Managing Cultural Activism: A Case Study of Buku Jalanan of Malaysia

Introduction

Every fortnight in a public park in a suburban Malaysian neighbourhood about 25km outside of the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, a mat with books is laid out, art materials for children stationed nearby in plastic containers, and a group of young men and women in their early twenties settle down to talk, swap stories, and engage with anyone interested in stopping by. A plastic banner is unfurled and posted next to them: Buku Jalanan Shah Alam (Street Books, Shah Alam) – the pop-up free 'library' that has become a nationwide phenomenon with chapters throughout the country. Reading is optional.

Buku Jalanan[1] which literally translates as 'Street Books' was founded in 2011 by Zikri Rahman, together with Azrie Ahmad and Mohammad Idham, when they were students at the Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), a large public university in the city of Shah Alam[2], Selangor, Malaysia. Conceived as a free, outdoor library, by a group of friends simultaneously interested in engaging with intellectually challenging ideas as well as in community service, Buku Jalanan has taken on the characteristics of a youth movement, inspiring lookalike chapters across the country, as well in countries as far afield as France and China. The Shah Alam Buku Jalanan was the first and longest running initiative, and consists of about 15 members. They self identify as a collective and have no formal organizational status, yet have managed to not only survive for over seven years, but have also continuously inspired others to launch similar initiatives, extending a reach and ideology that seems unhampered by institutional constraints of either a physical or organizational nature.

The pop-up library acts as both symbol and medium/conduit for cultural activity and, in fact, forms of activism. The members of Buku Jalanan Shah Alam are not practicing artists and most do not come from any kind of art or creative background, and what they do does not fit neatly into an immediately recognized category of art making or production. There is, in fact, very little to no 'art' being made in this case, in the sense of tangible or performative outputs that conform to conventional and formalistic definitions of art. The realm of art in this context is instead taken to encompass a broad range of cultural expressions and grassroots action and civic engagement.

How and in what exact form the original Buku Jalanan has functioned, and indeed, seemingly thrived, is the main focus of this chapter. As shall be shown, the collective is not completely unique in the cultural landscape of Malaysia, but is, in fact, part of a rising trend of socially engaged practice in the country and which shares characteristics with others in the region of Southeast Asia. However, it's rise and longevity in Malaysia is remarkable given its particular circumstances which merits further study. The looseness of its organizational structure and behavior will be analysed with reference to

management theory and also against a rising global trend of cultural activism and socially engaged arts and cultural activity. The case study is necessarily situated within the socio-political landscape of Malaysia and also within a particular time period of about ten years, from the late noughties till the present, 2018. The point of temporality is mentioned here for two reasons: one in so far as it relates to specific moments in time that affect the social and political realities in the country; and, secondly, in relation to the question of organizational sustainability over time.

 The investigation of Buku Jalanan is done in three parts. The first looks at its purpose or mission with an overview of the inception of Buku Jalanan, and attempts to identify the factors that drive its members to volunteer their time and energy to this endeavor. This author takes the view of Buku Jalanan as a collective of cultural agents (Sommer, 2005) and will offer a range of perspectives by which to contextualise the nature of their work. Part two looks at how they organize and the functional roles of its members, where an attempt shall be made to construct an understanding of the collective as an activism-led and horizontally organized group. The data on Buku Jalanan is compiled from several sources: media reports, printed materials provided by Buku Jalanan, published articles, a personal interview with three members, and a number of exchanges with Zikri Rahman over the course of 2017 through activities of a network of community-engaged arts practitioners administered by myself and researcher and arts education specialist Janet Pillai[3]. Lastly, we seek to respond to the question of sustainability that is often central to so many arts groups. In this particular instance, the question of sustainability is, as will be argued, both complicated and potentially resolved by the specific nature of the structure and purpose of Buku Jalanan.

Buku Jalanan: From Idea to Movement

Buku Jalanan, as initiated by Zikri Rahman, Azrie Ahmad and Mohammad Idham, was an outdoor pop-up library that in 2011 started appearing in a local park by a lake on a Saturday evening every two weeks. The rules were simple: anyone could borrow books, with no identification required and no penalties for anyone who failed to return a book. The reading matter was equally egalitarian: any kind of reading matter –it could be literary fiction, pulp fiction, historical texts and non-fiction, popular magazines or anything anyone wanted to contribute. The collection began with members' own personal books, but gradually came to grow and include more and more diverse contributions. Costing very little to execute, the impedimenta required are mats for laying on the grass, books, arts materials for children to draw with, and banners with their name, Buku Jalanan. At 5pm as the sun starts to descend and the often stifling equatorial heat abates, books are neatly laid out on the ground and Buku Jalanan members settle down for the next two hours. Children are enticed by the drawing materials and the '*conteng-conteng*' (scribbling) activity is a fun way to engage young parents, while making

their temporary occupation of their corner of the park more visible and expanding their use of public space.

