

# The ‘*kampung* formula’: Infrastructural adventurism and public art in Semarang, Indonesia

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Urban Studies

2023, Vol. 60(13) 2612–2631

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DOI: 10.1177/00420980231156016

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## Abstract

Describing the artistic and curatorial work of the Indonesian art collective Hysteria over the last 15 years, this paper considers public art as a practice of devising relations with various urban sites and actors. I focus on Hysteria’s core strategy of organising art festivals and exhibitions in *kampung*s – working-class urban neighbourhoods – with the aim of creating novel spaces for artistic expression, showing that the *kampung* serves both as inspiration for artistic experimentation and improvised public space in the absence of proper art infrastructure. Further, *kampung* space allows economically precarious artists to engage the city, that is, explore its social make-up and uncover economic opportunities. A long-term perspective on Hysteria’s work reveals that activities provide members as well as involved artists with valuable urban knowledge and connections. Turning the *kampung* into a subject of public art and infrastructure of encounter through what I call the ‘*kampung* formula’, Hysteria managed to establish itself as a representative of the poor and key interlocutor of urban development agencies, becoming eligible for a number of pro-poor project grants. Describing the relational network of art, *kampung* and the wider city, I therefore propose to see public art as a kind of ‘infrastructural adventurism’ that provides glimpses into various aspects of both formal and informal economies in the Indonesian city and extracts knowledge and value from marginal urban places.

## Keywords

culture/arts/creativity, infrastructure, *kampung*, neighbourhood, poverty/exclusion, public space, urban art

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## 摘要

本文描绘了印度尼西亚艺术团体 **Hysteria** 在过去 15 年的艺术和策展工作，将公共艺术视为一种与各种城市场所和参与者建立关系的实践。我们重点关注 **Hysteria** 在甘榜（工薪阶层的城市街区）组织艺术节和展览所采用的核心策略，该策略旨在为艺术表达创造新颖的空间。我们的研究表明甘榜既是艺术实验的灵感来源，也是在适当的艺术基础设施缺席时，临时采用的公共空间。此外，甘榜空间使经济不稳定的艺术家得以参与城市，探索其社会构成并发现经济机会。从长远来看 **Hysteria** 的工作，我们发现他们组织的活动为成员和参与的艺术师提供了宝贵的城市知识和联系。**Hysteria** 通过我们所说的“甘榜公式”，将甘榜变成公共艺术和公众接触基础设施的主题，使自己成功地成为了穷人的代表和城市发展机构的主要对话者，有资格获得一些亲贫项目补助金。因此，基于对艺术、甘榜和更广泛的城市之间的关系网络时的描绘，本文建议将公共艺术视为一种“基础设施冒险主义”，可以让人们对印度尼西亚城市正规和非正规经济的各个方面有所了解，并获取城市边缘地区的知识和价值。

## 关键词

文化/艺术/创意、基础设施、甘榜、街区、贫困/排斥、公共空间、城市艺术

Received December 2021; accepted January 2023

## Introduction

After the late-night opening of the art festival ‘Penta K Labs II’ in Nongkosawit, a poor neighbourhood located in the hilly south of Semarang, a friendly graphic arts student offered me a ride home. I was tired after a long and exciting day of performances, dance acts and speeches organised by the art collective Grobak Hysteria. It had turned the streets of the neighbourhood, its primary school and other publicly accessible spaces, into stages for diverse artworks: dance and theatrical performances, murals and noise music. Sitting on the back of the motorbike, I leaned forward to ask the young man why he had attended the vernissage. He answered that he enjoyed being around and learning from the collective’s members, especially its director, Adin. The road wound down through thickly forested slopes. The student suddenly added that he wanted to be like Adin one day. He admired his ‘wide network’ (*jaringan luas*) and the way Adin brought together various people and places through art.

This article considers art events staged in poor areas of Semarang as infrastructural entryways through which artists can engage the city and forge new links with each other as well as donors and state representatives. Creatively reflecting on the *kampung* as a marginal place allows artists to make visible previously unseen urban practices and actors. In this process, they, too, become visible to actors and institutions that sustain artistic practice in and beyond Indonesia. This study therefore sheds new light on the infrastructural dimensions of creative practice and pushes our understanding of public art to consider it as a relation-building device designed to foster new publics and economic opportunity.

While many have written about urban art and its beneficial role in promoting social and urban change (Brosius, 2016; Sharp et al., 2005; Turner, 2005), to my knowledge, there is no close ethnographic study of how art collectives balance artistic ambitions and economic pressure in Southeast Asia, and how these factors impinge on their art

practices. Urban scholars have pointed to the place of art in urban development, revealing its positive (Florida, 2002) as well as negative effects (Sharp et al., 2005) on, for instance, levels of accessibility (Ley, 2003). This article is in line with scholarship that critically examines the usage of public art by suspending judgement and focusing on art as part of socio-economic configurations of the city. Aharon-Gutman (2018) asked 'what happens when the ideal of public art as a tool of urban regeneration manifests itself in the Global South'. Similarly, Nagakawa (2010: S24) problematised the notion that fostering a creative urban culture naturally leads to social inclusion. Arts-based efforts of residents to counter the divisive consequences of economic crisis can fail to produce lasting improvement unless policymakers recognise the workings of art and provide 'a structure within which it can be cultivated as social capital'. Building on these insights, I ask what kind of public art is generated by an urban context in which such structures do not exist. What channels arise in these situations and how do artists become visible in the absence of appropriate art infrastructure, like public museums, galleries, or festivals?

