The 2013 documentary *Behind the Flickering Light (The Archive)*1 features the founder of Sinematik Indonesia, Misbach Yusa Biran (1933–2012). Pak Misbach had exchanged letters with Hafiz Rancajale, the director of the documentary. Read aloud by Rancajale, and his collaborators, this correspondence opens the film. The moment reveals a relationship with form: an idea had crossed Misbach’s mind – an incomplete idea for a film he had provisionally titled ‘On the Way to the Mosque’, a spiritual journey narrated through the unfolding of events inbetween his visits to mosques. Rancajale had responded, suggesting experimenting with the structure. On the screen, the conversations compose the voiceover, subtitles and archives in one frame: Misbach as the locus of history and knowledge; Hafiz behind the camera.

I recall this scene because it introduces artefacts transmitted and studied in cultural science: memory, event and image. It is also a good excuse to link another thread in the historiography, an intergenerational meeting of Pak Misbach, the initiator of Southeast Asia’s first formal institution dedicated to the preservation of cinema, and Hafiz Rancajale, an artist who has facilitated a number of initiatives in Indonesia’s post-Suharto cultural landscape. Both practitioners believe visual media to be processes of articulation, interpretation and reading that construct a knowledge base for political participation. For Misbach, he has also called such a task a grace of God; a practical reality crystallising in and coming closer to humanity, as Rancajale has put it.

The short conversation that follows could have been a footnote in Rancajale’s film on Misbach. It comes in the middle of what Rancajale has traced in his study of ideas, whether in his engagement with the genealogy of Indonesian modernity and its emergence in contemporaneity or in the production of materials and the conditions for art to thrive in the logic of communication. Like Misbach with the archival, Rancajale shares an overview of artistic practice implicated in the demands of cultural work, where memories, events and images mediated by artists are programmed in a wider set of obligations. The conversation offers access to a toolkit that summarises Rancajale’s relationships with people, objects, theories and circumstances, and which unpacks his artistic milieu to be approaches and duties of a social organism.

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1 *Anak Sabiran: Di Balik Cahaya Gemerlapan* [Behind the Flickering Light (The Archive)] narrates the life of Indonesian archivist Haji Misbach Yusa Biran; it can be seen on Vimeo here: [https://vimeo.com/90388100](https://vimeo.com/90388100). Film scholar and critic Umi Lestari reviewed the film in detail here: [https://www.nangmagazine.com/ten-years-after-entries/umi-lestari](https://www.nangmagazine.com/ten-years-after-entries/umi-lestari).
**Renan Laru-an:** At the 6th Singapore Biennale in 2019, your 2018 solo exhibition ‘Social Organism’ was presented in an abbreviated and updated iteration. That earlier assembly of your works at Galeri Nasional Indonesia in 2018 had acted as a survey of your practice since your last one-person exhibition in 1996, while the inclusion in a biennial is one of the rare international presentations of your work in the past two decades.² ‘Social Organism’ was framed in a more dilated ecology, art history and milieu of artistic practices. Your discursive vector ‘social organism’, and your commitment to what you call being a ‘facilitator artist’,

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² Hafiz had two solo presentations before his 2018 exhibition: an untitled presentation in 1994 at the Jakarta Institute of Arts, and ‘Hafiz: Prints, Painting!’ at Balai Budaya Jakarta in 1996. His most recent international participation was with the first edition of the Prague-based Biennale ‘Matter of Art’, 22 July 15–November 2020, curated by Tereza Stejskalová and Vít Havránek; see more here [https://matterof.art/visit](https://matterof.art/visit).
find kinship with some of the hyphenations attached to the practice of curating, pedagogy, organising and institution- or platform-building. Since the establishment of ruangrupa and Forum Lenteng, could you describe the development of the ‘facilitator artist’? What are the joys and anxieties of being a facilitator artist in the course of sustainability and the making of artworks?

Hafiz Rancajale: After the Reformasi (the post-Suharto era), almost all activists who had a background as an artist or as a student of art began to think about building initiatives and collectives, and to facilitate many things. It was not only about art, but related to the sociopolitical context at the time. Becoming a facilitator was what the society needed during those times, and so we started ruangrupa and Forum Lenteng.

An artist-facilitator was important for the cultural scene during this period: an artist-facilitator is an organiser who curates, shares and learns in collaboration with others. When we started, we interpreted new things in society and their sociopolitical contexts, including art. To be an artist-facilitator is to be part of these changes. When I initiated ruangrupa and Forum Lenteng as one of the facilitators, it was a commitment. I tried to reduce individual positions, including my own, in order to make the platform ‘an artwork’ itself. The artwork is the platform. A platform is a space for experimentation and speculation, a connection between society and art, and ultimately the scene itself. A facilitator is someone who makes a platform. As an artist-facilitator, I do not locate myself as the centre. My role was closer to ‘directing’ a friendship. In addition to platform-making, the facilitator knows how to make a connection between a friend and another friend; he or she widens and spreads a friendship – that is another idea of the artist-facilitator.

