



# After the house has gone: the future for Mes 56

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So Ruang Mes 56 recently decided not to have a space anymore. They refused to rent the house together with us. Kunci Cultural Studies Center, the organisation I work for, has been neighboring Mes 56 for five years at our old yet comfortable house on Jalan Nagan Lor 17. Until Bu Ris, the landlady, came to us one afternoon and said that she had to sell the house in order to cover her debts, so we had to move out.

Without a space, will Mes 56 still exist?

Some members of Mes 56 have grown into successful artists hence the money needed to rent a house should not be a problem. Taking this further, we might ask what is the meaning of an alternative space when the Indonesian art world has become completely controlled by commercial activities? What is the meaning of Mes 56 when all its members are drawn into such profit-making motives?

The exhibition of the younger generation of Mes 56 (Andri 'Abud' William, Arif Pristianto, Aderi 'Pungky' Wicaksono and Yudha Kusuma Putra 'Fehung') entitled *New Folder* last March displayed the collective's growing stature in the so-called Indonesian contemporary art boom over the past decade. Gone are the days when works are given to friends for free, or bartered for a drink or meal. Emails flow to Mes 56's inbox, containing proposals for residencies, as well as requests to give talks for numerous art and cultural organisations. Jakarta-based top-notch collectors, curators, fans, indeed Mes 56 members themselves have all built a cult system which was in full force at the opening of their show last March. Agung Nugroho Widhi recalls his reservations about the event:

Maybe I was just in shock. So many collectors came, all with their powerful Chinese money. Someone said that the works of Wimo are already on the buying list of those people even when they are still being printed. Being famous, people want your works badly: who would not want that? At the same time this can be disastrous, not to mention the gap between the money they possess and their knowledge of photography. Do they really understand the meaning of photography we are talking about?

It was around 2010, says Akiq AW, that the collective first began paying attention to their individual careers. Suffice it to say, this change in approach was partly connected to the market for photography and multimedia works now on the rise. Other members such as Angki Purbandono question the roles confined by the collective, which apparently led in his case to the rejection of a proposal for a solo exhibition. He also questions the group's internal flow of information.

In everyday life, the group's kind of disorderliness can be hurtful. Important information evaporates. There is no clear system, even though we always said that we have one, as to who is in charge of channeling information to the other members. Some people just do not know what is happening.

'I did imagine an absolute orderliness in Mes 56', says its appointed director, Wimo Ambala Bayang.

I imagined each member assigned to a particular job description. It would have been great if we kept that arrangement ... we could have a proper library and decent archival system. It would also have been great if we could secure a certain amount of money for the people working here. Each member could get a regular incentive. We could work for the organisation without losing focus on our own artworks and worrying about the basic



P12: Jim Allen Abel, *Rastra Sewakottama*, 2011, digital C-print.

P13: 1/ Fadli, the vocalist of the prominent Indonesian band Padi at Mes 56, early 2011. Mes 56 member Jim. Allen Abel was once the band's official photographer. Fellow artists joined in a sing-along: (left to right) Wimo Ambala Bayang, Fadli, Ican Harem, Uji Handoko.

necessities. But we are artists after all. This might explain our impaired capacity for running the organisation. We tend to be disordered, lacking for self-discipline, hindering the progress of many projects.

#### Wok The Rock sees the group as a brotherhood:

Each member is tied deeply to this brotherhood. Some of us have long gone to other cities, taking normal jobs for life. The affinity to this collective remains somehow. It is a capital readily available to build future collaborations.

Tempering Akiq's criticisms, Wok the Rock said that the distribution of rights and obligations within the group, as well as the formation of its supposed power-holders, is informed less by any structure than by wild, banal, pleasure-seeking activities such as drinking, partying, smoking weed, and so forth. 'I cannot imagine what would happen if we are really spaceless', he admits.

#### Edwin Dolly Rooseno reflects on their current situation.

I used to live wherever Mes 56 headquartered, moving from one house to another. It was all a fun and great time. Many people frequented our house, big people, friends, talking about what is hip in anything. Our conversations have proven to be productive moments for me. But playing housekeeping all the time can be very tiring too, you know. Maybe the decision we made means an opportunity to develop the members' personal careers and build synergy with other people. I only hope that we did not make a mistake.

One of the founding members of Mes 56, Eko Bhirowo said: 'Maybe we are just a bunch of artists who happened to be living together, we like to do something together. We just have not found the best way of managing a group like us yet.'

The particular case of Mes 56 causes us to consider the extent and impact of collaboration practices, which have long been encouraged, if not celebrated, here. What will happen when the seemingly radical impetus and grand ideas driving certain collaborations wear off? Will we find a valid reason to hold on to them? What kind of attempts should be made at keeping their formative contexts intact? Will it take us to a new path or to a new kind of deadlock, a series of the same old questions or curbs?

