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## **Crisis and collectives shaping art events: from events that matter to events that care**

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# Crisis and Collectives Shaping Art Events

## From Events that Matter to Events that Care

Julie Ren, Charlotte Matter,  
Rosa Sancarolo and Virginia Marano

### Introduction

The perpetual, relentless nature of crisis seems to be shifting its notion from an extraordinary rupture towards a fixture or even condition of contemporary life. As distinctions between crisis and a general sense of uncertainty are becoming less definite, the threats that accumulate are difficult to keep an account of, and the uncertainties render plans increasingly futile. Yet the art event, temporary exhibitions and gatherings, persist through these uncertainties. In light of this conjuncture, we revisit the art event, curious about its durability throughout both historical and more recent crises.

Especially for art events and actors considered a part of the ‘periphery’, working with crisis is hardly new. The centrality of crisis complicates frameworks of reference that might place this work in the tradition of Eurocentric scholarship and practices of socially engaged art – for instance, is it appropriate to frame the work of Atis Rezistans feeding Haitian mud cakes as part of different art events in terms of the white table-clothed dinners that Suzanne Lacy organised in La Jolla?<sup>1</sup> Though both are centred on sharing a meal, the condition of food insecurity in Port-au-Prince highlights the entanglement of art events and crises in an important way. Art events hosted in various contexts that comprise the ‘edges of the Global’, whose impact represent a ‘decentralisation of the

1 Moira Roth, ‘Suzanne Lacy: Social Reformer and Witch’, *TDR*, vol 32, no 1, 1988, pp 42–60

- 2 Oliver Marchart, 'The Globalization of Art and the "Biennials of Resistance": A History of the Biennials from the Periphery', *World Art*, vol 4, no 2, 2014, p 263
- 3 Julie Ren, 'Obscuring Representation: Contemporary Art Biennials in Dakar and Taipei', *Geographica Helvetica*, vol 76, no 2, 2021, p 111
- 4 Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison, 'The Promise of Non-Representational Theories', in Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison, eds, *Taking-Place: Non-Representational Theories and Geography*, Routledge, Abingdon Oxon, 2016, pp 1–36
- 5 Gavin Kroeber, 'The Event Landscape: The Contemporary Encounter of Art and the City', *PAJ: Journal of Performance and Art*, vol 110, 2015, p 30, italics in the original
- 6 Boris Groys, *In the Flow*, Verso, London, 2016, p 4
- 7 Cf. Martin Fuller and Julie Ren, 'The Art Opening: Proximity and Potentiality at Events', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol 36, no 7–8, 2019, pp 135–152, and Lane Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2013
- 8 Ho See Wah, 'How Can Art Biennials Continue to be Relevant?', *Art & Market*, 17 May 2021, <https://artandmarket.net/analysis/2021/5/17/how-can-art-biennials-continue-to-be-relevant>, accessed 9 August 2022
- 9 In 2021, the jury of the renowned Turner Prize nominated a shortlist consisting entirely of artist collectives.
- 10 For a literature overview, see Maria Lind, 'The Collaborative Turn', in Johanna Billing, Maria Lind, and Lars Nilsson, eds, *Taking the Matter into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and*

West' provide a much-needed refocusing of the sites and practices through which to understand what an art event means to different participants and in different contexts.<sup>2</sup> Beyond the well-documented proliferation of biennials and art events outside of the 'centres', there is a need to better understand their underlying structures and durability.<sup>3</sup>

With recurrent exhibitions like biennials and documenta, we consider the art event not as a singular moment of drastic change, but as an integral part of shaping place. That events are constitutive of place has been an ontological cornerstone of non-representational theories in cultural geography.<sup>4</sup> The relationship between events and places are further enmeshed in the realm of art, 'art and the city are blurring not so much because they have turned towards one another, but because each has turned towards *events*'.<sup>5</sup> The significance of the art event is further marked by its ubiquity, as Boris Groys has noted, 'the production of art events is more characteristic of contemporary art... Traditional art produced art objects. Contemporary art produces information about art events.'<sup>6</sup> The eventisation of art has thus become ordinary, characterised by its localised impacts and frequent recurrence.<sup>7</sup>

Specifically, we consider the function of collectives in shaping art events, shifting attention from pursuits of relevance toward practices of care.<sup>8</sup> Art institutions such as documenta or the Turner Prize have recently put collectives under the spotlight, and we likewise focus on the work of collectives in shaping events.<sup>9</sup> Collectivity is arguably – albeit in ever-shifting guises and terms – a constant throughout the history of art, as evidenced by the abundant research on the subject.<sup>10</sup> Yet there are times when collective practices take on a particular urgency and topicality. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette have argued that 'collectivism can be and should be periodised'.<sup>11</sup> While Maria Lind situates a 'collaborative turn' in the mid-1990s,<sup>12</sup> we observe a renewed interest in collective practices in recent years. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also of social movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, the conditions of crisis and collectivity as a response garner renewed attention. In this context, curatorial projects centring on notions of care have come to the fore and given new meanings to the etymological root of 'curating', from the Latin *curare* for 'taking care', but also 'curing, healing'. As the editors of *Radicalizing Care: Feminist and Queer Activism in Curating* ponder, 'curating has much work to do given the lasting wounds of colonial capitalism and racist patriarchy'.<sup>13</sup> We are particularly interested in the ways that collective forms of 'curating-as-caring' destabilise the medium of the exhibition and reframe it in terms of 'hospitality' and 'conviviality'.<sup>14</sup> We use the term 'event' instead of 'exhibition' or 'biennial' not only because we are intrigued by projects that transcend such formats, but also because we want to think, along with Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos, of 'care as an event'.<sup>15</sup>

We read the departure from individualistic production models of contemporary art not only as a critique of norms, but as a way to understand the art event under conditions of crisis. After framing the concept crisis as a condition, we explore the work of three collectives shaping the art event: ruangrupa, Atis Rezistans and Womanifesto. The selection of these three collectives is based on their shared practices related to care under conditions of 'ordinary' crisis. Their response to crisis is not a reac-

*Collaborative Practices*, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2007, pp 15–31. Subsequent scholarship includes Nina Möntmann, ed, *New Communities*, Public Books/The Power Plant, Toronto, 2009; Grant H Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2011; Rachel Mader, ed, *Kollektive Autorschaft in der Kunst: Alternatives Handeln und Denkmodell*, Peter Lang, Bern, 2012; Magdalena Bushart and Henrike Haug, eds, *Geteilte Arbeit: Praktiken künstlerischer Kooperation*, Böhlau Verlag, Cologne, 2020. Exhibition-related publications include Heike Eipeldauer and Franz Thalmer, eds, *Kollaborationen*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, Cologne, 2022, and Karin Althaus, Susanne Böller, Sarah Louisa Henn, Eva Huttenlauch, Matthias Mühlhng, and Stephanie Weber, eds, *Group Dynamics: Collectives of the Modernist Period*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Berlin, 2022.

11 Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, 'Introduction', in Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, eds, *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2007, p 3. Along the same lines, Jacopo Galimberti, for example, has taken the 1960s as a framework for his study of collectivity in art. Jacopo Galimberti, *Individuals against Individualism: Art Collectives in Western Europe (1957–1969)*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2017.