Buku Jalanan Shah Alam (henceforth referred to as BJSA) was the first and founding chapter, and Zikri Rahman has been its most visible spokesperson and advocate. He is also one of the most explicit and articulate in his views on society and politics and the need to reclaim public spaces and to create alternative and necessary spaces for discourse. Zikri[4] describes their founding thus:

> We would like to raise awareness and create alternatives for discourse. Books and the act of reading can be seen as neutral, but to see a group of students converge and take part in different activities and sharing sessions within the realms of books, arts, culture and activism helps us to fill the void within university discourse and reimagine what we can do together…. it is our desire to allow the culture of discourse and most importantly, the culture of dissent, to take place within our community (2017, pp. 51-53).

The void that Zikri describes is the result of specific controls and restrictions imposed on public life in Malaysia. University students are prevented from engaging in any kind of political activity, and the formation of student bodies deemed "unsuitable to the interest and well-being of the students or the University" is prohibited by law (University and University College Act 1971, p.18; Educational Institutions (Discipline) Act 1976). A further number of acts exist that impinge on freedoms of expressions for all citizens, such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 (PPPA), used to limit the number of news media outlets; the Communications and Multimedia Act 1978 (CMA) used to control and censor media content; and the Peaceful Assembly Act, meant to be a reformed version of the Police Act 1967 which controlled the right to assembly and frequently executed with the notorious Internal Security Act's (ISA) right of detention without trial, but has instead been wielded in ever more oppressive ways. Several laws were rescinded in the first term of Prime Minister Najib Razak from 2009-2014, drastically eroding Malaysian civil and political rights and freedom of expression, while promises of reform instead materialized into new laws that have further infringed on human rights, leading to a steady decline in Malaysia's global human rights ranking (Human Rights Watch 2018).

This context is attributed as one of the significant motivating factors for Buku Jalanan members, alongside other factors such as community and solidarity. Within the first year of BJSA's founding, a second Buku Jalanan chapter was set up in Ipoh, the capital city of the state of Perak, just north of Selangor, and also home to another large UiTM campus. The number of chapters then grew exponentially, with nine more established in 2012, followed by a swell of 21 in 2013 and 14 in 2014, bringing up the number of total chapters to 45. To date over 90 chapters have been set up, though how many truly active chapters remain is unclear. The rise in numbers in 2013-2014 is attributed by the

members themselves to the sociopolitical conditions of the time. Sharifah Nursyahidah, a Buku Jalanan Kota Kinabalu member, refers specifically to the climate pre and post the general elections of 2013 which led youth to various acts of activism, and also describes the year as one that saw the rise of many non-governmental bodies and arts collectives as a response to a political situation that was increasingly oppressive, "*situasi politik yang semakin menekan*"(translation by author) (*Buku Jalanan – Simposium Buku Jalanan: Sebuah Catatan*, 2017, p.12).

However, not all members profess overt political agendas, neither do they necessarily identify as activists. Buku Jalanan Shah Alam founding member, Azrie Ahmad, and two other current and active members, Asdani Saifullah Dolbashid and Fahmi Fadzil, state clearly that Buku Jalanan as a network or coalition of chapters does not label itself a leftist organization, despite what appears to be seemingly leftist leanings (2017, pers. comm., 27 December). This is reinforced by other chapters from the country as recorded in the transcripts of the Buku Jalanan Regional Symposium, held at the Ilham Gallery in Kuala Lumpur in August 2017 under the auspices of the 'Ilham Contemporary Forum Malaysia, 2009-2017'. Buku Jalanan was 'exhibited' as a cultural project with its organization and ethos showcased as a sort of living artefact in itself. A total of 45 members attended the symposium and also provided data prior to the gathering via email and a Google form survey. In the survey Buku Jalanan members were asked to choose whether they identified as an 'activator' (*penggerak*[5]), volunteer (*sukarelawan*) or activist (*aktivis*). Although the majority selected activist, there were others who made their non-political stance clear and others who preferred to describe themselves as an "active member" (*perserta aktif*), a term which seems to suggest not just being a member who is active versus inactive, but a member who is *pro*-active and motivated (emphasis added). (*Buku Jalanan – Simposium Buku Jalanan: Sebuah Catatan*, 2017).

This blending of art and activism, the testing of boundaries of public space and forging a sense of community characterizes but also complicates Buku Jalanan as it defies easy categorization. Their founding mission was very much driven by the realities faced by the populace, and which materialized as a subtle form of resistance particular to the cultural context of Malay mostly urban and suburban, college-educated youth. The members demonstrate a recognition of the failures of their government and a reaction against oppressive controls, describing the need to take matters into their own hands rather than depend on official institutions. However, their activities are not in the vein of agitation or direct lobbying for change, but instead are a carving out of political and social space, an exercise in expressive cultural democracy (Juncker and Balling, 2016).