The question of sustainability in a collective becomes part of the artistic concerns. We negotiate with the different stakeholders of art and culture, such as the government, the funding agencies,
galleries and museums, and the art scene itself. Negotiation is an artistic approach. When you see ruangrupa and Forum Lenteng, the development of these organisations are established through negotiation. An artist-facilitator sees negotiation as the main issue, because for him or her, there is no such thing as finality – there is no final result. Things and events are always in process. And this trust in ‘process’ is an important component of an artwork. Such facilitation uses an alternative space, not necessarily specific to what we conceive of as an art space.

RL: Your seven-channel video installation Song of Indonesian Modern Art (2012) charts the cracks and potencies in the legacy of ‘modernism’ and its future in ‘Indonesian modernism’ through the critical access of contemporary Indonesian art. In many tender moments, the chorus of these speeches or lectures excised and represented in our time and conditions reveal the longstanding foundation of cultural practitioners’ desire to shape the discourse and infrastructure of the arts on their own terms; Jim Supangkat’s argument for the ‘fusion of gaps’; Sanento Yuliman’s (1941–1992) advocacy for shared responsibility, including patrons and collectors, towards art’s publicness; Sindudarsono Sudjijono’s (1913–1986) heartfelt refusal to be colonised again; Hardi’s optimism for the new and the youth; and Toeti Heraty’s passionate call for engagement and endurance. These values merge with your leadership roles in institutions and collectives. Considering the troubles of our time, how urgent is it for

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3 A number of introductory directions to this topic can be accessed in a lecture, ‘New Indonesian Art in the New World Order: Siti Adiyati in Conversation with Farah Wardani’, organised by the National Gallery Singapore in 2019, accessible here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4j41RAcCEA; in addition, a repository by the Indonesian Visual Art Archive can be used for preliminary research at http://archive.ivaa-online.org/
artists to take leadership positions? Could you imagine an artist being part of the bureaucracy or civil service?

**HF:** I think it is really important, especially in Asia, for artists to take on leadership roles. Artists are not just producers of artworks; they produce knowledge and networks. Producing and enabling networks needs leadership because it connects the people in a network, and connects that network to stakeholders. From 2013–2017, I was a member of the Jakarta Arts Council. It helped me to figure out an ecosystem that I imagine in society, especially in Jakarta, and a context in which the art we believe in matters. Otti Widasari and I, along with friends at Forum Lenteng, we believe that art, film, media and activism should work together. Putting forward such an idea, you need to enter the bureaucracy as a stakeholder. I am really pushing friends to participate in the bureaucratic procedure because it is about implementing change – change in government policy, because the state uses public money so therefore it should follow a good direction.

I think art organisations or artists who can survive for more than ten years are implementing good negotiation with the public and with stakeholders and the bureaucracy. For me, aside from negotiation, being involved in the bureaucracy means giving another insight or perspective on what we have done and on what we are doing now in the field of contemporary art. In these institutions, they do not know what is happening in contemporary art. For example, Indonesian artists are active in global networks but the government is not really aware of it. I think it is important to educate them about this kind of activity or development.

**RL:** How did these figures – such as Supangkat, Yuliman, Soedjojono, Hardi and Herati, and their legacies – shape your relationship with modernism and Indonesian modernism?

**HR:** I am interested in these figures and the historical context of modern art. Through these thinkers, I wanted to understand the idea and the imagination of the modern art of Indonesia. This has become the shape of my thought on what I am thinking about modern or contemporary art. It is like trying to figure out the model: what kind of artist-facilitator or intellectual artist can fit in the new generation. My generation began being active after 1998. That is why I am interested in the context of both history and theory, what they produced in text. It is not only about the artistic approach; it is more about how the dynamics of being an intellectual plays a role in the modern art of Indonesia.

**RL:** The new audience in Singapore experienced distinct forms, materials and representation of your practice between two different locations. Unlike the museum presentation in 2018 in Jakarta, the Singapore Biennale dispersed ‘Social Organism’ in a university gallery and a repurposed military barracks. At the Institute of Contemporary Arts
in La Salle, the male body, image and voice were quite dominant, at least in terms of the impressions one would initially see. At Gillman Barracks, the presence of youth stood out in the documentation of performance, and the history of your drawings and sketches was annotated by two streams: memories of your own childhood, and the memories of young artists based in Jakarta who are mostly collaborating with you on various Forum Lenteng projects.

I remember reading in On Sketches and Odyssey, one of the rare compilation of texts about your work, about the influence of your father, Mas Dahlan Magek, a Mooi Indie (Beautiful Indies) painter in Minangkabau, in your artistic life.\(^4\) In the same book, which is prefaced with a dedication ‘for my father…’, the way you capture the landscapes of your hometown assembles a letter for him, a young Hafiz writing to his father in contemporary Indonesia. Such remembering of this paternal link is apparently absent, however, in two of your video works, Buku (Book) (2003) and The Old Men’s Club (2004),\(^5\) both of which are critical of and satirical about conceptions of lineage and fraternity. Could you speak about the presence of these images and concepts of maleness, patriarchy and youth in ‘Social Organism’?