To provide answers to these questions, I focus on the curatorial practice of Grobak Hysteria, better known as Hysteria, a collective that was founded by Semarang-based art students in 2007.<sup>1</sup> Describing its artistic interventions in marginalised neighbourhoods and other parts of Semarang over the last 15 years, I especially examine its links with the *kampung*.<sup>2</sup> I show how Hysteria's site-specific art events that intervene in the material infrastructure of marginalised communities not just temporarily extend spaces for artistic expression into the public realm and reduce social isolation. Staging encounters between disconnected urban actors by displaying life on the margins of the city also forges and maintains relationships with

institutional actors that support public art. Analysing Hysteria's core strategy of organising art festivals and exhibitions in *kampung*s – Indonesian working-class urban neighbourhoods – I show that the *kampung* serves both as inspiration for artistic experimentation and improvised public space in the absence of proper art infrastructure. Through this '*kampung* formula' economically precarious artists can engage the city, that is, explore its social make-up and uncover economic opportunities. Art exhibits staged in the *kampung* do not necessarily generate income and they are not immediately beneficial to artists. A mid-term perspective on Hysteria's work reveals that activities rather provide members, as well as involved artists, with valuable urban knowledge and connections. By turning the *kampung* into an object of art and infrastructure of encounter, Hysteria managed to establish itself as a representative of the urban poor and key interlocutor of development agencies, becoming eligible for donor-based project grants. Describing the relational network of art, *kampung* and the wider city, I therefore propose to see public art as a kind of 'infrastructural adventurism' (Kleinman, 2014) that provides glimpses into various aspects of both formal and informal economies in the Indonesian city. A detailed, bottom-up approach to studying public art shows that this adventurism co-existed with, if not provided, indispensable incentives to Indonesia's burgeoning creative urban economy.

This article does not address internationally successful Indonesian art collectives, such as *Ruang Rupa*, the collective chosen to curate the 2022 Documenta in Kassel, Germany. In fact, when I asked Hysteria's director, Adin, about the potential effects that appointing *Ruang Rupa* had on his own work, he scoffed at the insinuation: such 'big shots' had nothing to do with his work. They played in a different universe. Rather

than drawing further attention to these bigger art 'players', which do not represent the experience of most art collectives working in Indonesian cities, I highlight the interventions of a lesser-known organisation.

## Methodology and ethical dimensions

For this article, I draw on qualitative data collected during repeated visits of Semarang that allowed me to attend events organised by Hysteria and extensively exchange with its members. After encountering the work of Hysteria in 2014, I stayed in touch with its director, Adin and followed the work of the collective from afar. In 2018, I returned to Semarang to document the collective's events by participating as spectator and orator, conducting informal interviews with members and observing curatorial prep work. I also joined Adin on several promotional trips throughout Java. Prior to engaging in data collection, members of the collective were informed about my intent to study the collective's work. Oral consent was procured from all research participants quoted in this article. At public events, I was always introduced to the audience as a foreign researcher. In 2019, the art association Heidelberg Kunstverein invited three members of the collective to a one-month residency in Heidelberg, where I was teaching anthropology at the time. As local guide of the collective, I gained further critical insights into the collective's mode of operation and economic situation.<sup>3</sup>

Conducting participant observation and systematically taking fieldnotes as well as conducting open-ended interviews was supposed to elicit 'personally historicized, temporally formatted' (Katz, 2001: 445) responses to questions regarding the collective's operations. Such descriptions allowed the surrounding of artistic choices with a detailed and bottom-up understanding of

everyday life and decision-making processes while also integrating artists' understanding of their own social situations. This ethnographic approach to public art, I hold, offers a 'critique of inner-city life' (Low, 1997: 408) by providing a complex understanding of artists' responses to urban exclusion and precarity. In addition to collecting qualitative data during interviews and everyday social interactions, I collected discursive material, such as brochures and website texts, that were subsequently analysed. An interpretive approach was used in the analysis of this fieldwork material instead of systematically assigning codes.

I see my positionality vis-à-vis the artistic work of the collective as a critical observer and long-term interlocutor who is vested in developing a sustainable forum for urban art interventions in Indonesian cities. As such, research was framed from the beginning as a platform for mutual learning and exchange. Instead of offering monetary compensation to participants, which would have been difficult as a postdoctoral student, the project was intended to become a feedback tool for the collective. In return for participating in this research, I further vowed to help increase the visibility of the collective outside Semarang and beyond Indonesia, and participated in public events as speaker. Facilitating the art residency in Heidelberg also promised some financial gain and aimed at improving the collective's international portfolio.

## Relational art in the city

In her much-cited volume *Art and Social Change*, Turner (2005: 4) proposes that artists in Asia and the Pacific have been able, through their work, to 'reflect the values and aspirations of their own society and of humanity'. Turner recognises art as a form of resistance to violations of human rights abuses in the name of progress or capitalist

development. She situates art in the ‘broad area of social justice’, since art projects revolve around, or even involve, communities ‘to help them confront poverty and trauma [...] and preserve traditions and values’. Brosius (2016) and others have discussed how such political art materialises in cities of the Global South and with what consequences. In Delhi, she proposes, artists excavate overlooked urban histories and draw attention to exclusive city-building by creating a ‘dialogue between artists and urban sites around the issue[s] of the environment, climate change, the scarcity of water, clean air and green in the city’. This dialogic work, she argues, produces challenging insights into the ‘in-between spaces’ of a city and outlines urban trajectories that differ from those of the ‘world-class city’ (Brosius, 2016: 140). Brosius, therefore, considers artworks themselves as place-making strategies and claims to urban space based on new (or lost) knowledge of the city. Along with Turner, her account of urban art practices helps appreciate artists’ political stakes and roles in challenging and even moderating urban transformation in cities of the Global South.

Although these studies reveal the important role of artistic practice in unsettling hegemonic urban agendas and making alternative claims to city space, they do not account for the often complex and experimental ways in which art relates to its intended urban site and audience(s). Without critical scrutiny and careful contextualisation, such views can reproduce ‘public artopia’, a term developed by Zebracki (2013: 304) to capture ‘claims about what art “does” to people and places’ based on assumed ideas and ideals of public art. A situated analysis of public art requires examining ‘public-art producers’ personal perceptions of the role of art in urban space’. Zebracki et al. (2010: 787) consider these perceptions as a corollary of social processes

of differentiation that constitute urban life. As such, both personal and collectively shared perceptions and uses of the city always infuse objects of public art and their claims. Following Zebracki et al. (2010: 788), this article therefore aims at situating artistic practice in Semarang within the geographical and historical context of the city as well as art collectives’ economic precarity to understand the social and cultural dimensions of public art.

