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## FROM HERE AND NOW: NOTES FROM COMMON ROOM

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### ABSTRACT

*Since 2003, Bandung Center for New Media Arts has utilized Common Room as an open platform to accommodate emerging creative practice in Bandung. This place has become a transit space that bridging dialogue and multidisciplinary collaboration that is intended to connect numerous individuals, community and various organizations who come with diverse economic, social and political interest through certain negotiations, daily experiences and knowledge exchange. We also serve as facilitator for creative collaboration to achieve common goal and opportunities for those who are actively involve.*

*We intend to generate a place were people can add, edit and execute activities based on their own purpose and interest. It is an open platform with a vast network of cooperation that connect local, regional, and international creative communities and organizations in order to gain wider access on information and public knowledge in the area of public domain and creativity.*

**Keywords:** *Bandung, creative community, Internet, new media, creative economy, self-organized medialab, artist initiative space, artist-run space, urbanism, micro-politic, rhizome*

**<http://commonroom.info>**

*"[...] I think the term new media is actually quite useless. There's always been a new media. It was a new media when telegraph was invented, it was a new media when photograph was invented, it was even a new media when shadow puppet invented. These are all new forms of expression. And they all change and transform into the way we could communicate and interact to each other [...]"*

Suddhabrata Sengupta, during the lecture program in the Third Asia Europe Art Camp 2005 (Bandung - Indonesia, August 4 - 12 2005). [1]

### ART/INFORMATION/POWER

I have to admit that sometimes we still confuse to describe activities in Common Room. Once it was a house, which now turns into a public space. As long as I remember, it all started in 2003 when Reina Wulansari agreed to have some public activities in her house, after having long discussion with R. E. Hartanto, T. Ismail Reza and myself through the Internet back in 2002. This is of course related to some activities led by Bandung Center for New Media Arts and Tobucil (Toko Buku Kecil/ Small Bookshop). Both are organic initiatives that started their activities in 2001, which apparently started to initiate activities in Reina's private residence in 2003. Bandung Center for New Media Arts is an organization focusing their activities in developing media arts & multidisciplinary artistic practice, while Tobucil is known for their commitment in supporting local literacy movement in Bandung - Indonesia.

The idea to initiate an organization, which focuses on research and development in media arts and multidisciplinary artistic practice, was come from R.E Hartanto in the late 2001. During the time he was an artist who taking part in a residency program at the Rijksakademie v.B.K. Amsterdam. The whole ideas began to take form after our intense discussions through email and messenger. Back to that time, to have discussions through mailing list, MIRC or messenger surely was a new experience for us particularly when I've realized how the internet connection inevitably influenced the way we thought and eventually has strong influence in stimulating a new creative practice in our daily live. Although the internet connection has already been established in most major cities in Indonesia since 1994, I think even up until now it is considered as a new thing in most parts of Indonesia.

The aforementioned account may also fit with the description written by Rob van Kranenburg in his notes about the actualization of The Third Asia-Europe Art Camp 2005 in Bandung. In his article (referring to the opinion of Rasa Smite from RIXC, a media center in Riga, Latvia), it is said that the experience of using the Internet technology is considered to be a new experience for everybody, emphasizing the fact that such technology has merely occurred in more or less thirteen years (starting from the early development around 1992). Quotes from Rob van Kranenburg are as follows:

*"In terms of new media and policy there is very little clear and good practice and this is very logical as the visual metaphors of digitization for artistic purpose began only (with the exception of an IT/virtual reality driven trend) thirteen years ago with the launching of the browser. Rasa Smite from RIXC claims that the reason why she and other public domain driven artists in Latvia liked new media immediately was that there was no advantage for any one in any country as it was just as new for everybody. No one could claim a history that was uniquely theirs; every country had its own equally important story." [2]*

The development of Internet network in Indonesia has quite interesting process. The effort of developing such network has actually begun in 1986-1987 through some experiments in using Bulletin Board System (BBS) network connected with all BBS servers all over the world. Meanwhile, the inspiration to build Internet connection has also begun initiated by amateur radio user group, particularly ITB Amateur Radio Club (ARC) around 1986. Having only Transceiver HF SSB Kenwood TS430 belonged to Harya Sudirapratama and Onno W. Purbo's Apple II; some of ITB students such as Harya Sudirapratama, J. Tjandra Pramudito, Suryono Adisoemarta and Onno W. Purbo were learning from their seniors in amateur radio in 40m band (Robby Soebiakto, Achmad Zaini and Yos). Robby Soebiakto was said to be the most expert amongst the member of the group, especially for package of data communication, which had been developed into TCP/IP. Later on the package was being adopted by BPPT LAPAN UI and ITB, and turning into the establishment of PaguyubanNet in 1992-1994.[3]