Some elaboration is necessary here on the state of cultural and civic institutions in Malaysia. In terms of arts and culture, state museums and galleries exist throughout the country but these are not well funded or managed. Although it is possible that school children might visit such institutions at least

once in their lifetimes, a culture of arts-going is still not yet ingrained. Most states do not have performing arts centres, though in the 1970s and 80s civic centres were built in a number of cities in Malaysia, and for some time were venues for performances and community activities from cultural shows to weddings. Smaller community centres were also built in suburban neighbourhoods. However, by the 1990s most of these centres started to decline in their popularity, and new strategies for youth engagement were introduced by the government such as the Rakan Muda (Young Friends) scheme accompanied by the building of new centres –Kompleks Rakan Muda—in towns around the country. Rakan Muda was launched in 1994 and in 2015 underwent a millennial-targeted make-over and "rebranding" with a new website sporting a distinctly un-governmental look; a focus on creativity and urban youth culture; as well as a programme of mentors that include designers, dancers and visual artists, as well as a young TV celebrity chef and urban farmers (*The Star* 2015, *Rakan Muda*).

Libraries are also part of the cultural infrastructure, with state, municipal and community centre libraries in some shape or form throughout the country. Literacy rates have been improving steadily over the years and amongst youth aged between 15 to 24 years, it is nearly 100% (UNESCO). Despite such encouraging facts and statistics, however, news reports point to a decline in reading and question the criticality of reading materials being consumed, while the heavy censorship laws of Malaysia that results in frequent, and often quite controversial, book banning makes regular headlines (*The Sun Daily* 2006, *The Star* 2012, *The Straits Times* 2015, *Zan Azlee* 2016, *Malaysian Insight* 2017). Given such conditions it is arguable that most state sponsored institutions tend not to be viewed by a critical populace as spaces for discourse or an open exchange of ideas.

In terms of careers in the arts, it is mainly in the urban capital of Kuala Lumpur and the surrounding Klang Valley where there are sufficient possibilities for regular or full-time employment, whether as artists/creators or as producers/managers/promoters. Since the 2000s, however, secondary cities in Malaysia have been developing their cultural infrastructure or investing in "creativity" as part of global shifts towards creative industries and the economic benefits of culture for tourism, city branding and creative enterprises. Cities like George Town and Ipoh in peninsular Malaysia and Kuching in Sarawak, Borneo, boast annual arts festivals and city centres with commercially exploitable architecture and creative possibilities. This has led to a rise of new arts and culture workers in such cities, as well as in the capital, but there are still limited opportunities to find or create sustainable, full-time work in the field.

The arts and cultural landscape, thus, is one of limited arts infrastructure and funding mechanisms (Yong et al. 2016), under-developed systems of accountability and governance, as well as under-developed civic life within a tradition of top-down public administration. Any examination of an arts ecosystem –if one can even call it such—has to be considered within its economic and socio-political

context, and this context, while specific to Malaysia, needs also to be considered in relation to regional and global influences and parallel developments.

Intersections of art, culture and society

Despite less than encouraging conditions for earning a living through the arts, or, possibly also a result of this and a manifestation of economic and social discontent, there has been a discernible emergence of artists, designers and other culture workers initiating or running projects in or with specific communities around the country. In 2014, a survey conducted to document community-based arts practice in Malaysia provided basic profiles of practitioners engaged in a range of work from using the arts to engage with at-risk youth, to neighbourhood beautification projects; cultural mapping exercises to inculcate heritage and cultural awareness, to acts of cultural resistance to prevent forcible relocation (Arts-ED, 2014). Though responses were limited and only 22 profiles were obtained at the time, it led to the founding of an informal network of practitioners who have continued to stay in touch through social media, and occasionally connect in person through workshops or other events. Unlike countries like the United Kingdom or Singapore where the arts have become incorporated into social services under a neoliberal agenda, this has not yet developed into a full trend in Malaysia. Hence, it is found that many if not most projects are initiated by independent individuals or collectives of individuals, and, are often, spurred by a sense of social responsibility and justice.

The practice of artists or people using culture to affect social change is seen across Southeast Asia various forms. Examples include the Jatiwangi Art Factory, an artists residency programme located in the tile-making village of Jatiwangi, West Java, Indonesia, and integrated into the cultural life of this specific community; the D Jung Space Project of Thailand, bringing creativity and the arts to rural communities for social cohesion and identity building; and the festivals in pagodas, initiated by a young group of friends led by twenty-six year old film-maker Lomorpich Rithy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, a project that simultaneously reclaims a traditional practice while creating new traditions and developing tastes for contemporary arts[6]. Examples of Malaysian collectives working with communities that predate Buku Jalanan include Lost Gens, an artist collective and residency based in Kuala Lumpur who sporadically focus attention on issues such as urban heritage and habitat loss; and Sabahan collective Pangrok Sulap known for their woodblock prints and activist statements on social issues affecting their community such as illegal logging and environmental degradation, to messages of ethnic pride.

