

## Rumah YKP: Art in the Margins of Society

### I.

The Yayasan Kesenian Perak (YKP), or Perak Arts Foundation, was an institution that was funded by and worked closely with the government of Perak, a state about 200 kilometers to the north of Kuala Lumpur. Established in 1996, YKP was instrumental in providing the local people with opportunities to encounter and experience different kinds of art and culture, especially in consideration of the general lack of art-cultural infrastructure in the state. Its primary aim was to bring an awareness of art and culture to the public through its diverse projects and activities. The highlight of its activities was the annual Pekan Seni Ipoh, or Ipoh Arts Festival, which involved participants from inside as well as outside of the country. Held for five consecutive years until 2000, the weeklong festival included art-cultural-literary forums, poetry readings, concerts, theatrical performances, and art exhibitions, in addition to traditional cultural shows, a handicraft bazaar, and demonstrations. Sociocultural exchange programs were also arranged whereby invited participants were brought to places of interest around Perak to meet and interact with people, especially those in rural areas outside Ipoh, the state's capital.

Registered as a non-profit making organization, YKP had substantial autonomous power over its administration and activities. However, it still served as an agency that was required to abide by the Perak public service's rules and regulations and operate within its institutional parameters. Therefore, the presentation of art and culture was essentially informed and at the same time constrained by the state government's policies and strategies. Owing to its affiliation with the state government, YKP's programs always received extensive assistance from a diversity of state and federal agencies, including national institutions like the Institute of Language and Literature and the National Art Gallery. Indeed, the annual Ipoh Arts Festival was considered a state program with a huge budget allocated to it, and, as such, was included in the state's tourism calendar.

Unfortunately, support and patronage from the state terminated in 2001 due to some political interventions that were rooted in the dismissal from the cabinet of the former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, a close friend of YKP's founder-director. After this incident, YKP had to rent its own office premises and source its own funds to sustain activities and programs. YKP moved its office to a single-story bungalow located in the middle of a residential area. As its curator, I was given the task to re-strategize and reassess the direction YKP was to take. Thus began my search for a mode of operation

and an organizational template that would suit YKP's vision and objectives and fit its lack of funding and institutional support (at least at the state level).

During that period, I knew quite a few renowned artist-run organizations within the Southeast Asian region: Cemeti, ruangrupa, and Taring Padi in Indonesia, Plastic Kinetic Worms in Singapore, Project 304 in Thailand, and Big Sky Mind in the Philippines, to name a few. In Malaysia itself, Rumah Air Panas and UBU were two of several spaces run by people I knew or had links with YKP. Some collectives and initiatives formed by local artists, from Anak Alam in the 1970s, to LabDNA, Spacekraft, and Matahati in the 1990s, also caught my attention. Additionally, my study of local youth culture led me to be aware of how thriving and dynamic the underground music scene in Malaysia was, despite its lo-fi, indie, and self-supporting structure. What fascinated me with these artist-initiated spaces and underground collectives were their independent spirit, social engagement, knowledge sharing, interdisciplinarity, collectivism, and, most distinctly, their astute maneuverability and small yet loyal networks of supporters, sponsors, and friends. These are some elements an alternative space should have in order to succeed without the backing of any state machinery or institutions.

In 2002, the name of YKP was changed, unofficially, to Rumah YKP to indicate its shift from being a governmental agency to serving as an independent art space. Throughout its almost eight years in existence, Rumah YKP held various art, cultural, and social activities that ranged from traditional cultural performances, contemporary art shows, music gigs, performance art, and artists' presentations to activities such as a blood donation clinic, fundraising events, and educational projects, all serving to bring art and the public in a closer, informal, and relaxed environment. Its main focus was to provide a space for youth and the art-loving community around Ipoh, allowing them to appreciate art and culture without the need to travel to Kuala Lumpur, thus enabling them to participate in the art and cultural movement in Malaysia.



In addition to the annual Genta Merdeka, a multidisciplinary event arranged at Rumah YKP's premises to celebrate Malaysia's independence day, Rumah YKP also hosted Gebang Seni, a monthly art talk involving prominent local

figures in the fields of visual art, animation, film, music, and literature. It also arranged numerous series of dialogues, discussions, and workshops on art and culture with locals and visitors, including representatives from Malaysia's art spaces such as Parking Project, Matahati, and underground collectives, as well as cultural organizations from overseas like Universes in Universe and Indonesia's alternative spaces like ruangrupa, Common Room, and Taring Padi. Rumah YKP also built a small resource centre that catered to those interested in knowing more about art and culture and published *Suara Seni*, an art-cultural-literary journal.