The first generation of Mes 56, comprising photography and visual communication design students of the Yogyakarta Indonesian Institute of the Arts, began renting the flat at the former mess owned by the Indonesian Air Force at Jalan Kolonel Sugiyono 56 in 1994, and built a strong sense of community ever since.<sup>1</sup> Quite literally the group's name appropriated the function of the building, 'mess', and its street number, '56'. When it was officially launched as an organisation in 2002, they had already made a name as a group of young visual artists dedicating their life and work to photography. In the early years of the new millennium, the idea of Reformation was still in the air. New ideas were spinning fast, buzzing, building trajectory in the growing number of alternative media and local civil initiatives.

Under the banner of 'contemporary photography', the group drifted freely, unencumbered, stimulating experimental ideas in photography. All the immediate stakeholders – photo-journalists and amateur photographer associations alike – sought to be involved. Their supporters regard their works as innovative and cutting-edge, while others call them destroyers of the basic photography principles, without any real claims to being avant-garde. Having just left the first decade of the 2000s, and in view of current developments in technology, the visual experiments which Mes 56 promoted may no longer be considered novelties.

A new question arises: what are the set of reasons to justify the continuation of Mes 56? To what extent has this organisation contributed both to photography and wider society?

Surfacing from recent conversations with Mes 56 members is the hope of creating 'a real organisation' – as if what they had was not a real one – and the anxiousness about 'finding the appropriate financial resources for the organisation'. Virtually all the prominent cultural and civil society initiatives in Indonesia like IVAA (Indonesian Visual Art Archive), Ruangrupa, Cemeti Art House, as well as Kunci, highly depend on international donor agencies. Until now, Mes 56 members have shared the cost of routine expenses; their limited self-sufficiency only points to the state's failings in supporting key social and cultural programs.

The past five years has also witnessed the birth of newer models for alternative spaces in Yogyakarta, spaces born partly from local initiatives serving public needs, and partly from individual economic capacity. Sangkring Art Space (<http://>

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sangkringartspace.net/) and Langgeng Art Foundation (<http://langgengfoundation.org/>) were recently founded by wealthy, well-known artist Putu Sutawijaya and collector Deddy Irianto. Reflecting on the ill performance of the government sector, the rise of local philanthropic projects deserve closer analysis.

Last August, we (Kunci) finally launched our new office. Almost all our friends from Mes 56 came. I wonder what they thought of it. At the end of my interview with Wimo, he said (in a rambling mode) that he has always imagined Mes 56 as a kind of a rock band. As any band would experience, explained Wimo, the possibility of disintegration is high, although reunification is also equally possible.

Separation might still come our way, and we would never be reunited and work together as we always do. But I assume that it would be great if each fragment of this organisation creates different visual projects. Besides, soon we are going to publish the book as a commemoration of our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Then our name will be officially inscribed in history, and we have a chance of being legends. Who knows?

What then is the ultimate meaning of the Mes 56 collective for these boys? Is it perceived merely as a steppingstone; a reputation built on tremendous effort to then be used as a social ladder, only to be abandoned and reminisced about once in a while with nostalgia? Probably the whole story of an alternative art space is not unlike the story of an ordinary human being. There will be times when he or she gets bored and needs to be

imbued with fresh ideas. Notwithstanding the external elements at play which affect the lifespan of a particular initiative, alternative spaces, with their undeniably heroic character, have the capacity not only to die as martyrs but also to commit suicide, or to choose being in a state of suspension, continuing in a more informal, relaxed way. 🌱

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 I. For an article backgrounding Mes 56, see Zhuang Wubin, 'Contemporary photography in Yogyakarta: the case of Mes 56', *Art Monthly Australia*, No. 234, October 2010.

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*Ruang Mes 56: Contemporary Photography from Indonesia* is showing at the Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, 27 October to 11 December 2011. The exhibition includes the work of Wimo Ambala Bayang, Akiq AW, Agan Harahap, Angki Purbandono and Jim Allen Abel. [www.ccp.org.au](http://www.ccp.org.au)

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 clockwise: 1/ Angki Purbandono, *Beyond Versace* (2011), printed book.

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 2/ Agan Harahap, *Jl. Zamrud Rsaya no 28- 2*, 2010, digital C-print.

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 3/ Eko Bhirowo and Edwin Dolly Rooseno (with 'Don't Be Sad' tattoo) holding each other at a friend's wedding anniversary celebration, Yogyakarta, 2004.

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 Images courtesy the artists.