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Commons people: managing music and culture in contemporary Yogyakarta

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SUMMARY

This research is about musicians, visual artists, music collectors, fans, curators, and cultural activists, participating in the popular discourse of music through relevant music activities. It narrates these people, with some of their music-based plans and initiatives. It also narrates the elaboration of the spaces where the works take place. The implementation of the plans and initiatives takes place in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. It takes place in an urban media infrastructure setting.

I refer to the people in this research as musicians, visual artists, music collectors, fans, curators, and cultural activists. They were raised by local alternative milieu. I introduce the people in this research, the figures of the scene, through an elaboration of indie and alternative concepts. I employ self-organizing, collectivism, and institutionalization of cultural production as useful concepts to define the alternative milieu. It is the milieu, which shapes the production of tools and ways of organizing a series of action on managing music, culture, and life.

The people in my research are often referred to as *tokoh skena*, the 'figures of the (indie) scene', by their peers, because of their prominent position in that scene. To some extent, the scope of the works explored here is located within an indie music environment. However, my research does not focus on the textual and aesthetic realm of indie music. The people that I am researching here are moving within and across various music scenes at the same time. What I mean by indie is situated in the readiness for taking alternative approaches to control the cycle of cultural production and to consciously frame the musical activities within the wider social context.

Music is often perceived as the finished product of creative process. Many things seem to be determined and judged through what is visible—albums, musicians, performances. People in music, or music people, are often defined according to their designated function within industry. The meaning of music is constantly reframed. I choose points of musicking, which embody the dynamic relation to music. I study the development of the Internet-based record label union, event organizing, cassette collection, cassette repair, initiative to save a historical record company, and establishment of a record company. I pay attention to various dimensions of musicking that might be taken for non-music dimensions. They sustain the efforts exerted to make

something happen. I study about friendship, kindness, friction, and informal supports. I study old and new habits of doing music. I present them as innovative experiments in the field of music and popular culture. At the same time, I show why and how they fail and do not work.

I present commons as a framework to think about music. In the cases presented in this dissertation, music does not emerge as a determinant of a case study. Rather music is inserted as part of the questions, or plans, to be executed in a certain project. To define music as a commons might sound a bit odd, and indeed, there is more than one way to define a commons. In thinking about music as a commons, the focus is not on music of a particular genre. Music, which also serves as a commons, emerges as a horizon of possibilities, or a means, to be managed and maintained for different purposes.

I propose sustainability as a shared imagination of what doing music means. The articulation of such imagination informs the structure of the dissertation. The structure articulates the questions brought about by managing commons; they are the questions about a sense of security, sustainability, and documentation. It provides insights into what aspects that the people need to work on when they think about music.

The development of new technology and social media provides an environment where collaboration, networking, and sharing, constitute the elements to inform peer-to-peer relations. The city of Jogja (also known as Yogyakarta) serves as an ecosystem, surrounding the people and activities presented here with contexts. It fuels the people with the spirit to develop alternative infrastructure for art and culture.

I argue that the discourse of Indonesian music would be enriched from taking into account the condition of cultural production and the wellbeing of cultural producers. The performance of action on music and culture is always intertwined with the struggle for self-sustainability and personal survival. I suggest that consideration for these aspects direct music studies to observe the collective dimension of music. It shifts a perspective from seeing individuality as the ultimate form of artistic elaboration to the emergence of music as a source of collaboration. To view music as a collective project means to understand it as part of long-term cultural strategy. It provides links to media access, alternative distribution mechanism, social engagement practices, archiving, and cultural activism. It reveals the shared questions,

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vision, and plans that would remain unspoken otherwise. It leads to the production of vernacular keywords to define the character of doing music and culture in contemporary Yogyakarta.

Chapter one discusses the materialistic orientation of cultural access. It is a precondition for the emerging ideal of commons. To engage in contemporary music and popular culture is to practice different modes of consumption—buying, pirating, borrowing, renting, copying, and downloading. It is coupled with an exploration of everyday urban media infrastructure from which music and other cultural material accessed. It is part of a process of how cultural material is regarded as a resource. To regard cultural material as a resource is to pose questions against its availability and limitation. As the Internet provides a useful site of knowledge exploration, it requires knowledge of how to navigate the territories (shared or unshared) and the authorities which guard them. To regard cultural material as shared resources is to question their meaning as intellectual properties.

Chapter two is about Indonesian Net Label Union. Net label is an Internet-based distribution platform for musicians to share their music for free. The development of the Indonesian Net Label Union represents a self-organizing act to indicate an attempt to work together and reclaim distribution space. The decision to share music for free generates public resources. Distribution is also a space to consolidate ideas around sustainability for future works and precariousness of an artist. The union constitutes an avenue for making commons and doing commons. In this case, to commons is to employ sharing as a uniting concept and envisioned to be a collective project to achieve a collective sustainability.

Chapter three focuses on Walk the Folk—a participatory music gig. Lir Space, an alternative space for visual art and culture organized the gig. The running of Lir Space indicates a space-making act, a crucial element of the cultural movement post-1998, which is extended to the organization of Walk the Folk. The environmental dimension of the gig extends to an intention to develop a more meaningful relation with social environment. Using stage, audience, participant, and mode of interaction between musician and audience axes, Walk the Folk engenders the opportunities to reimagine the meaning of participation and contribution. Walk the Folk contributes to the nurture of moments to produce the participation climate within art production. The development of commons requires participation habit.

SUMMARY

The last two chapters—chapter 4 and 5—focus on archiving. Chapter four explores collecting practices among music fans. It uses an exploration of archiving conditions as a starting point to examine what counts as valuable in developing a collection. Archiving becomes a means to generate social values from collecting. Using a story of personal cassette collections as a case study, I examine various moments in the collecting process where senses and skills for valuation are exercised. I use it to draw a narrative of the meaning on what is important and the usefulness of collecting.

Chapter five explores a communal sense of loss and decline, which transforms into an awareness to collect music archives. Memory creates the ground on which the criteria of archives set and a sense of shared history built. The first part of chapter five talks about Nirmana Records, which uses re-issues as a strategy for preserving music material. The second part of the chapter captures efforts to save the historical music archives contained in Lokananta Records. They narrate initiatives to develop music as a form of public archives. Using the vinyl production of Nirmana Records and the current state of Lokananta Records as study cases, I interrogate the challenge to maintain commitment to care.

In the concluding chapter, I go back to the notion of sustainability as a way to interrogate the implementation of vision and plans in managing commons. I make sense of the ongoing development of the commons-making process. I reflect on a shared value throughout the various projects which I have examined, and try to define what managing a music commons means. The people in this research create a model of platform for cultural practices. The formats of the platforms examined in this research are not new. But they have been developed with different framing. In taking action to organize them, the people narrated here are taking different measures to make sense of the current condition, and develop their own ways of making values. The character of the platform is general, but it is something that can be repurposed and imitated in a different social context. This is the premise on which the long-term impact of the works of the people in this research can be concluded.