



## **Flipchart, Pebble and Pro-test sign**

*Material matters in the social art practice of the ruru huis*

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[preface]

My graduation project as a scenographer in 1996 - designing set and costumes for the opera *Die Zauberflöte* – already revealed my fascination for social issues: status, cultural capital, integration, and gender. I tried to address these issues in my interpretation by turning the opera into Grand Guignol, a traditionally puppet theatre. Later, in my professional career as a scenographer I gravitated towards different kinds of community theater, which - until quite recent - was frowned upon by the 'serious' theater world. But I have always felt that the transgressive and empowering forces of live performance are the most active in places with a different social structure than an art space, places with a need for play and space for intent interaction and communication. Not only the artistic product, but also the users (or participants) of this product and the relationship between the two interest me. Where exactly is art taking place and what is the impact of an artistic action in society? Stephen Wright (2013) in *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* asks: “Could it be that art is no longer (or perhaps never was) a minority practice, but rather something practiced by a majority, appearing with varying coefficients in different contexts? ... What is the coefficient of art, of such and such a gesture, object or practice?” (p.13). These are questions that interest me, that I would like to read about, think about, research.

The above text is written two years ago, as part of my motivation letter to enter the Pre-master program Arts, Culture and Society here at the Erasmus University. It explains exactly what I set out to do and why. And it also shows that the topic of this research has been my interest for a long time. In a way I feel that I have been studying my whole life. A very impulsive and intuitive way of studying. Ephemeral knowledge has seeped into my body by seeing, feeling, interpreting and acting in a wide variety of situations. I worked in the theater for eight years, initiated and ran an experimental performance platform and a performance collective, worked as a programmer, editor, producer, performer and cook.

Therefore I feel that this paper is made by both a rookie scientist and a more experienced artist. It seemed strange to have all the work done by the rookie scientist and completely dismiss the knowledge of the artist. At times I felt so constrained by the scientific tools of for instance coding programs, that I needed to use more ‘familiar’ tools like physical cutting and pasting of images and text. The book by John Law (2009) inspired me to not fully ignore this other, more inventive part of me, but incorporate it in my method. I therefore thank my supervisor Dr. Thomas Franssen, not only for being a great advisor but also for introducing this book to me. I also thank him for rattling at my brain and introducing me to the lovely world of STS. And of course I need to thank the person who has been rattling at my brain for the last twenty one years and who is not only the most important actor in my life, but also a significant one in this paper.

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## 1. Introduction

“Let’s make friends, not art” (Farid, member of ruangrupa, 2016)

Nowadays many art practices are based on engaged encounters between artists and a participative audience (Bishop, 2012; De Bruyne & Gielen, 2011; Kester, 2004; Lind, 2009). In this 'social art practice' or 'dialogical art', artists are searching for new ways to engage with society. Instead of producing art objects, they produce relationships between different social actors. As the production of autonomous art object has become less essential in these process-driven practices, it seems relevant to understand what possible other objects are taking their place as vessels of communication. In his book *Conversation Pieces*, Grant Kester (2004) signals that a more dialogic art asks for a shift in our perception of what constitutes art, moving away from the visual and sensory towards “discursive exchange and negotiation” (p. 12). This focus on intersubjective action implies that objects and materials have become less important in a social art practice. On the other hand, it is also signalled that there is indeed a material and visual production in a social art practice that is in need of analysis in order to understand how they provide both a social and artistic experience (Bishop, 2012, Kester, 2004).

This research is based on propositions from the socio-material turn in the sociology of art. Developments in Science and Technology Studies have sparked a growing interest in ascribing agency to material objects (Latour, 2005; Law, 2002; De Laet & Mol, 2000; Rubio, 2016; Thévenot, 2002). Objects facilitate, instigate, inspire, and obstruct dialogue. Thus, when dialogue is a core activity in the social art practice, it makes sense to investigate objects as one of the actors in that dialogue. By focussing on the associations between human actors (artists, participants, visitors) and non-human actors (material, objects, space) I aim to discover what sorts of agency material objects hold in this social art practice. My research question is therefore: How do materials and objects act as agents in a social art practice? To be more precise: what kind of objects and materials are present in an art practice that is based on dialogical interaction? How do these objects and materials associate themselves with human actors like artists and participants? And finally: how do different valuations of agency inform this network between actors?

I have chosen the *ruru huis* (in italics) in Arnhem as a case study. The *ruru huis* is a temporary space established by the Indonesian artist collective ruangrupa as part of their curatorship of the exhibition *SONSBEEK 2016: transACTION* in Arnhem, the Netherlands. Ruangrupa is strongly connected to the Indonesian culture in which community, collectivity and friendship are central (Juliastuti, 2012). For ruangrupa, contemporary art is always about inclusivity and making connections between individuals and groups. Both *ruru huis* and ruangrupa are purposely written without capitals, to de-emphasise a certain status that art can have in society. I consider the *ruru huis* a good example of a social art space, because this space serves as a meeting point for anyone who wants to share stories that are topical and relevant for – in this case - the citizens of Arnhem. In the *ruru huis* temporary, communal networks (in the Latourian sense of the word) are established, acted out and collapsing again.

This paper aims to show how some objects or materials are pivotal for a social art practice such as the *ruru huis*, because of their ability to perform and sometimes transform in different ways. I will zoom in on some of the material actors that play a role in constituting the *ruru huis* as a social art practice, like for instance a flip chart, a pro-test sign and a clay pebble. By analysing how their material properties influence communication, I intend to show how these objects are constitutive for an art practice that differs from the one that aims to produce autonomous artworks. Taking the assumption that social art is 'immaterial' (Kester, 2004) as a departure point I aim to demonstrate that objects and materials actually constitute the interface through which communication and interaction are performed and temporary communities (Möntmann, 2009) emerge.

## 2. Theory

Since its foundation in 2001, the Jakarta-based artist collective ruangrupa uses the context of social gatherings to enhance sharing information and create another meaning of social and economic transaction. For instance, by organising markets and initiating open air cinema's, they "deliberately interfuse shared artistic practices with communal experiences of culture, society, politics and everyday life" (Berghuis, 2011, p. 403).

This approach positions them in the field of a social art practice. This label can be regarded as an umbrella term for a post-studio artist practice that explicitly evolves around audience participation and collaboration. Other terms that are used are: "socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, interventionist art, participatory art, collaborative art, contextual art and (most recently) social practice" (Bishop, 2006, 179). In this paper I will use this last term, as it the most broadly defined term and it is not the aim of this paper to fence of a certain area in this practice.

This chapter has two goals and two main theoretical narratives. The first goal is to contextualise ruangrupa's practice within a certain art field, and the second is to explain why I have chosen a socio-material approach to understand this practice. To reach both goals, I will start with a general overview of how the social art practice came into being and how these developments connect to different forms of collaboration and changed the agency of the spectator. Then I will shortly explore the consequences of collaboration for the use of space and materials by connecting this use to the notion of hospitality. In the second part of this theoretical chapter I will focus on the main ideas within socio-material theory such as Actor Network Theory (ANT) and the rationale behind my choice to take this approach as my main perspective.

### 2.1 The Social (re)turn in Contemporary art

#### 2.1.1 Collaborative practices: from spectatorship to participation

Since the 1990s there has been an observable emergence of socially engaged, collaborative art practices in the contemporary art world (Bishop, 2006; 2012; Bourriaud, 2002; De Bruyne & Gielen, 2011; Kester, 2004; Lind, 2009). The fact that it hands over much of its agency to the participant or community involved, challenges the traditional idea of spectatorship and

encourages a new perception of an art form without audiences, where everybody is potentially a producer (Bishop, 2006).

One of the first major texts that addressed this shift was the book 'Relational Aesthetics' by Nicolas Bourriaud (2002). Although Bourriaud acknowledges that all art is relational to varying degrees, he explains that these art works specifically aim to establish intersubjective encounters, a process through which meaning and content emerges from a collective effort. Instead of an arrangement of artefacts in a space to be walked through, the artwork is presented as a period of time to be lived through, "like an opening to unlimited discussion" (p. 15). In other words: the artist creates certain conditions in which individuals or communities are given the facilities to produce a collective experience together, rather than presenting a symbolic object in a white cube that is consumed individually in a privatised mental space. Bourriaud (2002) positions this development in contemporary art in a broader cultural shift: on the one hand it reflects the change from a goods to a service-based economy while on the other hand it is a result of the birth of a global urban culture: "the constricted living in urban dwellings resulted in a scaling down of furniture and objects and has led to a bigger emphasis on manoeuvrability and dialogue" (p. 15).

The book by Bourriaud is valued by Claire Bishop (2006) as a major first step in identifying this development in contemporary art. Bishop acknowledges that the book fuelled the discourse on relational and dialogic projects, making them 'salonfähig' for the contemporary art scene. But although Bourriaud addresses the problems of conventional modes of artistic production as a way to respond to globalisation and the shift from a goods to a service-based economy, the author is also critiqued for the way he conceptualizes the relation between relational art and the capitalist system. Martin (2007) for instance, argues that the text of Bourriaud (2002) can be read as "... [a] manifesto for a new political art confronting the service economies of informational capitalism – an art of the multitude. But it can also be read as a naive mimesis or aestheticisation of novel forms of capitalist exploitation" (pp. 371). This view is supported by Bishop (2006), who is critical about the fact that most relational art projects that Bourriaud discussed happened in the context of a museum, gallery or biennial. Instead of moving these social interactions into the real world, Bishop argues that the institutional white cube was merely 'reconceptualised' into a workshop or laboratory. She describes the newly opened Palais de Tokyo, of which Bourriaud was one of the co-directors at the time: "Instead of clean white walls, discreetly installed lighting, and wooden floors, the interior was left bare and unfinished" (p. 51). Although it seems that the

space is designed to create events rather than hang art on walls, the participant is still a visitor in the more or less institutionalised world of the artist. This critical discourse on 'relational art' spawned multiple texts and a firm discourse on how artists are 'returning to the social' (Bishop, 2012, p. 3). As a consequence, it has moved from the periphery to a more central place in the contemporary art world and has become a genre on its own. As Bishop already points out by using the term 're-turn', the turn towards participatory art practice is not a recent invention, but has its roots in several historical antecedents dealing with the dichotomy of art-life: the Dadaist Cabaret Voltaire, Joseph Beuys' idea of the social sculpture, Allan Kaprow's 'Happenings' and Lygia Clark's Tropicália movement (Thompson, 2012, p. 8).

In his book *Conversation Pieces*, Grant Kester (2004) explores this origin in more detail. Although the scope of this paper is too limited to fully explore these origins, Kester's main argument is based on the idea that participatory art emerged from two contrasting paradigms of artistic production. The first paradigm stems from a variant of the traditional avant-garde and is based on what he calls the 'orthopaedic' relationship to an audience (p. xvi). By 'orthopaedic' he means that the uninformed viewer is guided by the artist into a more reflexive and critical awareness of the world. This specific variant of the avant-garde paradigm is rooted in the modernist view that the emergence of mass culture has a numbing effect on audiences (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1948). To counter this effect, it has become the responsibility of artists to evoke a more critical awareness with the viewer by offering them an experience of mental provocation or even disruption (Kester, 2004). Bishop (2012) in turn mentions two types of avant-garde when she contextualises the social turn: 1) the historic avant-garde in the Europe of the 1920's, and 2) the so-called 'neo' avant-garde in the 1960's, with its epicentre in the US. Both of these time-frames are connected with strong "political upheaval and activities for social change" (p. 3). The idea of the avant-garde paradigm as provoking and educating audiences is more thoroughly addressed by Hal Foster (1996) in his book *Return to the Real*. Here Foster refers to both the historical and the neo avant-garde ideology as social phenomena precisely because of their sometimes antisocial or alienating strategies.

