to do so, therefore, can have it and will have the chance to find out and even test out the scholarship itself. Again: all who is willing to do so.

What is the position of art in this constellation? Art is the travail and scholarship that is based on experience and the sharing of experience.¹³ The method of *gotong-royong* art is taken

using the needs of such curiosity as its starting point. *Gotong-royong* art is not a way to create a certain form, although there are always possibilities of the presence of objects or any physical manifestations out of such travails. *Gotong-royong* art has the objective to create an ideal condition in which knowledge and curiosity become shared ownership and of use to all involved and to their original scholarly institutions.

Footnotes

- 1 Hendro Wiyanto, “Kelindan Seni dan Sains Terapan” in the weekly *Tempo* magazine, 11 May 2014. It can also be read on http://lifepatch.org/Kelindan_Seni_dan_Sains_Terapan
- 2 I am not a linguistic expert—it is just that I think a number of words (and especially terms) that have been adopted into Indonesian often lead artistic practices in the country to the abyss of exoticism, or to contexts that are thoroughly different from the artistic practices of their countries of origin.
- 3 Badan Persiapan Umum Pelaksanaan Kemerdekaan Indonesia (The Committee for the Preparatory Work for Indonesian Independence, 1 June 1945
- 4 “[relational aesthetic is] a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context.” – Nicolas Borriaud in the catalogue of “**Traffic**”, an exhibition at the CAPC Musée d’Art Contemporain de Bordeaux, 1996.
- 5 During the period of 2006-2013, www.collabarts.org often discussed the discourse of ‘collaboration’. Irit Rogoff’s essay on the site, “Production Lines: Conversations on Collaborative Arts Practice”, serves as a main reference of sorts in talks about art done in collaboration with a lot of people.
- 6 “In contrast to co-operation, collaboration is driven by complex realities rather than romantic notions of common grounds or commonality. It is an ambivalent process

- constituted by a set of paradoxical relationships between co-producers who affect one another. Collaboration entails rhizomatic structures where knowledge is not arranged around a centre, but grows exuberantly and proliferates in unforeseeable ways. In contrast to co-operation, which always implies an organic model and a transcendent function, collaboration is a strictly immanent and wild praxis. [...] In the last instance collaborations are driven by the desire to create difference and refuse the absolutistic power of organization. Collaboration entails overcoming scarcity and inequality and struggling for the freedom to produce. It carries an immense social potential, as it is a form of realization and experience of the unlimited creativity of a multiplicity of all productive practices.” – Irit Rogoff and Florian Schneider, “Production Anticipation”. Excerpted from Held, David, and Henrietta L. Moore, eds. **Cultural Politics in a Global Age: Uncertainty, Solidarity and Innovation**. Oxford: Oneworld, 2008.
- 7 Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents”. Taken from **Artforum**, February 2006, p. 178–83.
 - 8 “Every collaborative activity begins and ends within the framework of the collaboration. It has no external goal and cannot be decreed; it is strict intransitivity, it takes place, so to speak, for its own sake.” – Florian Schneider, “Collaboration” paper for the **Summit: Non-aligned initiatives in education culture** (Berlin: May 24-28 2007). Available at <http://summit.kein.org/node/190> (accessed September 20, 2014, 5.46pm, GMT+7).
 - 9 ST Sunardi; A. Supratiknya; and Ardian Prabava. **SUKA HARDJANA: Manusia Anomali Tanpa Kompromi**. Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Penerbit Universitas Sanata Dharma, 2014, pp. 31-35 (Seni dan Masyarakat).
 - 10 Clifford Geertz, “Local Knowledge: Fact and Law in Comparative Perspective,” in Geertz *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, NY: Basic Books. 1983, p. 167-234.
 - 11 The stories can be read on <http://hackteria.org/wiki/HLab14-Exhibition> as well as in the book *#Hlab14* (2014)
 - 12 The preparation can be viewed here youtu.be/w-zn1CAfPAQ, the orchestra itself is documented here youtu.be/jA5TAUj_-9c, and here youtu.be/rB5ZRkWqoGk is a video uploaded by one of the participants in the CMF 2012 opening ceremony. The declaration of JATIWANGI PLEDGE read by the people of Jatiwangi lead by the Jatiwangi Sub-District Chief, Police Chief of Jatiwangi District, and Jatisura Village Chief can be viewed here youtu.be/RPuCOKI6Tyg and the English translation of the pledge is available here id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jatiwangi,_Majalengka. The Indonesian version of the JATIWANGI HYMN can be viewed here youtu.be/BJdFmOUwfD4, and the English version of the hymn is available here youtu.be/EfGQ7MlthzU.
 - 13 “Producing unites the act of manufacturing with the act of bringing to light, the act of defining a new relationship between making and seeing. Art anticipates work because it carries out its principle: the transformation of sensible matter into the community’s self-presentation. The texts written by the young Marx that confer upon work the status of the generic essence of mankind were only possible on the basis of German Idealism’s aesthetic programme, i.e. art as the transformation of thought into the sensory experience of the community.” – Jacques Rancière, **DISSENSUS: On Politics and Aesthetics** (Ed. & trans. by Steven Corcoran). 2010: Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, USA, p. 44.