Since its debut in 2011, the Biennale Jogja’s ‘Equator’ projects have sought to produce artistic encounters between Yogyakarta and other locations in the ‘Global South’ that lie partially or wholly between 23.27 degrees of latitude north and south, marking the imaginary lines that are known as the Tropics of Cancer (north) and of Capricorn (south). Initiated in 1988 as a showcase for local artists’ work, Biennale Jogja was overhauled in 2010 with the establishment of the Yayasan Biennale Yogyakarta (Yogyakarta Biennale Foundation) and increased participation in the organisation of the event by contemporary artists and curators. The inaugural ‘Equator’ exhibition featured Indian artists as interlocutors with their Indonesian counterparts, while subsequent editions engaged with the Arab region (2013), Nigeria (2015) and Brazil (2017).

Now in its fifth iteration, the project presents a very specific and germinal reorganisation of geocultural relations in the contemporary world, offering interpretations of the international that are unusual if not unparalleled in the plethora of triennials, biennales and (annual) art fairs that seem to produce competing as well as complementary art ecologies of their own, like linked eruptions in a geological or climatic system manifesting across the globe like so many hotspots. The notion of using each edition to bring about an engineered collision between a pair of discrete art cultures united by causal and conventional factors would seem to follow the idea of a rules-based art practice that seeks to interrogate the conceit of uniqueness and originality. However, once we realise that the bulk of the world’s poorer economies lie in these warmer climes, the political position advanced by the ‘Equator’ projects becomes evermore poignant.

The 2019 edition under the curatorship of Yogyakarta-based Akio AW and Arham Rahman, and Penwadee NM from Bangkok, saw the biennale return closer to home, featuring Indonesian artists in juxtaposition with those from the Southeast Asian region under the interrogative thematic ‘Do we live in the same PLAYGROUND?’ Included were 33 Indonesian artists (including four collectives) and 19 (or 25, if members of a women artists’ collective from Southern Thailand were counted separately) from the region. A new feature introduced in 2019 was the inclusion of separate exhibitions showcasing three liminal island locations with a bilik (cubicle or chamber) for each: Hong Kong, Taiwan and Timor-Leste, which though adjacent to or entirely within the Southeast Asian region geographically, are either not yet members of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, established 1967) as in the case of Timor-Leste, or have contested claims to separate identity (Hong Kong and Taiwan). In her public talk introducing Bilik Taiwan, titled ‘The Library of Possible Encounters’, curator Alia Swastika (also Director of Biennale Jogja) suggested that while immediately invoking the national pavilions of Venice, the biliks were so named in order find a locally resonant and internationally distinctive point of difference. While curatorially innovative, the biliks were of uneven quality: the tightly curated and highly resolved representation of Taiwanese artists was not paralleled in the uneasy mashup of two previous exhibitions from Para Site (Bilik Hong Kong, titled ‘Sea Breeze’ to signify the winds of migration), and the uninflected ethnographic display in Bilik Timor-Leste (‘Delapan Derajat Lintang Selatan’, or ‘Eight Degrees of Latitude South’). Equally unfortunately, both of these were stranded in the northern part of Yogyakarta, in the ill-frequented cultural centre of Universitas Gadjah Mada.

A distinctive feature of this year’s biennale was the relatively high number of featured artists who were not men. Twelve women and one non-binary person were part of the Indonesian cohort, while the international selection featured eight (or 13, counting collective members separately) women artists. This was remarkable in light of overwhelmingly patriarchal narratives of modernism and contemporary art in Indonesia and the region. A second point of interest was the effort by biennale organisers and curators to seek out voices of difference within the ‘peripheral’ construction of Indonesia and Southeast Asia in the global art world. This attention to peripheries within

Opposite:
Citra Sasmita, *Timur Merah Project: The Embrace of My Motherland*, 2019, acrylic on Kamasan canvas with turmeric and spices, each scroll 400 x 90cm; photo: Documentation Team, Biennale Jogja 2019