The second model that informs the contemporary social turn in art is that of Community Art (Kester, 2004). In this praxis the artist uses art as a creative tool to empower (often marginal) communities. For instance, Augusto Boal (2006) was a key figure in empowering the working class in Latin America by developing new forms of participatory theatre. During the 1980's and 1990's he completely reconfigured the role of the audience by arguing that spectators should be



seen as 'spect-actors', and he provided them with the agency to actually take over the roles of actors in the play. Whereas the avant-garde uses alienating tactics to shock an audience into something new, community art - like that of Boal - seeks to bridge the gap between artistic representation and real life by identifying and dismantling this alienation: "The spect-actors, by acting out their ideas, train for "real life" action" (Bishop, 2012, p. 124). In other words, the audience is given a voice to communicate what is important to them, instead of being told what is important. Because the spect-actor is acting as herself, necessity of artistic skill is not required. There are many more examples and varieties of community art, but the main similarity is that – although some artist involved might disagree - oftentimes aesthetic quality is less relevant or at the least subservient to its social-political, instrumental goals (Bishop, 2012, p. xvii). This is one of the reasons why the community art paradigm has long been marginalized and looked down upon in the art world.

Kester (2004) argues that in recent times artists have felt the need to move beyond the limitations of both paradigms and have been looking to combine artistic autonomy (rooted in the avant-garde) with audience agency (rooted in community art). The following paragraphs will show how the (partial) break down of artistic autonomy gave room for new models of collaboration and allowed for major changes in the agency of the spectator.

### *2.1.2 Collaborative practices: Five models of participation*

Collaboration is that space of interconnection between art and non-art, art and other disciplines, that continually tests the social boundaries of where, how, with what, and with whom *art might be made*. (Roberts & Wright, 2004, p. 532).

A contemporary social art practice such as the *ruru huis* in Arnhem aims for and depends on collaboration and participation of an active audience. As we have seen, the two art paradigms mentioned above (avant-garde art and community art) both relate to audience participation and collaboration in very different ways.

It has become clear for scholars from different disciplines that - independent of the level of authorship of the artist – artistic creation indeed relies on a fundamental co-production between audience and artist (Becker, 1984; Rancière, 2009; Hennion, 1995). For instance, Rancière's notion of *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009) coincides with Hennion's (1995) idea of

mediation: the user (audience) is as much part of constructing an artistic space as the producer (artist). Hennion uses mediation as key concept to integrate the sociological analyses concerning the conditions in which art is produced with the often separated analyses of the aesthetic or semiotic aspects of an artwork. Kester (2008) argues that collaboration is in fact responsible for the deconstruction of what he refers to as the 'ego-imperialism' of autonomous, artistic identity (p. 60). Although the concept of the artist as a singular, creative genius has been the epistemological fundament throughout much of modern art history (see White and White, 1984, for its nascency), it is definitely challenged in recent times because of the third paradigm of collaboration (Lind, 2009; Wright, 2004).

The first model of collaboration in the art world that I want to address is what Kester (2008) calls the 'technical collaboration' (p. 60). This refers to the collaboration between an artist and other people in the field like printmakers, carpenters and curators. Howard Becker (1984) has made a major contribution to the sociology of art by addressing this fact in his book *Art Worlds*, in which he shows that a work of art is indeed always formed by a collaboration of many individuals, and artists indeed dependent on many other efforts by other people. Maria Lind (2009) adds a feminist perspective to this kind of collaboration when she remarks that especially "many male artists [...] have been able to rely on more or less invisible support from surrounding women" (p. 53).

Although this sociological perspective has pierced the myth of the artist as individual genius, in a technical collaboration the artist is still largely 'autonomous' and largely in control of the artistic product. However, this autonomy shifts when collaboration with other people who are not artists become part of the artwork. Lind (2009) explores in great detail how different kinds of collaboration in the art field have distributed artistic agency. She draws on Kravagna who has distinguished four models of artistic collaboration (p. 59/60):

1. *Working with others*: Artists use their audiences to address socio-political issues often in a more cynical way. The artist often still visualises these issues in an aestheticized way.
2. *Interactive art*: Audiences influence the work by reacting on it, but the underlying structure made by the artist stays intact.
3. *Participatory practice*: Producer (artist) and receiver (participant) are not the same, but the latter is the focal point and the result of the collaboration should in some way

benefit the participant.

4. *Collective action*: A group of people (artists and non-artists) initiate and carry out a concept together, either in or outside an art institute.

These different models show that in all four models the artist is relying on the occurrence of the active audience/participant who is part of the artistic process, although agency in the project varies and is not always evenly distributed between the two.

### 2.1.3 Collaborative practices: from participation to usership

As a more radical development of the last model, art critic Stephen Wright (2013) argues that people have started to approach art in another way than the classic position of spectator or even participant. Because of the opportunities created by the user generated content of the 2.0 culture they have become *users*. Although for experts or owners the word *use* in art is often related to *abuse*, 'usership' as Wright describes in his essay "Toward a Lexicon of Usership" (2013), is neither revolutionary or submissive, but rather practical, direct and self-regulating. To illustrate the dynamics of usership, Wright uses the example of Wittgenstein's user-based theory of meaning from his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953): 'Wittgenstein argues that in language, all the meaning that there is, and all the stability, is determined by the users of that language, and by nothing else. [...] It changes, but no one user can effect change; we are, at best, co-authors in the language game of usership' (p. 67).

All these different models are specifically of interest for this paper because the concepts of usership, mediation and co-production are very much related to how *ruangrupa* wants the *ruru huis* to function: as a place to be used by people of Arnhem on their own terms. The goal of *ruru huis* is indeed to create an open space that is accessible for all and facilitate the emergence of networks between possible stakeholders, be it neighbours, artists, students or local entrepreneurs. There is no fixed or preconceived idea what these networks can be or how they can be meaningful for either the expo *SONSBEEK 16: transACTION* or the participants. Through instant (improvised) programming in the space, the organisers presume that content can be generated in a horizontal way. Issues or topics that concern people in the direct neighbourhood can materialise into projects or programs. You could say that they are not only asked to participate, but actually be 'producers' (Bruns, 2007) of the space.

This whole mechanism of usership without preconceived ideas about possible outcomes, is strongly connected to the notion of *nongkrong*. In this very Indonesian tradition people sit together in a social setting and chit-chat about topics that naturally emerge (Nilan, 2014; vanhoe, forthcoming). They exchange stories in an informal way, and conversely build a network of shared meanings and mutual understanding. Because nobody has a stronger voice in steering the conversations in a certain direction, pressing topics or focus points that concern all emerge naturally from the conversations. These can then become real projects, or, if nobody jumps into action, they either remain latent possibilities for future action, or leave the conversation. This is an ongoing process.

Finally, the social art practice such as the *ruru huis* is largely constructed around making the space inclusive by facilitating collective action and usership. In my view this aim for inclusion is in turn related to the notion of hospitality. If hospitality is largely established, mediated and experienced by means of material objects (Lynch et. al.,2011), how can this materiality then support and constitute 'usership'?

#### *2.1.4 Facilitating usership: Hospitable spaces*

In 1994 a small pleasure boat hosted a company of politicians, journalists, sex-workers and activists during a three hour cruise on a lake in Zurich (Kester, 2004). The Austrian artist collective WochenKlausur organised this event as part of a project addressing drug policy. During the trip the participants were able to shed their professional role and subsequent position as representatives, and instead were talking, listening, and sharing collective knowledge as individuals: "In the ritualistic context of an art event, with their statements insulated from direct media scrutiny, they were able to communicate outside the rhetorical demands of their official status" (Kester, 2013, p. 2).

What struck me in this example and in many other texts about the social art practice, is the fact that most writers focus on the content and process of inter-subjective exchange, and do not address the role of spaces and objects. In this case the boat seemed to have played a crucial role in achieving this horizontal dialogue. Although most scholars agree that many if not all participatory projects use physical objects, forms, or constructed spaces (like the boat of WochenKlausur) as a matrix for interaction, there has been little attention towards *how* these non-human agents facilitate the dialogical situation.

In his informative book *Spatial Aesthetics*, cultural theorist Nikos Papastergiadis (2010)

makes the helpful distinction between the word for place in which events occur (topos) and the method in which they occur (tropos). Papastergiadis claims that they are both linked to collaborative action:

To collaborate with people, to receive them and work with them, is to be attentive to this engagement between topos and tropos. Collaboration is a way of receiving others, involving both the recognition of where they are coming from, and the projection of a new horizon line towards the combined practice will head. (Papastergiadis, 2010, p. 106).

Architect Jane Rendell (2006) points out that because of the move away from the institutional realm of the museum and gallery, the relationship between art and space has become more and more significant. Often these spaces – contrary to museums and galleries - are chosen by artists themselves as an important part of their material context, as in the example of WochenKlausur. In other words, artists are more and more concerned with constructing the material dimensions of a collaboration themselves.

Following from what is discussed above, it seems therefore crucial for artists to be sensitive to the agency of materials in order to create surroundings that allows for active usership and collaborative practice. In the next part of this chapter I will apply a socio-material perspective to go more into detail about how material agency functions and how it affects interaction. |

## **2.2 The Material turn in the Sociology of art**

### *2.2.1 A socio-material perspective*

For a long time the human component has been the main focus of sociologists in understanding the production of art (Hennion & Grenier, 2000). Sociology of art has been occupied by how the artwork is constituted through social interaction, busting the myth of the genius (as in the work of the aforementioned Becker, 1984) and thereby focussing on human intermediaries. Hennion and Grenier describe the theory of belief as central to this critical approach. In this theory of belief, which has been kept in place by theorists like Durkheim and Bourdieu, our values and feelings - even the most seemingly intimate like aesthetic taste and emotions – are assumed to be produced by institutions and collective mechanisms (see Bourdieu, 1983). Subsequently the art object is treated as only a medium for creating our social identity and thus reduced to a set of

tokens or signs. Moreover, art objects are not valued as effective by themselves, since they are seen as “nothing but the materialisation of our self-production of ‘ourselves’ as a collective entity” (Hennion and Grenier, 2000, p. 3).

In the last decades however there has been an increasing interest within the social sciences for the importance of artefacts and material schemes, and many theorists have explored how objects function as agents or social actors (Appadurai, 1988; Latour, 2005; Law, 2009; Mukerji, 2015; Rubio, 2012; Thévenot, 2002; Yaneva, 2003). This socio-material approach concerns itself with the question “how material forces affect the conduct of everyday life, discusses how and when nonhumans have agency, and explores the methodological value of studying materiality for illuminating under-examined forms of social life” (Mukerji, 2015). Sara Malou Strandvad (2011) for example empirically explored from a sociology of arts perspective the material process of constructing an artwork. By analysing the development of several Danish film projects from idea to execution, Strandvad found that objects and the artistic practices in which they are engaged are often mutually constitutive.