Talk by Gerhard Haupt and Pat Binder of Universes in Universe, at Rumah YKP, Perak, Malaysia, 2007. Photo: Nur Hanim Khairuddin.

Poetry reading by Danish poet Ole Lillelund at Rumah YKP, Perak, Malaysia. Photo: Nur Hanim Khairuddin.



Printmaking workshop conducted by Rumah YKP for NGO organization EMPOWER in support of a tsunami aid program, Pahang, Malaysia.



Sculpture by Tengku Sabri during Contemporary Art in School. Courtesy of Rumah Air Panas, Kuala Lumpur.



Operating in a city situated distant from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital and its political and economic centre as well as its (only) art and cultural hub, Rumah YKP encountered a set of concerns and problems probably not experienced by alternative spaces inhabiting and serving communities in Kuala Lumpur. (The majority, if not all, of the spaces, collectives and initiatives mentioned in the following were/are based in Kuala Lumpur or its vicinity.) First of all, Ipoh does not have enough art-cultural infrastructure or funding to support and sponsor Rumah YKP's programs. Secondly, in Ipoh, the size of the art audience is smaller and its level of sophistication lower than in Kuala Lumpur. These were some of the key factors that impeded Rumah YKP's sustainability and development, even though until its closure the local public and art-cultural communities did show remarkable support and enthusiasm towards its activities.

## II.

In the development of modern art in Malaysia, the emergence of artists' groups, clubs, and organizations since the 1920s was mainly prompted by artists' need to pursue their creative endeavours in a collective environment. The spaces where members of these groups met served as places for them to learn and practice their skills and to share their knowledge and experience in art, normally under the tutelage of well-known artists who in many cases acted as the groups' founders and leaders. These spaces functioned as studios for artists to produce artworks that would then be shown in their own spaces or private and public exhibition spaces. Current groups, like Studio Sebiji Padi, Di Kala Jingga and Studio Rajawali, also adopt the same approach. Even Matahati, Malaysia's longest-running artists' collective, was moving in a similar direction during its formative period in the 1990s.

Formed in 1974, Anak Alam (Children of Nature) can be considered the earliest artists' collective in Malaysia. It involved a variety of artistic disciplines, from painters and printmakers to dramatists, performers, writers, and poets, both educated and self-taught. Housed in an old government bungalow where some of its members lived, worked, and exhibited their works, it was the first to instigate a pluralistic, interdisciplinary creative movement. Concrete poetry, experimental theater, happenings, and multimedia shows organized by them seemed radical for the Malaysian art audience at that time. Despite being a self-sustaining entity, it also received moral and financial support from the government by way of its close connection with certain prominent figures in the Institute of Language and Literature and the Ministry of Culture. Members of Anak Alam too were active contributors to Malaysia's first art-cultural journal, *Dewan Sastera*, which became a vehicle for them to present their works and express their ideals regarding art, culture, and literature. The collective was finally disbanded around the mid 1980s, when the government reclaimed the mansion the artists were occupying, thus ending their communal living and collaborative practice.

The advent in the 1980s of theatre-oriented groups, notably Five Arts Centre and Centrestage Performing Arts, seemed to push the roles of

independent art-cultural spaces to another level of sophistication and significance with their interdisciplinary, intercultural, critical, and contextual approaches. Since its formation in 1984, Five Arts Centre has been injecting contemporary social, cultural, and political issues into the contexts of exhibitions, projects, performances, and workshops that they held in diverse places, including theatres, galleries, schools, and on the streets. Centrestage Performing Arts was active in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At Centrestage, artists coming from various disciplines had the chance to not only meet and collaborate with one another, but also to experiment with diverse modes of expression that included theatre, music, film, and video.

