



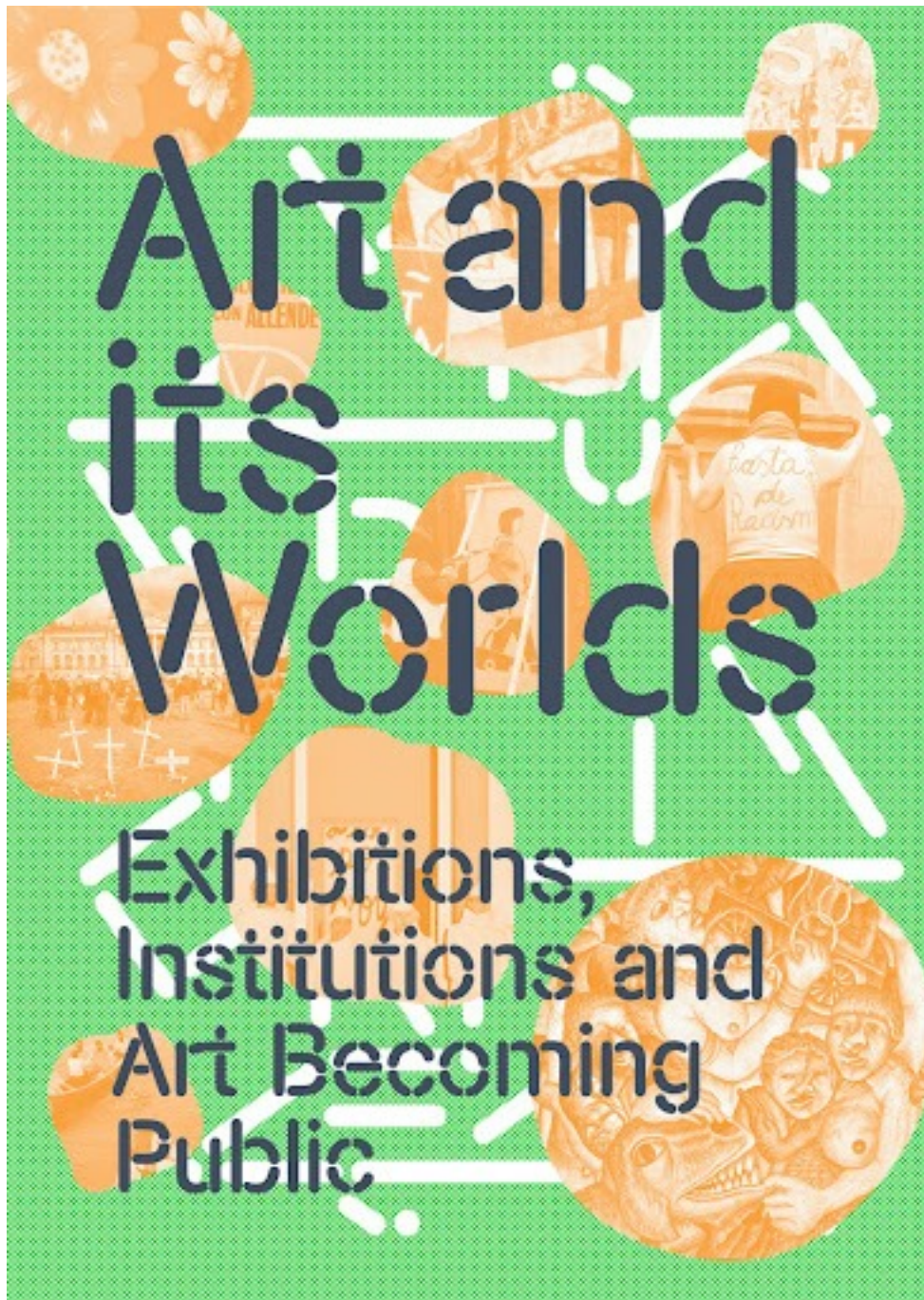
Wor(l)ds: An Eclipse

Reading “Art and its Worlds” sent Michal B. Ron on a journey in time and space between anarchist art collectives, various languages, multidirectional cartographies, and strategies of creating publics for art.