### *2.2.2 Actor-Network Theory (ANT)*

An important influence in this socio-material turn are the ideas behind the Actor-Network Theory. According to Bruno Latour (2005), one of the proponents of this approach, it should not be seen and applied as a theory, but rather as a tool to understand temporary and instant moments of ‘associations’ between both human and non-human agents.

Latour therefore argues for a redefinition of the word ‘social’. Within sociology, two understandings of ‘the social’ are commonly used: the first is the local, face-to-face interaction that people have with each other. The second is the ‘force’ that makes those local interactions sustainable (p. 65). He proposes to do away with the second, as it cannot practically account for the way durable social ties are achieved: “To jump from the recognition of interactions to the existence of a social force is ... an inference that does not follow from the premise”(p. 65). What he means is that recognizing that there are face-to-face interactions which we call social, does not in any way assume the existence of another kind of abstract, invisible social force that explains why these interactions occur. Instead, Latour prefers to speak of the social as made up of ‘associations’ (p. 64) that can be traced without having to rely on an invisible (structuralist) force that we as researchers cannot see. Within ANT, social ties are seen as movements, as modifications between ‘actors’ that are not necessarily human, but can also be objects, or

spaces.

Now what is exactly the nature of this network of associations? In order to understand these associations that create the network, we first have to delineate who and what takes part in the action (Latour, 2005). Although Durkheim (1982) argues that 'things' have no motivating power, he does mention that for instance their speed or direction (think of a steam train) affects social transformation. Latour (2005) on the other hand claims that distinguishing between material and social entities seems like a reasonable approach until we realise that "...any human course of action might weave together in a matter of minutes, for instance, a shouted order to lay a brick, the chemical connection of cement with water, the force of a pulley unto a rope with a movement of the hand, the strike of a match to light a cigarette offered by a co-worker" (p. 75). In other words, it is impossible to understand this network of collective interactions (collective as in all different types of actors working together) when you leave out some of the entities because they are non-human. If we want to understand social ties we have to acknowledge the fact that the continuity of these ties almost never involves only human-to-human associations, and neither object-object connections, but that the action oscillates between both human and non-human actors and together they create a sustainable network over space and time.

The 'actant' is the key element of actor-network theory. The actant can be a collective like a group or organisation. But it can also be an animal, an object, (i.e., tools, shoes, furniture), a text or symbol, and even a mental concept (i.e., a feeling, memory, dream). In other words, the actant can be anything as long as it is recognised as influencing the action: "... any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor—or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant" (Latour, 2005, p. 71). Wendy Griswold (2013) explains why object can indeed also be actors: "These non-human actors create opportunities and problems, and the ways in which other actors in the network address them produce new ways of understanding and organising the world" (p.347).

According to Latour it is precisely these non-social means that expand the 'life' of human interactions. In other words: if our 'social' world consisted solely of local, human interactions it would stay very ephemeral and chaotic, and would never have the ability to create more durable relationships. To illustrate this, Latour compares our social interactions to that of a very closely related species: the baboon. The research done by Shirley Strum in the 1970s is one of Latour's sources of inspiration for ANT. In this research Strum shows how baboons construct their social life and reveals the incredible effort it takes to maintain an ever crumbling social structure

without the use of objects. Precisely because they have 'no thing' (p. 70) they are being 'nice' to each other as a social strategy: social skill and social reciprocity like grooming appears vital to barter or leverage over other baboons (p.69). For Latour this fact makes the next step to understanding the role of objects more intelligible: objects and materials (things) are important actors in sustaining and making *durable* the power structures that make up our society.

Of course this does not mean that material actors are always the instigators of the action, but they might indeed "... authorise, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on" (p. 72). Here Latour refers to the idea of 'affordance', a concept introduced by James G. Gibson in 1986. Affordance captures the multiplicity of possible relations that an actor can evoke with other actors: a chair can allow for resting old bones, but it can also block the way to the toilet, or both of them at the same time. In Gibson's view, affordances are preconditions for activity (Greeno, 1994, p. 340).

Furthermore, Latour (1986) also uses the concept of the immutable mobile. Actors (both human and non-human) can move between places while remaining the same in their material form. This immutability allows for relations to be performed in the same way in a variety of different locations (Hetherington & Law, 2000). For instance, a table is an immutable mobile. It has a clear function that almost everybody knows and understands: it is an object to sit at or place things on. On the other hand, the table can allow for small adjustments. For instance, when it has been used for a long time it can be painted or the legs can be replaced. Despite these small changes it keeps its identity as a table. At the same time, it is mobile because it can travel from a factory to a shop to a home. It stays a table in all these different localities also. Therefore, a table is an immutable mobile.

The concept of the immutable mobile is further explored by Law and Mol (2001) who introduce the variation of the *mutable mobile*. As Law and Mol argue: when an object becomes mutable and mobile because it can function as different object in more than one network configuration at the same time, we can start to think of it as a 'fluid' object. In the empirical research done by De Laet and Mol (2000), the Zimbabwe Bushpump is the lead actor performing this fluidity. They explain the Pump's fluidity by the fact that its borders are not sharply defined: "The Pump is a mechanical object, it is a hydraulic system, but it is also a device installed by the community, a health promoter and a nation-building apparatus. It has each of these identities - and each comes with its own different boundaries" (p. 252). In other words, it is an object that 'flows' (p. 6) between different network configurations. Another aspect is that its success is not a



binary matter. For instance: the Bushpump can be successful in providing water, but not in proving health (because the well is infected). Or it can give water to individuals, but fails to be an actor in connecting larger communities. In other words, the success or failure depends on valuation in different realms, for example political, ethical and aesthetic. You might have started to wonder how the concept of the mutable mobile relates to the topic of this research. In my opinion the fluidity of the Bushpump has many similarities to another object from the practice of ruangrupa.

In 2015 ruangrupa initiated an open air cinema project in which they donated a mobile cinema cart to several communities in remote areas in Indonesia. This 'Gerobak Bioskop' provided the technical means and content to screen alternative media on critical issues. Furthermore, it encouraged locals to produce their own video's in order to address local issues and screen them in a town gathering.

The screening device is collaboratively made by artists, designers and IT technicians in such a way that the community itself can finish the design according to their own local aesthetics. The Gerobak's (carts) will be donated to the community and regularly monitored to make sure there can be regular screenings. A workshop is included so that the community can produce their own program. (Afisina, 2015).

This way the Gerobak Bioskop created a mobile, critical space to watch film or video collectively in places that lack access to other than mainstream information. Ruangrupa also did not use their own aesthetics to decorate the Gerobak, but left it bare in such a way that the locals could paint it themselves. I would argue that this makes the Gerobak a great example of a mutable mobile that is fluid and an actor in multiple networks of meaning.

Finally, De Laet and Mol even speak of fluid people and they argue that "in order to shape, reshape and implement fluid technologies, a specific kind of people is required: non-modern subjects, willing to serve and observe, able to listen, not seeking control, but rather daring to give themselves over to circumstances" (p. 252/253). In my view this concept of fluidity is interesting because it seems that it is exactly this fluidity that is pursued by many artists in the social art practice: to be able to move through different networks, sometimes mutating from artist to gardener, social worker or scientist, while also keeping their position in the network as an artist. This is a delicate balance, because – as De Laet and Mol argue - if they mutate too

quick, the artist ceases to exist and the social art practice becomes something else (politics, welfare, hobby). It is important in this context to realise that the valuation of both the artist and the material as plays an important part in the way they are being actors in a network. For that reason I will shortly address the significance of valuation in the following paragraph.

### 2.2.3 Valuation theory

Now we have established that objects are important agents in sustaining and making durable social associations, we can make a last step to how valuation of these agents are part of the nature of these associations. Recently a more pragmatic approach to value and evaluating has grown more important in cultural sociology (Franssen, 2015). Moving away from the primarily relational approach of Bourdieu, who mainly focusses on how cultural objects are valued by the process of consecration, this line of research argues for “a more situational and material approach to value and evaluation” (p.67). Valuation theory is therefore very much connected to ANT in the sense that “Objects and people are jointly involved in the evaluations needed for coordination. Both have moral qualities, and each varies in value” (Thévenot, 2002, p.5). In other words, various values inform the way actors act within a network. Parallel to the statement of Hennion and Grenier (2000) earlier, value is not simply seen as the result of a shared belief system, but it is the outcome of a complex range of activities connected to both material and conceptual production (Helgesson & Muniesa, 2013). If the goal of the *ruru huis* is to provide a space for people to form temporary, horizontal communities through collaboration and shared narratives, we need to understand how values are negotiated in order to reach this ‘commonality’.

Thévenot (2002) stresses that these valuations are not fixed, but there are “a number of different modes of legitimate evaluation (p.7). First, each mode of evaluation has a different configuration in the effort of reaching commonality. The research on tomatoes by Heuts and Mol (2013) serves as a good example here, as it reveals that there is no such thing as ‘the perfect tomato’. Each context (commonality) where the tomato is an actor – a greengrocer, a sandwich shop, a tomato farmer – has another hierarchy in values (firm vs. juicy, red vs. green). Another example from an even more relevant social art perspective is given by Mandy de Wilde (2014). She observed that sometimes art spaces compete with initiatives from the neighbourhood in the advantage of the first because they are more valued by the government as being more effective, while in reality “the transformative potential of celebrating culture appears to be less influential

in the creation of a warm communality” (p.144). As pragmatic theorists, the aim of Boltanski and Thévenot has not been to “contextualise and localise collective claims” (Thévenot, 2002, p.4), but taking a more processual, post-structuralist approach. Their focus lies on the “operations needed to move towards commonality” (p.4). In other words, in accordance to what Latour (2007) argues, commonality is not something fixed (as in social groups or communities), but it is time and time again reconfigured through shared networks of value. That is why Thévenot argues it is important to realise that all evaluations are temporary and critical assessment of *worth should therefore happen in “a realist encounter with the world”* (p. 8), involving tangible things.