12 Lind, 'The Collaborative Turn', op cit

13 Elke Krasny, Sophie Lingg, and Lena Fritsch, 'Radicalizing Care:

tion to global crises or social movements, but rather situated within everyday conditions of crisis connected to contexts (including scarcity, poverty, climate disaster) and participants (including issues of gender). In light of crisis, these collectives are changing what the art event represents, its complex functions and potential futures. Exploring practices related to care, we can identify how it takes a multitude of different forms and meanings; depending on its surrounding contexts, actors, and goals, this includes the sharing of resources within a given community, the implementation of a supportive non-productivity, and the concern for healing and nourishment as art practices and community-based interventions. Finally, we consider how these collectives' practices reflect modes of caring that we read as forms of resistance under the condition of crisis.

## On the Condition(s) of Crisis

To establish the context of the collective practices we will be examining, we distinguish the condition of crisis from the dominant understanding of crisis that remains tied to its conceptualisation as a disruptive event. In the realm of intellectual history, Reinhart Kosseleck posits that crisis represents critique – in which the old order is put into question.<sup>16</sup> Crisis serves as a rupture from the previous order and therefore also represents a temporal concept, a transition from one historical epoch into the next. More recently, Janet Roitman grapples with the same question about the status of the term crisis, interrogating 'the effects of the claim to crisis'.<sup>17</sup> Calling something a crisis, Roitman contends, means turning it into an event, delineating it as something with a clear beginning and end.

Yet the current conditions of crisis defy a sense of ending. Inspired by Lauren Berlant, we consider 'the ordinary as an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on'.<sup>18</sup> Following their reframing of crisis as a condition rather than an event, we understand that 'Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming'.<sup>19</sup> Navigating what seems overwhelming entails a different kind of response than the state of emergency that a crisis as a disruptive event might necessitate.

When crisis is not framed as a disruptive event with a foreseeable end, but as an enduring condition, two conceptual shifts can be discerned. First, the understanding of crisis is moved from an instance, or an event placed in a specific context, to the framing of crisis *as* context. Second, Henrik Vigh argues that crisis as context – in other words, framing crisis as a condition rather than an event – creates a 'terrain of action and meaning rather than an aberration'.<sup>20</sup> If crisis as an event may inspire intervention on the basis of an unusual situation, eliciting perhaps an unusual response, the notion of crisis as an enduring context would instead imply a different kind of action that is not based on an understanding of the issue as something unusual, but more embedded or structural. Indeed, empirical research around the lived experiences of austerity illustrates the different terrains of action

Feminist and Queer Activism in Curating – An Introduction’, in Elke Krasny, Sophie Lingg, Lena Fritsch, Birgit Bosold, and Vera Hofmann, eds, *Radicalizing Care: Feminist and Queer Activism in Curating*, Sternberg Press, London, 2021, p 16

- 14 ‘Curating-as-caring’ is a term used by the editors of *Radicalizing Care*, op cit. For a discussion of hospitality and conviviality in relation to curatorial and artistic practices grounded in care, see Beatrice von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, eds, *Hospitality: Hosting Relations in Exhibitions*, Sternberg Press, London, 2016, and Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos, ‘Other Forms of Conviviality: The Best and Least of Which Is Our Daily Care and the Host of Which Is Our Collaborative Work’, *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, vol 23, no 1, 2013, pp 126–132.
- 15 McArthur and Zavitsanos, ‘Other Forms of Conviviality’, op cit, p 127
- 16 Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1988
- 17 Janet Roitman, *Anti-crisis*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2014, p 12
- 18 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2011, p 8
- 19 Ibid, p 10
- 20 Henrik Vigh, ‘Crisis and Chronicity: Anthropological Perspectives on Continuous Conflict and Decline’, *Ethnos*, vol 73, no 1, 2008, p 8
- 21 See, for example, Gargi Battacharyya, *Crisis, Austerity, and Everyday Life: Living in a Time of Diminishing Expectations*,

entrenched in everyday life when the frame of reference shifts to crisis as condition rather than event.<sup>21</sup>

Analysing the work of collectives through this framing implies that we explore the potential terrain of action and meaning that this condition of crisis facilitates. Understood as a critique of embedded and structural conditions, it is a lens of crisis that sidesteps the spectacular. Rather than the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Europe, therefore, we consider crisis in terms of precarious conditions of work, resource deprivation, recurrent natural disasters, and the uncertain environments that most of the world faces as the generating contexts for the organisation of art events. We want to read these responses not as mere adaptation or a sign of resilience, but as a mode of resistance. Instead of the loud political activism of refusals like the Havana Biennial Boycott in 2021<sup>22</sup> or the discursive noise of the fourth Athens Biennale in 2015 heralding the ways ‘times of crisis are good for art’,<sup>23</sup> we have selected three cases that operate on a different register of political resistance.

Expanding Ranjit Hoskote’s reflections on ‘biennials of resistance’, our interest here is less in the structures of events, but rather in the actors conceiving and realising these events.<sup>24</sup> With ruangrupa, Atis Rezi-stans and Womanifesto, we focus on the work of collectives whose engagement with care is key to their understanding of, and response to, crisis. Another striking commonality consists in their work not being limited to one field of artistic production. Expanding conventional boundaries between artist and curator, or notions of ‘artists as curators’,<sup>25</sup> they are inherently both, and, crucially, also more, acting as facilitators, hosts, teachers, and/or promoters, eschewing the urge to label or delineate their roles. Thus, these collectives challenge and resist established categories and the neoliberal drive towards professionalisation in the art sphere, privileging instead notions of community and care.<sup>26</sup> As curator Ilaria Conti remarks, ‘Artistic expression takes its ability to speak from, to, and for communities from a spectrum of communal practices that aren’t meant to be eradicated from life and placed in the institution, as they are part of a broader continuum of knowledges and experiences.’<sup>27</sup>

Conti refers to the artist Benvenuto Chavajay Ixtetelá, who explains that there is no specific word for ‘artist’ in Tz’utujil language; rather, ‘the term used, *q’omaneel*, is used also for doctors, musicians, and other activities that share a healing, communal, living dimension’.<sup>28</sup> In similar ways, the collectives we consider in the following situate their art practices at the intersection of diverse activities. To a certain extent, their response to crisis already begins with this epistemological disobedience and the refusal to follow norms of exhibition systems, opting instead for collective sharing and caring.

## ruangrupa: A Practice of Sharing Through *Lambung*

The appointment of ruangrupa as the artistic directors of documenta fifteen in 2022 has propelled the Indonesian collective onto one of the most prestigious art world stages. The turmoil around their appointment

- Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015, and Sarah Hall, 'A Very Personal Crisis: Family Fragilities and Everyday Conjunctions Within Lived Experiences of Austerity', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol 44, no 3, 2019, pp 479–494
- 22 Eileen Kinsella, 'Havana Biennial Boycott Gathers Support, With Hundreds Signing Open Letter Against Government Crackdown', *Artnet*, 19 October 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/boycott-havana-biennial-quickly-gathering-support-2022604>, accessed 10 August 2022
- 23 Eva Fotiadi, 'The Biennale as a Device: 4th Athens Biennale', *Necsus European Journal of Media Studies*, vol 3, no 1, spring 2014, pp 391–398, <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15130>, accessed 10 August 2022
- 24 Ranjit Hoskote, 'Biennials of Resistance: Reflections on the Seventh Gwangju Biennial', in Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Ovstebo, eds, *The Biennial Reader*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2010, pp 306–321
- 25 Elena Filipovic, ed, *The Artist as Curator: An Anthology*, Mousse Publishing, Milan, 2017. See also Celina Jeffery, ed, *The Artist as Curator*, Intellect, Bristol, 2015
- 26 Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World*, op cit
- 27 Ilaria Conti, 'Callejeando', *Juchari Palabra* 1, August 2020, p 11
- 28 Ibid
- 29 See, among others, ruangrupa, 'Antisemitism Accusations against documenta: A Scandal about a Rumor', *e-flux Notes*, 8 May 2022; <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/467337/antisemitism-accusations-against-documenta-a-scandal-about-a-rumor>, accessed 10 August 2022; Jasmine Liu,

and their documenta possibly signifies just how disruptive the work of collectives can be.<sup>29</sup> In 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, ruangrupa laid out their broader analysis of what 'times of crisis' imply. They wrote, 'Patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism have never seemed so problematic as under the current challenging times. The inequality those bigotries bring are becoming very visible – we hope that business as usual will not continue after this.'<sup>30</sup> In other words, existing forms of domination are rendered more visible, but they are not new. And the 'business as usual' conditions that were already unbearable for most of the world represent a condition of crisis that demands changes in its ways of operation.

What we want to draw attention to here, however, is not so much the singular event of crisis, but rather how ruangrupa envisions ways of dealing with persistent crises, and in particular their idea of *lumbung* and collective care as a response to this understanding of crisis. The Indonesian term for a communal rice barn, *lumbung* is about a practice of sharing. ruangrupa describes the idea behind *lumbung* as similar to owning a drill: 'Those who own one don't necessarily use it daily, and someone else can use it in the meantime. Because of this, not everyone in the community needs to own a drill.'<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, ruangrupa centred its practice and its curatorial concept for documenta fifteen around concepts of resources, resourcefulness, community, and care. In keeping with the idea of *lumbung*, a conspicuous portion of the invited participants were, like ruangrupa, collectives. Through their collective decision making, they practiced assembly (*majelis*), which they described as

a space where people sit side by side, sharing, discussing, speculating, solving problems, sharing food and humor without time limits. In Jakartan slang, the word *nonkrong* is used to describe this activity. It can even mean doing nothing collectively. Within aimless conversations between friends is a sense of mutually taking care of each other.<sup>32</sup>

Importantly, the values of collective support and resource-sharing championed in documenta fifteen were not directed only towards the artists, but also towards the audiences. For instance, the solidarity ticket allowed visitors to buy additional tickets for others with limited financial means to attend.<sup>33</sup> Over 3,500 'Soli-Tickets' were purchased, giving a corresponding number of people the opportunity to visit the exhibition free of charge.<sup>34</sup> While this accounted for a small proportion of the more than 738,000 documenta fifteen attendees, it was an initiative to increase accessibility for audiences perhaps unable or unwilling to pay the twenty-seven Euro entrance fee. Accessibility was also at the core of communication and mediation, with an accessible website featuring sign language interpretations, adaptive design, alt text, and translations in easy language. These undertakings sought to make the event more inclusive of different groups within an often perceived exclusive and elitist art event.

The connection that ruangrupa draws between art and collectivity is not new per se: art is almost never the solitary act that archaic approaches in art history have long exalted. Rather, as sociologist Howard Becker



'140+ Documenta Artists and Organizers Denounce "Racist Attacks" Following Vandalism', *Hyperallergic*, 6 June 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/738367/documenta-artists-and-organizers-denounce-racist-attacks-following-vandalism/>, accessed 10 August 2022; Thomas E Schmidt, 'Verschweigen, das geht nicht mehr: Hat die Documenta ein Antisemitismus-Problem?', *Die Zeit*, 12 January 2022, <https://www.zeit.de/2022/03/documenta-15-kassel-antisemitismus?>, accessed 10 August 2022

- 30 ruangrupa, 'Ruangrupa, the Collective in Charge of the Next Documenta, Reflect on What It Means to Curate in Times of Crisis', *Artnet*, 4 June 2020 <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/ruangrupa-the-collective-in-charge-of-the-next-documenta-reflect-on-what-it-means-to-curate-in-times-of-crisis-1878111>, accessed 14 June 2022
- 31 Josa Lukman, "'Lumbung" for the World: ruangrupa on Documenta and the Pandemic', *The Jakarta Post*, 10 June 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2020/06/10/lumbung-for-the-world-ruangrupa-on-documenta-and-the-pandemic.html>, accessed 10 August 2022
- 32 ruangrupa and Nikos Papastergiadis in conversation, 'Living Lumbung: The Shared Spaces of Art and Life', *e-flux Journal* 118, May 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/118/395154/living-lumbung-the-shared-spaces-of-art-and-life/>, accessed 10 August 2022
- 33 'Documenta 15 Announces Participating Artists', *Artforum*, 4 October 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/news/documenta-15-announces-participating-artists-86874>, accessed 10 August 2022
- 34 'Documenta fifteen closes with very good attendance figures', press release, 26 September 2022, <https://>

observed in the 1970s, it must be understood as a 'collective action' in which a multitude of people are involved, not only including the labour of studio assistants, but also that of manufacturers and suppliers of material, of logistics providers, of curators and critics, of audiences, of administrative personnel and maintenance workers.<sup>35</sup> Yet much of the collective action without which most art could not exist remains largely unrecognised. The special emphasis that ruangrupa has given in their curatorial selection to projects and collectives that are socially engaged works towards more acknowledgment of otherwise invisible labour.<sup>36</sup>

In the wake of an increased interest in collective practices in art, some have recently expressed criticism and rightly pointed out their pitfalls. Helmut Draxler is sceptical of the exaltation and institutionalisation of collectivity, recalling that 'collectives always reveal flip sides shaped by violence; they are inherently not just inclusive but invariably also exclusive'.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, there is a risk of political co-optation of communal practices intended as forms of resistance.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, ruangrupa has not always succeeded in its different efforts to circumvent the exploitative conventions of the art system. Although they enlisted the street paper *Asphalt*, a publication sold by homeless people in Hannover, as documenta fifteen's media partner and exclusive platform to disclose the eagerly awaited artist list, the mainstream media were quick to seize the news and redistribute it through their own channels, turning the whole exercise into a rather symbolic gesture, instead of joining ruangrupa in the effort of challenging the rules of the art world game.<sup>39</sup>

Nonetheless, ruangrupa's approach to curating Europe's most revered exhibition retains a sense of institutional subversion. For instance, rather than a stable list of artists and art objects, they foresaw the contributions evolving and changing over the course of the exhibition. The range of topics and formats taken up by the invited collectives varied enormously as well. Though the media may have highlighted the 'Global South' character of ruangrupa and their selection of lesser-known artists' collectives 'instead of big names',<sup>40</sup> ruangrupa itself underlined how this offers a false understanding of their work: 'this is not about the Global South as something foreign to or different from a Global North'.<sup>41</sup> Their focus is on *lumbung* as a method of sharing together, not as a criterion of selection. Employing *lumbung* as open, ongoing, and collective curatorial vision, ruangrupa's artistic direction led to a clash of systems.<sup>42</sup> The scepticism they faced by numerous reviewers prompts Sholette's questioning, 'if the show's decentralized curating has been attacked as "bad", then according to what reputed standards?'<sup>43</sup> Speaking for ruangrupa, Ade Darmawan acknowledged, 'We think the wider reaction to our show has shown the frictions that occur when different structures are forced to work together. But despite all the hurt, it's been great to see that so many of the artists have stayed in solidarity with one another.'<sup>44</sup> By challenging the individualising and authoritarian role of curatorship and art direction,<sup>45</sup> ruangrupa crystallised their documenta as characterised by 'frictions' and 'solidarity'.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, their experience revealed the predicament of scaling up practices of collectivity rooted in systems of solidarity and locally-grounded struggles. Ronald Kolb describes the risk of 'scaling up in solidarity' as 'the danger of universalizing solidarity in relativizing ways and equalizing struggles at the global level without their complex, situated