Hysteria’s interventions, in many ways, bear the hallmarks of contemporary public art. As Radice (2018: 51) has suggested, the global surge of public art in urban space ‘speaks to artists and curators’ ongoing interest in engaging “the public”’. Such art pieces often want to engage the public, which can be a site, audience, or subject matter, by inviting participation and being interactive by design. A ‘relational’ aspect is dear to artists whose work is geared towards ‘unpack[ing] the implicit and explicit codes and associations that produce a site’ (Radice, 2018: 51) and who confront audiences with their own, often highly partial, assumptions. Art is thus relational when ‘the form of the artwork is in the relations it establishes’ (Sansi and Strathern, 2016: 426). This type of art whose origin can be traced back to the 1990s creates the conditions for more or less extensive exchanges with various audiences and takes as its ‘theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space’ (Bourriaud, 2002: 113). When artists or art collectives intervene in urban space, they therefore contend, negotiate and coexist with other imaginations and uses of urban space (Binder, 2008). They engage these contentious imaginations, producing a dialogue or material exchange with the audience by becoming ‘a mediator, a person that fosters and provides situations of exchange, rather than a creator of objects’ (Bourriaud, 2002: 32, cited in Sansi and

Strathern, 2016: 426). Public art in Indonesia variously embraces and articulates this quest for (different) connection. In post-Suharto Indonesia, democratisation brought entirely new possibilities of expression. Street graffiti could suddenly be turned into performative action that used the street as ‘a screen, a stage, an audience, and an ongoing public sphere that flows automatically from cyberspace to the streets and back again’ with the intent to forge new publics (Lee, 2016: 307). Even if staging art in the *kampung* follows this tradition, why are artists turning to the secluded *kampung* when art has successfully ventured into many spaces of public life in Indonesia?

In her portrait of Indonesian art collectives, Kusuma (n.d.) seems to argue that, as urban life has increasingly become rhythmised to the swiftly changing realities of capitalism, art collectives represented an organisational strategy that allowed artists to assume their reformative role in society. While collectives’ work often consisted of pushing the limits of traditional artistic practice, they also played an important role in oppositional politics. Since the proliferation of art collectives in the post-Suharto period, their existence remained characterised by strong precarity. Based on Kusuma’s description of art collectivism as ‘survival strategy’, I hold that art collectives still represent platforms for developing non-normative forms of art on the margins of legitimate art forums. However, given the changing political and economic landscape of art practice, how do artists secure their position in society today?

In this article, I add an infrastructural perspective to the analysis of public art in the relational vein to build a situated understanding of its uses in contemporary Indonesia. Since membership in an Indonesian art collective does not typically generate a reliable and substantial income, it is important to consider the infrastructural work through which art generates actionable ties to various

urban audiences and places. In the case of Hysteria, and also other collectives, practice has centred on less governed urban spaces where capital accumulation sits uneasily between and sutures formal and informal economies. By approaching art as a form of infrastructural adventuring into these spaces, I want to draw attention to the role of artistic practice in positioning collectives and their members to the material processes of uneven urbanisation as a resource-capturing process.

### Art as adventure in infrastructure

Infrastructure, I argue, is a helpful lens in building a situated understanding of how art collectives engage with urban publics and places. By targeting urban infrastructure, collectives not only engage the users and recipients of sociomaterial assemblages as participants, but they also reach potential supporters, such as humanitarian organisations and the state. As Larkin (2013: 339) argues in his seminal article on infrastructures, they are ‘things and also the relation between things’. Speaking to and through urban infrastructure, such as riverbanks or water wells, art collectives can join in a widespread urban activity that Simone (2014) has called ‘devising relations’. Devising relations, according to Simone, has to be considered as an urban modality and sustained attention to infrastructure through which people make mega-cities like Jakarta liveable:

People figure themselves out by figuring out arrangements of materials, by designing what is available to them in formats and positions that enable them to take different vantage points. What is possible for people to do with each other is largely a question of what exists between them and how this “between” can be shaped as active points of reference, connection, and anchorage (Simone and Pieterse, 2017: 3).

Addressing and staging itself within urban infrastructure, artists can conjure up this

'between' and interrogate it as a relational sphere. Devising relations is precisely the goal of 'adventures in infrastructure', a practice that Kleinman (2014) observed among cosmopolitan adventurers spending time at Paris Nord, the busy central train station in the French capital. Kleinman showed how African migrants investigated and used the public infrastructure of the train station to scope out opportunities and 'create an alternative system of channels and social relations, thus making their own form of social integration where state institutions had failed' (Kleinman, 2021). This infrastructural work allows to carve out spaces of manoeuvre that produce economic opportunities as well as a sense of belonging in the city.

As Newberry (2008, 2018) and others (Barker and Gibbins, 2018; Kusno, 2020) have argued, the Indonesian *kampung* can be productively analysed from an infrastructural perspective. As a peripheral and often temporary urban phenomenon nested in the material and temporal structures of Indonesian cities, it has allowed generations of migrants to survive in the metropolis, providing the resources for economic ventures and cultural identification. As I will show in the following, art exhibits in the *kampung* can be understood as 'infrastructural adventures' that temporarily rewrite urban space for the purpose of devising relations. Through art events and platform building, Hysteria produces new assemblages of places and social links. These mainly transient events turn relatively self-enclosed *kampungs* into parts of a larger network, connecting sites in space and time. The art collective Hysteria allows its members to derive a certain value from building relations between locations and people: they provide opportunities for networking and produce job opportunities, as well as short-term revenue. Further, exhibits are turned into lasting platforms for the planning and carrying out of

future adventures. Experience and knowledge generated from specific locations can thus be made generative in other contexts. Using an 'eventalization' strategy, to use Pløger's term, Hysteria manages to bring various elements into a new relation (Pløger, 2010). While this generates social and economic opportunities for involved actors, it rarely changes conditions on the ground for *kampung* dwellers. Therefore, while art collectives enrol the material and immaterial infrastructures of the *kampung* to reimagine artistic practice, it is important to ask what putting this urban space teetering between formal and informal economy to new use entails for other urban residents. By staging exhibits for a motley audience of state representatives, development actors, tourists and academics in the *kampung*, Hysteria's work reappropriates peripheral urban spaces, 'special niches bypassed by the dominant logics of formal real estate, finance, and commodity circulation' (Caldeira, 2017: 3) for this audience. It also temporarily reappropriates *kampung* space for its own artistic ambitions. From this perspective, Hysteria can be said to operate in the 'entrepreneurial' sector of the informal economy (Peterson, 2010) and is not excluded from processes of capital accumulation. It is important to note that while Hysteria's exhibits unsettle hegemonic practices of confining art to galleries or universities, their adventures into peripheral *kampungs* pursue the goal of exiting informality (see Bromley and Wilson, 2018: 5).