Review / Michal B. Ron April 28, 2023

Bo Choy, Charles Esche, David Morris and Lucy Steeds, eds. *Art and its Worlds: Exhibitions, Institutions and Art Becoming Public*, London: Afterall, 2021

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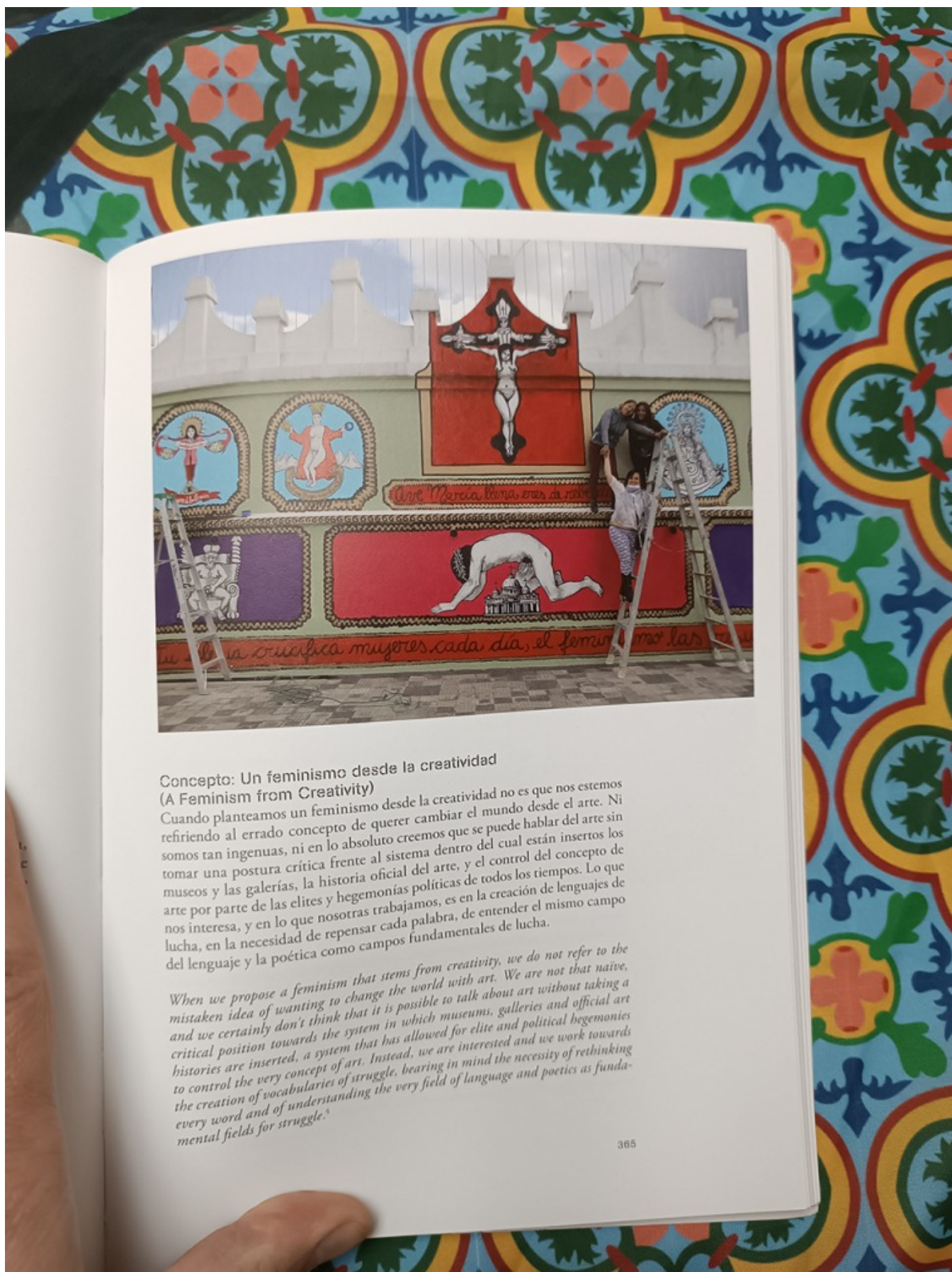
In *Art and Its Worlds: Exhibitions, Institutions and Art Becoming Public* (from now on: *AaIW*), a publication of *Afterall's Exhibition Histories* book series, art comes through in language. The essays in the book introduce art exhibitions and institutions most readers didn't experience. Anchored wherever she is based, this reader, like most readers, is (far) too far away from most places in the world. She is also (way) too late to travel in time and view exhibitions from over ten years ago. (As a parent of young girls, she is nowadays too late to travel in time and view current exhibitions mostwhere). Bringing her to these exhibitions and to the art they made public is a challenging endeavor, but this book does exactly that. Insisting on a plurality of worlds in which art operates, it invites the reader to become a public for that art: witnessing art through a public-ation. Let's re-term it: public-aCtion.