- [www.documenta.de/en/press#press/3056-documenta-fifteen-closes-with-very-good-attendance-figures](http://www.documenta.de/en/press#press/3056-documenta-fifteen-closes-with-very-good-attendance-figures), accessed 30 May 2023
- 35 Howard S Becker, 'Art as Collective Action', *American Sociological Review*, vol 39, no 6, December 1974, pp 767–776
- 36 'Documenta 15 Announces Participating Artists', op cit
- 37 Helmut Draxler, 'The We-Ideal: Toward a Critique of Collectivity', *Texte zur Kunst*, vol 31, no 124, December 2021, p 42
- 38 Ibid
- 39 Tony Inglis, 'Hanover Street Paper Asphalt Partners with Prestigious Contemporary Art Exhibition Documenta Fifteen, Exclusively Announcing Line-up', *International Network of Street Papers*, 4 October 2021, <https://insp.ngo/hanover-street-paper-asphalt-partners-with-prestigious-contemporary-art-exhibition-documenta-fifteen-exclusively-announcing-line-up/>, accessed 10 August 2022
- 40 Stefan Dege, 'Documenta International Art Show Focuses on Global South', *Deutsche Welle*, 17 June 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/documenta-international-art-show-focuses-on-global-south/a-62172854>, accessed 10 August 2022
- 41 Ade Darmawan, 'Speech by Ade Darmawan (ruangrupa) in the Committee on Culture and Media, German Bundestag, July 6, 2022', documenta fifteen official website, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/speech-by-ade-darmawan-ruangrupa-in-the-committee-on-culture-and-media-german-bundestag-july-6-2022/>, accessed 10 August 2022
- 42 Ronald Kolb and Dorothee Richter, 'Editorial', *On Curating, Documenta fifteen – Aspects of contexts and practices*.<sup>47</sup> Scaling up implied an erasure of the locally-grounded experienced struggle – the specific contexts from which different participants and ruangrupa work – which were often invisible in the frictions presented in the media. Rather, these frictions exposed an inability or unwillingness of different stakeholders to acknowledge, comprehend, and dialogue with different points of view, and especially to situate these within their specific social and visual contexts of origin.<sup>48</sup>
- These frictions also highlight the disruptive nature of ruangrupa's conceptual intention and implementation of practices of care, togetherness, and solidarity. Instead of an exhibition of representational objects, ruangrupa's practice was defined by the accentuation of enlivened archival material, commoning practices, and the invitation for visitors to embrace a more participatory and engaged way of experiencing art.<sup>49</sup> Through a vision of trans-local interconnectedness and alliances, they adopted an approach to read and correlate diverse collective expressions of resistance against different circumstances of oppression.<sup>50</sup> For ruangrupa, 'business as usual' was defined by 'times of crisis' and unacceptable conditions of oppression; *lumbung* and the implementation of collective care served as a way to operate in these times. Transplanted to documenta, however, the logics of the exhibition (including curatorial control and responsibility) generated frictions that revealed how collective care can also be a disruptive practice.

## Atis Rezistans: Centring Resources

One collective that ruangrupa invited to documenta fifteen is Atis Rezistans (Resistance Artists) and the Ghetto Biennale in Haiti. Starting to make art in the late 1990s and known as the Sculptors of Grand Rue and Rue du Magasin de l'Etat, Céleur Jean-Hérard and André Eugène made artworks that were closely tied to place, with locally sourced materials and in sculptural monuments influenced by Vodou. They have since grown into a shifting artistic community and in 2007 founded Atis Rezistans, a mix of established and younger artists. At the core of the Ghetto Biennale, artists are invited in each edition for a residency in Haiti to produce their work locally. Leah Gordon, one of the co-initiators of the Ghetto Biennale, traces back its origins to 'issues of mobility and exclusion' and explains how the idea was born out of necessity, because Haitian artists were facing visa problems that hindered them from seeing their own works exhibited abroad.<sup>51</sup> If they were unable to access the international events critical for their artistic careers, they would bring the international audience to them.

The naming of the event is reflective of the many, even contradictory aims of the project. Choosing 'ghetto' connotes the issues of mobility and exclusion that members of Atis Rezistans faced, whereas the active appropriation of 'biennale' is reflective of the institutional benefits for visibility, distribution and networks the organisers hoped the event would bring.<sup>52</sup> Obviously there is the pitfall of exploitation, also described by locals as a 'polemic spectacle of poverty'.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Polly Savage has commented how 'Assimilation of the urban poor has long served to inject novelty into jaded art systems' – though her assessment of the first edition was that 'many of the visiting artists undertook relational, process-based pro-



*Commoning in Curatorial and Artistic Practices*, no 54, November 2022, p 4; Dorothee Richter, 'Curatorial Commons – A Paradigm Shift?', *On Curating, Documenta fifteen – Aspects of Commoning in Curatorial and Artistic Practices*, no 54, November 2022, p 42

- 43 Gregory Sholette, 'A Short and Incomplete History of "Bad" Curating as Collective Resistance', *e-flux Criticism*, 21 September 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/491800/a-short-and-incomplete-history-of-bad-curating-as-collective-resistance>, accessed 7 May 2023

- 44 Kabir Jhala, "'Germany has cancelled us": As embattled Documenta 15 closes, its curators ruangrupa reflect on the exhibition – and what they would have done differently', *The Art Newspaper*, 22 September 2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/09/22/documenta-15-closes-curators-ruangrupa-exhibition-kassel>, accessed 19 May 2023

- 45 Richter, 'Curatorial Commons – A Paradigm Shift?', *op cit*, pp 29–50

- 46 Kabir Jhala, "'Germany has cancelled us": As embattled Documenta 15 closes, its curators ruangrupa reflect on the exhibition – and what they would have done differently', *op cit*

- 47 Ronald Kolb, 'documenta fifteen's Lumbung: The Bumpy Road on the Third Way: Fragmentary Thoughts on the Threats and Troubles of Commons and Commoning in Contemporary Art and Knowledge Production', *On Curating, Documenta fifteen – Aspects of Commoning in Curatorial and Artistic Practices*, no 54, November 2022, p 76

- 48 Kolb and Richter, 'Editorial', *op cit*, p 4. Elly

jects, often providing residents with strategies for self-representation, and resisting excessive mediation or spectacle' and thereby 'disrupt the zones of exclusion entrenched in both contemporary art systems and the geopolitics of the global poor'.<sup>54</sup> From its programmatic title to its implementation and individual projects, the Ghetto Biennale navigates between the defiant gesture of 'ghetto' as a criticism of the restrictive nature of the artworld and 'biennale' as an ambition to access those same institutions they are critical of. As Gordon herself remarks, 'From the very start, by appropriating the super-charged word "biennale", the Ghetto Biennale could be accused of scrambling up the greasy pole whilst affecting to cut it down at its roots.'<sup>55</sup>