### **Semarang's (missing) art scene**

Despite a considerable population of just under two million, Semarang is not precisely an art mecca. Its art portfolio pales beside that of Yogyakarta, its smaller southern neighbour, which is often seen as the cultural centre of Indonesia: tourists, art lovers and fine art students from Indonesia and overseas flock to Yogyakarta where new



**Figure 1.** Art installation depicting Semarang's entrenched problem with tidal flooding.

galleries specialising in modern art are still popping up every year. Spielmann and Cohen (2017) observe that the lasting boom in contemporary art in Indonesia primarily affected the established art economies in Bali and Java, concentrated in the Javanese cities Yogyakarta, Bandung, Jakarta, Magelang and Solo. The absence of art infrastructure in Semarang can also be related to the city government's decision to prioritise shopping and entertainment infrastructure. Semarang boasts several high-end malls and is aggressively exploring the touristic potential of its colonial architectural remnants (Yapp, 2020). In recent years, the economic situation of Semarang's inhabitants has markedly improved due to new business opportunities and booming tourism. These shifts, however, have not significantly changed how wealth is distributed

spatially in Semarang. Rather, economic growth has accentuated the gulf that separates the city's rich and poor since colonial times. This rift is expressed in the city's spatial makeup which has not significantly changed since the end of Dutch colonial rule (Ley, 2021; Wijono, 2014). The coastal North is home to Semarang's poorest while the hilly South and downtown show the highest concentration of income and capital. Artists working in Semarang have repeatedly addressed the starkly uneven distribution of wealth and the flipside of modernist urban development by turning their gaze on the *kampung*, where largely 'lower-class communities still offer up the material and immaterial infrastructure' (Newberry, 2018: 192) to survive in the modern city in the face of rising prices of land, environmental degradation and state violence.

Behind the recently renovated Blenduk Church, a small alley leads to Semarang's only contemporary art gallery. The *Galeri Semarang*, established in 2001, is a privately owned and run exhibition place for contemporary art. The gallery owner, Chris Dharmawan, considers the art gallery as a 'medium' for the work of contemporary Asian artists and, notably, Indonesian artists (Figure 1).

In 2013, Hysteria participated in an exhibition on tidal flooding, locally called *rob*, hosted by the Galeri Semarang. The collective created a photographic mosaic of Semarang by assembling portraits of neighbourhoods that are affected by the controversial phenomenon of *rob*. Elsewhere, I describe *rob* as excessive tidewater resulting in "larger infrastructural failure", such as seeping riverbanks and oozing house floors (Ley 2021:4). Many residents blame *rob* on the established practice of extracting groundwater through private wells, the primary cause of land subsidence. As the overlapping and entangled coloured threads suggest, however, there is no single cause of *rob*.



Instead, tidal flooding is a compound of infrastructural dysfunction, uneven urbanisation and ecological changes. In front of the photographs, 'Be Careful – Affected by Tidal Floods' signs create a sort of augmented reality experience by drawing the viewer into an imaginary flood scenario. Suggesting shared exposure to tidal flooding, the piece effectively bridges symbolic gaps between privileged downtown publics and flood-stricken slums in Semarang's coastal North. Notably, the piece subverts the gallery space, an elitist space with limited access, by simulating a flooding incident. Such subversion strategies are typical for Hysteria's work which often draws attention to ignored urban infrastructures and offers opportunities to sensorially engage with them.

Producing new vantages of the city is at the heart of Hysteria's interventions. At the time of entering the exhibition at *Galeri Semarang*, members of Hysteria knew that it would quickly exhaust the space offered by Semarang's official art facilities and therefore needed to develop a sustainable art practice that would allow its mainly student members to maintain creative activities. In the following section, I chronicle the becoming of Hysteria before I zoom in on the collective's formula of creating art in the *kampung*. This '*kampung* formula' paved the way for Hysteria's involvement in larger donor-funded projects. The formula builds on the material and immaterial infrastructures of the *kampung* and draws inspiration and credibility from them, turning Hysteria into a broker of actors with various intentions.

## Becoming Hysteria

At the age of 20, Adin came to Semarang to study literature at Universitas Diponegoro (Undip). As a boy growing up in Rembang, a small city on the coast of Central Java, he often felt excluded. He was bullied at school

'for being different from the other kids'. Semarang, a university city, offered reprieve and escape from his narrow-minded upbringing. Along with the study of literature, it helped him 'escape' both from being the target of mobbing at school and the confines of his conservative upbringing. Developing a strong interest in writing and composition, he soon began contemplating publishing his own work. Together with four literature students from Undip, Yuswinardo, Heri CS and Sutiyono, Adin co-founded Hysteria in 2004. The students deplored a lack of a creative platforms in the city through which they could disseminate their own personal work (see Amalia, 2018). At first, the collective focused on publishing stories, poetry and other literary work in their own 'zine', a self-published booklet containing original or artistically appropriated texts and images. The small print runs were produced via a photocopier. In 2007, Hysteria began raising money for other art projects by selling *Nasi Kucing* ('cat rice'), a popular night-time rice snack, on a street corner in downtown Semarang. They called their first urban intervention 'Grobak A@t'. Traditionally, a *grobak* is a cart used for transporting cooking utensil or water canisters through the city. It allows food hawkers to prepare meals on the go and cater to publics outside of their own neighbourhood. To advertise the intervention, the newly formed collective organised a public exhibit, inviting musicians, performers, actors and visual artists to showcase their work in the street. This first intervention was followed by many similar happenings that were financed with profits from the rice sales. Grobak A@t marked an experiment in turning the street, 'a social space with its own particular cast of characters, its own forms of social organization, and its own vernaculars' (Barker, 2009: 155) into a transient exhibition site. Given the politics of street life in post-Reformasi Indonesia,

where gangs competed for dominance over access to public amenities, Hysteria's brief take-over crucially reveals the street as a 'terrain for democratic or oppositional politics' (Barker, 2009: 159).