In Southeast Asia, the line between art and social engagement is a blurry one. Indonesian curator Grace Samboh asserts that artists in Indonesia have never been separated from their social surroundings and asks "What is *not* socially-engaged? (emphasis added) Without an existing and

working system, everyone depends on each other anyway" (Samboh, 2016). Iola Lenzi describes the relationship between artist-artwork-audience in Southeast Asian contemporary art as a trope developed "not for the sake of promoting a collective relationship or identity, but for conveying information and provoking thought through involvement", whereby "practitioners don't convene audiences as an experiential end-in-itself, but rather are driven by social objectives wherein audience-inclusiveness is a means of co-opting resistance" (Lenzi, 2014, p.12). In his discussion of pioneering Indonesian artist Moelyono among others, Japanese curator Junichi Shioada highlights the concern for community and how artists can build a better future for that community using art, making a distinction of Southeast Asian art practices from Western practice because of this (1997, cited in Lenzi 2014, p.11). Indonesian urbanist Marco Kusumawijaya is a vocal advocate in the region for the role of communities as laboratories for urban experimentation for ecological sustainability or as critics against the market (Kusumawijaya, 2012, 2014, 2015).

The type of cultural activity mentioned above and certainly the nature of the work of Buku Jalanan, whether by design or indirectly, tends to challenge or completely ignore the market authority in the arts and instead serves to destabilize and address imbalances of power: artists or individuals using creative or cultural means to engage with society around them for social change rather than economic gain. Such practice has been discussed increasingly in the past two decades, and goes by various terms: cultural activism, cultural resistance, community-engaged or socially-engaged arts; in the visual arts socially-engaged art is discussed as participatory, dialogical, or collaborative art (Bishop, 2006; Kester, 2004; Helguera, 2013); while in the performing arts, often in the realm of applied theatre, the work of pioneering figures such as Brazilian theater practitioner and political activist and founder of the Theatre of the Oppressed, Augusto Boal, has been far-reaching in its influence, and forum theatre and theatre of the oppressed continued to be practiced today. In recent years socially engaged arts practice has also become a topic of interest for urbanists and geographers. British researchers Buser and Arthurs (2012, p.3) place cultural activism in the context of urban planning, spatial politics and civil society, describing it as a form of organization of the intermingling of art, activism, performance and politics, and framing it according to three broad concepts that: a) challenge dominant constructions of the world; b) present alternative socio-political and spatial imaginaries; and c) disrupt relationships between art, politics, participation and spectatorship. Focusing on the relationships between artists and works of art with publics, between civic leaders and citizens, and between the humanities and its engagement with the world, Doris Sommer of the Cultural Agents Initiative at Harvard University, terms these practitioners, or activators, to borrow a Buku Jalanan term, as 'cultural agents': people who are not necessarily artists but individuals who use a variety of cultural means to lead towards collective change (Sommer, 2014). Recognising small acts as well as grand interventions, culture does its 'work' when art meets accountability.

Returning to Southeast Asia, the intersections of art and society, as we have seen, is not new and the discourse goes beyond a conceptual avant-garde turn in contemporary art, with the artist or cultural initiator seen to be an integral part of their community or society. In the case of Buku Jalanan we find groups of young people seeing to *create* community, whether amongst each other, or as cultural citizens participating in democratic life. Borrowing the language of Sommer, we apply the term cultural agents to the activators of Buku Jalanan: cultural acts by agents who are not necessarily artists, seeking to engage with members of society through purposeful and symbolic organistion. Buku Jalanan is a free library that uses literature and books to create a platform for community engagement. Through the situating of their activities in public space they exercise their rights as citizens and through its sustained and regular recurrence, make a symbolic statement about power, access and the democratization of space. For each individual participant, through the interactions with each other and with the materials they read, they engage in discourse and learn to respect alternative points of view, while developing critical political and civic sensibilities. Their ideology is propagated through their sustained activities and inspires other youths to similar action. Yet, all this is done in a purely voluntary and seemingly unsustainable manner.

Most literature on socially engaged art tends not to intersect with questions of organization, and certainly not with the language of management. From its early days of inception as a recognized field of management, in many parts of the world the role of the arts manager has traditionally been associated with either the nonprofit framework supported by arts or cultural policy and government and private philanthropy; or as a function of the art market where consumption drives creation. In either framework, the idea of enabling the creation of artistic outputs and ensuring that it reaches an audience has been increasingly discussed using business terms of management and administration, and, in fact, the link between management and the arts has been seen as a "mark of respectability" (Chong 296). Even in countries with less advanced infrastructure and support for the arts, the concept of art management is linked to the professionalization of the field. With socially engaged art and cultural activism a growing feature in the landscape of art and culture, however, it is increasingly likely that there are and will be arts managers and students of arts management who choose to apply their energies to work that is more integrated with their social constituents, and which affect or call for social change. It is imperative, therefore, that we seek new models that go beyond the binary of non or for profit organisation, and that fall outside or somewhere in between the categories of public, nonprofit; and private, for-profit. This will be discussed further in the next session on the operational characteristics of Buku Jalanan.

Managing a 'non-organisation'

By 2014, as Buku Jalanans sprouted around the country, the founding members discovered that not all new chapters necessarily conformed to the same shared values. As a response to this, they produced a set of guiding principles written out as a manifesto that was and is made available to all members in the form of a zine. Zines are a popular form of literature in Malaysia (Wang, 2017) and punk aesthetics and the DIY (do-it-yourself) ethic are a common identifier amongst Malaysian youth subcultures regardless of their actual music or tribal affiliations. Indeed, a handmade, photocopied form of self-publishing expresses effectively the ideology conveyed in Buku Jalanan's manifesto. The growth and rapid spread of Buku Jalanan, while recognized as needing to be managed somehow, was also recognized as a close result of its ethos, and it was therefore vital to not disrupt or restrict the autonomy each chapter was meant to have. The principles are not meant to be prescriptive but serve to underline their core values and make more tangible members' collective and shared identity.

