





Documentation of *Hunger, Inc.*, 2015

About Food and its Political, Social, Ecological and Economic Implications

by Anna Goetz

The Indonesian artist Elia Nurvita examines political, economic, and social structures. She investigates how they have developed over time, in what way their transformations are reflected in society and how this determines the everyday life of the individual. Her central subject of investigation is the thematic complex of nutrition – what we eat, where the food comes from, how it is produced, distributed, and prepared – and the associated political, social, ecological, and economic implications.

One of her key projects is *Hunger, Inc.* (initiated in 2015), which the artist has been re-staging in various contexts and different exhibitions. Moreover, *Hunger, Inc.* was nominated for the Visible Award 2017. It was originally developed on the occasion of the Jogja Biennale *Hacking Conflicts – Indonesia meets Nigeria* in 2015, which addressed the conflicts, chaotic conditions, and ideological discordance, which form part of instable democratic systems such as those in Nigeria and Indonesia. The installation and the associated actions have subsequently been set up and programmed, in a slightly altered form, within the framework of the exhibition

Installation view of *Hunger, Inc.*, 2016

Simmer: The Politics of Food (2016) at the Kunstraum LLC in New York, as well as *Recipro(vo)cation* (2016) at the National Gallery of Indonesia in Jakarta.

For the exhibition, Nurvita developed a spatial structure that was both, an autonomous artistic installation, and an improvised space and platform for various actions and scenarios. The basic structure was given through a tent, inspired by the temporary architectures as erected by non-government organisations in order to establish and provide short-term structures which are lacking in given social contexts, such as stations for food distribution or healthcare. The tent was made of simple cotton tarpaulins stretched over a basic wooden frame and an attached eye-catching print-logo. This was composed of eight red, open hands, arranged counter clockwise in a circle to form a sun wheel, and the inscription *HUNGER INC.* The tent was equipped with a makeshift communal kitchen, a large dining table, and a flat screen, that broadcast news programmes reporting on current riots which were a reaction to the inferior quality rice distributed to the needy within state food rations.

In Indonesia rice is a state-recognised basic foodstuff and in the 1980s was enshrined as a basic right of every individual. This basic right and the associated socio-political implications as an instrument of power for



Documentation of *Hunger, Inc.*, 2015

the personal enrichment of individual people has been abused to this day. Thus, state subsidised distribution programmes for low income households, for example, are permeated by corrupt structures. All too frequently, the result is the unequal distribution and the issuing of inferior quality rice leading to conflicts and uprisings among the population. The logo of *Hunger, Inc.* parodies of the logo of the Indonesian government bureau of logistic that is in charge for the state subsidised distribution programmes.

In the course of the biennial in 2015 Nurvista initiated various events and a happening in the temporary architecture. She invited a chef to prepare gourmet dishes with the inferior rice from the state subsidised programmes and organised film screenings about the re-use of discarded food, as well as discussion rounds,

which addressed the political and social implications of food as a commodity. Furthermore, with information events for people living in the neighbourhood who are considered socially deprived by the government, she parodied a presentation format, which is frequently used by NGOs in schools and which seems to demonstrate 'good intentions' of an empowerment mission in order to obtain international funding rather than being effective. Although these formats may be rooted in a good cause, I believe, they nevertheless affirm an assumed superiority and sophistication of the teachers compared to the taught, a practice prevalent under colonialism.

In addition to the programme of events, Nurvista also initiated a happening, which referenced the riots reported about in the news broadcasts that were shown on the screen in the tent. This television, which projected the

conflict-laden reality of everyday life in Indonesia into the staged artistic environment of the exhibition space in real time, formed an important connecting element: by means of the indirect intrusion of real events into the symbolic space of art, awareness was generated for the disparity and distance between the two worlds.

For the happening, Nurvista included the local population, who wage this struggle on a daily basis and were the subject of the news reports at the time. She invited members of the local community to the biennial in order to re-enact the protest actions and chants, which they were employing to express their demands. This resulted in a surreal doubling, as the conflicts, which were present outside the institutional art space, now entered the symbolic space of the tent in the exhibition space directly, whereas the television had still simu-

lated a distance and implicit un-involvement for the viewer. Through the physical repetition of the protest against social ills, Nurvista shattered the imaginary bell jar, which protects the claimed symbolic nature of the space of art – the anger and the rebellion, as well as the demands, were real. This interpenetration questioned an established allocation of roles between the ‘performer’ and the ‘viewer’ within the framework of the happening. At the same time, it challenged the societal power structure between those who loudly condemn the social divide by which they are disadvantaged, and those who profit from that same system, perhaps actively shape it, or merely dispassionately ‘observe’ it. Nurvista created a situation, which places the symbolic constructed nature of the art space under pressure, triggering a self-critical engagement amongst viewers with respect to their own position.