While these charged intentions remain, and the Ghetto Biennale has hosted continual editions since its inception, the inter-*klas* conditions of this event accentuate the everyday challenges that members of Atis Rezistans continue to face. One member describes the existential nature of this conflict:

I am part of Atis Rezistans since 2007, and I still cannot feed my own seven children. I don't understand, what use does it even have to be an artist if you still cannot support your own family from it? Sak vid pa kanpe! [An empty sack can't stand up!]<sup>56</sup>

The reality of facilitating an event in which artists are invited to engage with the local context and produce works in areas where people regularly experience hunger results at times in projects involving food. One such instance was Lee Lee's work *Nourish* in the third Ghetto Biennale in 2013, where the artist collaborated with Haitian grandmothers to cook and distribute meals to local residents. Two years later, she participated in the fourth Ghetto Biennale with another work that addressed food shortages and situated the issue within the context of environmental crises. Her *Sacred Soil* established gardens and seed libraries, and planted fruit trees native to Haiti.<sup>57</sup>

Likewise, as part of Atis Rezistans's participation in documenta fifteen, the duo Lafleur & Bogaert (composed of Haitian artist Michel Lafleur and Belgian artist Tom Bogaert, who started their collaboration in 2013, when they met during the third Ghetto Biennale) made *Bonbon Tè Majik* (Magical Mud Cakes) and offered them to the public. Haitian mud cakes, typically prepared from a special type of mud mixed with salt and vegetable fat, are often described by Western commentators as an unequivocal sign of the country's pervasive poverty, literally forcing people to eat dirt.<sup>58</sup> Yet others argue that they are in fact a traditional nutritional supplement, favoured especially by pregnant women for their mineral values.<sup>59</sup> In fact, the practice of eating earth or soil-like substances, also called geophagia, is known in numerous regions around the world; it was first described by Hippocrates almost 2500 years ago and has been attributed religious properties in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and hoodoo.<sup>60</sup> For documenta fifteen, Lafleur & Bogaert produced their mud cakes with soil from a clay pit near Kassel, questioning what gets lost in translation, but also how meanings and values shift (in cultural, religious, nutritional, and monetary terms) when local practices are dislocated. In this way, the work of this collective complicates the reading of a practice

Kent for example situates ruangrupa's collective curatorial practice within the Indonesian tradition of conscious collectivity, in: Elly Kent, 'The History of Conscious Collectivity Behind Ruangrupa, *On Curating, Documenta fifteen – Aspects of Commoning in Curatorial and Artistic Practices*, no 54, November 2022, pp 25–28

- 49 Aneta Rostkowska and Giulia Bellinetti, 'What documenta fifteen offered to the future – documenta fifteen closing days #1', *Metropolis M*, 29 September 2022, [https://www.metropolism.com/nl/opinion/47748\\_what\\_documenta\\_fifteen\\_offered\\_to\\_the\\_future\\_documenta\\_fifteen\\_closing\\_days\\_1](https://www.metropolism.com/nl/opinion/47748_what_documenta_fifteen_offered_to_the_future_documenta_fifteen_closing_days_1), accessed 19 May 2023
- 50 Kolb, 'documenta fifteen's Lumbung', op cit, p 61
- 51 Leah Gordon, 'You Can't Always Curate Your Way Out! Reflections on the Ghetto Biennale', in Sophie Dornhof, Nanne Buurman, Birgit Hopfener, Barbara Lutz and Leah Gordon, eds, *Situating Global Art: Topologies – Temporalities – Trajectories*, transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, 2018, p 129
- 52 Ibid, p 135
- 53 David Frohnapfel, 'Notes on How to Irritate a Group of Committed Artists: Politics of Emotions at the Ghetto Biennale in Port-au-Prince', *Space and Culture*, vol 23, no 1, 2020, p 69
- 54 Polly Savage, 'The Germ of the Future? Ghetto Biennale: Port-au-Prince', *Third Text* 105, vol 24, issue 4, July 2010, pp 493–494
- 55 Gordon, 'You Can't Always Curate Your Way Out!', op cit, p 135
- 56 Frohnapfel, 'Notes on How to Irritate a Group of Committed Artists', op cit, p 72

in terms of what is perceived as a response to a crisis vs what is valued or recognised as local knowledge and practice.

Throughout its different editions, a recurrent aspect of the Ghetto Biennale – and Haitian art more generally – has been its negotiation of, and response to, precarity and crisis. As Donald Cosentino observes, 'Haitian art has been locked in a *danse macabre* with its own history', and the presupposed correlation is always the same: 'the worse the circumstances, the more astonishing the art'.<sup>61</sup> One month after the first edition of the Ghetto Biennale opened, the 2010 earthquake struck Haiti, killing more than 200,000 people.<sup>62</sup> Peter Haffner's history of crisis and international tourism contextualising the Ghetto Biennale, which also involves political violence and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, describes the earthquake 'as the latest in this series' of hardships.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, the earthquake did not hamper the following editions of the event from taking place, but rather shaped the expectations, in terms of their criticality (about the art market/artworld) and in terms of their utility (did they help any local artists?).

Perhaps logically, then, the seventh edition of the Ghetto Biennale, foreseen to take place in 2022 after an extended break of three years due to the Covid-19 pandemic, was conceived around the theme of healing. The call 'Swen Moun' (Heal People) invited artists and curators to explore the topic from different angles, in relation to society, politics and the environment as well as to body and mind.<sup>64</sup> A core aspect of the 2022 edition was to become the 'Geto Klinik', an autonomous, self-organised health centre for the neighbourhood where the biennale takes place. A small team consisting of a doctor, nurse and pharmacist would have performed basic check-ups for the residents of the neighbourhood, placing special attention on common local health issues, such as high blood pressure and diabetes. The Geto Klinik would have also acted as an information centre, providing guidance and details about free health resources and medical facilities in Port-au-Prince. Importantly, therefore, the project would have centred on healing not only as a response to the global pandemic, but also healing from the local, ongoing health crises in Haiti. Yet other, equally persistent crises caught up with the organisers and prevented the Biennale from taking place: due to the unstable political situation and concerns over the safety of the invited artists, it was suspended until further notice.<sup>65</sup>

While grounding their practices in the needs of a local community, and organised around notions like collaboration and collectivity, inner group hierarchies and power relations loom. Atis Rezistans define themselves as 'a dynamic group of majority-class artists working in the Grand Rue neighbourhood of downtown Port-au-Prince' and 'a shifting community' on the documenta fifteen website,<sup>66</sup> but Cosentino has questioned whether they constitute a collective at all, arguing that 'They are mainly in competition with one another, one of their most creative, Guyodo, having branched off from his former colleagues, exhibiting his sculptures in a chic gallery in (relatively) bourgeois Pétionville.'<sup>67</sup>

Cosentino's questioning implies that a collective constitutes some kind of non-competitive community in which members do not have individual pursuits. Yet Atis Rezistans, and particularly their involvement in producing the Ghetto Biennale, shows that the access to power in the form of

57 Peter Haffner, 'Ghetto Biennale 2015: Contested Creativities in Haiti's Ghetto Biennale', *Art and the Public Square*, vol 5, no 2, 2016, p 127