Although little empirical research has been done in the field of the social art practice from a socio-material perspective, we can find some case studies that can serve as examples or inspiration for this paper. For instance, Rubio & Silva (2013) investigated “the temporal and spatial trajectories of artworks in the field of contemporary art” (p. 163). By looking at the deteriorating process of for example the artwork *Floor Cake* by Claes Oldenburg, they found that the material properties of artworks actively influence the way the art field is organised. Albena Yaneva (2003) also employed an anthropological approach in her concern with the mediatory role of art objects (p. 171). By directing her attention to “tiny, infra-small differences among objects in an installation that allow the aesthetic mediation to happen” (p.171), she uncovers the interdependence between artist and material. Still, most of these inquiries concern a visual art practice with objects that are clearly defined as art. Bishop (2012) recognises the fact that within the social art practice there is indeed a material and visual production that is in need of a new way of inquiry:

The point is not to regard these anti-aesthetic visual phenomena (reading areas, self-published newspapers, parades, demonstrations, ubiquitous plywood platforms, endless photographs of people) as objects of a new formalism, but to analyse how these contribute to and reinforce the social and artistic experience being generated. (Bishop, 2012, p. 8)

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 A Qualitative research approach

As this explorative research revolves around how people engage with objects and materiality, an ethnographic approach seems appropriate. As a preparation for this research I have spend two days in the ruru huis to find out what methodology would work best to get access to the information I was looking for. During the observation I immediately noticed that it was not desirable to sit in a corner and write down what I was observing. Mainly because the aim of the ruru huis is to invoke interaction and, it felt somewhat awkward to position myself outside of the social framework and not interact with the people present. So I decided that observing from a participant/observer perspective would be most fitting to the research question. This is confirmed by Bishop (2012), who argues that in order to understand a processual art practice, one also has to immerse herself in it:

Very few observers are in a position to take such an overview of long-term participatory projects: students and researchers are usually reliant on accounts provided by the artist, the curator, a handful of assistants, and if they are lucky, maybe some of the participants. Many of the contemporary case studies in this book were gleaned through hit-and-miss field trips, which led me to understand that all of this work demands more on-site time commitment than I was habitually used to as a critic of installation art, performance and exhibitions. (Bishop, 2012, p. 6).

Similarly, the ANT approach also seems to be intrinsically qualitative as it is “a model that weaves together threads of material semiotics, ethnomethodology, and situational analysis” (Cerulo, 2009, p. 534) to reach an understanding about the *what*, and does not specifically aim for answering the *why*. Therefore, the data gathering is strongly rooted in ethnomethodology and will be analysed using the method of interaction analysis. The term ethnomethodology was first coined by Garfinkel (1967) and aimed for “the use of mundane knowledge and reasoning procedures by ordinary members of society” (Heritage, 2014, p. 4). Interaction analysis therefore specifically aims at finding information in the details of social interactions and in the everyday interactions between members of certain communities (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). Instead of collecting data as a result of a pure cognitive activity (e.g., protocol or survey interview data)

interaction research is a method used for empirically investigating the interaction of individual beings both between each other and with material objects in their environment. It sees artefacts and technologies as a social field and it is the goal of interaction analysis to recognise and identify the recurring or irregular way in which people “use the resources of the complex social and material world of actors and objects within which they operate” (p. 41).

When a research is centred around understanding a contemporary phenomenon - like in this case a social art practice - and the circumstances around this phenomenon are not clearly manifest, often a case study is used as empirical inquiry (Yin, 2013). Complex social events often contain “many variables of interest, multiple sources of evidence and different theoretical propositions to guide the collection and analysis of data” (p. 1). Oscillating between data and theory, this inductive method allowed for the emergence of new concepts, which is why this paper can be regarded as an explorative research.

### **3.2 Case study: the *ruru huis***

I have chosen the ruru-huis project in Arnhem as a case study and site of empirical exploration. The ruru-huis is a space in Arnhem initiated by ruangrupa, an Indonesian art collective from Jakarta. They have been chosen to curate the latest edition of the SONSBEK expo in 2016. Ruangrupa usually creates projects that emerge from and are embedded in their immediate surroundings, be it in Indonesia or in other places in the world. They invest time and other resources to connect to the location where the project takes place, and have developed different strategies to accomplish this (Juliastuti, 2012).

As a run-up of the exhibition in 2016, ruangrupa have created a 'living room' in an empty shop in the centre of Arnhem: *ruru huis*. This space serves as a meeting point for anyone who has ideas, comments, proposals or is otherwise interested in participating. As discussed earlier in this paper, the mechanism of facilitating usership without preconceived ideas about possible outcomes, is strongly connected to the notion of the Indonesian concept of 'nongkrong' (Nilan, 2014).

The ruru-huis is used as a case study because of several reasons: first of all it has a clear physical space. Although some activities take place outside the huis, most of the interaction takes place inside this particular space (former shop). Secondly, the ruru-huis is not only open during events, but doors are open for everybody three days a week: it is meant to be a living room, a userspace. Third, it is a temporary project specifically aimed at creating networks and interaction

and challenges the local community to actively shape its content. Because the project runs from September 2015 until August 2016 it allows for the emergence of various configurations between many different actors. The main members who run the space during this timeframe are: ruangrupa, reinaart vanhoe, Sanne Oorthuizen, Sanne de Vries and Marije Tangelder. Finally, I know the ruangrupa collective personally, and therefore it is much easier to naturally blend into the project and talk to people. Of course this also means that I have to be aware of certain preconceptions of the method of ruangrupa and try to be as objective as possible.

### **3.3 Data collection, Operationalisation and Analysis**

In the process of data collection and operationalisation I took the following steps:

*Step 1: Gathering data (phase 1):* I started by observing for 5 days. As a participant-observer in the *ruru huis*, I made notes, talked to people, took pictures and recorded both audio and video material. I was often part of the workshops and therefore I could gain a better understanding of how materials were used and how they felt. Lofland and Lofland (1999) explain that taking field notes is the best technique to log your data when you engage in participant observation: “For the most part, field notes are a running description of events, people, things heard and overheard, conversations among people, conversations with people” (p. 7). According to them taking field notes can be divided in three distinct steps: 1) *mental notes*: “The act of directing your mind to remember things at a later point” (p. 4), 2) Because the mind very easily forgets, you need to provisionally preserve them by jotting them down when nobody watches: “*jotted notes* are all the little phrases, quotes, key words, and the like that you put down during the observation and at inconspicuous moments” (p. 4), and 3) *Full field notes*: a running log of all your earlier jotted down notes. This log should be made as soon as possible at the end of the day or immediately after a shorter observation period. Indeed, after each observation I spend time writing out my jotted notes, supported by the audio-visual material. This audio-visual material was then labelled and organised in folders by date and medium.

*Step 2: Analysis (phase 1):* After gathering data in a rather ‘unfocussed’ way, I started to code my field notes and part of the images with the Atlas.ti coding program in a similar widespread way. The codes ranged from ‘ownership’ to ‘memory’ to ‘professionalism’. By arranging these codes into families, I started to discover some patterns regarding the use of objects. As a result, there was already one object that emerged as interesting to follow as ‘actor’ as it seemed to connect to the idea of the mutable mobile and harbour different kinds of agency:

the clay pebble.

*Step 3: Gathering data (phase 2):* Because I sought to discover additional objects or materials which could be 'followed' more in depth, I spend another three days in the *ruru huis* observing. Besides following the clay pebble as one of the actors, I was trying to look for other 'processual', recurring activities as these events allow for a better understanding of how materials transform or behave over time.

*Step 4: Analysis (phase 2).* During the analysing of the data looking for more actors, I found that materiality is sometimes difficult to write about. I noticed that focussing on the analysis of the field notes did not provide enough information to take the next step in selecting more key-objects. So I started to analyse a much larger selection of the visual data (photographs, video) by coding all the objects and materials I encountered in categories of function. (e.g. architecture, decoration, foods & drinks, printer matter, technical equipment etcetera). Going back to reading theory, I also found more concepts that informed the coding, like 'mobility' and 'authorship'. At the end of this analysis I managed to locate a few more actors among the objects: the flipchart, the window and the pro-test sign.

*Step 5: Gathering data (phase 3).* In the third phase of observing I followed the chosen objects for another four days more intensely. By scrutinising these objects on site and observing how both artists and participants interacted with them, more concrete knowledge emerged on their specific agency in the artistic production process.

*Step 6: Analysis (phase 3).* In the final analysing step I found that coding the fieldnotes and images in Atlas.ti did not work for me anymore. So I first started writing the stories of the objects. To support the writing I searched for a way to visualise the network between the different actors in order to really understand their associations and agency. However, Atlas.ti did not provide enough room to work with my data the way I wanted. Inspired by John Law's book 'After Method' (2005), I decided I would actually take his notion of "method assemblage" (p. 22) literal. So I selected and printed the images with relevant actors, cut them out and shoved them around on a paper. By connecting them with concepts like *mutable mobile*, *participation*, *hospitality*, and *fluidity*, I made a visual network analysis with the pebble as main actor (see image 3.1).

*Step 7: Synthesis.* After this point writing the empirical part became more easy. During the writing I kept going back and forth between theory and results, and slowly the concepts became more clearly related to the empirical observations. This iterative process continued throughout

the writing, as new insights came to the fore that needed theoretical support. The notion of different kinds of collaboration and usership only started to become significant in the final stages of the research, followed by recognising the importance of inclusiveness to facilitate this usership. For instance, only after reading Lind (2009) on collaboration I realised that some craft materials used in the *ruru huis* are seen as more 'gendered' than others (embroidery vs. clay) and can thus affect accessibility. At many points during the writing I went back to the visual materials to allow for new insights and support the findings.



image 3.1

### 3.4 Benefits and disadvantages

Many of the observations in the *ruru huis* are still only located in my memory. Being a participant-observer for the first time can be very overwhelming and processing the immense amount of information extremely daunting. There have been moments that I had to retrace objects through vague or badly framed pictures because I did not know at the time that the information was valuable. For instance, when I decided to follow the flip chart, I had to retrace its steps by looking at pictures from observations when I was obviously not occupied with its role in the *ruru huis*.

Finally, a disadvantage that was simultaneously also a benefit was the fact that I am



personally involved with the people that run the *ruru huis*. This made me into a very conspicuous person and often people wanted to talk to me during my observations, which of course made it more difficult. On the other hand it was also easier for me to gain information from participants and artists because I was so close to the organisation. As mentioned earlier, my relationship with ruangrupa also raises the issue of bias. I have tried to avoid being too favourable about the workings in the *ruru huis* by acting as reflexive and critical as possible in my encounters with its patrons.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Material agency

Upon entering the space of the *ruru huis* it is immediately clear for any visitor that cultural ‘things’ happen here. Stepping through the glass door, the first things you see is the windowsill full of flyers, stickers and postcards. On the right wall stands a big vitrine case with innumerable objects inside: a broken cup, a puzzle, a huge dried fungus, a pair of white socks with red dots, multiple drawings, mini sculptures, small notes, gum, handwritten letters, cassette tapes, maps, lp’s and so on (see image 4.1). In the space itself are tables, chairs, couches, flowers in a vase, a carpet, paintings on the wall and an ashtray of the local football club Vitesse. In the kitchen we find cups, glasses, plates, a coffee machine, trays, toilet paper, fruit, a microwave, towels, spoons and soap. Some of these objects, such as the dried fungus, seem traces of past (inter)actions and they make you curious about what happened. Others, like tables and pens, evoke little contemplation because there is nothing special about their presence.