In 1994 Internet service Provider (ISP) started to appear in Jakarta with the network provided by IndoNet, followed by many other ISPs behind, so that Internet network in some major cities in Indonesia were rapidly flourished. In 1995, there were 10,000 Internet users in Jakarta, 1,000 in Bandung, and 3,000 in Surabaya. In Bandung, such growth of digital media development and Internet connection had been influencing the birth of a new form of expression triggered by digital media; especially in an emerging field of music, visual arts, and fashion, by the rapidly increasing local youth communities which made and spread their works within independent networks. [4] Some artifacts from this new creative tendency are being captured by the exhibition entitled Class of '95, which was held in Common Room in March 2005 [5]. The show was being curated by Ahmad Marin and Helvi Syarifudin, showing some posters, photo images, t-shirts, memorabilia and other artifacts representing the development of local indie pop scene which has existed in Bandung since mid 1990's. Both Marin and Helvi are the founders of Trolley Magazine (2000-2002), and currently own FF/WD Records together with DJ Dxxxt.

Dr. Bambang Sugiharto recalls the above symptom as the latest phenomenon in the development of Bandung's creative scene. It is important to notice that such phenomenon mentioned by Dr. Bambang Sugiharto in this context refers to the existence of a wide range of

artistic expression made by the youngsters, distributed frequently by Trolley Magazine in year 2000-2002. During that time Trolley Magazine was considered as one of the few alternative media, which disseminated information about the emerging development in the field of music, visual art, design, fashion, and so forth. Established in Bandung by the year 2000, this magazine had only 10 editions and halted issuing in 2002. In the description from Dr. Bambang Sugiharto, his comment on the above development by giving notes says:

*"[...] In the world of Indonesian visual art development these days, for example, it is believed that there is a dissolving point between "discourse market" and "market discourse", as mentioned on the observation by Jim Supangkat. Yet, it is interesting to notice the courting between the discourse of pop culture and indie-label with the pure art expression presenting in the figure of "Trolley" in Bandung. In the first phenomenon, the works of contemporary artists, which is marginal in the beginning, has now entering firmly into the galleries representing a settle culture. Yet in the last, works of these types are entering precisely to the sub-culture area, to alternative media and independent scene [...]" [6]*

We could find similar tone on the notes by Rizky A Zaelani on the implementation of Bandung Art Event 2001, quoted from a curatorial introduction for exhibition:

*"[...] The matter on this particular 'Bandungish' will surely be a trace of identification model and a certain conceptualization with its own history of interest. Meanwhile, such model and conceptualization have been changing now [...]" [7]*

In the exhibition entitled "Undiscovered Territory/Our Hidden Territory" held by Oktagon Gallery Jakarta (28-30 May 2004), a group of young artists from Bandung were being invited to perform and exhibit their works. Among the group of artists who were taking part in this particular event are Biosampler (multimedia performance collective), Homogenic (electronic band) and an absurd electronic band called Jaeger Boys Transistor that consisted with Niang (Biosampler), Achong (Teenage Death Star), Iman (Electroflux), Hendra (RNRM), and Anto (Ripple Magazine) as the guest star. This group of artists has received an excellent response during opening of the exhibition that is attended by huge crowd of youngsters from Bandung and Jakarta [8]. This event was also exhibiting some works done by Ripple Magazine, Airplane System, FF/WD Records, Reverse, Monik Clothing, 347/EAT Boardrider & Co. and Cerahati as the part of new emerging creative scene in Bandung in the post-1990's.

I believe that during this particular period, such terms of web art, video art, new media art, and so forth; have become a general term in Bandung's art scene. All of them are growing side by side with various creative activities that are being dominated by the local youth communities. In the broader context, this new and emerging creative scene is also encouraging the birth of numerous local economic activities that are growth eventually through their knowledge and creative skills. Besides t-shirts, they were also producing various products and creating new approach in artistic expression; especially in the field of visual arts, graphic design, literature, computer game, music, video etc.[9]

As the comparison with how Internet is being used as an alternative medium to express political view, some of Internet users in Indonesia or abroad may have been familiar with "Apakabar" mailing list. This list has been started to operate since October 1990 to February 2002 and being moderated by John A MacDougall, who is during that period is the creator and moderator of regional newsgroup on Indonesia (Institute for Global Communications). Within this mailing list, Indonesian citizens all over the world could communicating and express their own political view freely and the mailing list then became an alternative communication tools that penetrates the media control and political domination led by New Order Regime back in the mid 1990's. Up to February 2002, this mailing list had intercepted at least 175,000 posting in Bahasa Indonesia and English; and accessed by no less than 250,000 readers from 96 different countries [10]. It can be said that Apakabar mailing list has been successful to nurture the development of a virtual network that supporting the underground movement which has finally overthrown Soeharto's military regime in 1998, together with civic movement that is involved by students, civic group, and political activist.