In June 2008, the collective began renting a house with five rooms in Sampangan, a hilly Southern residential area. They named their basecamp *Grobak Art Kos*. A 'kos' is a sort of boarding house comprised of small rental units. It is a common and affordable housing solution for students and young workers. Hysteria's members and collaborators mostly refer to the small, detached house as 'Stonen', a shortcut for the name of the street it is located on. Adin was one of Stonen's first three permanent residents and lives there to this day. At the time of conducting research for this paper, the other tenants were the collective's space manager Bagus and programme manager Purna. When they are in Semarang, they sleep, cook, hang out and work at Stonen. A room equipped with computers and whiteboards is the collective's designated workspace, while the largest street-facing room can be used for public events, such as presentations, movie screenings and concerts. While Stonen serves as a creative platform and meeting space, foremost it established the collective in space and gave the collective an official seat. The house is strategically located in a calm residential street. While it is not particularly central and a far cry from the economic potential and visibility of downtown locations, it crucially enabled Hysteria to obtain legal status. As an incorporated organisation, Hysteria can receive, administrate and spend funding from external donors. Core members of the collective receive an irregular salary and get to live at Stonen. Others affiliated with Hysteria are either unpaid interns or volunteers who may use the rooms for diverse purposes, such as organising events or even just hanging out. As Reidl (2020) observed, most collective

members are enrolled at a local university or have already obtained academic degrees, suggesting socially upward mobility and/or middle-class background. The space manager Bagus marked an exception because he grew up in the poor *kampung* Bustaman and is a trained technician.

Beyond being an event space, Stonen has thus become a veritable home to some members while also being a hang-out spot and a place for artistic experimentation to many others. Past exhibits that featured nudity, a cultural and religious no-go in Indonesia, show that Stonen has become a haven for progressive artists in an increasingly religiously conservative country. After the release of Joshua Oppenheimer's critically acclaimed documentary 'The Act of Killing' in 2012, Hysteria attempted to publicly screen the officially censored movie at Stonen. From personal communications, I know that the screening was interrupted and ultimately cancelled after members of a paramilitary group threatened to violently crash the event.

The abridged history of Hysteria shows how students with little to no means managed to create niches for self-expression in various parts of the city and develop a voice that could be heard even outside of Semarang. While it played an important role in the becoming and consolidation of Hysteria, Stonen represents only a node in a rhizomatic and ever-growing social network that the collective has been able to build. Sustaining this network remains contingent on support networks within and beyond Semarang. In an interview with the alternative media outlet *Portal Semarang* published in 2012, Adin complained about Semarang's 'apathetic' (*lesu*) arts scene and the absence of adequate infrastructural support from the government (Portal Semarang, 2012). As a solution, he proposed to reach out to artists working in other cities. They should combine their strengths and build synergetic

networks. This alternative infrastructure would then substitute for the lack of initiative on the part of the government. In line with this strategy, Hysteria has repeatedly coordinated art events in various districts of Semarang that invited artists from other Indonesian cities. I turn to these exhibits, which made Hysteria visible beyond the confines of Indonesia, now.

### **'Penta K Labs' and the *kampung* formula**

Following a workshop organised by the Jakarta-based Rujak Center for Urban Studies in 2012, Hysteria founded *Pekakota Forum*, a multidisciplinary platform that addresses urban issues as diverse as land tenure, garbage disposal and flooding (Amalia, 2018). *Pekakota* strategically focused on *kampungs* to demystify this disparaged part of Indonesian cities. More specifically, it used site-specific art to interrogate the meaning and function of public facilities and space from the viewpoint of *kampung* residents. As such, it saw in organising art exhibitions a 'translating practice' (Suchet and Mekdjian, 2016: 235) necessary for revealing the *kampung* as a space where marginalised people manage to eke out meagre livings through idiosyncratic and improvised infrastructures and practices. Hysteria further used *Pekakota* 'as a tool to connect with the people and to be accepted as and trusted by them so they can start to discuss the most urgent issues in the [urban] village' (Amalia, 2018: 35). The *Pekakota* programme was in fact inspired by Jane Jacobs and her citizen-based urbanism (Ley, 2017; Zukin, 2006) that foregrounds the necessity of street-level interactions and calls for the preservation of historically grown infrastructures. Jacobs' motto 'downtown is for people' led Hysteria to organise its first art festival in the poor downtown *kampung* Bustaman. This festival, discussed

in more detail below, paid particular attention to the empowerment of *kampung* residents through valorising street-level knowledge. Increasing civil capacity through the 'identification, distribution, and utilization of everyday knowledge' was in turn expected to benefit the city as a whole (*untuk kebaikan kota*) (Pekakota, 2022). The art festival was facilitated by a project grant from the Japan Foundation. As I argue in this section, Hysteria managed to become eligible for such grants from development agencies by developing and refining what I call the '*kampung* formula'.

Led by Adin, in 2014, Hysteria transformed the damp alleyways of Bustaman, a densely inhabited *kampung* bordering on Semarang's famous Chinatown, into a colourful open-air art gallery featuring the works of street artists from Semarang and other Indonesian cities. The event had the catchy name *Bok Cinta*, or Love(d) Curb, based on the name of a cherished hang-out spot frequented by local teenagers. As it was, the narrow streets of the packed neighbourhood offered little space for gossiping and chatting (*nongkrong*), a much-enjoyed activity in Indonesia. As the project's own blog points out:

The attribute 'love' after 'bok' has a psychological dimension [in that it] creates a positive image of the activity. The absence of adequate public space in [Bustaman] makes the 'Bok Cinta' site a substitute for proper public space that should be owned by residents.<sup>4</sup>

As an art project concerned with *kampung* dwellers' infrastructural improvisations, *Bok Cinta* assembled the creative work of a dozen artists from Semarang and other Indonesian cities (Ungaran, Batang or Yogyakarta). Together they attempted to establish what constituted public space in Bustaman and identify the potential for, or even create new, publicly available space in the confines of the dense neighbourhood. For instance,

artists produced murals that chronicled the neighbourhood origin and transmutations, displaying the faces of local community leaders and a village map (Amalia, 2019). Others decorated the central gathering space with sculptural art or staged movie screenings. Further, throughout *Bok Cinta*, 'visitors were treated to various programs such as workshops, joint drawing activities, revitalization of the almost-extinct local games, and music concerts' (Amalia, 2019). Hysteria also repeatedly involved residents in making art, for example, by inviting them to participate in the organisation of a 'traditional dance party' (Prasetyo et al., 2018). As such, Bustaman became the stage for relational art projects (Radice, 2018) – it involved locals in considering the meanings of place and the local modalities of public infrastructure.