The manifesto's four principles are as follows (translated from the Malay by the author):
- Reading materials for all/all types of things may be read
- Mobilised/operated freely, independently and with full autonomy
- Committed to a process of knowledge culture through B.A.C.A[7] (Books, Art, Culture, Activism)
- Celebrating (claiming) public space as a space for the culture of knowledge (*Panduan Berbuku Jalanan*, n.d.)

Included also in the zine are the following recommended readings: *Guerilla Warfare* by Che Guevara, *Hungry for Peace – How you help end poverty and war with Food not Bomb*s, by Keith McHenry, and *Tactical Urbanisn: Short-term Action, Long-term Change, Vol. 2* by Mike Lydon , texts which further proclaim the ideology that informs their activities, (Panduan Buku Jalanan, n.d. , p.5).

The founding Buku Jalanan of Shah Alam (BJSA) is neither an incorporated company nor a registered society and has no formal source of regular funding. In Malaysia, it is not, in fact, common for arts and culture organisations to be registered as nonprofits; and what type of an organisation Buku Jalanan could be, in any case, which would be met with approval by the necessary approving government agency, is unclear. Even amongst the different chapters, there is variation in sense of self and purpose. It is also precisely because of this fluidity, however, that Buku Jalanan is so attractive to would-be members.

Most if not all Buku Jalanan chapters were started by students or recent graduates who returned to their hometowns after university and felt the need for similar activity in their hometowns. Only eight chapters receive external funding, and one, Buku Jalanan Chow Kit has formally registered as a

nonprofit organization and is currently planning to expand their services to become a school for undocumented children, Sekolah Buku Jalanan. All the other chapters run on a wholly voluntary basis and this is something that has been recognised by members as a problem for sustainability. The absence of formal registration furthermore raises questions of governance, leadership, and accountability. Nevertheless, although systems of control may be deemed necessary for best business practice and organisations' compliance required in accordance with country specific legislation, we question here whether this lack of organisational structure also results in an agility which can be advantageous; a lack of structure can, in fact, permit a nimbleness and responsiveness to one's environmental context and any changes that may and inevitably do arise.

That different chapters have different ideas about what they are, or what collective form they take, is less relevant to the members than the working processes that they adopt. With the range in identifications – from a book club to a space for ideas, to a space for community engagement to a cultural movement – all members agreed that there was no need, in fact, to agree on a singular definition or form (*Buku Jalanan – Simposium Buku Jalanan: Sebuah Catatan*, 2017). This is one of the strengths of Buku Jalanan – their flexibility and malleability enough for others to take on and make it their own. They offer a basic philosophy and ideals, and the rest is up to anyone who shares their basic ideology. Some chapters have even renamed themselves, and this is acceptable. One member summed it up thus: "to me, the name Buku Jalanan is just a label. It doesn't matter whether a movement (chapter) does not use the Buku Jalanan name but the strategy is the same to spread knowledge to society" (translation by author) (*Buku Jalanan – Simposium Buku Jalanan: Sebuah Catatan*, 2017, p. 37). Buku Jalanan, therefore, becomes a tool, an approach, a methodology or strategy. It is not a thing in itself –but how does one govern a strategy?

Accepting that Buku Jalanan is an approach, but that each individual chapter has an identifiable form through which it executes its ideology, it is arguable that a framework of management can be applied to offer a semblance of organizational structure. However, arts management as a field of study and practice tends to focus on issues of survival and of sustainability centered on either funding or in organizational management, and the efficient running of arts organisations like businesses. The notion of success is too often viewed through the lens of financial success and efficiency and productivity are given assumptions and natural presuppositions of a business or entrepreneurial framework. The terms 'management' and 'administration' with its connotations of systems and execution of tasks seem far removed from the notion of agency, which implies autonomy and empowerment. Thus, it is questionable whether such systems are compatible with the collective practice of this study. Nevertheless, in an attempt to answer this, four basic functions of management are applied to Buku Jalanan Shah Alam (BJSA): planning, organizing, leading and controlling (Byrnes, 2015; Rosewall,

2014). Incorporated under leading and organizing are questions of staffing and supervising, and we start with this first.

BJSA has a flat, non-hierarchical structure and they do not have a designated leader. Although Zikri Rahman has been more visible than other members of BJSA, both he and the other members interviewed make it clear that this is not a leadership role. This has immediate implications for planning and organizing. According to the members interviewed, Azrie, Fahmi and Asdani, all decisions are made collectively (2017, pers. comm., 27 December). The bulk of their communication is via WhatsApp and they also use social media forms as Facebook and Twitter to complement face to face communications; a majority vote for consensus is practiced to respond to any issue that is put forward. Their manifesto already sets a very open and inclusive platform for participation which requires very little decision making on a daily basis: no themes or parameters are set for books, therefore nothing is rejected; the actual programme is simple and repeated each fortnight, thus there is little need for discussion or that can lead to potential disagreement. Other tasks involve designing posters and flyers, and this, like everything else, is done on a voluntary basis. According to Azrie, Fahmi and Asdani, this was how they successfully operated in the first three years without any issue. The main occasions in which they most often have to exercise collective decision-making is when they engage in activities beyond their core park and reading programme; examples of this include responses to incidents in their community that compel demonstrations of solidarity, or in the taking up of social causes.