Image 4.1

The *ruru huis* aims to create temporary communities through the activity of sharing stories. My main objective is to show that to allow this dialogue to happen, many objects and materials are asserting their agency. By analysing many different configurations between actors I found different categories in *how* materials and objects function. In the following paragraphs I will therefore first discuss the three different kind of functions that I have distinguished and show their relationship to accessibility. When discussing these three functionalities it is important to stress the categories are not mutually exclusive: often materials and objects have multiple functions. What I want to argue here is that their agency lies in the way their function is perceived and how this function is being negotiated in order to establish interaction. After explaining these different 'realms' of function, I will continue with several empirical cases that will illustrate how the agency of many of the objects and materials in the *ruru huis* also depends on how artistic collaboration is organized. Some artists in the *ruru huis* create the interface for dialogue by evoking what I call a kind a friendly antagonism: using empty, unfinished or inconspicuous material agents to establish relationships (Bishop, 2006).

#### 4.1.1. *Facilitating materials*

Some materials and objects can be seen as a necessity for collective action. Think about floors, walls, doors and windows: they enable you to physically enter a space. Once inside there are many other objects that allow you to stay a certain amount of time such as tables and chairs, heating, food and drinks like coffee and tea, toilet paper, and so on.

When they function properly, they are rarely noticed as agents. This is probably the reason why - although they play a major part in the construction of commonality - these objects are seldom mentioned by an art critic. Nobody ever addresses the fact that the toilet was clean and there were ample amounts of toilet paper available. They are what we can call 'secret agents'. Because, despite they their sometimes inconspicuous appearance, they have indeed agency that often becomes clear not by their presence, but rather by their absence. For instance, Artist Juul would not start her meetings with the Moluccan community before she knew that everyone had helped themselves to coffee or tea, and maybe a cookie: "When we all have our biscuit and a cuppa, we can start" (Als we allemaal ons natje en droogje hebben, kunnen we beginnen). This shows that although often quite mundane in their appearance, these facilitating objects have great agency in the *ruru huis*. Only when suddenly all tables have disappeared, or the window is gone and it is raining inside, this agency becomes more evident. On the other

hand, when an interior has a very pronounced style, this can also affect the way people feel either included or excluded. This is why the *ruru huis* aspires a rather nondescript style when it comes to its interior.

Most of these objects and materials are very much attached to the space and they rarely leave: they are either an inextricable part of the *ruru huis* space (windows, floors, toilet), or selected by the organization (chairs, tables, cups). While many other objects and materials continuously enter or leave the huis (in the pockets of visitors or via the trash bag) these facilitating materials are a stable factor. They create a certain continuity. However, their stability does not mean that they are immutable immobiles. On the contrary, they slowly change throughout time: the table collects pencil traces, the window receives new texts, and the content of the vitrines keeps changing.

#### 4.1.2 Operative materials

Other objects and materials in the *ruru huis* are actively being used, transformed or sometimes even used up. They are the *operative* materials that make it possible for the artist to operationalise and materialise collective action, like for instance scissors, paper, needles, thread and fabric. But also less 'crafty' and more 'dialogic' materials such as flip charts, pens and paper, microphones, projectors, laptops and screens. The agency of this operative agent is also connected to the level of knowledge or experience that a user has with the material. For instance, when someone does not know how to work with a sound system, he or she will probably be less inclined to use it. In other words, the operative materials can be more or less hospitable or user-friendly. Contrary to their facilitating counterparts, it seems that the user feels more agency whether or not to engage with it. For example, when one of the participants in a workshop did not like the fabric brought by the artist, she disregarded it and decided to use her own fabric. Still, the artist of course also has to endorse this choice, but as many activities are indeed using the collaborative or participatory model, the participant is granted much autonomy. This group of materials is often the most 'fluid', as they can transform more easily and change their function in the process: a piece of clay is used for meditation to get people focussed, it is a vessel for storytelling and it can be an art object. In other words, they are actors in different configurations during the process, sometimes they create togetherness, other times confusion.

### 4.1.3 Evidential objects

Finally, in the *ruru huis* you can find many objects that have become tokens, or signifiers of past collective action: flyers, posters, drawings, the words on the window, stickers, notes, video's, photographs and almost everything in the vitrine. Most of these *evidential* objects carry some kind of story connected to activities that took place the *ruru huis* and are thus more symbolic in their agency. They are less 'operative' in the sense that they invite you look and interpret on a more symbolic level. For instance, I found that the vitrine especially attracts people who either visit for the first time or people who are waiting. This also applies for the numerous flyers and booklets that lie around in the space. They are usually only noticed by people who are not participating in a collective activity: visitors looking for information, or people waiting for their appointment with the organising staff. There is a certain ambiguity to these objects and for most people their meaning is unclear. Some objects have little signs but the texts are very vague and often people wonder what they are and why they are there. When I asked one visitor to describe the space to me he says: "[There is] a vitrine with to me very indecipherable objects". Thus the vitrine serves as a kind of cabinet of rarities and its agency lies in evoking questions. This is a strategy that is a recurring theme in the *ruru huis*, as we will see later in the text. In the spirit of hospitality, there is no real selection process happening in the collection of these materials and everything is seen as worthy to keep and welcome to occupy the space.

## 4.2 Follow the actor

The next part of this chapter will be more descriptive, telling the story of several objects that I encountered in the *ruru huis*. Acting in accordance to Latours' motto 'Follow the actor' (2005), I have studied the actions of these specific objects and they will serve as the empirical examples of how 'things' and materiality play (or refuse to play) their part as agents in creating communal, temporary social networks in the Latourian sense of the word.

### 4.2.1 Actor #1: Table

The interior of the *ruru huis* is in a constant flux. Chairs and tables, cups and mugs, handbags and flowers, are persistently being moved through the space. Their movements become particularly diligent when there is an event planned that day. The first objects that start to move are the tables and chairs. They are being rearranged by the artists or organisers in such a way that they serve best the purpose of the event. Sometimes they are all connected to form one big table,

other times they are folded and put into the back of the space in order to create more space.

The interior of the *ruru huis* came together as a result of most pragmatic and some concise choices. Most of the furniture is either bought at the thrift store or found at the Sonsbeek office. Hence it is a mish-mash of clashing aesthetics and indeed not really representing a coherent style. You can argue that this has become a fashion in its own since artist Wim T. Schippers designed a wedding room in the town hall of Amsterdam in the 1980's by combining a rather random array of styles. But as member of the *ruru huis* reinaart explains, they specifically do not want to adhere to any style:

We chose deliberately four tables that we could fold easily, but also don't look like we bought them new, or that they don't look like office tables. So that they are a kind of in-between. We can fold them, but they are not like these beer benches. And they are not such kind of office, or plastic kind of thing. We looked quite hard to find the right thing, that it's like: Oh, hm, these are kind of nice tables, but not designed, not from Ikea— not obviously from these beer tables, or—not too shabby plastic, or something like, yeah. Searching for the right tone. If they are office tables, it's too cold. Or if they are in a retro style, that's a specific style.

This aim for non-descriptiveness creates some confusion in the way the space is perceived and interpreted. When asked about their opinion of the interior, the replies of visitors and participants vary substantially, ranging from 'messy' to 'vibrant', and from 'hermetic' to 'open'. Some find the space inviting and hospitable, while others see it as distant, anarchistic or 'high brow'. Another visitor remarks that she still don't know what the *ruru huis* stands for or what they aim to do ("Ik begrijp nog steeds niet waar ze op uit zijn").

Each time an event takes place, the tables move around the house and are being arranged in different configurations. Sometime they are folded (which is not an easy job because they are quite heavy) and put away in a corner. There is only one moment during my observations that one of the tables becomes more visible in the activities. This is the moment when one of the folded tables does not want to unfold (see image 4.2). Because the two people who are unfolding the table are not succeeding, others people that are present come to their rescue. There is some struggling going on, which also evokes laughter. The table soon complies and some moments later it is standing in upright position, ready to hold items for the 'swap

market’.



*image 4.2*

At another moment, when - after one night of intense drawing and tagging by various graffiti artists - the tables turn out to be full of pencil traces, nobody is distressed. Marije, the assistant patiently scrubs of most of the traces and life in the *ruru huis* continues. Slowly the *ruru huis* becomes covered with these traces. The vitrines gather more and more objects, and there is an accumulation of flyers and posters lying around. In the eyes of some people this affects the *ruru huis* in a negative way: “Because of the mess the space does not seem to be very clean. A tidy space looks much more neat. The artworks don’t really stand out and visitors either don’t see them or are not interested”. When I ask her what artworks she is referring to she points towards the paintings on the wall. Two of them are bought in the thrift store as decoration while another is a painting of the old central station by local amateur painter Gerard. On the one hand this shows that the choice to have all the activities leave their trace in the space, can also have an inverted effect on the hospitality: objects become obscured because of the cluttering of the space. At the same time this also shows that what someone values as an artwork differs between users.

#### *4.3.1 Actor #2: Flipchart*

One of the other objects that modestly shuffles along with the activities in the *ruru huis* is the flip chart. For a long time during my observations I was not very aware of its presence. Perhaps it kept slipping my attention because its appearance is indeed somewhat inconspicuous: dressed as

an office clerk it did not exert its agency in a very visible manner. This flip chart is a device on three sleek, grey-coloured metal legs that can be adjusted in height. All three legs converge like a tripod. Attached to the front two legs is a rectangular metal plate the size of an A1 paper, with a small horizontal ledger to put markers. On the back a third leg provides stability when standing. Attached to the top of the metal plate is a clamp which holds a pad of A1 paper. The pad is clamped in such a way that the individual pieces of paper can be turned over at the top. Each flip then allows for the next empty page to be written on. The flip chart is not very heavy, so it can be moved around the space easily to where you need it. The third leg can be folded so it can stand against the wall or in a corner without taking up much space.

The first time I encounter the flip chart it was standing near to the entrance, a few meters into the *ruru huis*. It had big letters written on its paper sheet: “COME INSIDE the *RURU HUIS* & LEAVE BEHIND YOUR STORY ABOUT Arnhem!” (translated from Dutch, see image 4.3). And in the bottom left corner, in smaller letters: “we are open thursday, friday (saturday) from 13.00 – 18.00 hour”. Taped next to the word Arnhem is a flyer of the *ruru huis*. The writer had forgotten the ‘h’ in Arnhem and there is the word ‘oeps’ in red next to this mistake. There are some highlights made with coloured markers. I see that it is not the first sheet of paper that has been written on because there are some sheets already folded over the top.



image 4.3



The next time I came into the huis, it was standing prominently a few meters into the huis, with its back to the window. It had flipped a few pages and it now had the following text written on it: “What do they think about Sonsbeek as an event.” and “How do they feel about the fact that an Indonesian collective are the curators.” Both questions turned out to be part of a workshop for high school students. They were asked by a member of ruangrupa, Farid, to go into the city and ask people these two questions. After their ‘fieldwork’ the next assignment was “to turn the answers they gathered into art”. The students made two performances in which they incorporated the replies they got from interviewing people. They used many post-its that stuck around in the *ruru huis* for many weeks to come.

On the third day of my observation, the flip chart had not moved. It still carried the message for the students. Because the workshop environment was gone, the words suddenly seemed to be addressed to anyone coming into the huis. Although nothing changed, the fact that the main actors (the students) had left the stage transmuted the message into a more or less open questions to anyone.