In the wake of new and challenging sociocultural realities and imperatives in the 1990s, a number of artists began assuming a more critical stance toward institutions, for aesthetic, sociological, political, economic, and strategic reasons. The national interests of public institutions and the consumerist concerns of private galleries were largely at odds with the positions taken by this new generation of artists, impelling them to redefine, if not to rebuff, the intrusive power of institutions in the dissemination, interpretation, and mediation of images, texts, and discourses. This transgressive stance towards institutions regarding art and cultural production, distribution and consumption, manifested itself in a big way, and with impact, within the underground music scene. Thus, if the escalation of alternative spaces is to be associated with the spirit of independence among art practitioners, the role played by a collective of underground musicians in the late 1980s and into the 90s could be taken as an important indirect influence, although the link between these musicians and artists cannot be easily established as they appeared to exist and practice largely in isolation to each other (only a very small number had probably crossed paths with one another in music gigs and art shows). Moreover, one cannot ignore the fact that the mushrooming of alternative spaces in Malaysia since the late 1990s happened in parallel with the emergence of artist-run spaces around the region.

In view of their self-empowering mentality inspired by DIY ethics of punk culture and their creation of inter-supportive networks, this group of underground musicians living in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur, influenced the rise of myriad underground bands, indie labels, jamming studios, gig organizers, merchandise producers, and zine editors. Their house, dubbed 121C after its mailing address, served as a communal meeting point for youth having a similar interest in music genres related to punk rock and extreme metal. Gradually it turned into a place to trade zines and cassettes, to discuss gig arrangements, make demo tapes, exchange news, ideas, and resources. Another seminal group was Republic of Brickfields, founded around 1996 by a few members of the 121C collective and based in a house nearby. The DIY approach of underground musicians to music making and distribution, their strategies in evading formal structures of control, anti-capitalist and anti-corporate stance, and joyous celebration of life through their art (i.e., music), provided a proven template for the formation of autonomous collectives and communities.

Another form of self-directed spaces and collectives leaned more toward the sociopolitical sphere. A small number of them, notably APA (Artis Pro Active) and UBU (Universiti Bangsar Utama), arose out of sociopolitical upheaval in 1998. (The two groups were invited to participate in the Gwangju Biennale in 2002.) APA was started by several visual artists and theatre exponents and did not have any specific physical space as a base of operation, whereas UBU, which occupied a house in an old commercial building in Bangsar, was initiated in 2000 by a group of political and student activists who acted as key organizers for street demonstrations and protest rallies during the early stage of Malaysia's own Reformasi, a mass political movement spurred by the 1998 sacking of the then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. While APA presented its critiques in a rather cerebral and dialogical way, UBU's approach and actions were more direct, confrontational, and situationist, employing agitprop, guerilla theatre, graffiti, performance art, protest music, and interventionist strategies. Besides giving free tuition to poor students and providing a space for Food Not Bombs, UBU also held art-cultural events and parties and organized classes, workshops, and dialogues to instigate sociopolitical awareness among urban youth and university students. These politically inclined spaces and collectives brought a new dimension to the function of art and culture, introducing them as tools for social transformation, civil rights reformation, and the betterment of public governance.



Since the 2000s, alternative art spaces, collectives, and initiatives have become increasingly active and varied, playing pivotal roles in the next phase of the development of contemporary art and the social functions of art in Malaysia. Through collaborations between visual artists, graphic designers, writers, musicians, DJs, architects, filmmakers, and even non-artist collaborators, they promote new artistic forms and cultural media, such as performance, experimental sound, and digital photography. In their attempts to engage with a wider audience and to reach out to the

Rei Shibata in the performance event *Stopover*, at UBU (Universiti Bangsar Utama), May 30, 2005. Photo: Juliana Yasin.

*Bebek, I Hate Boundaries*, 2005, performance at Lost Generation Space, Notthatbalai Art Festival, Kuala Lumpur. Courtesy of Lost Generation Space.



Lost Generation Space, Kuala Lumpur.



*nyba-kan*, 2005, performance at Lost Generation Space, Notthatbalai Art Festival, Kuala Lumpur. Courtesy of Lost Generation Space.



larger segment of the society, Rumah Air Panas, Lost Generation Space, SicKL, Urban Village, and Findars, to name a few, do not only organize cross-disciplinary events and art dialogues within their own premises, but they also present community-based and site-specific projects in public spaces. Although several artist-run spaces, for instance, HOM, are primarily set up to provide spaces for young artists to exhibit and sell their artwork, many, like Parking Project and Buka

Kolektif, now give emphasis to non-object-based, non-commercial art and public and interdisciplinary-engaged art practices.