The collectively written introduction by Lucy Steeds, David Morris, Charles Esche and Bo Choy, sharply frames the texts selected for the anthology. We face the gift possessed by eloquent thinkers in British English, mother to the global English tongue, born under colonization and its unfolding throughout capital globalization. Yet here language no longer forms and sustains a superiority, but becomes a stage, serving other voices and speakers.

They teach us new terms: "[In our language the word for the sea means the 'spirit that returns](#) [2]," tells Adjoa Armah in the title of her essay, quoting a conversation held in Ghana, where the author goes on a journey beyond Western cartography, searching (47). "NIRIN WURRUNMARRA" titles a visual contribution by Brook Andrew and Anthony Gardner. It is a collage of a reproduced printed document, marked and augmented with hand written comments, and digitally added notes and images. The printed title NIRIN WURRUNMARRA is marked with a circle (70). "~~DON'T~~ KNOW THE WORDS? ~~LOOK-EM-UP!~~" asks, demands and erases a pen-written comment to the right, while a comment with an arrow to the left clarifies in black marker: "**LET'S PLAY.**" Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's title, "[Amo la montaña / I Love the Mountain](#) [3]," insists on keeping the original Spanish, following an exchange with a young Chinese artist in Ecuador (167-177). The anarchy-feminist collective [Mujeres Creando](#) [4] maintain their Bolivian Spanish all through their contribution: "[La creatividad es un instrumento de lucha y el cambio social un hecho creativo](#) [5] (creativity is an instrument of struggle, and social change a creative act)" (362-369). The activists combine documentary photographs and statements, starting with a provocative question: "¿Quién les ha dicho que el feminismo es un producto europeo [...]" - "Who told you that feminism is a European product [...]" (363)

[1680639487082.jpg](#) [6]



**Concepto: Un feminismo desde la creatividad
(A Feminism from Creativity)**

Cuando planteamos un feminismo desde la creatividad no es que nos estemos refiriendo al errado concepto de querer cambiar el mundo desde el arte. Ni somos tan ingenuas, ni en lo absoluto creemos que se puede hablar del arte sin tomar una postura crítica frente al sistema dentro del cual están insertos los museos y las galerías, la historia oficial del arte, y el control del concepto de arte por parte de las elites y hegemonías políticas de todos los tiempos. Lo que nos interesa, y en lo que nosotras trabajamos, es en la creación de lenguajes de lucha, en la necesidad de repensar cada palabra, de entender el mismo campo del lenguaje y la poética como campos fundamentales de lucha.

When we propose a feminism that stems from creativity, we do not refer to the mistaken idea of wanting to change the world with art. We are not that naive, and we certainly don't think that it is possible to talk about art without taking a critical position towards the system in which museums, galleries and official art histories are inserted, a system that has allowed for elite and political hegemonies to control the very concept of art. Instead, we are interested and we work towards the creation of vocabularies of struggle, bearing in mind the necessity of rethinking every word and of understanding the very field of language and poetics as fundamental fields for struggle.³