On the fifth day I come to the huis, the flip chart is standing near to the entrance, with it back to the wall. Somebody has flipped the former page to a new empty one. It is standing like that for the most part of the day. Although it is a busy day, with several workshops and presentations, nobody is engaging with the object. Then, halfway the day, the flip chart is moved to the centre of the room. reinaart has taken a marker from its ledger and is now starting to write down some words. He explains to the visitors and artists that he is assembling words to make a dictionary. Each event that is related to Indonesia, he tries to gather ten words that are relate to what is happening at that moment in the *ruru huis*. Because the words are connected to the activity of that moment, the dictionary will thus represent the knowledge of that day:

It is nice because at the end, when we have a collection of words, and then people who want to go to Indonesia can learn the language in another way, to find their way in Indonesia. ... When you know these words it's a very nice way to be another sort of tourist.

This day we have been out in the Sonsbeek park collecting herbs and plants with artist collective Thought Collider from Amsterdam. Their practice is based around building dialogue between disciplines and social strata. The aim of their art practice is to have people talk about things and

share knowledge or experiences. After coming back to the *ruru huis*, they have been making *jamu*, an Indonesian herbal potion. The workshop is part of their project The Institute for the Design of Tropical Disease's, an ongoing exploration on the concept and knowledge of medicine with a non-dogmatic, do-it-yourself approach (Thoughtcollider, 2016).

reinaart has written a few words already on the paper: drizzle, medicine and mushroom. He asks the Indonesians who are present for the translation in Bahasa. Together with all the people present in the room, we discuss the translated words and add more words that are connected to the weather and to our experience in the park. Indonesians have a word for the moment when a rain shower makes the audience of an outdoor movie flee the place. We discuss the etymology of words and how they come into being. For instance, Ade - one of the founders of ruangrupa - explains that the word *jamu* derives from a combination of spell, potion and health. Later reinaart explains that this dictionary will be part of a book publication about the *ruru huis*. He takes pictures of the paper sheets every time that he has been engaged with the audience writing the words. So while the flip chart stays in the house ready for another message, the image of the written words travel via reinaart's camera to his laptop, where they will be transcribed into digital text in order to become a book one day.

The flip chart is a kind of public space: it is accessible for anyone close to it, to write or draw something. Whenever the content is not appreciated or seen as relevant the page can be turned over or even ripped out and thrown away. At the same time, when flipping through the pages, most messages seem to be very informative: the program of the day, what's on the menu, a dictionary of Indonesian words, etcetera. Only an occasional drawing is made as an illustration of the message and one page even has a disposable plate and a straw taped to it. Somehow the flip chart does not seem to inspire people to fully use its potential as a carrier of visuals. For instance, at an occasional meeting of graffiti artists - who you would expect to desecrate any surface they encounter - I was told that the flip chart was ignored and its pages were left untouched, except for one small 'tag'. Was it because of its bureaucratic appearance and common use in a more office-oriented space? Still, there are small interventions to challenge its rather official identity: little post-its and white sticky labels are attached to the side of the frame, together with an almost empty balloon. They are relics of the student workshop, carrying messages like: "I don't really like art", and: "Ruan what?!". So the flip chart has its subversive side as an agent. Although the workshop was weeks ago, the messages have not been removed, and still cling to the side of the flipchart.

On the sixth day I come to the huis, the flip chart is back to its old spot near the door. Its front page is empty again. Artist Juul Sadée is organising her workshop with the Moluccan community. At the end of the day reinaart proposes to add to the dictionary again together with the participants. Instead of moving the flip chart to the middle of the space he leaves the flip chart where it is and people come to gather around the place where it is standing. This time reinaart has already written ten words on the paper. He accounts for this choice by saying that he felt that everybody was already somewhat tired, and he didn't want to take much of their time. That is why he has taken the liberty to choose ten words from the last part of storyteller Aone's narrative. But it soon turns out that nobody from the group is really interested in the words he has written down. The conversation takes a different turn and there are words propping up that are not on the list, like 'kapok' which means 'serves you right' (wie niet horen wil, moet maar voelen, of: eigen schuld dikke bult). Because the surface of the paper is almost full, people start writing in the margins themselves. An animated discussion about what you can and cannot talk about in Moluccan culture emerges and the final conclusion is that you need detours in storytelling to arrive at the core of a topic.

On the seventh day I come to the huis, it still has the last page of the dictionary on its front page. For the rest of the day it will stay like that. Nobody engages with the flip chart or tries to read and discuss the words. They are preoccupied with other activities like talking about public space in Arnhem, or preparing the art market festival scheduled for the week after. On both the eighth and the ninth day I come to the huis nothing has changed. The flip chart is still carrying the dictionary but is ignored as people are busy with other activities.

On the tenth day I come to the huis, there is a meeting of people who want to start a platform for sound and noise performances in Arnhem. One of them has performed in the ruurloo huis during another event and knew it was available for activities. After a three hour conversation, Ade joins the meeting and he shows some YouTube video's about Indonesian noise. The group discusses differences between noise-scenes in various countries, and reinaart grabs this opportunity to introduce the dictionary. He pulls the flip chart into the group and the discussion fluently continues on paper: *bising* means noise, *swakelola* means do-it-yourself, *budaya* is culture, *jejaring* is network and *glodok* refers to electronic stuff.

On the eleventh day I flip through the pages and I read messages related to events I did not attend. There is a menu of a shared meal in collaboration with another organisation *Delen Die Hap* (Sharing a Bite) and a program overview which includes a calligraphy course. This shows

that the flipchart can be an intermediary and inform you about what is happening in the space by writing the program on it. But the text can also guide your action, for instance by carrying the words: “loempia’s, 1,50” with an → in the direction of the door. This linguistic communication is connected to the notion of the ‘speech act’ (Austin, 1962). In his seminal text *How to do things with words*, language philosopher Austin distinguishes between locution (only referring to what is there: the words “loempia’s, 1,50” and an arrow), illocution (the underlying message: somebody is selling loempia’s outside), and perlocution (what happens as effect: somebody realizes she is hungry and goes outside to buy a loempia) (p. 101). According to Austin, a speech act is performative: we are not merely reading the words, but we are using them as a message for possible action (p.6). Thus, as an easy accessible, hospitable space for speech acts, the flip chart can be used as a mediator that influences how people move around the space. One of the last moments I saw the flipchart is placed in front of the window after closing time, as a message for people outside.

#### 4.3.3 Actor #3: Window

One day a text appeared on the window of the *ruru huis*. It was put on there from the outside without notifying the organisation of the *ruru huis*. The text says: “IF I TAKE CARE OF YOU, OTHERS WILL TAKE CARE OF ME ??”, and: FROM COMPETITION TO COMPASSION ?? (see image 4.5). Although there were people present in the *ruru huis* that day, nobody realised it was being put there by artist Mattie without consent. Suddenly these words - quotes of Joseph Beuys - made out of yellow vinyl gave the space of the *ruru huis* a new facade.

This intervention is initially regarded as a rather ‘aggressive deed’. First of all because it was done without consent and secondly it is very substantial and visually dominant. On the window there was already another image made by *ruangrupa* at the beginning of the project: two maps in green lines, representing the centre of Arnhem and the Sonsbeek park. The *ruangrupa* collective often uses maps to provoke stories about a city (image 4.4). People are invited to interact with the maps, by writing information on it, or by using the little stickers that *ruangrupa* made carrying symbols of houses, animals, barbecue's etcetera. This way they can ‘annotate’ the locations in the city where they spend time or where they live. They deliberately does not include street names on the maps, as a way to prompt small spatial confusions. By making it incomplete, they intervene with the normal agency of a map.



Image 4.4

This is what Bishop (2006) calls ‘antagonism’. She draws on Lacan and Mouffe when she states that Antagonism “is the relationship that emerges between ... incomplete entities” (p. 66). The use of incomplete maps as a way to provoke stories has become one of ruangrupa’s well-known strategies and it makes clear how an object such as a map is not just used, but rather ‘produced’ collectively.

In a meeting organised by himself, named KWW (Kijken Wat het Wordt) - which can be translated as Let’s See What Will Happen - Mattie describes his choice to put the yellow letters unasked on the window as an impulsive action: because he was so “full of this text” he felt an instant urge to do something with it. Because reinaart had told him that the *ruru huis* can be used as a studio space for local artists, he immediately acted on that. While he explains this, someone in the group questions this impulsivity by saying that it must have taken a lot of preparation to cut out the letters, deciding the size and colour, in short: designing it. Additionally, there is also the issue of choosing the moment: when to put it on and with whom? So, as this visitor argues: “It seems more like a complex process than an impulsive artistic intervention”. Then Mattie tells us that in order to support and sustain his artist practice, he has a job as a letterer (beletteraar) in museums and galleries. He cuts out information texts for exhibitions from vinyl for a living. So he has these kinds of resources readily available and has become very skilled at cutting out letters and sticking them on surfaces. Because he was so quick and efficient in putting the letters up, and because of the professional use of the material, nobody asked questions. Had he used paint and brush, a whole different configuration of valuation would have

occurred. Because of the skillfully cut vinyl material, the text immediately merged with the other professional material on the window and thus affected the maps in a substantial way.

Also, they were put on the front window, one of the first visual spaces you encounter of the *ruru huis*. Although at first perceived as aggressive action, the intervention was embraced because the content of the text fits with the *ruru huis* values: “The colour is good, the text is right, everything is right. So it had to be like this. So if... no, actually, there is no if. It just fits”.

While the text of Mattie blended in and nested itself in the *ruru huis* like a real cuckoo’s chick, there are other objects affixed to the window that does not. A big poster made by another artist is only allowed to hang in front of the window for a limited amount of time. It is a A0-size poster with a text sprayed on it, saying: “The Poster Pillar Action (De Plakzuil actie) by the Union of Transgression” (see image 4.6). After a week it is removed. First of all, because it is so big it severely blocks the sight. Secondly, as reinaart explains:

If I don’t even understand what it is about, what will other people think of it? The poster is problematic because it makes things unclear. It uses a certain aesthetic like DIY, street-language, but with a very intellectual message. Mattie’s intervention is ‘stout-hearted’ but not abnormal and fits with what the *ruru huis* wants to communicate. It is open. This poster is inaccessible and therefore an anomaly in the huis.



image 4.5

#### 4.3.4 Actor #4: Pro-test sign

Some objects are specifically made by artists with the intention to have them used by others. As part of the same window project described above, Mattie also made a 'pro-test' sign carrying one of the texts by Joseph Beuys. During the KWW meeting, Mattie explains that he went out on the street carrying this sign to provoke dialogue. Standing in the city with the sign indeed provoked a lot of conversation. Because of this - for him - very successful action, Mattie wants to leave the sign in the *ruru huis* so that everybody can take it outside into the city. He is very excited about this plan and he is showing us the sign. It is covered in bubblewrap, but we can see the words cut out from the same yellow vinyl. The rest of the evening Mattie shares more ideas on collaboration during the Sonsbeek park exhibition. He proposes to establish a temporary artist collective that only operates in an improvising manner. Ideas are exchanged but as the turnout of the evening is rather low, no concrete decisions are made. That evening when we leave the space, the sign - still covered in bubblewrap - is leaning against the bookcase, waiting to be carried out onto the street.