Opposite, top left: Performance event at Findars. Courtesy of Findars, Kuala Lumpur.

Opposite, top right: Opening reception at HOM. Courtesy of HOM, Kuala Lumpur.

Opposite, middle: Talk at Findars. Courtesy of Findars, Kuala Lumpur.

Opposite, bottom: A music gig at HOM. Photo: Nur Hanim Khairuddin. Courtesy of HOM, Kuala Lumpur.

Several underground music collectives/studios in recent years have started to incorporate other art forms in their showcases. Rumah Api, a space run by a punk community, for example, holds art exhibitions, film screenings, video projections, and zine festivals in addition to their usual music gigs. On the other hand, many alternative spaces initiated by artists, including those owned by established institutions, have begun to feature elements usually associated with subculture, counterculture, and youth culture, such as music, graffiti, comic, and other youth-generated media. Interdisciplinary collaborations and interactions between recent artists are probably more inclusive, hybrid, and fluid than those previously attempted by Anak Alam and Centrestage. Events such as Notthatbalai, Rantai, Maskara, Projek Rabak, and Pekan Frinjan arouse more interest because of the intersection of varied art-cultural forms, from music and film to installation and literature.

Urban Village, Rantai art event, 2012. Photo: Nur Hanim Khairuddin.



### III.

By and large, the operational modes and curatorial strategies adopted by most alternative spaces in Malaysia do not necessarily entail a practice of reaction and resistance against art-cultural-economic institutional politics and policies. It is true that a few of them do aspire to review the functions of private and public institutions in their bureaucratization of cultural policies, commodification of cultural life, and propagation of certain historical and ideological agendas, as well as to re-examine the ownership of the means of production, presentation, and distribution of art, and hegemonic controls imposed over style, form, and content of art-cultural products. However, they do so in order to strategically free themselves from institutional trappings and commercial constraints for the sole purpose of enjoying their artistic and creative freedom to the fullest.

Working outside the mainstream circuit of art institutions and commercial galleries undoubtedly has helped them erase the boundaries separating

high and low cultures and art and non-art communities, thus reducing the contested territorial forces existing in the realms of art, culture, and public. Although some independent spaces realize social and political engagement in the real sense, expressing their critical positions on certain national sociopolitical issues, some, on the other hand, are purely driven by political impetus directed at attaining more individual freedom in the pursuit of happiness and entertainment. I would argue that the majority of these spaces do not essentially reject institutional structures and the art market. Their intent, on the contrary, is to provide an alternative, some sort of an extension rather than a serious counterpoint to the systems in place to control and monitor. In brief, they attempt to operate in parallel to existing systems and structures of art-cultural management and not merely assert the kind of aesthetics and the politics of art in opposition to those institutions.

Art, cultural, economic, technological, social, and political contexts have changed drastically over the years. Thus, the same old actions and tactics may no longer hold the same significance and impact that they previously did. If alternative art spaces are to keep on developing and having long-term sustainability, they must strive for greater heights of complexity and activism and higher levels of integrity and wisdom. They must be able to engage in new technologies, new discourses, and new audiences. Given that they exist at the margins of society and in an environment largely not supportive towards their endeavors, at least in the Malaysian context, they should widen their interests and concerns beyond the narrow confines of art and culture. They should learn how to maneuver within institutional parameters.

In recent times we have witnessed a corresponding shift in the social function of art. Art and artists are now playing greater roles in promoting public action and facilitating social change. Alternative art spaces, collectives, and initiatives, along with other new forms of self-directed institutions created by artists, must have a clear vision and conception of what values they desire. The values they hold dear and strive to achieve usually require some personal sacrifice, not only in terms of time, money, and energy, but also in terms of having to delicately balance these desired values with their own interests, aims and emotions, the situational politics, the surrounding sociocultural milieu, the aesthetic tendencies of the public, and the shift in the demographics of audiences and consumers of art and culture. To be able to make waves and generate ideological movement, in spite of the shortage of funding and institutional backing, they must be ready to discard the shallow, selfish, and impotent mindset that has been the demise of many before them.