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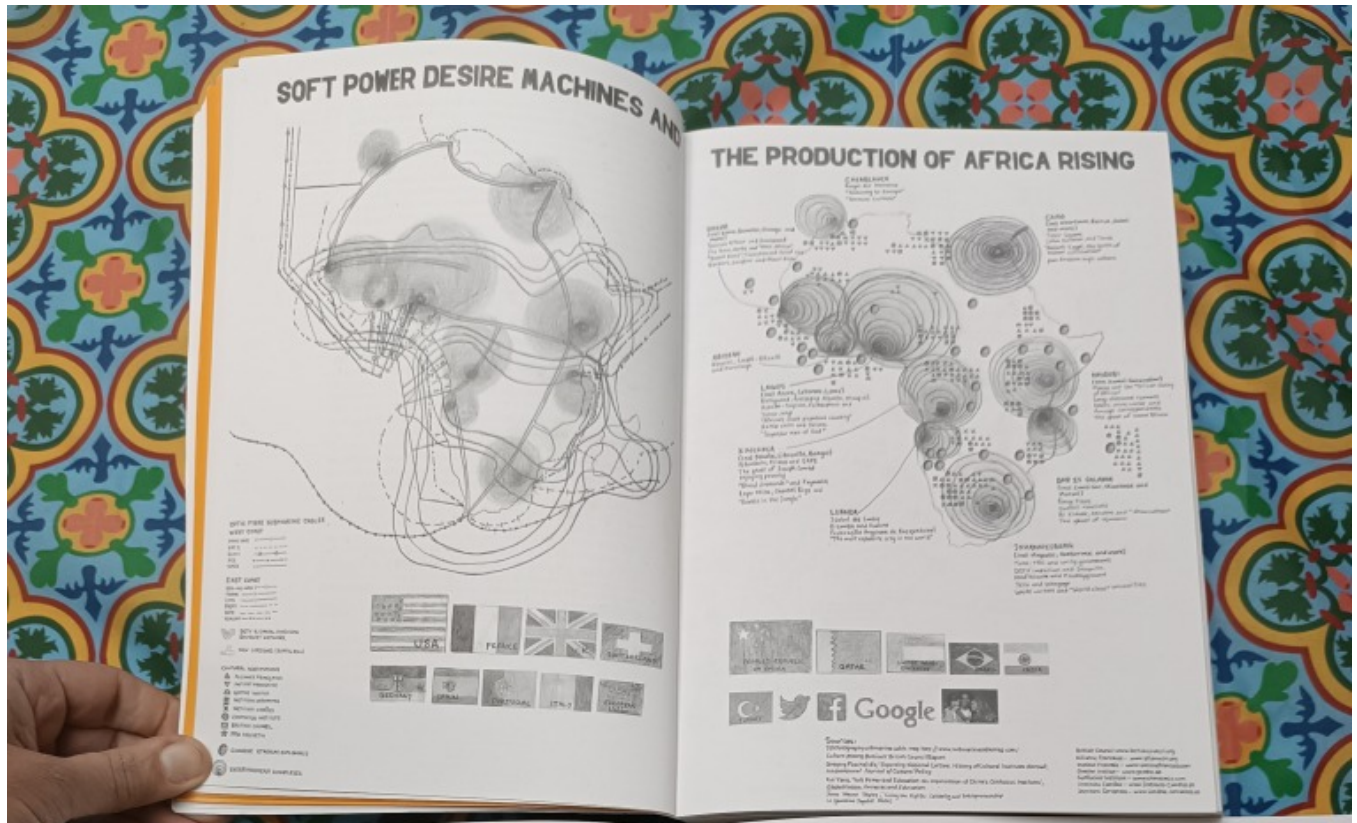
Art and Its Worlds, page 365, with [Mujeres Creando. Concepto: Un feminismo desde la creatividad \(A Feminism from Creativity\)](#) [8]

Photo by the author, published with the book editors' permission. Background: Shira Wachsmann,



Practice of Invasion, 2018. Reproduced with the artist's permission.

[1680639487139 \(1\)2.jpg](#) [9]



[10]

Art and Its Worlds, double spread, pages 34-35, with [Chimurenga. 'Soft Power Desire Machines and the Production of Africa Rising'](#) [11]

Photo by the author, published with the book editors' permission. Background: Shira Wachsmann, Practice of Invasion, 2018. Reproduced with the artist's permission.

Art and its Geographies

If we study geography with *Aa/W* while sitting in the narcissistic self-centered global north, we could call the locations and enterprises it features peripheral or remote. Some titles disclose their localities: Latin America, indigenous art in Canada, India, Kabul, Dakar, China, Hong Kong, Lisbon. But this book does a Copernican move of de-centering, in which the collected essays polyphonically introduce, describe, and analyze every artistic venture on its own ground. Art from elsewhere gets as close to *here* as it gets – while staying *there*. Art and its worlds – in plural.