Christina ‘Ling’ Quisumbing Ramilo, *Forest for the Trees: Peri-Peri Library*, 2019, wood scraps, 426 x 426 x 651cm; photo: Documentation Team, Biennale Jogja 2019
peripheries drew out an important characteristic of the contemporary world often eclipsed in reckonings centred around the fictions of national and regional geographies. The staggering internal diversity of Indonesia is a case in point, well borne out in the work of artists who were not from the Java/Bali-centric mainstream of the Indonesian and international art worlds. While ironic, it is nonetheless true that Javanese artists can easily be showcased as being from the periphery in Switzerland, but are nevertheless part of the privileged and dominant art economy within Indonesia.

The equalising function implied by the equator collapses under close scrutiny to reveal a multitude of contradictory, competing and compelling histories and realities grounded in the local, as highlighted by the work of the Muslimah Collective, a group of five Muslim women from the Pattani region of Southern Thailand. In many cases including this example, the biennale did not shy away from presenting work that to sophisticated gallery-goers may have seemed somewhat short of full formal or conceptual complexity. And this was one of the exhibition’s strengths. It did not always feature works with cosmopolitan gloss, well-informed by and referential to conventionally recognised constructions of contemporary art history; many projects in this year’s biennale would not have looked out of place in an art school graduation exhibition. In several cases, the artists had either not been through university-based art school curricula, or were at very early stages of their careers. A curatorial strategy increasingly shared by actors in several locations in the world, this goes a long way in challenging the usual expectations of ‘biennale art’, introducing instead a dynamic if not always comfortable sense of the biennale as process or a way station at best, rather than a singular event.

The process this time was characterised by a number of residencies, large and small, often involving emerging or early-career artists (art school-educated or otherwise) undertaking substantial amounts of research through immersive experience. The plethora of ‘fringe’ events, including an ambitious – even if sometimes faltering – exhibition at the Cemeti Institute for Art and Society gave evidence of the energy and communitarian spirit of the entire series of exercises that went into the making of the biennale.

Across the five venues were several projects that stood out for their poetic immediacy, formal innovation and conceptual complexity. Charwei Tsai’s single-channel videos ingeniously projected on the underside of a sagging ‘shelter’ of industrial tarpaulin in Blik Taiwan signalled a careful and compassionate fusion of the ethical with the aesthetic. The women featured in her videos, either singly or in groups, as singing heads in close focus or as silhouettes sharing personal narratives of transition and loss, were mesmerising presences whose lives touched ours despite all differences. Elsewhere, in the Jogja National Museum, Filipina artist Christina ‘Ling’ Quisumbing Ramilo used her residency to construct a library out of timber from demolished homes, where the books lining the shelves were merely single blocks of wood, with the audience responding to the invitation to make an imaginarium out of crafted debris by titling individual blocks into books of the imagination. Also at the same venue was informally trained Balinese artist Citra Sasmita’s installation of suspended scroll-like paintings counterbalanced by cloth bags of nutmeg, cloves and other spices, with text across the floor written in powdered turmeric. Viscerally redolent, the room invoked an alternative cosmology centred on female energies of creation and destruction. Sasmita undertook a revision of received knowledge, including the usually phallocentric mythology of Java and Bali, conjuring up instead an entire universe brought forth and ruled over by female presences.

Throughout the biennale, there was an effort to pay attention to minor voices, marginal narratives and microhistories. In an effort that has close affinities with restitutional historical projects such as that of the Subaltern Studies Group, this biennale offered up a perspective on what genuine multilateralism and polycentric organisational models can achieve. We may well live in the same playground, but the best games are not necessarily the most popular ones. Having a go on an unfamiliar hobbyhorse is an excellent way to discover truths hidden in plain sight.

Jogja Biennale’s ‘Equator #5: Do we live in the same PLAYGROUND?’ ran across five venues in Yogyakarta from 20 October until 30 November 2019.