*Bok Cinta* was also a legitimising act. As the above blog quote suggested, the intervention aimed at removing a stain from the area and its inhabitants by embellishing the *kampung* with locally meaningful public art. In the case of Bustaman, a secluded but relatively small *kampung*, painted murals were primarily supposed to brand the neighbourhood as a 'creative urban kampung' (Yuliastuti and Sukmawati, 2020) with a distinct cultural identity. Embellishing *kampung* space showed a desire to improve Bustaman's reputation and lure state workers and tourists into the area. By activating local knowledge and practices, it aimed at enhancing a sense of community and fueling interactions that would address residents' needs and reduce social exclusion. Though it is difficult to establish the impact of *Bok Cinta* on urban space, the artistic engagement with local infrastructure increased the visibility and legitimacy of Hysteria's art practice. Venturing into the material and immaterial infrastructures of Bustaman substituted lacking gallery space and made Hysteria eligible for follow-up funding.

A few weeks after the exhibit, I met Adin in person at a fancy coffee shop that was one of the few middle-class hang-out spots in town with a bona fide espresso machine. He was casually chatting with an American NGO employee about using open street maps to visualise local resilience to climate change. Shortly after the encounter, Hysteria entered into a collaboration with the not-for-profit Ushahidi to start a participatory mapping programme in the central sub-district Purwodinatan as part of the Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilience Cities initiative. In the next section, I will tease out how the *kampung* formula led to new avenues for Hysteria's unique practice of infrastructural adventurism.

### **Kampung art and the project system**

The next art project of Hysteria, *Penta K Labs*, continued to put the bottom-up mission of Pekakota into practice. In July 2016, word reached me that Adin was curating a second big art event in a poor littoral neighbourhood of Semarang called Kemijen. As I did not attend this event myself, I am basing the following account on Hysteria's archive and reports from former research collaborators. Kemijen was and continues to be plagued by flooding, pollution and poverty (Ley, 2018). Many neighbourhoods of Semarang's North are abandoned territories where clusters of densely inhabited *kampung*s endure regular tidal flooding while waiting the state to fix the drainage infrastructure. In Kemijen, the Rockefeller Foundation had been supporting community building efforts and disaster preparedness activities run by the NGO Mercy Corps. The art event staged in Kemijen and called *Penta K Labs* was covered by some of the biggest local newspapers. Even Semarang's mayor, Hendrar Prihadi, attended the event. Over the duration of two days and nights, the

biennale featured local and international artists who staged concerts, performances and other events in the streets of the neighbourhood, many of which touched on the area's ecological predicaments.

*Penta K Lab's* success was testimony to the increased sophistication of Hysteria's formula. Hysteria's director, Adin, had chosen a neighbourhood well-known to urban planners and the public eye due to its problems with tidal flooding or *rob* – a '*kampung* area' in need of improvement in the eyes of the government and labelled 'vulnerable' by international NGOs. Residents' longstanding struggle with flooding successfully lured representatives of the government out of their offices and into a neglected part of the city, which is something that even international NGOs had not managed to do. This suggests that *kampung* residents had trusted Adin and his colleagues to represent and display their neighbourhood in an intimate way, to narrate their problems and aspirations to the wider public.

Like *Bok Cinta*, *Penta K Labs* was preceded by months of immersive social research using qualitative methods, such as social mapping and biographical interviews. Long-term immersion aimed at understanding the social and spatial makeup of Kemijen and its water infrastructure. Knowledge generated from ground-level research produced the themes and local concerns around which invited artists constructed their interventions. As Bagus, a long-time employee of Hysteria, explained to me, the collective uses 'deep hanging-out' techniques to familiarise locations and get to know residents before suggesting any artistic actions. According to Reidl (2020), Bagus once put his job description as: smoking cigarettes and drinking tea with residents, getting to know their concerns and aspirations, and understanding the demands and joys of their everyday lives. Based on these relationships, Hysteria was able to become a

broker between residents and the government by allowing the former to relay problems, such as economic stagnation and infrastructural failure, to the authorities in face-to-face interactions.

The follow-up event, *Penta K Labs II*, briefly touched on in the opening vignette, was hosted by an upstream *kampung* experiencing water shortages. Hysteria fittingly called the exhibition *Sedulur Banyu*, Javanese for 'water siblings'. Rerouting rivers in upstream areas to cater to downtown populations led to water scarcity in Nongkosawit. To develop a sensitive commentary on this issue, the collective used a well-rehearsed approach: it dispatched researchers (members, interns and students) to the subdistrict to spend time with locals, scout exhibition sites, approach authorities and anticipate potential conflicts. *Penta K Labs II* featured many artworks related to water, a life-giving substance in the upstream area, where rice farming and animal husbandry are the main source of income. The Columbian feminist muralist, Valeriana, and her associate Cristina Rodriguez from Mexico painted a giant mural portrait of locally revered freshwater species. They invited students to identify these species as well as endemic plants to 'raise [...] awareness of [the] environment'. The Semarang-based performance art group *Direct Performance Up* staged a haunting enactment of water degradation at the village's dysfunctional spring. The journalist, Riska Farasonalia, further performed a cacophony of sounds related to food preparation: she asked elderly female inhabitants to engage in daily cooking tasks, such as cutting and mashing vegetables. The performance provided visible and audible proof of the cultural and economic practices that allowed Nongkosawit's residents to sustain everyday *kampung* life, an existence on the margins of the city that is now imperilled by water shortages. Lastly, over the weekend, a

local offered walking tours along the area's century-old irrigation canals.

Although Hysteria used the exhibition to speak about the city's politics of water distribution, politicising an upland *kampung* turned out more difficult. The exhibition failed to generate momentum and was poorly attended. At the same time, it afforded Hysteria additional knowledge of Semarang's water problems. After Hysteria had been able to relate to urban flooding in downstream Semarang, it had now gathered data on watershed usages in an uptown area. Hysteria's engagements reveal a thematic genealogy suggesting that the collective had learned to follow *en vogue* targets of developmental aid. As mentioned previously, choosing the downstream neighbourhood Kemijen as site for intervention was such a strategic move. Here, the collective touched on the issues of marginalisation and flooding, two highly fundable topics in the age of climate change. After the exhibit, Adin admitted that appealing to donors caused him feelings of alienation. He said when he visited Nongkosawit, he often thought to himself: 'what am I doing here' (*mau apa di sini*)?