Documentation of *Hunger, Inc.*, 2016



The design of the installation *Hunger, Inc.* is reminiscent of those temporary architectures that replace makeshift structures lacking in a given context. In this sense, *Hunger, Inc.* provides a discursive space on the basis of rice's production and distribution structures, and its overriding political and social implications. A microsystem is created within which the societal conditions outside of this installation space is reflected and questioned. Within the confrontation, the happening gripped the 'visitors' as well as the 'performers' participating in the exhibition.

According to the artist¹ this experience can offer a form of catharsis, and to this end, establish a reference to the *Theatre of the Oppressed* founded by Augusto Boal². In the 1960s Boal rediscovered the artistic performance form *Invisible Theatre* as practiced by communist theatre groups in the 1920s and 1930s. The *Theatre of the Oppressed* is performed in public spaces where pedestrians become members of the audience, without knowing that the situation is staged, assuming it to be real. The actions thus developed into subversive instruments of political education, serving to address mechanisms, which determine society but are ignored or covered-up in daily life. As playful, aesthetic, and theatrical encounters between people, they function as social and communicative resources that are neglected in everyday life.

Nurvista's work is subversive to the extent that it questions existing social orders and mechanisms and challenges the relationship between a real and a staged situation. However, in contrast to the *Invisible Theatre*, she does not embed a provocative, staged situation in the everyday context of the 'spectator'. Instead she allows the 're-enactment' of current societal affairs within the artistic context by those affected, and not by unrelated actors as in the case of the *Invisible Theatre*. This generates an alternative forum for discourse that is lacking in everyday life.

In *Hunger, Inc.*, the roles of 'spectator' and 'actor' as well as 'real' and 'constructed' sphere are superimposed. In *Rerasan Jaman (Pondering the Spirit of an Epoch)* (2015), however, which the artist developed in collaboration with researcher and activist Lisistrata Lusandiana and facilitator for community Savytri Puspitasari within the framework of the long-term project *Made in Commons*, organised by the KUNCI Cultural Studies Center in Yogyakarta, these roles were clearly determined. In reaction to the increasing privatisation of services, goods, and public spaces currently witnessed in Yogyakarta, *Made in Commons* KUNCI invited artists to draft hypothetical alternative models in which the access to resources and their distribution is a basic right. The programme encompassed a large number of different formats: in addition to an exhibition, several workshops and lectures were organised and public happenings and interventions were carried out, in order to challenge various utopian models.

Nurvista's project *Rerasan Jaman* was based on the board game Monopoly, which the artist altered in accordance with the social and economic situations and the subsequent spatial distribution in Yogyakarta. Furthermore, she defined a basic tenet of the game that the players could modify its principles in joint negotiation processes and mutual agreement. Usually, the general idea of the board game Monopoly is "all against all"; it is won by that player who has accumulated the greatest wealth through individual purchases and the subsequent renting of properties, which includes privatised electricity and hydropower plant as well as railways stations. However, in the artist's altered version, the player who accumulated the greatest capital through the most strategically skilful negotiation of forms of cooperation was the winner.

Thus, in Nurvista's project the tenet was discussing and acting out alternative models for the distribution of public space and land as well as their collective administration. As an installation, Nurvista's version of

1 www.elianurvista.com/Hunger-Inc

2 Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, New York 1958



Documentation of Monopoly Games, *Rerasan Jaman*, made in Commons Exhibition, 2015