In an interview done by Marie Le Sourd during the implementation of the Third Asia Europe Art Camp in 2005, I recall that such situation above has left a strong impact on how we see the existing power structure that is occur in that time on the statement below:

*"After 1998, we were very skeptical about all governmental and ministry-related institutions, as well as the existing cultural organizations and established artistic practices. This also goes for the old way of handling artistic activities, used to accumulate power in terms of authorship with a signature. It was art for art's sake. There's nothing wrong with that, but we felt that we needed an alternative approach [...] Hierarchical structure does not fit with contemporary cultural practices. Now we can communicate everywhere and with everyone. Anyone can be a center and relate with others. We have to distribute the power and the information; including the rights of authorship in order to liberate the discourse and allow the power to circulate". [11]*

I think a lot of people have noticed that after 1998, most Indonesians have to experience sudden change in their social and political life after having a turmoil that was led by economic and political crisis, which has started to happen since 1996. This in turn creates a turbulence that has been affecting almost every aspect in our daily lives. Some says this is merely a representation of an institutional failure made by the state. The system fails to recognize and accommodate new aspirations which being nurtured by the rise of new technology and global capitalism. But we cannot ignore the fact that some of us feels the collapse of state power in Indonesia is also driven by our own failure to foster institutional support towards democratization and civic empowerment in our very own society.

#### **CONTROL/ALT/OPTION: WHERE DO WE BEGIN?**

In Indonesia, there are no public funding and institutional support for cultural organization that focus on supporting the development of contemporary artistic practice and digital media culture, so most of contemporary art and digital media practices must rely on private initiative. Some cultural organization and artists groups usually develop their activities through variety of program supported by local civic organization, foreign cultural center, or foreign funding institution. When we decided to establish Bandung Center for New Media Arts in 2001, somehow we realized that it is almost impossible to develop an organization with such limited support in funding and facilities. This is the reason why we decided to initiate our activities based on online platform since the Internet is the cheapest and most accessible medium in our time.

Throughout an extensive research and projects, we become conscious that in order to establish an institution which fostering the development of contemporary artistic practice and digital media culture in Indonesia, we have to start on certain socio-political context. Although the contemporary media art practice are mostly being shaped by the development of new technology and global network, it is also important to recognize local knowledge and resources in order to gain creative connection with local users & communities. I suppose this notion has a strong relation with our interest to counter the impact of technology that has implied displacement, disinformation, uniformity, and alienation; which in some extent brings us into a situation that full of conflicts and disintegration, besides borne numerous formats of terror, confusion and frustration in our daily life. [12]

In a new media arts competition for ASEAN region in 2006, the practice of cultural uniformity in technology and new media arts practices is described as the following text:

*"One important role played by recent new media technology is to bridge the differences by providing tools for information exchanges. Technological developments of this kind, especially generated by the use of computers and television, have further given rise to a new model of interaction. However, due to its global compulsion of uniformity, such as in the language and equipments, the new media also threatens to obliterate the diversity in the region." [13]*

In relation with the above description, we may need to acknowledge the rise of various media art and cultural practices that supporting the growth of extensive principles on equality, appreciation towards diversity, independency and solidarity amongst civil society both in local and global context [14]. Perhaps we also need to consider the description stated by Dr. Bambang Sugiharto who elucidated the artistic practices through Deleuzian perspective as “a micro narrative in progress, working through rhizomatic networks in its production and dissemination of ideas; a collective project to nurture plurality of ideas and to nourish interrelationship.” [15]

In an article written by Agung Hujatnikajenong, Krisna Murti and Heri Dono are two examples of Indonesian artists who frequently use media technology, either by implementing the latest trend in media technology such as video, internet, and synthesizer, or applying more simple approach such as using a self-made electronic device or used computers bought in secondhand market [16]. In his writing, Agung Hujatnikajenong reveals a wide gap in Indonesian society in general, as most of Indonesians do not have the access to new technology. In his opinion, Agung recalls that this problem is not only shows the wide gap in the field of science and public knowledge, but also reflects the gap in economics and political context [17]. It can be said that government and corporate interest have always dominating the development of media technology in Indonesia, while the majority of people act as passive audience.