While there is no hierarchy, each member is described as having a "niche" and the trio insist that each member is sufficiently self-motivated to do their part. They say that there are rarely occasions where no member is able to deliver and there are always "back-ups" for whoever is not able to deliver. All that is required for each session is a single individual with the necessary commitment. Each has skillsets that they make known and roles they fill. However, these roles are not considered "static" and are also rotated as described by Fahmi:

> We were thinking that we need to push each other with what we do, and try to experience different things so that we understand how to manage ourselves properly…It started ad hoc, but then it became something quite regular. (If) the number of members who are active becomes less, the other people who are not used to the roles that they were used to are able to pick up. They understand the picture of what they are supposed to do (Fahmi, 2017, pers. comm., 27 December).

The members, thus, are operating within a shared understanding dependent on mutual respect and responsibility. There is no hierarchy of supervision, but in effect, they all supervise each other.

Once a year, BJSA organizes a trip outside of their city, a "getaway", where they reflect on what they've been doing and "discuss directions for the next year" (Fahmi, 2017, pers. comm., 27 December). This is when planning occurs and it is at one of these company retreat style trips that their 2014 Manifesto was drafted. From these reflections they also began to see the potential for greater impact though their activities. While the annual getaway results in a goal or objective for the year, perhaps a series of themes of issues of importance, the day-to-day operations is still loose and organic. Things may be suggested as and when they arise and the group members respond accordingly.

From this, we can see that BJSA conforms in some ways to the workings of a more conventional organization. There is planning and decision-making, executed at a collective level. There are roles that are defined yet flexible. What they lack in terms of systems for control they seem to compensate with trust and faith in their fellow members. To examine this more deeply is beyond the scope of this paper, and necessitates approaches that draws more on the social sciences and humanities than of business and management. However, there are also regional scenarios that offer some basis of comparison.

Indonesia, with its vibrant grassroots organisations and artist collectives offers a valuable and culturally familiar point of reference. Nuraini Juliastuti, a scholar and herself a co-founder of the Jogjakarta-based collective KUNCI, outlines the characteristics of what she describes as "alternative spaces" in Indonesia: youth initiated, often in multi-purpose spaces, utilizing electronic media for communications, and marked by a flexibility in the activities they run as well as operationally. She further stresses an openness to networks:

> with their inherent non-formal character, a particular activity of an alternative space is building collaboration with another space not necessarily working in the same field….The strength of alternative spaces to form a new cultural movement lies in the combination of the capability to build a network with other creative spaces, and their potential to form cultural communities (Juliastuti, 2008).

In a dialogue with Ade Darmawan, Director of Ruangrupa, a Jakarta-based visual arts collective founded in 2000, the two compare notes on collective and horizontal organization in Indonesia and on art infrastructure models that differ from that in the West (Juliastuti, 2012). Ade describes alternative spaces as a type of response to the context in Indonesia where the state has failed or neglected to produce adequate support for the arts.

> I prefer to look at the works of (artist initiated) spaces as 'contextual responses'. Performing a series of experiments in their local environments, they develop an applicable model to respond to local needs. Such contextual responses, occurring in different places and sometimes short-lived, develop into local survival strategies. In the absence of formal art

infrastructure, they work to improve the local system. They attempt an ideal system, even if that is only an illusion (cited in Juliastuti, 2012, p.121).

There is an emphasis on process in the work of Ruangrupa, and the term "social practice" is used to describe the collaborative nature of their projects, not just within the members of the collective but with other partners and the community beyond. Networks are defined as being a precondition: "it is like the idea of building a friendship. It is organic, spontaneous and open. Often, building a network also means a political act" (cited in Juliastuti, 2012, p.124).

It must be noted here, that the actual function of management is never explicitly talked about. The members of the collectives perform various tasks and may perform specific roles that may be fixed or changing, and this is a normal function of their organization with a recognized "tension between structure and non-structure in organisations", organisations that are deliberately horizontal in structure and practice ("Curating Organisations Without Form", 2015). Crucial also to the conversation of collectives in Indonesia is the concept of friendship (Budhyarto, 2016; Samboh, 2016), which also figures prominently in the foundation of BJSA. The founding members were well acquainted with each other prior to their coming together to form BJSA, and it seems their friendship is a vital though easily overlooked factor in what binds them together and steers their productivity in the absence of formal structures. These intimate relationships, based on shared values and experiences, and navigated within personal and not professional boundaries stands in marked contrast to the contractual relationships based on formal transactions that are the norm in conventional organisations.