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\(^4\) A comprehensive scholarly work on Minangkabau’s role in the Indonesian art world can be perused in Katherine Bruhn’s essay online: Katharine L Bruhn, ‘Community and the Rantau: West Sumatran Artists in Indonesia’s Art World’, Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia, vol 2, no 1, March 2018, pp 119–142 doi:10.1353/sen.2018.0004

\(^5\) The Old Men’s Club is a performance project in collaboration with Reinaart Vanhoe
HR: I admire my father. He introduced me to art. When I was a child I loved painting, but then I got bored with art in high school. I didn’t like it because of our family’s difficult financial situation during that time. We lived in Pekanbaru, far from the art scene and the art market; my father was a disappointed man. But when I was in art school, I became more aware of my father’s legacy: his sketchbooks, drawings and paintings. That is when I realised the importance of Mooi Indie.6

When I made the book for an exhibition in Graz, Austria, I revisited my father’s sketches and drawings, and I attempted to interpret new drawings of my hometown (Pekanbaru). He was quite important in Mooi Indie and in some of the literature about Indonesian modern art. He was a friend of Nashar and Oesman Affendi, and a student of Wakidi (1889–1979). I remember him to be open, when we maintained a strong Muslim tradition in West Sumatra. He gave me some left-wing books, and we loved reading together. I dedicated the book to him because he wanted me to be an artist and I wanted to see what his legacy means to me and my family. So, yes, my father is a main figure in my artistic life.

It is common to keep up your spirit with the young people. Contemporary art and collectives are always led by a younger generation that know about the contemporary situation. At Forum Lenteng, which is composed of five generations already, we always invite and collaborate with a new class to keep in touch with the different generations. It is good to know from them what is happening now, how to know the new language, what they see and what they say about their situation and about the older generation. You can reflect and experience contemporary art through the youth.

Baku talks specifically about texts and books at the time it was exhibited at Cemeti in 2003.7 I was trying to understand the value of texts and books for myself and for my imagination as an artist, so I suddenly took my books from the library and threw them out, smashing them on the wall – a reflection on what is knowledge and what is the text; to gift and to give back; to destroy; to question the text or the discourse or theory. To question modernity.

RL: And yet in the new installation of books in a vitrine, you cut them up neatly, with child-like curiosity and attention to how to build anew…

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6 ‘Mooi Indie’ is broadly conceived, used and understood to define and describe romantic landscape paintings of colonial Indonesia. Discourses produced on Mooi Indie have been sustainably developed both locally and internationally. A recent survey of terminologies of ‘modern’, ‘contemporary’ and ‘art’ in Southeast Asia’s vernacular languages can introduce a rich ground for terms like Mooi Indie; for more see: Thanavi Chotpradit et al, ‘Terminologies of “Modern” and “Contemporary” “Art” in Southeast Asia’s Vernacular Languages: Indonesian, Javanese, Khmer, Lao, Malay, Myanmar/Burmese, Tagalog/Filipino, Thai and Vietnamese’, Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia, vol 2, no 2, October 2018, pp 65–195 doi:10.1353/sen.2018.0015

7 Cemeti – Institute for Art and Society was founded in 1988 by artists Mella Jaarsma and Nindityo Adipurnomo and has since operated as ‘Cemeti Gallery’ and ‘Cemeti Art House’, www.cemeti.org
HR: My intention was different this time: to create an object as a new object. Like a game, I provoked and played with the books and texts I have collected since I was a student. You can deny them and reconstruct them into new forms. Of course, it is provocative to cut up books, but the goal is to figure out the new form of books as an object, as a sculpture. The same idea applies to my drawings.

The book is really an idea about the form. And the idea is about how one can grab the form from a basic idea. It comes from lines, from really simple things. The book is actually one of the forms where you can do a reconstruction – to reconstruct your own ideas, new forms, and that is the way the social organism works.

Hafiz Rancajale, installation view of ‘Social Organism’, 2017–2019, courtesy of Singapore Art Museum

Hafiz Rancajale (b Pekanbaru, Indonesia) is an artist, curator and one of the founders of the collective ruangrupa. Hafiz has established a number of artistic institutions in Indonesia, including Forum Lenteng (in 2003), OK.Video (in 2003, a department of ruangrupa), Arkipel – Jakarta International Documentary and Experimental Film Festival (in 2013), among others. He lives and works in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Renan G Laru-an (b Sultan Kudarat, Philippines) is a researcher. He is the Public Engagement and Artistic Formation Coordinator at the Philippine Contemporary Art Network (www.pcan.org.ph).