One week later there is a day full of activities in the *ruru huis*. I am looking for the sign to see if it has been used yet, but it seems to have disappeared. After spending some time looking for it, I ask reinaart where it is. He looks like he suddenly remembered its presence and he says: "O yeah, the sign. It must be here somewhere". Then he remembers where and he points me toward the back of the space. I see it now. It is standing in a corner - still covered in protective bubblewrap - with its front against a coatrack, next to the vacuum cleaner (see image). The bubble wrap looks exactly the same as the week before. I take a picture of the situation. Because I take a picture a girl asks me what it is. I tell her it is a 'pro-test' sign by Mattie van der Worm. She does not ask any more questions. One hour later I notice that the sign is standing against the wall near to the stairs. It is unwrapped and standing next to a black paper basket. Later I hear that reinaart has taken it and unwrapped it. Now that the bubblewrap is gone I can access it better and look at how the sign is made. It is about 1.50 m. high and consists of a rectangular multiplex board that is fixed on a wooden pole. The size of the multiplex board is about 45 x 60 cm. It is neatly painted in a spotless white, and the pole is left blank. The letters are made of yellow vinyl and they are very well spaced across the board. They are all captions. The text is the same as the one on the window: "IF I TAKE CARE OF YOU, OTHERS WILL TAKE CARE OF ME", but it does not have the question marks at the end. Instead the name of the artist from whom this quotation

is from is added in small letters: Joseph Beuys (see image 4.6).

During the day I observe the sign. People stand next to it, often with their back towards it, people pass it when they go to the cellar. I don't see anyone touch it or engage with it in any way. When I ask reinaart about it some three weeks later, he says it is still not used by anyone.

Although Mattie perceives of the agency of the pro-test sign as operative, and expects people to take it outside and use it as a vessel for dialogue, this does not happen. It appears that for most people this operative agency is unclear. The pro-test sign specifically needs the street and a non-art context to become an agent for dialogue, but this agency can only be activated by another actor, for instance a post-it saying "take me to the street for a walk" or a person explaining the concept of Mattie to visitors of the *ruru huis*.

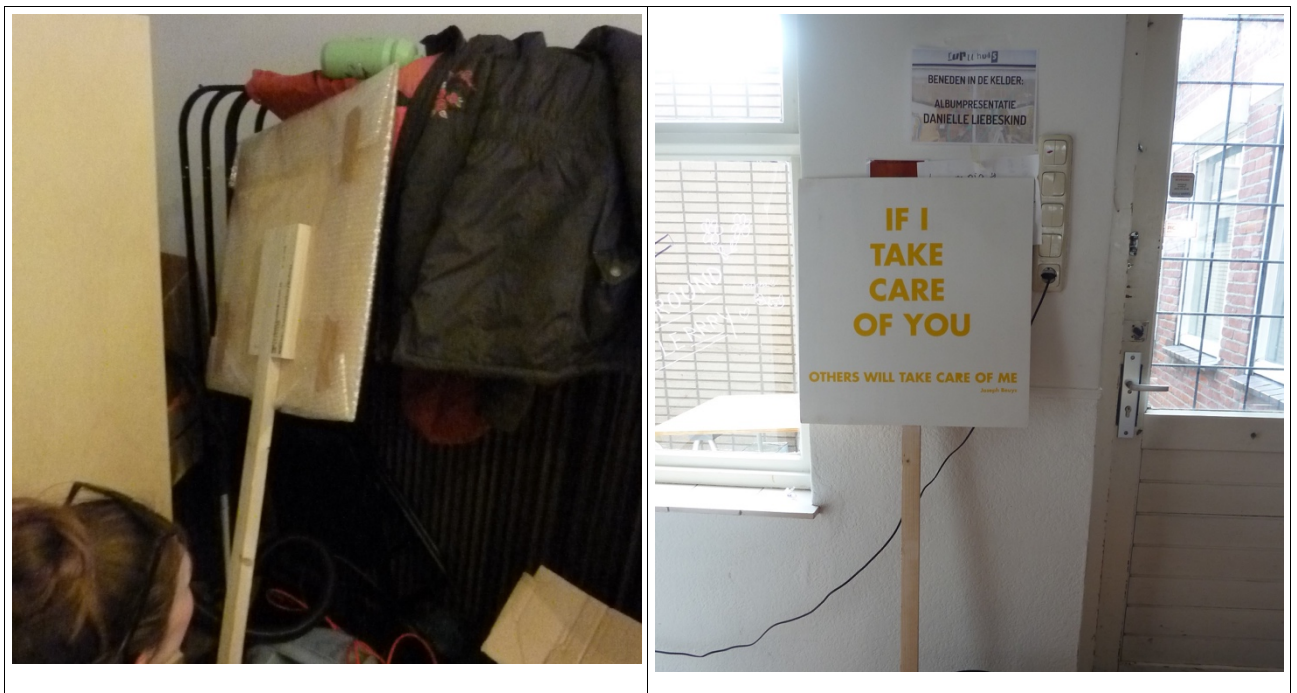


Image 4.6

#### 4.3.5 Actor #5: Pebble

Finally, one of the more longitudinal projects in the *ruru huis* is that of artist Juul Sadée. Juul has been working with the Moluccan community in Maastricht since 2012, and was invited by ruangrupa to continue this work with the local Moluccan community in Arnhem and build an artwork for *SONSBEEK 16: transACTION* in the Bronbeek museum. Her aim is to co-create an installation that addresses topics like birth place; the concept of home; language and education; emancipation; immigration and colonisation. According to Juul her sculptural work always



emerges from intense interaction with individuals and communities. Through meetings, workshops and dialogue, she creates installations that she describes – in analogy to Beuys - as ‘social sculptures’ (see also: Social sculpture research unit, 2012):

For me, the meaning of a social sculpture is that everyone takes responsibility for the process. I might have made the framework and developed the atmosphere, set the tone, but now the people themselves have taken over and they now also feel the responsibility to do things or organise stuff.

A central element in her collaborative project called ‘SO’ are meetings with the Moluccan community from Arnhem. These meetings provide a context where objects are made and stories are told. During the project Juul uses these objects and stories as material to construct the installation in Bronbeek. Several of these meetings took place in the *ruru huis*, others were organised in a community centre in Tiel, and in the Bronbeek museum. Although the meetings were aimed at second and third generation Moluccan women and men, anybody that was interested was always welcome to join the activities. It turned out that initially Juul planned all meetings in the *ruru huis*. But that would mean that all Saturdays in Februari and March the space would be ‘occupied’ by Juul, and this would leave little space for unexpected, instant events. The organisation considered parallel programming, but in the end they agreed that organising an event simultaneously would disadvantage both Juul and the other user, as her workshops are rather intimate and confidential. Thus, the organisation of the *ruru huis* found another place in Tiel where meetings could take place. As Tiel has a large Moluccan community, this turned out to be actually very beneficial for Juul in terms of getting people involved in the workshops.

#### *warming up*

Before the participants enter, Juul, her assistant and the *ruru huis* person in charge that day are setting up the space. The heat is turned up, coffee is brewed, water cooked, toilet paper checked and tables and chairs are moved around. Usually two tables are put together with their short sides towards each other so it makes one large workable surface. The chairs are positioned around the table. After the coffee is brewed and the water has boiled, the *ruru huis* person puts the hot liquids in thermos flasks on the table, along with clean cups, glasses and sometimes

cookies. When the participants arrive, they greet Juul and chat among each other while taking of their coats. Then they pour themselves a tea or coffee and find a seat.

As every meeting draws new participants to the group, Juul usually starts the meetings with an introduction of the project. By showing what was done before and how things are evolving, she includes every new participant in the process. The way she explains the progress is by showing her sketchbook with drawings and collages while explaining how her ideas are evolving - often as a result of what has been done in the workshops. Sometimes she brings the objects produced in former meetings and discusses them shortly.

After she has introduced the project, small cubes of clay are distributed among the participants. The cubes of clay are part of a warming up ritual that Juul invented to get everyone in the mood and concentrate:

I always like to start with doing something really simple. Because clay is earth, and that is such a basic material. We have earth, water, fire and wind. We start the meeting with really feeling the material first. And also to stop the chattering for a moment, because there is always a lot of chatter going on. So it's important to first literally 'earth' for a while.

Juul's choice to work with clay has several reasons. First of all, she tells me that she wanted to attract more men to the group. In earlier projects she had been working with embroidery, sculpture and performance, but this time she decided to work with clay. Although clay seems more like an inclusive and less 'gendered' material, in the end only three of the more than twenty participants are male.

The other reason for using clay is that - like always in her practice - she wants the participants to co-create the final installation in Bronbeek and clay is easy to work with. Indeed, clay is a very accessible material: it is soft and easy to knead and model. It has a certain 'inviting' quality: the malleable material calls for manipulation. In comparison: imagine holding a piece of marble in your hand. You can sense the difference. Unless someone has developed skills in sculpting marble, the material is much less inviting for manipulation. If Juul would have brought marble, the participants would probably have felt hesitant if they were asked to model it, and maybe even frustrated because of unfamiliarity with the tools. Besides that, it is not the goal of the meetings to learn how to sculpt. The participants are here to help Juul tell the story of the

Moluccan identity.

Juul needs the stories they tell during the meetings as material for her final installation in Bronbeek. Thus, she creates an atmosphere in which these stories can appear naturally and without much effort. Clay, as opposed to marble, wood, iron or steel, is easy to be manipulated with bare hands. While some people get very involved with the material, and create beautiful objects, others mainly chat among each other without paying much attention to what they are making. You could say that clay is a ‘hospitable’ material because it allows you to determine your own level of engagement with it.

### *Collective mediation*

The cubes of clay are being cut from a big ‘loaf’ of clay by Juul’s assistant Rosio. The little cubes are passed on around the table until everyone has received one. The size of the cube is approximately 5 by 5 centimetre. Juul tells us to roll the cubes in little balls, like “preparing meatballs”. We are told not to roll them too long, otherwise they will dry out and that will make little cracks in the material once it gets baked in the oven. Everybody engages in rolling the clay, looking at the shape and the possible emergence of cracks (see image 4.7). After rolling the clay into a small ball, we are instructed to push it firmly between the palms of our hands. There is a relative silence, but some people discuss the way to work the clay and show each other how they do it. One woman jokes that she is too strong for the clay, her clay balls are all very flat! There is laughter.



*Image 4.7*

Every time we finish rolling and pushing, we put the now pebble shaped pieces of clay on the table. As everyone produces the pebbles in a different rhythm, there is a constant flow of clay

cubes going around the table, passing from hand to hand. Sometimes, when someone is in the process of pressing the pebble, the person ready for a new fresh cube of clay has to wait a bit. The softness of the material allows the participants to make an imprint of their hands in the clay. They transform its meaning through a very simple gesture and thus become mediators in the collaborative production of an artwork. Juul emphasises this fact by calling the pebbles 'identity stones'. She connects different narratives to this gesture of pressing your hands together around a piece of clay:

Everybody has her own lifelines and fingerprints. So it actually is a symbol for a personal encounter with yourself and the clay. Besides that, hands are very important: you make things with your hands, you shake hands with other people, you make contact with your hands. It is a symbol for communication between yourself and the other.