Buku Jalanan shares several features with their Indonesian counterparts: flexibility; an openness to networks and the leveraging of these networks to achieve their goals; and a specific response to a specific need in their local environment. This response is a fluid and adaptable one, and it appears that BJSA has evolved in response to the needs of members and of the community in which they have a presence. In inquiring into the groups longevity and what was presently in their future, the responses turned inevitably to a discussion on sustainability.

The sustainability conundrum

Between 2013-2015 the members of BJSA rented a physical space together with another collective and ran their activities from this new location. Now, in 2018, they are exploring ideas to again attempt a more structured 'home' for BJSA. The members interviewed described their current state as being on a "down", after their rapid ascent in 2013, followed by a period of relative stability which they view more or less as a plateau, and they are now facing a potential decline (Fahmi, 2017, pers. comm., 27 December).

To obtain this new space, a physical 'home' for BJSA, their first step is to come up with a financial strategy to make this possible. As is typical for the group, there is no clearly defined way to go about this. It is a goal to work towards in whatever way each member works. Despite acknowledging that it is a resource heavy undertaking, Asdani explains the rationale and need:

> (Perhaps) we don't need to have a space. We can have our events anywhere. But for the long term, I don't think (going without a space is) sustainable. Because it involves a lot of effort and…we don't want everything to be so random, so ad hoc. Because you can say now that maybe you can have a workshop once or twice a month, but how long can you (continue like this). If you have a space we can really organize ourselves, have a proper space, have proper events and have people really committed to the group. (Asdani, 2017, pers. comm., 27 December)

The members speak with conviction. They feel a need to make greater and more sustained contributions and believe that a physical space enables this. They see the place that they would set up as another step in the counter-narrative of public space and hope to see how their 'private' space can be truly more 'public'. By recognizing the increased privatization of public space and how what is conventionally thought of as public spaces are never truly public, they are able to reconcile their move to a physical and fixed location and continue an intellectual engagement with these concepts of power. What emerges here is not so much an issue of public space reclamation but the vital creation of common space: "common space as a property that is fundamental to a community's existence as a body" and that fulfills the need for citizens to engage in common space in order to fully realize their fullest potential as cultural beings (Kusumawijaya, 2014). Buku Jalanan is significant for its ability to offer such a common space, whether it be an open public park with its spatial boundaries redefined and politicized through temporary claiming, or a bricks and mortar, walled enclosure, that allows them to experiment with ideas of private and public.

Conceptually this may be resolved, but the cold, hard reality of financing a space remains to be addressed. The members of BJSA are currently exploring co-operative models in search of a viable business structure that would enable them to retain their independence and autonomy as a private entity not beholden to funders, while neither being a fully commercial venture, free from what they view as a potentially corrupting influence of money. One member, Azrie, has recently ventured into a business selling screen printed tee-shirts and apparel by local independent labels, and they are considering the feasibility of such creative enterprises. As is the trend with youth spaces, it is likely that the hybrid space they envision will be one the incorporates youth culture of DIY make culture, music, fashion and café culture (Juliastuti, 2008).

Seeking funding in the form of grants or sponsorships is not an option for Buku Jalanan both in practicality as well as ideologically. However, it is necessary to consider what the lack of receptive support structures means for groups that do not possess a defined organizational structure therefore setting them outside most systems of support, and whom engage in acts of subversion, regardless how subtle; and when culture is not offered for consumption but is instead a matter of *participation*. Such a scenario is increasingly less of a rarity, and it is proposed that increasingly hybrid spaces will become the norm versus the exception. Charles Esche, referring to the Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art in Sweden, proposes a new way of thinking about arts organisations:

> Now, the term 'art' might be starting to describe that space in society for experimentation, questioning and discovery that religion, science and philosophy have occupied sporadically in former times. It has become an active space rather than one of passive observation. Therefore, the institutions to foster it have to be part community centre, part laboratory and part academy, with less need for the established showroom function. They must also be political in a direct way, thinking through the consequences of our extreme free market policies (Esche, 2004).

We can begin to recognize some of this in an organisation like Buku Jalanan: a space for experimentation, for discourse, for active participation and community, and a direct expression of political and social ideology and practice.

Buku Jalanan: what next?

While in Indonesia the movement of alternative spaces occurred in the post New Order era of the late 1980s, it seems in Malaysia this is a movement that is currently picking up momentum in a 21st century incarnation, and particularly in the form of library/reading room alternative spaces. In addition to Buku Jalanan, independent 'library' spaces have been emerging in recent years in the greater Kuala Lumpur area, as well as in other parts of the country. The Rumah Atap library and collective which hosts discussion events, and the Malaysia Design Archive which started as an online archive of design and has evolved into a physical reading room and discussion space as well as archive of visual culture, are both residents in the Zhongshan Building in Kuala Lumpur, a community of independent arts, culture and design initiatives that also includes an independent publisher. In other parts of Kuala Lumpur are Booku, an architect-initiated library and book space; and the Little Giraffe Book Club in Cheras that focuses on activities for young children. The newly set up Ruang Kongsi (literally Shared Space) in George Town, Penang, aims to be a community library as well as "a centre for social transformative knowledge and holistic learning with community courses on philosophy, social studies, human rights, democracy, and practical skills", as described on their crowd-funding start-up webpage (mystartr | Ruang Kongsi).