Many essays problematize geography and cartography: Adjoa Armah, for example, considers Black *ungeographies* (40), while Miguel A. López returns to Paul B. Preciado's dialogue with Félix Guattari's 'schizoanalytic cartography' (54). In "Aftermaths?: DOCUMENTA (13) in Kabul," Francesca Recchia



critically observes the attempt to make Kabul a satellite of Kassel. The resulting recalibration makes an opposite move relative to global art shows, such as biennials and documentas, de-positioning artistic production for their unifying agendas, while re-presenting themselves as the ever-solid center of a world, the globalized art world.

This is educational. (It is no coincidence that *Afterall* also founded an [Art School](#) [12]).¹

For a student of art history (in Haifa, another remote periphery), it used to be principally about memorizing (mostly masculine) christian names in French, Italian, or German. University introductory courses contextualized art production within Western history, and drew art's cartography on European and American geographies, expanding, with colonialism, into antiquity while advancing toward exoticism.

Nowadays, viewing a biennial (in Berlin, as another center of a world) demands exercising new reading and memory skills: learning how to pronounce foreign names, and widening the knowledge of geography, and histories – now in the plural, too. I must think of *The Conquest of Space. Atlas for the Use of Artists and the Military* (1975), a work by Marcel Broodthaers (another name one has learned how to pronounce by now). In this miniature artist book, as big as a matchbox, the artist lists selected nation states, alphabetically, from “Afrique du Sud” to “Zaire”, and adds images depicting the contours of their borders in black shapes. Against this equation of states, no matter how big or small they in fact are (or were in 1975 – Zaire, for example, no longer exists), I must also think how misleading the relativist term “western” is. If you “go west” from America – you arrive in east Asia – or, the “far east”. [Far from where?](#) [13] “China is actually in the west of our gaze,” says Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, writing from Ecuador, “if we consider the solar cycle, and we could also say it is now a symbolic and economic West for us. In this way, in honour of geography, we should speak of Europe as our Northeast. From where do we speak when we rant against ‘Western Culture’?” (166)

Art and its Histories

[1680639487131.jpg](#) [14]



Black Quantum
Futurism, Time
Capsule Map, 2021.
Courtesy Black
Quantum Futurism

Below: 'You
are now here',
workshop, 2017.
Courtesy Black
Quantum Futurism

[15]

Art and its Worlds, page 41, with [Black Quantum Futurism, Time Capsule Map, 2021](#) [16]

Photo by the author, published with the book editors' permission. Background: Shira Wachsmann, Practice of Invasion, 2018. Reproduced with the artist's permission.



In temporal terms, this book does not make art eternal. It is important, it was important, for its own moment, for its own public. We can learn, *today*, from a now, that happened there, *then*. We can join a public, for something that has *happened*. This focus is inverting a canonizing art history, which sets a hierarchy we need to internalize, as objective and factual, for all times to come. *AaIW* is not about widening that canon and making it more inclusive. It is a timely rejection of canonization. Maybe this is the reason this book doesn't feature much art, in the sense of artworks. Bo Choy captures the spirit, writing on "Womanofesto", workshops and residencies that took place at Boon Bandarm Farm, Northeast Thailand: "[...] the artists realised that what they most enjoyed was just being together; this led to the vision of a more open-ended creative exchange with no specific exhibition outcome that could take place either online or offline." (234)

Time breaks apart from a unifying-relativizing thinking through zones. A Lebanese student recently reminded me that he, sitting in Beirut, was time-wise in the future, compared to my placement in Berlin in that virtual conversation. Yet, this future feels like the past, he said. Many texts reintroduce the reader to other temporal considerations and reflections. The mission statement of *Exhibition Histories* already opens up temporal perspectives on the past, present and future, connecting archival materials with "current and future practices". Adjoa Armah reminds us how Black Quantum Futurism "opens up not only simultaneous *elsewheres*, but also *elsewhens*." (42) John Tain writes about 1989 in Hong Kong, "the year has a more ambiguous place." Whereas in the West the year 1989 has a triumphant sentiment, the protest and massacre in Tiananmen in June resulted "less in a start than an end." (252)

Worlds Eclipse

We have just witnessed such a conflict of histories with [documenta 15](#) [17](from now on: *d15*) (2022), under the artistic direction of the Jakarta-based collective [Ruangrupa](#) [18]. Reading *AaIW* and David Teh's contribution, "Who Care a Lot? Ruangrupa as Curatorship," could have prepared *documenta*'s public to what was to come. Teh describes Ruangrupa's curatorial vision as "Karaoke as Method," with a "strong DIY ethos and a lack of hierarchy." (264) "[At OK Video](#) [19]," Ruangrupa's fifth video art biennial which was installed at the National Gallery of Indonesia (Galnas) in 2011, combining video works from the Western canon with local production, "the foreign material was not the main event." It "nested within a locally curated smorgasbord." (263) Teh sums it up: "worlds came together, but they were worlds apart." (262)