58 Slavoj Žižek, 'From Democracy to Divine Violence', in Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Daniel Bensaid, Wendy Brown, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Ranciere, Kristin Ross, and Slavoj Žižek, *Democracy in What State?*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010, p 109. See also Jonathan M. Katz, 'Poor Haitians on a Mud Diet', *Los Angeles Times*, 3 February 2008, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-feb-03-adfg-haiti3-story.html>, accessed 13 April 2022

59 Sera L Young, *Craving Earth: Understanding Pica: The Urge to Eat Clay, Starch, Ice, and Chalk*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2011, pp 91–93

60 *Ibid*, p 16 and pp 46–57

61 Donald J Cosentino, 'Riding with Death: Vodou Art and Urban Ecology in the Streets of Port-au-Prince, by Jana Braziel', *New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, vol 93, no 1–2, June 2019, p 136

62 Estimates vary greatly, but one reported estimate in February was around 230,000. 'Haiti Quake Death Toll Rises to 230,000', *BBC News*, 11 February 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8507531.stm>, accessed 9 February 2022

63 Haffner, 'Ghetto Biennale 2015', *op cit*, p 125

64 'Call for 7th Ghetto Biennale 2022: Swen Moun', Ghetto Biennale official website, <https://ghettobiennale.org/7th-ghetto-biennale-2022/calls/>, accessed 10 August 2022

65 Conversation with members of Atis Rezistans during documenta fifteen at

resources and visibility – by bringing an audience to Haiti – is central to the work of the collective. In other words, the pursuit of a more bourgeois agency is perhaps not at all antithetical to the intentions of what these collectives are also set up to do. The crisis at stake here, and their response to it, is about conditions of poverty – not necessarily about artworld hierarchies or questions of authenticity.

## Womanifesto: Foregrounding Togetherness and Hospitality

Dealing with scarce resources is also at the core of the Bangkok-based women's artist collective Womanifesto, whose evolving artistic and political platform conveys on different registers what it means to make art in light of crisis. Their artist-initiated gatherings began in a context of economic and political upheaval, with the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and 'coup after coup'.<sup>68</sup> Without resources or invitations, they started to grow organically within self-expanding exchanges. Being left out of the art discourse, they decided 'in representing ourselves we refused to be made invisible'.<sup>69</sup> Building on Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of white feminism reducing all Third World women into a collective other,<sup>70</sup> Yvonne Low proposes to re-trace Womanifesto's feminist roots in a broader history that ran parallel to Western feminist art movements rather than as a derivative.<sup>71</sup>

Rather than working towards the canon, in a gesture that resonates with Silvia Federici's critique of value under capitalism,<sup>72</sup> Womanifesto starts from the personal experiences and claims a new political space, proposing diverse ways of art making and showing alternative practices of meaning-making that are less about the end result and more about the process.<sup>73</sup> One of the collective's specificities was events, 'relying solely on memory and without the use of recording tools' as Flaudette May Dautin described in a lecture about the legacy of Womanifesto.<sup>74</sup> Some of the first artworks that were produced, as in the case of Suwannakudt's *Akojorn* (No-Go Zone), were ephemeral and were not documented, intended to be experienced by the audience in that specific political when and where.<sup>75</sup> Installed at the entrance of Womanifesto's inaugural show *Tradisexion*, the work consisted of a clothesline hanging tube-shaped cloth that are associated with the menstrual cycle and blood in Thai culture.<sup>76</sup> As Low observed, the male viewer as he was entering the exhibition space was not only forced to engage with the work, but he was almost touched by the work.<sup>77</sup> The transgressive quality of this art event relates to the interaction of gendered objects and bodies, but also as particularly legible to a Thai audience.

Not only are they non-material, but, moving past the romanticising of a participatory artworld that often relies on precarious work conditions – they eclipse the idea of work at all. In 2001, they set up a ten-day workshop in a farming community in northeast Thailand, during which thirteen artists, six volunteers, and local artisans met and shared an intimate experience of communal care. Conceived as an extended picnic, the participants were not required to produce art during the workshop, postulating the ideal of collectivist non-productivity. The idea of

St Kunigundis Church,  
Kassel, 18 June 2022

- 66 'Atis Rezistans / Ghetto Biennale', documenta fifteen official website, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/lumbung-members-artists/atis-rezistans-ghetto-biennale/>, accessed 8 June 2022
- 67 Cosentino, 'Riding with Death', op cit, p 136
- 68 Varsha Nair, 'Of Key: Notes on Womanifesto's Fluidity', keynote lecture at the symposium 'In Light of Crisis: The Fraught Significations of Contemporary Biennials', University of Zurich, 19 May 2022
- 69 Ibid
- 70 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1991
- 71 Yvonne Low, 'Phaptawan Suwannakudt's *Akojorn* (1995): Connecting Women', in Brenda Schmahmann, *Iconic Works of Art by Feminists and Gender Activists: Mistress-Pieces*, Routledge, New York, 2021, p 228
- 72 Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, PM Press, Oakland, California, 2018
- 73 Varsha Nair, 'Womanifesto: A Biennial Art Exchange in Thailand', *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia*, vol 3, no 1, 2019
- 74 Flaudette May Datuin, 'Women Imaging Women: Feminine Spaces, Dissident Voices', in Binghui Huangfu, *Text and Subtext: Contemporary Art and Asian Women*, Earl Lu Gallery, Singapore, pp 16–31, as quoted in Yvonne Low, 'Phaptawan Suwannakudt's *Akojorn* (1995)', op cit, p 226

collectivist non-productivity stems from a feeling that Varsha Nair describes as 'exhaustion' and the need to give themselves 'more time to regain energy and concentrate on our work and family life. This led to the idea of going on a "picnic", away from Bangkok.<sup>78</sup> Though there were creative activities (building a kiln, learning crafts), Womanifesto's workshop (re-)centred hospitality and care at the core of their exchanges.<sup>79</sup> As a conscious response to the energy required for organising art events, they eschewed productive for reproductive spaces, proposing a different format, with different temporalities and different expectations, reflecting a feminist practice of care.<sup>80</sup>

Womanifesto adopts the art event as a central part of their work, and in fact claims the appellation of biennale for themselves (while refusing to strictly adhere to the dictates of a two-year rhythm), but they radically transform its function, its meaning for participants and the kind of participants that are involved.<sup>81</sup> Their critique of the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that inform art events found expression, for example, in the way they envisaged the fourth iteration of Womanifesto in 2003. Under the title 'Procreation/Postcreation', it set out to explore 'old and new myths and realities surrounding *creation*' in order to 'reveal how they have influenced the thinking of societies in the past, today and may continue to do so in the future'.<sup>82</sup> Conceived as a publication rather than a conventional exhibition, it started from an international open call that specifically invited both 'artists and non-artists' from around the world to participate.<sup>83</sup> Submissions could be sent both by email and by post, but most arrived digitally. The use of mail-art as a discursive production sought to bridge distances and rethink proximity within the context of an alternative opportunity to exchange, while the use of a recycled cardboard box to collect the contributions offered a contrast to the use of technology in creation. Crucially, they accepted all submissions instead of curating a selection. As Keiko Sei reported at the time, 'The organizers didn't select by gender, race or quality; they only called for contributions and archive everything.'<sup>84</sup>