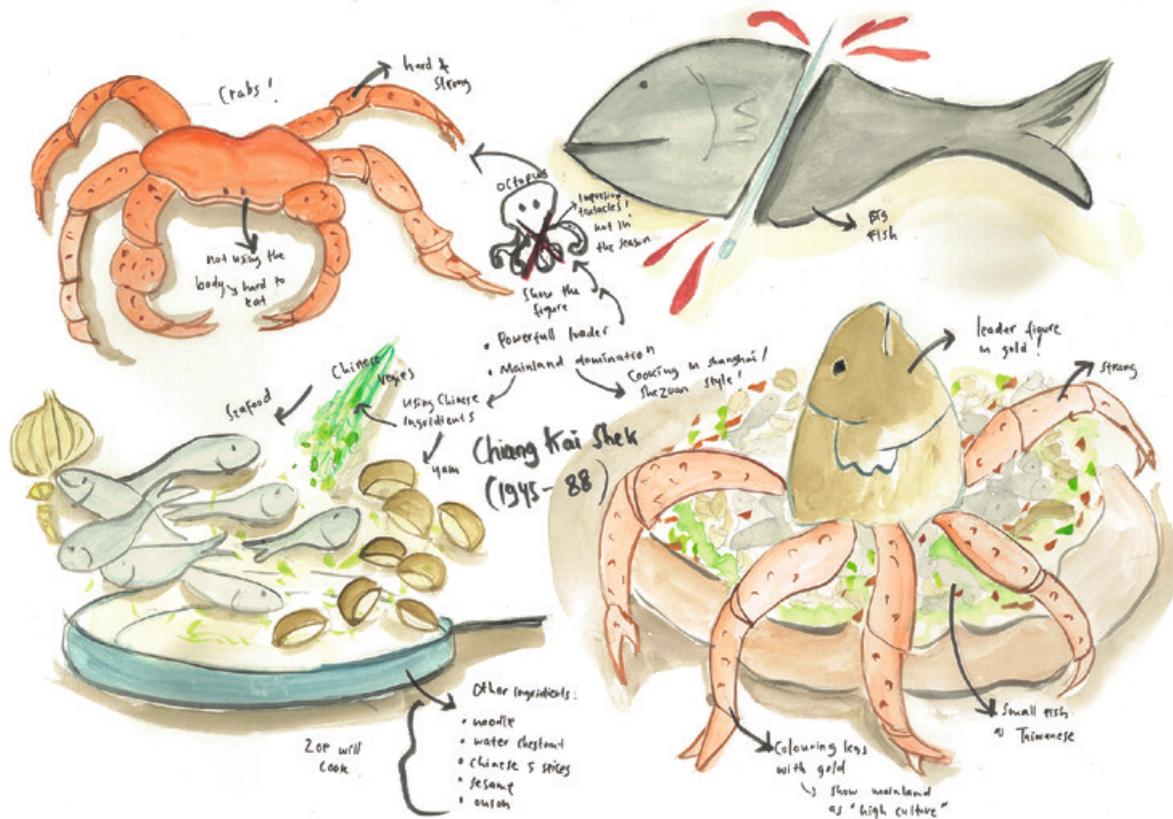


Documentation of *Rerasan Jaman*, Made in Commons Exhibition, 2015





Mural of Possibility of Inauthentic Recipes, 2016



Drawing of *Feast on the Evolution of Taiwan*, 2014

Monopoly was part of the exhibition in the Jogja National Museum in Yogyakarta: the board game on a table in the centre of the installation was designed to invite visitors to engage in a game with each other. The rules were listed on the walls and a zine, which addressed the different forms of cooperation with respect to the allocation of land, as well as legal aspects of the theme of the access to, distribution, and administration of urban space was provided. In addition to the installation, the artist also organised tournaments – both inside the museum, as well as outside in public squares or parks in different districts of the city. Each round brought together players from different social and economic contexts and enabled them to engage in debate.

In *Hunger, Inc.*, it was Nurvista's aim to raise awareness for social inequality as a topic that affects everyone and at the same time to reflect on the associated mechanisms. The exhibition visitor was no longer an impartial 'spectator' but also a member of society and called upon to enter into dialog. In *Rerasan Jaman*, however, the artist utilised the symbolic quality of the art context in order to investigate alternative models for the current social order.

In addition to those works described above which reflect current societal circumstances and strive to produce changes in contemporary socio-political structures and relations, the artist has produced other works, which

address the complex entanglements that have formed cultural identities over centuries. These projects were preceded by extensive research of the genesis of a culture that were under her examination.

Within the framework of a residency at the Taipei Artist Village, she developed the project *Feast on the Evolution of Taiwan* (2014). Here she grappled with the country's turbulent colonial past and how it had influenced the population's identitarian self-understanding. Parts of Taiwan were under the rule of the Dutch East India Company for a period during the 17th century, which used the island state as both a staging post for its trade with Japan and China as well as a means to control Spain's and Portugal's trade and colonial activities in East Asia. Later, Taiwan functioned sporadically both as an autonomous country and a vassal state of the Chinese mainland until it came under Japanese rule from the middle of the 19th century. Following the capitulation of Japan in World War II, the allies returned the island state to China, until Taiwan declared its independence in 1949. However, with respect to international law, Taiwan's status remains disputed to this day. The country is fighting for its status as an independent state in the face of the One China policy of the People's Republic of China and is only recognised as an independent state by a few countries.