And what happened in Kassel when Ruangrupa became the foreigners? In terms of language and words – Ruangrupa's *d15*, already in its title, refused the dominance of the (European) host, forcing the (global) English "fifteen" on this edition of this very German institution. *d15* further introduced the Indonesian term "Lumbung" – which means rice barn – as its conceptual and ideological framework. The expectation of the global capitalist art market met with many other art worlds, taking care of their own sustainability – with a tactic here termed "harvest." The West used to term it: "publicity." Geographically – *d15* exhibited primarily collectives from the global South. Historically – with [the crisis of Taring Padi's mural People's Justice](#) [20] (2002), it became Indonesian versus German history. The mural was an accusation of Western forces fuelling Suharto's dictatorship in Indonesia. It included imagery that in the German context could only be identified with caricatures of antisemitic propaganda. The mural was removed.

At the end of his analysis of Ruangrupa's curatorial practice, Teh comes to the conclusion that "for this spirit the audience, rather than the work of art, may be the ultimate object of curatorial care." (273) But what if an audience refuses to become a public?



[1680639487102.jpg](#) **[21]**



try's second president, Soeharto. The second, which is ongoing, reflects its flourishing and democratisation since the wave of popular disgust (*reformasi*) that unseated that regime amidst regional financial crisis in 1998.² In this period, the social conscience that had long been a cornerstone of Indonesian aesthetics – modern art's *sine qua non* since the independence struggle against the Dutch – found expression in a figurative modernism still loyal to social realist in its scope. Its story remained that of nationhood, of the struggle for, or against, nation), seasoned here and there with the 'local' or the 'national'. Artists emerging since *reformasi*, however, are more playful and eclectic, enjoying the latitude of a liberalised public sphere, and the country's steady rise in the global neoliberal pecking order. But emblematic of this new generation, ruangrupa strives to retain some of the representational logic of the old.

It is a remarkably stable commitment to activism and populism. The early embrace of lo-fi copy culture, digital and open publishing models dovetailed with a new rigour at the time that was de rigueur at the vanguard of global art in the 2000s. Since 2000, ruangrupa has published *Karbon*, a journal of urban visual culture, which promotes criticism but also a new language. The biennial Jakarta 32°C, which they have organised, brings students' work into the museum. Under the umbrella, democratising the first steps to public art, festivals like OK Video, meanwhile, become camps and workshops, as did their tenth anniversary.

In April 2020, the collective space at Gudskul, an alternative school initiated by ruangrupa and the collectives Grafis Huru Hara and Serrum, was turned into a mini-factory to produce face masks and hazmat suits for distribution to medical workers during the Covid-19 crisis. Courtesy the artists

[22]

Art and Its Worlds, page 265, with the collective space at [Gudskul](#) [23] "turned into a mini-factory to produce masks and hazmat suits for distribution to medical workers during the Covid-19 crisis."



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- 1. I must think here on Gudskul, an alternative school initiated by ruangrupa and the collectives Grafis Huru Hara and Serru in Jakarta, Indonesia. Gudskul was a notable participant at [documenta 15](#) [24].

Source URL: <http://tohumagazine.server288.com/article/worlds-eclipse>

Links

- [1] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/unnamed_19.jpg
- [2] <https://www.afterall.org/article/in-our-language-the-word-for-the-sea-means-the-spirit-that-returns>
- [3] <https://www.afterall.org/article/i-love-the-mountain>
- [4] <https://mujerescreando.org/>
- [5] <https://www.afterall.org/article/mujeres-creando-insert>
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- [16] https://images.e-flux-systems.com/lowRes_timeCapsuleMap_RBG_2.jpg,1400
- [17] <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/>
- [18] <https://ruangrupa.id/en/>
- [19] <https://ruangrupa.id/en/ok-video-2/>
- [20] <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/statement-by-taring-padi-on-dismantling-peoples-justice/>
- [21] <http://tohumagazine.server288.com/file/1680639487102.jpg>
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