Another way that Womanifesto has rethought the conventions of the art event, and challenged its often ageist rationale, has been to bring together different generations of women, such as in their residency program that took place on a farm in 2008. Participant Pan Parahom (Mae Pan) who was seventy years old at the time, had worked on a farm all her life and experimented with making natural dyes for yarn that she weaves into cloth. She described the experience:

I don't think I do anything great – part of it is just to enjoy myself. Other people may not recognize or relate to what is going on. But I am enjoying something that other people cannot see. People say that there is something mysterious here, something that cannot be explained. I have never felt scared or unsafe, or that there is any danger. And those people who come here and feel the same way, I can well understand them. I think that the 'something mysterious' does not mean to harm but means well to all who come and stay here. Please feel you are part of the land.<sup>85</sup>

This description captures a few aspects of Womanifesto's work: bringing people together, foregrounding hospitality, acknowledging affects and emotions, sharing experiences and practices that are not always

- 75 Yvonne Low, 'Phaptawan Suwannakudt's *Akojorn* (1995)', op cit, p 228
- 76 Ibid
- 77 Ibid, pp 229–230
- 78 Ibid, p 159
- 79 Nair, 'Of Key: Notes on Womanifesto's Fluidity', op cit
- 80 Oona Morrow and Brenda Parker, 'Care, Commoning and Collectivity: From Grand Domestic Revolution to Urban Transformation', *Urban Geography*, vol 41, no 4, 2020
- 81 When asked in 2009 by a journalist what she thought about the possibility of there being a biennale in Thailand one day, Varsha Nair pointed out: 'There has been a biennale in Thailand since 1997 – "Womanifesto". I don't think that has even registered in people's minds.' Asia Art Archive, 'Interview with Varsha Nair', *Ideas Journal*, 1 January 2009, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas-journal/ideas-journal/interview-with-varsha-nair>, accessed 15 June 2022.
- 82 'Womanifesto 2003: Call for Participation for "Procreation/Postcreation"', Womanifesto Archive, Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/womanifesto-archive-2003-procreationpostcreation-21297/object/womanifesto-2003-call-for-participation-for-procreationpostcreation>, accessed 15 June 2022
- 83 Ibid
- 84 Keiko Sei, 'Procreation/Postcreation: A Womanifesto Art Project', *SPAFA Journal*, vol 13, no 3, 2003, p 38
- 85 Pan Parahom (Mae Pan), 'Notes from the Farm', Womanifesto official website, <http://www>.

visible. This kind of exchange extends into more recent online Gatherings in 2020 and 2021 similarly organised around dialogue, meeting and listening rather than presentation. It is precisely the intangible that carries meaning outside of productive practices or events that must generate an outcome. And yet, the question of tangibility and visibility of Womanifesto's activities must be raised, precisely because 'much remains to be done for women artists in the region', as Varsha Nair notes.<sup>86</sup> One way of working towards more recognition for these artists, without slipping into the pitfalls of co-optation in times when the art market is especially eager to 'discover' and capitalise on previously marginalised voices, has been to make their archive accessible online.

In 2018, they began to compile, review, and digitise hundreds of records documenting their activities since the mid-1990s, including photographs, audio-visual materials, publications and ephemera, press clippings and documents in collaboration with the Asia Art Archive (AAA). Driven by a desire to conserve the tangible traces of their lived experiences and by a more practical need to protect the artistic material gathered over the years from humidity, weather and decay, the Womanifesto Archive mirrors the collective's strivings to claiming a(n archival) space and sharing knowledge and experiences.

The lasting impact of Womanifesto is not only the material remnants but also the sense of collectivity they helped to foment. 'Informed by Womanifesto's ethos, [the Womanifesto Online Archive] adopts feminist principles of horizontally collaborative co-production, intellectual and creative generosity, and long-term investments of care in order to produce voices, stories, histories and exchanges that are of, for and by the community itself.'<sup>87</sup>

The foundational practices and pursuits of Womanifesto can be recognised in their initial sense of collectivity around the intersection between being women and being artists in Southeast Asia; a will to build an international and intergenerational but simultaneously locally-based community; an interest in an interpersonal and at times intimate cultural dialogue; and an artistic exchange cultivated on a lived togetherness.<sup>88</sup> While the format of the art events conceived by Womanifesto has constantly been altering its dynamics (from exhibition to residency, from cyberspace to archive), the concepts of collectivity, sharing, and togetherness have served as a stable continuity of purpose. Focusing on the position of women and shared intergenerational knowledge, Womanifesto prioritised 'bringing up children, day-to-day living, caring for ailing parents'.<sup>89</sup> In addition to centring these care responsibilities as a mode of continuity, the durability of Womanifesto is also attached to the stability of a core group of people. While new people are always brought in, having core members through many decades creates a sense of intimate togetherness and trust, from the use of private homes to the sharing of personal resources.

Thus, Womanifesto offers a distinct alternative to pursuits of spectacle and relevance often ascribed to the art event.<sup>90</sup> Operating on the 'terrain of action and meaning' that follows crisis as an ordinary condition,<sup>91</sup> Womanifesto's events are not 'merely' adaptations to circumstances but also critiques of a production-oriented system and a political refusal to be invisible. The role of care for Womanifesto is not only about the gendered responsibility of care-taking but a central force for sustaining their art event.



womanifesto.com/events/womanifesto-residency-program-2008/, accessed 8 June 2022

- 86 Nair, 'Womanifesto: A Biennial Art Exchange in Thailand', op cit, p 147
- 87 Clare Veal, Marni Williams, Roger Nelson, and Yvonne Low, 'The Womanifesto Online Anthology', in Nadya Wang, ed, *Check-In: An Art & Market Publication*, Margins Print, Singapore, 2021, p 100
- 88 Nair, 'Womanifesto: A Biennial Art Exchange in Thailand', op cit, p 147
- 89 Ibid, p 173
- 90 Jeannine Tang, 'Spectacle's Politics and the Singapore Biennale', *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol 6, no 3, December 2007, pp 365–377
- 91 Vigh, 'Crisis and Chronicity', op cit
- 92 On the connection between care and feminist practice, see Joan C Tronto and Berenice Fisher, 'Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring', in E K Abel and M K Nelson, eds, *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1990, pp 36–54, and Elke Krasny, 'Feminist Thought and Curating: On Method', *On Curating* 26, October 2015, pp 53–71
- 93 Morrow and Parker, 'Care, Commoning and Collectivity', op cit, p 608
- 94 See, for example, Hito Steyerl, 'Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy', *e-flux Journal* 21, December 2010, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/21/67696/politics-of-art-contemporary-art-and-the-transition-to-post-democracy/>, accessed 10 August 2022; Julieta Aranda, Anton Vidokle, and Brian Kuan Wood, eds, *Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of*

## Events That Care

In focusing on the values, practices and priorities of these collectives, we reflected on the relationship between crisis and the art event, taking the notion of care as an overarching and shared concern. As an event that cares, the art event is not only a reactionary vehicle of coping; the centrality of care also (re-)mediates the relevance of the art event itself. From events that matter towards events that care, from production towards reproduction, a reading of the art event from the perspective of collective and feminist practice under the condition of crisis sheds new light on the event.<sup>92</sup> In their analysis of the crisis of care that cities face, Oona Morrow and Brenda Parker urge for feminist lenses to apply lessons from the past in which 'women challenged conventional and uneven domestic and urban relations in imaginative and multi-scalar ways, based on ideals of collectivity, creativity and care'.<sup>93</sup> In the context of urban transformation historically, women organised housing cooperatives that shared food and provided safety networks by pooling resources.