The different influences from the Netherlands, Japan and the People's Republic of China have left a strong mark on Taiwan's culture at different levels. Not only their values and laws were introduced, but also foreign flora and ingredients of nutrition. Specific regional customs regarding preparation methods shaped Taiwanese culture at many levels.

Within the context of her research for *Feast on the Evolution of Taiwan*, Nurvista analysed the ingredients, composition and preparation of Taiwanese dishes and meals with respect to their different influences: how



Documentation of *Feast on the Evolution of Taiwan*, 2014 (above) and *Possibility of Inauthentic Recipes*, 2016 (below)

these were absorbed and changed within the country's culinary culture over time. In conclusion, she organised a series of dinners to which among laypersons she invited several experts from different professions, who all engage with the topic of food and nutrition from different perspectives: chefs, nutritionists, historians and artists. The individual meals served during these dinners provided the foundation for a multi-layered debate on the social, political, ecological, and economic entanglements of traditional Taiwanese ingredients and the preparation methods employed.

Whereas *Feast on the Evolution of Taiwan* traced and reflected on the complex implications of the different

cultural influences, which have shaped Taiwanese food, the project *Possibility of Inauthentic Recipes* (2016) focused on those dishes, which individual nations and ethnic groups claim to be their tradition and a 'typical' cultural asset.

Possibility of Inauthentic Recipes was developed with in numerous project phases: after the introductory research, Nurvista held cooking workshops. Together with the participants, she attempted to prepare meals that were as authentic and 'pure in origin' as possible, and therefore not shaped by 'foreign' influences. The results of this experiment were presented and served to visitors within the framework of an exhibition. On the walls, she had sketched in chalk large map-like examples of the global migration routes of different ingredients, meals and dishes took across continents and this way, she graphically illustrated their global migration and different influences. The "appetizers" presented alongside were labelled *evicted*, *no origin*, *displaced*, or *stateless*, and respectively pointed to the impossibility of preparing a 'genuine' dish.

The fourth project phase took place outside the exhibition space at the regional market and aimed to bring together a diverse group of participants for cooking workshops. Here the key questions of Nurvista's *Possibility of Inauthentic Recipes* were discussed at a further level. The participants cooked traditional recipes which have developed over many decades and which, as a result of migration movements or changing political systems, have been shaped by different cultures. In turn, they were considered part of a specific cultural background and often prepared by ethnic groups which have been cast out from their ancestral cultural circle. Banh Flan was prepared, a so-called French-Vietnamese dessert that originates from the time of the French occupation of Vietnam and, further, a special fish curry, which is traditionally cooked by Rohingya people to celebrate the end of Ramadan. Paradigmatically, these

dishes served as examples that certain customs enforce cultural assimilation, and, moreover, often deny the history of their own cultural evolution. Ethnic groups and their ancestral customs are cast out from their origins, from their history and cultural understanding. Currently, the worldwide growth of a nationalist and protectionist mind-set can be observed as well as the pursuit of a pure, distinct "mother culture".

Nurvista examines how such cultural-historical developments are manifested in customs of food, as dishes and preparation methods always derive from multi-layered contexts and have accompanied individuals or entire populations on their routes of migration throughout the centuries. Every new context adds to their development and interprets them differently. The assumption of 'authentic' dishes as an outcome of one single culture is claimed false. The inherent logic of this mind-set would also deny that 'culture' as such is already determined by the interaction of different influences and contexts, and is always subject to continual change. The idea that a dish or a meal belongs to one single culture can be attributed to the human obsession with exclusive intellectual property.