But the clay pebbles are not the only actors, they also attract other objects to the stage. Because the clay is wet and leaves a thin layer of residue on the hands, it can spoil the clothes of the participants. Therefore, Juul put aprons on each chair when preparing the workshop earlier. They are a mish-mash of all kinds of materials with different patterns and colours and collected by Juul in the course of her practice, primarily because she often wears them herself. Her mother in law keeps making them "as a present for Sinterklaas". Perhaps because of their used look the aprons have a certain domestic quality: they all look like they have once been part of a household. We are all wearing the aprons and the fact that even the men wear them adds to a sense of togetherness.

While we are rolling the pebbles, Juul tells the story of how a pebble ends up as sand grains. She explains: "Objects are really important in stories", and she invites people to tell stories about objects. Somebody starts to tell a story about a shoe, and this evokes a flurry of shoe-related stories which all take place within a Moluccan context. One woman remembers how her father used a certain kind of slipper for slapping her when she was naughty. The group immediately starts discussing this specific kind of slipper (that was very common in that time and location). Another man talks about his son who was raised in Indonesia for the first five years of his life and did not want to wear shoes when they moved to the Netherlands. This shows that the pebble is not only a physical object, but it is also a vessel that evokes stories, which in their turn evoke collective memories among the group members.

As this storytelling is an important part of her 'social sculpture', Juul invited a storyteller one day with a Moluccan background to come and tell stories. In her final installation she wants to install a soundscape made out of fragmented stories. She hopes that Aone - the storyteller - will inspire people to tell their own stories, and both which will serve as material for the soundscape. Another important element in the artwork are hand puppets, which are also made by the participants during the meetings. While the hand pebbles represent their identity, the puppets symbolise their alter-ego's. In preparation for Aone's performance, Juul uses a small side table to arrange all the objects that the group has made until now. The tables are standing in the back, carrying coffee, tea and chocolates. She carefully puts a blue cloth over the table and places all the puppets and pebbles that have been baked on the little table. She invites Aone to use the puppets as characters in his stories. While Aone is talking, we sit in a circle around him and are making the clay pebbles.

In the story of Aone - which takes more than three hours and is strung together like a beaded necklace - the pebble is first the earth and the sky, then an island, and at one point even a prince. I notice that Aone prefers to use the stones instead of the puppets to illustrate his story. Somewhere after a short break Juul puts a puppet in his hands, but he looks very uncomfortable and after fumbling it around a bit, he puts the puppet back on the little table. It is clear that he is not inspired by the puppet, and prefers the pebbles as illustration for his stories. It looks like the undefined shape of the pebble is more open for interpretation.

### *Fixating*

At one moment in the meeting, most of the clay cubes that Rosio has been cutting from the loaf, have mutated from 'material' (cubes of clay) to 'objects' (identity stones). But that does not mean that this is a permanent and stable state. It has to be kept in place by several actors. Up to that moment the participants have been the most important mediators in turning the material into an object. By rolling, pressing and leaving their personal traces in surface of the clay pebble, they are collaboratively producing the artwork. This is what Juul aims for:

For me, the meaning of a social sculpture is that all take responsibility for the process. I might have made the framework and developed the atmosphere, set the tone, but now the people themselves have taken over and they now also feel the responsibility to do things or organise stuff.

This sounds like very horizontal approach, and strongly related to the idea of the facilitating artist shedding her authorship (Bishop, 2006). But to what extend can the group take this responsibility? Before the pebbles become part of this collaborative artwork, the many mutations in the process necessary are primarily mediated by the professional artist Juul.

Although you can be an amateur in shaping the clay, you need a few professionals to have it stay in that shape. When clay objects become wet, they lose their shape and disintegrate into plain clay again. To make the artwork durable, the clay pebbles need to be baked at a temperature of at least 950 degrees. For that, a professional oven is needed. The clay Juul is using for the project is red-baking *chamotte*. She has chosen this type of clay because it is rather easy to bake. Chamotte means that the clay contains little grains of pre-baked clay, which makes it easier to bake without breaking. Because of the little grains the air bubbles which are sometimes still present in the clay – and the malefactor for ruptures - can escape more easily. But before the pebbles can go into the oven and get fixated, they have to dry for a while. By letting the water evaporate from the clay, the pebble slowly hardens up. It is a prelude to the baking process. Too much water inside the clay would make the pebble burst once in the oven, because the evaporation process happens too quick. Juul maintains a note book which keeps track of all the steps of times and temperature each time she is baking ceramics.

Before she puts the now air-dried pebbles in the oven, she selects the ones that she really does not want to be fixed. Juul has a clear vision of how the pebbles should look. Although she lets people do their way during the workshop, she gives small remarks during this exercise: “You should not actually sculpt it, it should become a natural shape, otherwise it becomes something too ‘ecstatic’”. Still, despite her instructions, some are really very far from her vision: they look like lumps of clay instead of the pebbles Juul imagined. As their function for Juul has now changed from operative to becoming evidential, their valuation also changes. The rejected pebbles are therefore thrown into a bucket and mixed with a little water. After some days of soaking they are ‘un-pebbled’ and have become soft clay again. Juul then rolls this recycled wet clay on a gypsum plate until it has soaked up the excess of fluid and it has reached the right ‘hospitable’ consistency again. After turning them into big balls the clay is ready to go back to Arnhem for a second chance on becoming a pebble (see image 4.8). The flexibility of the unbaked clay does not only allow for easy use by the participants, but it also allows Juul to edit their work.



*Image 4.8*

The pebbles that made it through the selection, are now ready to be baked. There are several stages in heating up the clay material in the oven, and in each stage something changes in its materiality. For instance, at 573 degrees celsius, the quartz crystals rearrange themselves in a different order. This is called inversion and is a crucial moment in the vitrification of clay into ceramics. To get to this stage takes about five hours of heating. The different stages in heating up must be completed slowly and also the cooling down needs to happen gradually to prevent the material from cracking. In this case the oven was turned on at 07.45 a.m. and turned off at 15.00 p.m. The door was only opened the next day at 9.30 a.m.

This shows that the process of baking is intricate, time-consuming and demands a certain amount of expertise and knowledge and the help of professional equipment such as the oven. Once the pebbles are baked, not only their material properties have changed, but as a result also their role as mediators within the collective meetings. They are now in the hands of Juul, who decides what is going to happen to them, and who will primarily be concerned with their placement in the final art installation.

## 5. Conclusion

In the *ruru huis* local people meet, collaborate and initiate activities themselves. They are encouraged to become users, instead of being mere participants. This research evolved around the question “How do materials and objects act as agents in a social art practice such as the *ruru huis*?” What kind of objects and materials are important in an art practice that is based on dialogical interaction and how do these objects and materials associate themselves with human actors like artists and participants?

In this paper I tried to show how the agency of objects and materials constitute the interface through which this communication and collaboration is performed. Latour (2005) has argued that agencies become apparent through associations with other actors in the network. But the agency of both human and non-human actors can differ depending on the ‘configuration’ of the network. Through analyzing many different configurations that occurred in the *ruru huis*, I found three different categories of how objects and materials are being used. Subsequently I found that all three functions are directed at inclusiveness and active participation in different ways. Some objects are familiar or inconspicuous actors, while some exert their agency through ambiguity. Moreover, I found that many objects and materials in the *ruru huis* were often incomplete, shapeless, nondescript or empty, and their agency became visible precisely because they were slightly *dysfunctional*.

By observing the artistic practice of ruangrupa, Juul Sadée, Mattie van der Worm, reinaart vanhoe and others, I have found that the agency of materials in the *ruru huis* is strongly connected to both accessibility and the position of the human actor in the collaboration. By analyzing many different configurations that occurred in the *ruru huis*, I found that: 1) most objects and materials function to create an inclusive, hospitable space; 2) different categories can be distinguished in *how* they function to achieve this goal; and 3) the actuating of their agency depends on how artistic collaboration is organized.

The first step in the process was distinguishing between different kinds of functions, such as facilitating, operative and descriptive. This distinction gave insight into how objects and materials were used and perceived. Secondly I discovered that the art practice of the *ruru huis* is a continuous process of negotiating the agency of materiality in order to make the *ruru huis* as accessible for usership as possible. Sometimes this was done very like choosing the ‘right’ tables, allowing the ‘right’ words on the windows, or choosing an inclusive material like clay to work



with. Other times accessibility was compromised because of error of judgement regarding the proactiveness of the potential users. For example, the pro-test sign needed more guidance from its author to become accessible for users. This does not necessarily mean that it is a less hospitable object, but it just needed more specific mediation. In other words: allowing for usership needs to be negotiated all the time. Without editing the *ruru huis* in regards to what objects stay or go, it is in danger to become diffuse, cluttered and illegible for visitors. Professional knowledge and sensitivity of the artist does play an important role in this: by carefully employing, negotiating and combining different sorts of material, the artist can act as a fluid person that allows objects to have agency and meaning in more than one way. In the *ruru huis* a friendly, but sometime slightly antagonistic space is created by leaving things unfinished (like the map), non-descript (like the furniture) or shapeless (like the pebble). On the other hand, the objects should not become really antagonistic and confuse people too much, like in the case of the poster.

To conclude, we have seen that audiences have turned into users and participants and they play an active role in shaping an art practice. Objects are active agents in transforming, informing and obscuring these collaborations. Particularly in recent forms of social art practices, materials and spaces are used as vessels of communication, rather than transformed into autonomous art objects. That is why this change in agency of all the stakeholders in the art process demands another way of looking at materials. In the *ruru huis*, negotiating the agency of materials often resulted in a friendly antagonism, which was sometimes successful and other times less effective in creating temporary communities and dialogue.

#### *Discussion and suggestions for future research*

It feels like I have just barely started to grasp the material I have been researching. There is so much more to explore in this regard and sometimes I felt overwhelmed by the possibilities. For example, during the observation I noticed that the word 'SONSBEEK' was a very powerful agent in the functioning of the *ruru huis* because of its strong historical connotations and institutional identity. This both facilitated and frustrated the inclusiveness of the activities in the huis. However, I did not choose this word as one of my actors because I wanted to specifically focus on the material aspects and furthermore this topic was somewhat distant from the usual affairs in a social art practice. On the other hand, there were also directions that I could not venture further because of time constraints. For instance, I found a possible interesting connection between the three material categories and the categories of worth by Boltanski and Thevenot (2006). But as

the scope of this research was limited, I had to decide not to pursue this thought. But I do want to share it here. It seems to me that *facilitating* materials strongly connect to *domestic* and *civic* values. On the one hand they make you feel comfortable as a person (domestic worth) while at the same time they connect people through a standardised, recognisable, and stable presence (civic worth). The *operative* materials on the other hand are more connected to *industrial* worth (their functioning) and *inspirational* worth (they can make you happy to work with it). Finally, the *evidential* products seem related to *market* worth and *fame* as they have a more symbolic agency that have the potential to gain exchange value.

To conclude, I think that I might have followed too many actors. My enthusiasm for both the theory and the practice and the load of information carried me away sometimes. That is probably why I have strayed here and there during the process and why it was so difficult to conclude this paper. But I do now.

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