We find this scholarship on care relevant for our analysis of collectives, whose practices reveal that the precarious conditions endemic to the artworld are nothing new.<sup>94</sup> Likewise, the collective as a form of artistic collaborative process is also not new and points to the labour of those involved in producing art.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, thinking about art as collective action invites us to be mindful not only of the labour of those involved in the artworld – such as curators, studio assistants, exhibition organisers, critics, dealers, and audiences – but also to acknowledge the work of all the uncredited workers involved, such as technicians, suppliers, transporters, caterers, maintenance workers, administrative staff, and cleaning personnel. These conditions of precarious work endemic to (art) events elevate the urgency of focusing on care within curatorial practices.<sup>96</sup>

Though the collective may be regarded as a constant throughout the history of art, the ideas and ideals associated with collectivity are subject to change. For instance, the shift in terminology from idealised, arcadian notions of communities and cooperatives in the 1960s and 1970s to the neoliberal networks and corporations of the 1990s and 2000s represent distinctly different modes of collectivity.<sup>97</sup> According to Tom Holert, 'working in a collective framework does not automatically lead to a critical stance toward the mechanics of originality and individuality: Performing as a member of a group can, for instance, easily become the precondition of an individual artist's success'.<sup>98</sup> In this debate, it is also noteworthy that artistic convivial practices can offer a conceptual tool to challenge the notion of collectivity. Jasbir K Puar explains how 'conviviality' as a feature of assembling 'does not lead to a politics of the universal or inclusive common, nor an ethics of individuatedness, rather the futurity enabled through the open materiality of bodies as a Place to Meet'.<sup>99</sup>

Spurred by the global pandemic, experiences of isolation, and growing awareness of systemic inequalities, there is a need to rethink the relevance of the art event and the collective. Patrick Flores, former curator of the Singapore Biennale, argues that in

- Art*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2011; Angela Dimitrakaki, 'The 2008 Effect', *Third Text* 123, vol 27, issue 4, July 2013, pp 579–588; Panos Kompatsiaris, 'Art Struggles: Confronting Internships and Unpaid Labour in Contemporary Art', *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*, vol 13, no 2, 30 September 2015, pp 554–566, <https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v13i2.613>, accessed 10 August 2022; Panos Kompatsiaris, *The Politics of Contemporary Art Biennials: Spectacles of Critique, Theory and Art*, Routledge, New York, 2017
- 95 Howard S Becker, 'Art as Collective Action', *American Sociological Review*, vol 39, no 6, December 1974, pp 767–776
- 96 See Helena Reckitt, 'Curating and/as Care', keynote lecture for 'New Alphabet School #4 Caring', Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 12 June 2020
- 97 Tom Holert, 'Joint Ventures: The State of Collaboration', *Artforum*, vol 49, no 6, February 2011, <http://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201102&cid=27403>, accessed 28 July 2022; see also Christian Kravagna, 'Working on the Community: Models of Participatory Practice', translated by Aileen Derieg, in *Transversal*, January 1999, <https://transversal.at/transversal/1204/kravagna/en>, accessed 4 May 2023; Shannon Jackson, *Performance, Aesthetics, and Support Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, Routledge, New York, 2011; Grant H Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004; Bojana Cvejic, 'Collectivity? You Mean Collaboration', in *Transversal*, January 2005, <https://transversal.at>
- light of the pandemic there is a need for art events like the biennial 'to signify or intuit precarity and vulnerability in the context of a persistent resistance'.<sup>100</sup> In their work as collectives, ruangrupa, Atis Rezistans and Womanifesto's relation to care incorporates precisely this element of vulnerability in the context of resistance. In particular, the centrality of process/method, the sharing of resources, and a supportive togetherness illustrate how events that care in a context of crisis also reflect a form of resistance. Especially for ruangrupa and Womanifesto, it is their process that sustains them. The way that *lumbung* is adopted as a way of entrusting collectives with a stage, as a method of sharing, implies a shift from *lumbung* as a curatorial mission that frames the expectations for a theme, towards *lumbung* as a way of bringing different artistic participants together. In their ways of caring for members' individual life situations and in their workshop without work, Womanifesto similarly shifts focus away from the stage and towards the backstage where artists gather and establish a kind of togetherness and facilitate exchange without the pressures of producing an exhibition. The art event thus is not synonymous with an art exhibition – it takes on new connotations of togetherness and care, often around a table with food. The Ghetto Biennale's projects on collective cooking and eating or communal healing, conceived as both art practices and as responses to the needs of local residents, achieve a multi-dimensional practice of resistance. They consist of caring for the community's immediate well-being and enacting artistic practices that celebrate their heritage while re-writing negative stereotypes, and ultimately denouncing conditions of poverty rather than turning into an object of spectacle.
- While nourishment connects Womanifesto and the Ghetto Biennale, it also represents another key component of a caring event: sharing resources. For all three collectives, the condition of crisis is closely tied to the access to resources, perhaps the defining factor for those artworld actors condemned to operating on 'the periphery'.<sup>101</sup> By practicing *majelis* (assembly) and meeting points, ruangrupa create a sense of mutual exchange and sharing. Whether it is in the form of sharing a meal, or imagining a health clinic, or creating new spaces in refusing to be rendered invisible, or offering platforms for other collectives, sharing resources is political and not only financial.
- An idea of a collective body and the notion of 'resistance as re-existence' is emphasised by Julieta Paredes Carvajal, a founding member of Mujeres Creando: she coins the notion of community-based feminism (*feminismo comunitario*) to describe what is 'born in our contexts, in our bodies, in our circumstances, in the dreams that we want to build... It has to do with an autonomy concept... It thinks from the common identity, the collective body, the side by side'.<sup>102</sup> Sharing resources offers a critique of inequality and the production-orientation of art events that often take place under absurd conditions of crisis in which art workers are exploited. Yet sharing resources can simultaneously reflect a mode of care attentive to a collective body and its needs, facilitating its visibility, recognition, nourishment and health. Reading modes of resistance through these practices of care, collectives like ruangrupa, Atis Rezistans, and

transversal/1204/cvejic/en, accessed 4 May 2023; Ines Barner, Anja Schürmann, and Kathrin Yacavone, 'Einleitung', in *Kooperation, Kollaboration, Kollektivität: Geteilte Autorschaften und pluralisierte Werke aus interdisziplinärer Perspektive*, special issue of *Journal of Literary Theory*, no 1, 2022, pp 3–28

- 98 Holert, 'Joint Ventures', op cit
- 99 Jasbir K Puar, 'Prognosis Time: Towards a Geopolitics of Affect, Debility and Capacity', *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, vol 19, no 2, July 2009, p 168
- 100 Wah, 'How Can Art Biennials Continue to be Relevant?', op cit
- 101 Marchart, 'The Globalization of Art', op cit
- 102 Julieta Paredes, 'Feminismo comunitario', *Asamblea Feminista Comunitaria, UNIFEM Bolivia*, 2010, quoted from Ilaria Conti, 'A Streetwalker's Re-Existence: La Bienal en Resistencia', paper presented at the symposium 'In Light of Crisis: The Fraught Significations of Contemporary Biennials', University of Zurich, 19 May 2022

Womanifesto suggest possible ways of re-signifying the art event under conditions of crisis.

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