As it has been shown, for Nurvista the thematic complex of nutrition exemplifies aesthetic, sociological, ecological, and economic implications. The artist's approach reveals an understanding of culture that is determined by what Édouard Glissant characterised as *Globality*³. The cultural theorist used the term to describe a world determined by diversity and relations that flourish in rhizomatic structures, as opposed to extending from linear roots like a genealogical tree.⁴

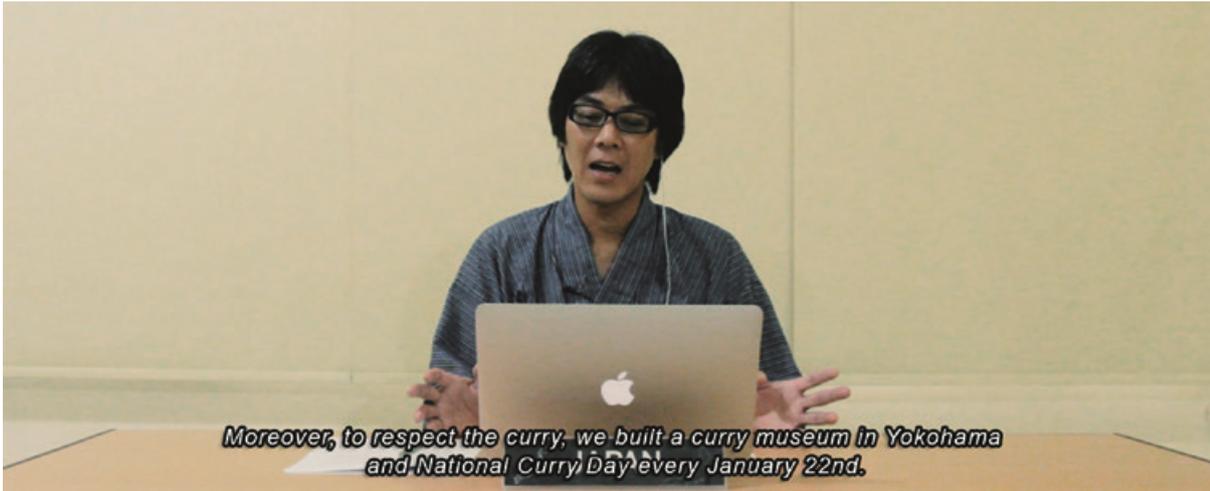
A key feature in Nurvista's work is the manufacture of temporary situations in forms of microsystems, whose

3 Édouard Glissant, *Kultur und Identität. Ansätze zu einer Poetik der Vielheit*, Heidelberg 2005

4 Dieter Wenk, "Synthese als Surprise-Party", October 16, 2005, www.textem.de/index.php?id=827, last accessed November 28, 2018



Possibility of Inauthentic Recipes #2, exhibition view, 2018





Stills from *Safeguarding the Curry Burger*, 2018



Workshop of *Table Beyond Borders*, 2018

structure and functionality reflect the social context they are rooted in and opening it up for examination. In a playful way, societal relations are re-enacted in order to analyse, reflect on, and renegotiate their chaotic, complex genesis and systematics.

These happenings, environments and events set-up by Nurvista follow the tradition of “participatory art”, whose forerunners can be identified in the European and Latin American avant-garde of the 1960s, and which has enjoyed a renaissance since the 1990s. Here, Claire Bishop makes a clear distinction between participative and interactive works. Interactive art is characterised by a one-to-one relationship between the viewer and a structure provided by the artist. Distinctively, participative art focuses on the involvement of the exhibition visitors: They become co-producers and accordingly are both artistic medium and material.⁵

Nurvista’s set-ups and spatial installations are adjacent to Nicolas Bourriaud’s concept of *Relational Aesthetics*⁶. Those works of art that display such a relational aesthetic no longer present a finished event. Instead, they design ‘forms of the future’ provoking events and triggering certain forms of behaviour among the viewers or visitors. As civilians⁷ with individual experiences and accumulated knowledge they enter a space of interaction, which, despite its initiation by an artist, is shaped by all participants equally.

In distinction to Nurvista, the works that can be subsumed under a relational aesthetics are primarily concerned with rededicating the conditions of the exhibition space and the artistic framework. The aim is to create a site of social interaction and consumption as



Installation view of *Possibility of Inauthentic recipes #2*, 2018

a means to highlighting the essential symptoms of the consumer and information society. The works of Nurvista, however, gain complexity on a different level as she enlists co-producers to debate social structures and mechanisms within this symbolic space of art. However, both forms share a strong political dimension which is manifested in the displacement of social patterns and functionalities – within a space which is operating according to different rules and, to all intents and purposes, displays heterotopic features.

5 Claire Bishop, *Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London 2012, pp. 2–4

6 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. Paris 2002

7 Tom Finkelpearl, “Participatory Art”, in: Michael Kelly, *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Oxford 2014, http://arts.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Participatory_Art-Finkelpearl-Encyclopedia_Aesthetics.pdf, last accessed: November 28, 2018