Following the notes from Agung Hujatnikajenong on his critics towards the development of modern science and technology represented by the works made by Heri Dono are stated as follows:

*“The low-tech installation made by Heri Dono could be seen as a representation of the failure of the so called progressive mindset that is being nurtured by modern science and high technology. His works is also can be understood and having equal value for the human existence in wider context, especially in representing the existence of local knowledge about technology and showing one amongst numbers of the marginalized discourse in global communication.” [18]*

Similar opinion also has at least reflected in the statement of W. Christiawan in the introduction of his works for International Symposium for Electronic Arts 2002 (ISEA 2002) held in Nagoya, Japan. In his work entitled “Performance Lecture #2”, W. Christiawan stated that the modern technology could ease human's life today, so that to some extent human should not be slaved by the technology. Furthermore, he explained that one important matter behind such development is observing the role of humans who stand behind the development of modern science and technology, thus the advanced technology-integrated world could become closer to local environment and more human oriented. [19]

## **THE MAKING OF PLACE: BECOMING COMMON ROOM**

*“We are at a crossroads where artists and designers are not only increasingly taking control over the very principles and materiality of the 'networkwaves', but also are more determined to make local applications for everyday use.” [20]*

One has to realize it is not an easy feat to set up a place that is open for any possibilities. When we decided to execute the Rhizome Project in year 2002, it was difficult to predict the result of this project before the whole activity ended [21]. We had a lot of doubt at the beginning of the project since most of participants had their own way in executing their ideas. But by the given time, slowly the participants started to respond the library space and create some works, which turned the space into a hybrid place where personal expression confronted the public activities. For me it was very clear that the whole process, which had occurred during the realization of this project, was also a form of negotiation, which normally happens in the public space. Perhaps this is how we start cultivating our attention onto the public space, especially after we discover a lot of surprising result and various forms of expressions that are flourished in this particular kind of place. A public space is where the friction and negotiation mostly occur. It is a window to many possibilities.

In the same year, Hartanto was taking part in a project called The Bessengue City Project together with 3 other artists consist of Goddy Leye (Cameroon), James Beckett (South Africa), and Jesus Palomino (Spain). They were working together with local community development authorities and built a small shelter equipped with small radio station and developing various projects, which involved local inhabitants. The place and the facility then turned to be a center of meeting and communication among locals in Bessengue City [22]. I supposed this particular project is encouraging us to initiate more public engagement projects, which latter on also led us to set up a place for public activities in Common Room.

In the beginning we started to initiate various public participatory projects using various mediums such as video, photography, and internet executed altogether by Bandung Center for New Media Arts. Most of the projects focused on the issues of urban life in Bandung. For instance the Luncheon on The Grass (2003), 36 Frames Photography Project (2004), and City Surgery Project (2004), which have been our continuous research project and being used as tools to investigate various problems occurring in Bandung's urban surroundings up until now. Particularly in Bandung, people are confronted with layered, fragmented, and fully distorted spaces, almost organic like a living amoeba. City spaces are no longer merely building blocks but also crowded by noises of activities and intervention, which has forced us to apply a strategic improvisation as a method of survival. Therefore various studies of cases on city spaces are quite important for us, particularly when we are confined in city spaces that grow in enormous speed while our adaptation abilities are limited.

## **CONCLUSION: CREATIVE COMMUNITY & PLACE 2.0**

Up until now, besides activities and projects led by Bandung Center for New Media Arts, some programs in Common Room are also being initiated by anyone who are interested in setting up their own activities in this particular place. Most of the times we try to provide technical supports and accommodation needed as part of public initiative activities, which enables us to share responsibilities and creates a platform for creative collaboration. Starting from the beginning of 2004, Common Room has been facilitating numerous exhibitions, screening, workshops, lectures, discussions, small music concerts, cultural festivals, etc. This in return allows us to have a broader connection with different group of people and organization both within local and international context. It has become a place bridging dialogue and multi-disciplinary cooperation intended to connect numerous individuals, community and various organizations with diverse economic, social (ethnic and religious groups) and political interest through certain negotiations, daily experiences and knowledge exchange; as well as creative collaboration to achieve a common goal and opportunities for those who actively involve within Common Room and its existing networks.

However not all activities in Common Room come out as a success. Despite of lack of financial support and ability to have more sustainable program, sometimes we also have to deal with unexpected conflicts, friction and disagreement. By this matter, I suppose this is a part of the risk that we have to cope when we decided to establish Common Room as an open platform that can be added, edited and execute activities with various form of aspirations. We also comprehend that from its very beginning Common Room has always been a fluid and has served as a transit place for many possibilities. Therefore such dynamic occurring within Common Room is an inevitable consequence.

Up until now, most activities in Common Room have been aimed to encourage the growth of independent creative communities in terms of economic, social and political context. In general, local community development activity in Common Room are intended to support the emerging development in the field of visual arts, urban architecture, music, fashion, literature, new media and further study of urban culture. The purpose is to develop independent civil society that is equipped with a vast network of cooperation, which is connected with local, regional, and international civil communities and organizations around the globe in order to gain wider access on information and public knowledge. In the end, the further purpose of all activities that is being nurtured in Common Room is to discover a wide range of possibilities in diverse social/cultural

interaction, as well to build alternative business model to establish a sustainable local community in order to stimulate the birth of creative minority who can show us a glance of our future.

## NOTES & REFERENCES

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