In the absence of other suitable platforms and urban spaces in Semarang, Hysteria's strategy of adventuring into and appropriating urban space worked particularly well when it thematized the *kampung*. Hysteria's work managed to reclaim the *kampung* as a public stage for artists. Using the *kampung* as stage *and* topic of intervention allowed the exploration of alternative publics and the combination of artistic practice with a sensibility to social inequality. After the exhibit in Nongkosawit, Hysteria once again partnered with an international development agency, the Netherlands Enterprise Agency, which invited them to co-design an approach to tackling climate and water issues in Semarang. The partnership did not allow Hysteria to expand its art portfolio. But as

Adin put it, Hysteria has a way of 'proposing non-art programs that can always be articulated as an art expression' (Penta K Labs, 2018). Maintaining the collective, however, meant going beyond the *kampung* formula to access additional funding streams, as I show in the next section.

### Urban art after the *kampung*

In 2018, Adin told me he was worried about the collective's economic situation. Planning for the collective's future was difficult given the short-term, project-related funds that Hysteria was primarily running on. In addition, the second iteration of *Penta K Labs* was not as successful as its predecessor and failed to generate immediate follow-up funding. The only government worker in attendance had been a representative of a city government initiative called 'Kampung Tematik'.<sup>5</sup> The situation revealed the limits of the event-based funding scheme of Hysteria. Without successful events, members of Hysteria had to dip into their personal savings to keep Hysteria afloat. Giving talks and entering competitions was one way of generating additional income and covering the collective's ongoing expenses, such as rent. In 2019, Hysteria won the YouFab Global Creative Award, an annual competition organised by a Tokyo-based 'innovation lab' called FabCafe. The collective further promoted an illustrated autobiography. The booklet describes Hysteria's sustained work in Semarang and its usages of art towards platform building. Producing the booklet exhausted Hysteria's budget. When I visited Indonesia in 2018, Adin was tirelessly pitching the booklet throughout Java and personally sold copies at art events to fans, admirers and other practitioners. The booklet was meant to demonstrate the unique approach of the collective and showcase its tested curating techniques to potential



**Figure 2.** An Instagram post by Adin shows him posing with Triawan Munaf, head of Bekraf.  
Source: Instagram profile.

collaborators. It chronicles past interventions and takes stock of the collective's toolkit of site-specific engagement. Looking back on Hysteria's past activities, the booklet suggests a new chapter in the collective's existence: instead of solely producing *kampung* exhibits, the collective consolidates its approach and stages its art of platform building. The booklet therefore not only chronicles the collective's many activities in Semarang – it also imagines its future role which increasingly lies in conceptualising and coaching relationship-building between artists and the city.

While Adin promoted the book in and out of Semarang, it became clear to me that he deeply desired to leave the 'project system' which had co-shaped Hysteria's *kampung* formula. His aim was to foster institutional structures that would allow art collectives like Hysteria to access public funding streams and have a steady income. Unlike project grants from NGOs, public funding streams suggested greater reliability and sustainability. To that end, Adin began to advertise the Semarang Forum for the Arts, which he also called 'a sustainable art ecosystem'. This change of direction became especially evident during a trip to Bali in November 2018, when Adin and I visited the *World Conference on Creative Economy*, an international meeting of creatives from all around the world.

Just as we got bored of browsing samples and schmoozing with art producers, we noticed a frenzy of movement by the entrance. Mainly young convention participants were clustering around a man whom Adin quickly identified as Triawan Munaf, the head of Indonesia's Creative Economy Agency or *Bekraf*. At first, Adin hovered in the background and watched the crowd. Then, he turned to me with a grin and said: 'I will introduce myself and plant the booklet'. He let out a nervous laugh before actually moving in Munaf's direction. Though hesitantly at first, he managed to strike up a conversation. I watched Adin pull the recently published booklet from his backpack and hand it to Munaf. Before shaking hands, Adin even managed to snatch a selfie with the powerful man that he subsequently posted on social media (Figure 2).

Approaching *Bekraf* was a prerequisite for making Hysteria eligible for a new type of funds. Indonesia's state agency for creative economy was founded in 2015, based on the belief that the creative sector holds key potential for Indonesia's economy. In 2018,

the head of Bekraf proudly announced that growth in the country's creative industries exceeded growth in the national economy (Jakarta Post, 2018).<sup>6</sup> Predictions of an increasingly important economic role of Indonesia's creative industry relies on corresponding observations regarding the country's e-commerce industry (e.g. social media) over the last five years. The government wants to facilitate this coupled development by deregulating investment in the creative sector, hoping to increase employment rates and copyright filings. Notably, the goal of Bekraf is to formalise the arts as a step towards unleashing the full economic potential of the sector. According to its own data, 92.37% of producers remain self-funded and have not received external funding through, for instance, private loans. To turn art into a national asset, the agency wants artists to incorporate and become limited liability companies which qualify for intellectual property rights. Intellectual property rights would help artists make more efficient and financially gratifying use of their work. This in turn would make them desirable targets of further investments. Securing funding from Bekraf can increase the credibility and visibility of art collectives and make them eligible for funds from a range of investors.

Although it promises greater visibility for artists, Bekraf's attempt to liberalise and commercialise art has been met with criticism from many left-leaning artists and organisations. Accordingly, Adin's attempt to secure funding from the state for the Semarang Forum for the Arts caused backlash. His move, for instance, was criticised by artists and activists based in Bandung. After all, a research interlocutor argued, Hysteria had established itself as an interlocutor of the excluded and supported artists in their quest to speak truth to power. Plus, receiving funds from public agencies risked undermining Hysteria's ability to showcase uncensored artistic work. Turning to the

state for financial support was therefore considered as a problematic act, endangering the freedom of expression that art collectives enjoy when they are self-funded or at least sponsored by international agencies. To these observers, it felt as if Hysteria was betraying itself by incorporating national development priorities in the interest of sustaining art.