Buku Jalanan is both part of a youth movement and is also a movement in itself. Like their cohorts above, they are cultural agents who are activating new spaces for imagination, new possibilities and values. They are neither a non-profit nor a for-profit, and their lack of a clear mission or organizational structure enables a sense of fluidity and freedom to choose to be whatever the members collectively want Buku Jalanan to be. Though concerned about matters of sustainability, their perspective of sustainability is in sustaining their energy and commitment to run their activities first, and only then on that of financial sustainability. The question of viewing themselves as staff of an organization is not even part of the discussion. Their autonomy and independence are not just for the organization but for each individual within it. The friendship amongst members is an extremely strong binding factor, one which is not untypical for collectives. They are not answerable to a board or any kind of supervisory committee, but are accountable to each other, and their communities will also hold them accountable; the clearest measure of their worth is in whether anybody seeks to engage with them through their activities.

The challenge is in maintaining this freedom, both ideologically and operationally, while bound to a physical space and the technical requirements in running it, or, to use a term by Buku Jalanan, in activating it. Charles Esche (2004) uses the term "political imagination forum" which captures the possibilities of the kind of spaces that groups like Buku Jalanan aim to be, but also outlines the conditions needed: "Creating possibility is not a fixed point of view but a slippery and changeable condition made of spatial, temporal and relational elements. In other words, for possibility to emerge there needs to be a site, a moment and a group of people" (para. 5).

Whether they go by the term of activists, activators, or cultural agents; or are viewed as a contextual response, a methodology, or a social practice, Buku Jalanan is a response to a specific felt need, at a specific moment in time. Buku Jalanan and collective cultural agents like them, as both process and an entity, offer possibilities for reimagining new relationships and structures for the organization or activation of cultural activities for social impact. Their flat, horizontal organizational structure depends on networks of support and bonds of friendship, while social relevance and their social relationships are both motivations and rewards. The workings of cultural agency and socially engaged arts do not fit into standard fields of study, and this chapter puts forth an argument for further context-specific and inter-disciplinary research to identify and propose new frameworks for better understanding work of this nature. In the meantime, the activists and activators of Buku Jalanan will continue to act as free agents in their communities, and in the imagining of new realms of possibility.

Endnotes

[1] *Buku* is the Bahasa word for 'book'; *jalanan* is a noun for streets or a network of streets, from the root word *jalan* which can mean road or street. But *jalanan* can also mean 'street' as in 'street artist' with its rebellious connotations. An English translation fails to convey this effectively, therefore we maintain the Bahasa name throughout.

[2] UiTM was first founded as a training centre in 1956 around the time Malaya was moving towards independence from the British. It was founded on nation building goals through indigenous and accessible education, and it offers low tuition rates for *bumiputera* students (ethnic Malay and indigenous youth). In 1967 it became the MARA Institute of Technology (ITM) and by the late 1990s transitioned into a university recognized by the Ministry of Education. Its name was changed to the MARA University of Technology/Universiti Teknologi MARA, with an 'i' retained in its acronym UiTM as a signifier of its history and to distinguish it from UTM, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, one of the oldest engineering colleges in the country. Today it is the largest public university in the country and the Shah Alam campus is its main and original campus, with over 21 state satellite campuses across the country, and over 500 academic programmes on offer.

[3] The Community Engaged Art Network Asia is an informal network of practictioners initiated by myself and independent researcher and founder of art education organization Arts-ED, Janet Pillai, in 2015. In 2017 with funding from the Krishen Jit Astro Fund, we ran two workshops to connect further with practitioners and facilitate knowledge sharing as a community of practice. A brief funders report summarizes the activities, of which Zikri and other members of Buku Jalanan was a part, and an article on the first workshop by Mark Teh (2017) is available at http://ceaasia.wixsite.com/home/malaysia

[4] As is the convention of Malay names, all individuals will be named in full and henceforth referred to by their given names.

[5] The translations are by the author. An alternative translation of the word *penggerak* would be mover, the root word *gerak* being move, and there is a correlation with Buku Jalanan being described as a movement (*gerakan*) by the members themselves as well as in this paper. However, the word 'activator' is preferred in this context as in English it captures more accurately the essence of someone who makes things happen

[6] All of the examples mentioned here are projects and activities that the author has learned of through contact with the founding or coordinating members of the initiatives. More information on Jatiwangi can be found through their social media accounts, as well as http://jatiwangiartfactory.tumblr.com/are. They are also discussed in Mitha Budhyarto's article "Hospitality, Friendship, and an Emancipatory Politics", *Seismopolite: Journal of Art and Politic*s, December 2015. For information about D Jung, see the report of the CEA Regional Exchange Meeting & Roundtables 2016 at http://ceaasia.wixsite.com/home/malaysia. Information on the Cambodian festival is only available in Khmer but can be seen on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/bonnphum

[7] The acronym spells out the Bahasa word for 'read' – *baca*

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