While the future of the Semarang Forum for the Arts remains uncertain, the pressure on Hysteria to change its funding strategy suggests that becoming financially viable requires moving on from old playgrounds, such as the *kampung*, and tapping into new resources. While the interventions of collectives like Hysteria generated meaningful relations with *kampung* constituents, members cannot reliably live off these relations. They are forced to imagine an artistic practice beyond the *kampung*. The *kampung* thus worked as a middling ground, as suggested by Kusno (2020: 968), that is, an urban infrastructure in the making that becomes the stage of a 'symbiotic intermingling' of various urban actors and economic projects. The *kampung* as a space that exists on the periphery of the state and the city assembles various kinds of capitalist production which coevolve collaboratively and antagonistically. Venturing into the *kampung* offered opportunities to mingle with artists and state representatives. Learning from and syncing with the informality of the *kampung*, Hysteria managed to become an interlocutor of urban actors that it would not have otherwise met. This perspective shows the intractability of urban art from what Kusno calls 'middling urbanism' which is specific to the Indonesian *kampung*. Hysteria will most likely continue to produce exhibits in *kampungs*, but its move away from irregular project money and to more reliable funding streams signals a new kind of infrastructural adventurism. The *kampung* was a launchpad for city-wide projects, such as the Semarang



Forum for the Arts. We might therefore ask if the example of Hysteria mirrors a more general tendency, whereby the *kampung* provides cultural and aesthetic blueprints for social configurations that congeal on the periphery of the state. The evidence presented here suggests that art, too, ‘takes advantage of the *kampung*’s scale and local networks to both provide and reproduce extremely low-cost labor that subsidizes Indonesia’s comparative advantage as a surplus-labor economy’ (Newberry, 2018: 198).

## Conclusion

Developing the concept of the ‘*kampung* formula’, this article offered a situated analysis of public art that accounts for the economic precarity of aspiring artists and the lack of accessible art infrastructure in the port city of Semarang. In the absence of gallery space and a proper art scene, Semarang-based collective Hysteria found an amplifying and performative device in the urban *kampung*. Its interventions in the realm of the *kampung* aimed at ‘building bridges’ between disparate publics and creating new channels of communication between inhabitants and their city. To use Pløger’s (2010: 863) words, Hysteria’s event-based interventions opened spaces for a ‘subpolitical play between non/visibility and modes of performative articulations’. These articulations temporarily created public spaces in which *kampung* residents mingled with government officials and could raise important issues, such as infrastructural decay or flooding. Hysteria’s interventions did not create transgressive spaces that suggested a radical politics of artistic expression and critique. Rather, exhibits often drove home the point that the *kampung* is a constitutive part of Indonesian cities and deserves aesthetic and cultural attention. In so doing, these exhibits tended to reproduce ‘*kampung* culture’ by eliciting

artistic commentary on traditional life on the fringes of the city while confining radical artistic expression to its headquarters. However, Hysteria’s work also reclaimed the *kampung* as a public sphere worthy of consideration to create new channels of expression for disenfranchised residents. It remains to be seen whether residents can use these channels and the attention that exhibits generated to their benefit.

For Hysteria, however, accessing this public sphere provided needed exposure, economic opportunities and forms of revenue. The uneven usefulness and value of art events says something about the general urban experience in contemporary Indonesia: cities still offer or allow dreams of social mobility and can become inspirational milieus for newcomers. Yet, they do not work for the majority. In the face of economic insecurity, devising relations is a strategy that socially isolated art collectives, too, deploy to establish themselves in the city. Preparing and holding art events allows to figure arrangements of materials and spaces in the city, with the aim of developing new vantage points. Hysteria successfully weaves connections in and through the *kampung*. While documenting their exhibitions shows that outsiders can become trusted participants in *kampung* life by creating novel situations of exchange and involving the population in the production of public art, these exhibits rely on differential social and geographical mobility. One way to make these exchanges more equitable would be to use exhibitions in order to thematise the very precarity and economic strategies of art collectives themselves, as they represent another tenuous mode of urban existence and resistance.

From the side-lines of Indonesia’s art industry, the Semarang-based collective Hysteria has developed a kind of public art that sounds out urban arrangements and urban positionalities to understand and seize

infrastructural and economic connections. It builds on these relations, in the hopes of rearticulating them as art. In the case presented in this article, the *kampung* offers a productive trope and methodological focus to examine how artists articulate themselves through adventures in urban infrastructure. While my ethnographic mode of inquiry was useful for mapping emergent relationships between artists and the city and how the collective form can activate these through relational art, it did not provide a comparative perspective that would allow discussing the scale of artistic adventures in urban infrastructure. I hope that the articles' findings and conceptual developments will work to inspire other researchers of urban public art and collectivism in Indonesia and beyond to understand how art ecosystems are built from within cities and how urban infrastructures inform public art.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the members of Grobak Hysteria for sharing their deep knowledge and insights on art and the *kampung* with me. Many thanks to Gamia Dewanggamanik and Bronwyn Frey for discussing drafts of this article. Early insights from research were also presented and discussed at the colloquium of the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg.

### Declaration of conflicting interests


The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Research in Semarang was supported by a Postdoctoral Research Fellowship from the German Academic

Exchange Service. Writing-up was supported by an Emmy Noether Grant from the German Science Foundation.

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### Note

1. There are many art collectives in Indonesia. When I asked a young artist based in the cultural capital, Yogyakarta, if he could name a few art collectives, he right off the bat could think of a dozen. In Semarang, too, several variously successful collectives have formed and disappeared over the years. For a history of Indonesian collectives, see Kusuma (n.d.).
2. The urban *kampung* is a unique characteristic of Indonesian cities and a classical trope of Indonesian governance (and studies, see Guinness, 2009; Newberry, 2008; Siegel, 1993; Simone, 2009). *Kampung*s can be described as mixed-income neighbourhoods and semi-autonomous communities who often mobilise their own resources to protect, police and maintain communal space. While many *kampung*s possess traditional decision-making structures, many scholars have pointed to the *kampung* as an extension of state rule (see Barker, 1998).
3. The collective has been provided with various drafts of this article.
4. My translation, original quote: 'Atribut "Cinta" sesudah "Bok" lebih berdimensi psikis dan menimbulkan citra positif dari kegiatan itu. Ketiadaan ruang publik yang memadai di tempat itu membuat situs "Bok Cinta" menjadi pengganti ruang publik layak yang semestinya dimiliki warga'. (Bok Cinta, 2020).
5. The agency had launched the initiative in 2016 and involved Hysteria in formulating a bottom-up approach to *kampung* planning. It had then 'dropped' the collective, to the frustration of Adin.
6. Indonesia's creative industry contributed USD\$19.99 billion (7.44%) to the country's GDP in 2016 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2018: 16). It is important to note that this figure

includes the culinary arts and fashion which are the most profitable. Their profits far exceed the performance arts, photography and music. See also Jakarta Post (2018).

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