

## Research Article

# Dewan Syuro Kurator: A Decentralised Model of Curatorial Practice

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The Biennale Jawa Timur at BJT is an event that first commenced in 2005 and is now held once every two years.. Its curatorial approach is always changing in each event and also underwent a significant change in the last two Biennales, the eighth in 2019 and the ninth in 2021. The most recent one has a new approach to its curatorial practice, called *Dewan Syuro Kurator* (DSK). The DSK is a group of selected curators which also act as a subdivision for artistic directors that will be responsible in nine divided areas in 38 cities in East Java province. The approach of DSK is unique and radical to liven the expectation of the ninth BJT which focuses on collectivism and inclusivity of the Biennale. This paper explains the approach of DSK curatorial practices as well as reflect on e BJT artistic directions. The methodology used is interview analysis and a literature review to strengthen the final statement of the DSK curatorial practice. The result is that DSK practice is yet to be perfect but feasible nevertheless and could be a reference to future curatorial practices that specifically caters to huge events with many stakeholders with an addition to inclusivity to its exhibitors, artists, and participants, as well as its audience.

**Keywords:** Biennale Jawa Timur, curatorial practice, decentralised, collective practiceCorresponding Author: Agnisa  
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## 1. Introduction

Biennale Jawa Timur (East Java) is a long standing event that has been held since early 2000. This event is one of many anticipated events in East Java because it has few big art events [1] to be celebrated. The Biennale Jawa Timur (BJT) before the 8th in 2019 was always held conventionally and centralised in the capital of East Java province, Surabaya. The biennale was first organized in 2005, and has since become a major platform for contemporary art in the region, attracting artists, curators, and the public especially in East Java province [2].

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Over the years, the Biennale Jawa Timur has undergone significant changes in terms of its curatorial approach and focus. In the early years of the biennale, the curatorial practice was largely centred around showcasing the work of local artists and promoting the cultural heritage of East Java [2]. Adapting to the progression of the East Java art scene, the curatorial had shifted from a very academic approach to collectivism.

One of the key themes that has emerged in the curatorial practice of the East Java Biennale is the role of art in addressing social and political issues. Many of the exhibitions have focused on themes such as environmentalism, gender and sexuality, and human rights, and have sought to create a space for dialogue and reflection on these issues. Another significant aspect of the East Java Biennale's curatorial practice has been the use of site-specific installations and performances, which have been used to engage with the local community and explore the unique cultural and historical context of Surabaya and East Java [3].

Overall, the East Java Biennale has played a vital role in promoting contemporary art and fostering cultural exchange in the region, and continues to be a vital platform for artists and curators from around the world. The most recent one in 2021 focuses on mapping collective practice that was a continuation of the eighth Biennale Jawa Timur (BJT). "Padhang Rembugan" [4] became the common theme that held the whole event together where every collective that participated mattered and a decentralised event was formulated. This decentralised [5] model then invites more than 100 programs to be held in a month timespan, 19 November - 19 December 2021. Therefore to have an unconventional curatorial approach was strategized and the Dewan Syuro Kurator (DSK) – translated as Shuro curatorial council, was born.

## 2. Methodology

This paper aimed to explain and entangle the DSK system to manage an event in provincial size. The methodology used in this research is to interview curators that are involved in the ninth BJT and explain their curatorial approach from their perspective. There are nine DSK that are equally tasked to manage the curatorial system for 38 cities in East Java Province. Each curator was responsible for three to four cities that participated in BJT, and each city's programs varied from nine to 34 programs. The program's models also varied from residency, discussion program, exhibition, cultural

research, and art activism. Next, identifying the target population for the study. This may include curators, artists, and other stakeholders involved in the BJT.

The sample for the study is too big if every mentioned sample were to be interviewed, therefore, the interviews were only conducted with the BJT artistic directors that were involved in one of DSK's curatorial approaches. This paper also acts as a reflection note of the artistic directors' completed task in the ninth BJT in 2021. Then the collected interviews were reviewed with relevant literature to see the hypotheses's significance. The purpose of this study was to provide a strategy to non-conventional curatorial practice in the also unconventional art scene of East Java.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

Firstly, the interview from the artistic directors stated that the tasks and functions in the organisation are certainly complex. From the very beginning of the BJIX planning process until after BJIX it is the professional responsibility of the artistic director of BJIX. The artistic director's [6] portion is very large, and in theory, from the theme to the practice of artistic work related to the delivery of art to the audience is the professional responsibility of the artistic director. With such a large portion of work, in practice, of course, there are various challenges that will arise during the process until the finalisation of the work. Then from this problem, the problem asked is, if theoretically the responsibilities and work area are so large and wide, how significant is the portion of the artistic director's workload in this biennale?

Despite the many challenges and responsibilities that come with the role, the artistic director's workload is significant and essential to the success of the BJT. Without a strong and dedicated artistic director, it would be difficult to achieve the level of vision and creativity that is required to make a biennale successful. However, it's also important to note that the artistic director may have a team or assistant that could help to distribute the workload, and other stakeholders and curators might have different important roles in the organisation. This is where the DSK was first initiated.

Secondly, this point finally needs to be evaluated, how big and significant the artistic director's work is. This pattern of decentralisation involving many people requires work that must be interconnected [7], both between programs and artistic. The Syuro Curator Council (DSK) initiative was created to bridge the process involving an area of 38 cities and regencies. The DSK is also a unique step, as well as a peculiar strategy in this

decentralised artistic process. The first initiation of their formation is as a bridge or an extension of the director's board. This is also one of many strategies developed this year to echo the true meaning of decentralisation. This is what gave birth to the DSK initiative. But then there is a separate reflection about the DSK system that was created. The initial hope was that the 9 members of the DSK would become an agency, but later, it was the relationship of artistic power that eventually became a problem that often appeared at this BJIX event.

Power relations are important, we need to be aware of that. In practice what has happened, structurally the director is above the DSK. Although in the process in BJT, the director level tried to make it equal. However, different capital that the DSK (not to mention the pandemic) made structured communication quite an obstacle. Adaptive is the only strategy used in the program coordination and negotiation process, so power relation needed to be negotiated [8]. So, power relations must exist, theoretically, and practically [9].

The problem that arises when adopting a horizontal [10] work system is indeed full of intrigue. The nine DSKs representing the nine territorial divisions approach his residency, doing extraordinarily extensive artistic work as well. They are directly involved from the work process and artistic process of the artists in their respective areas. But here it needs to be underlined, it doesn't mean that the role of artistic director will be replaced, but indeed the reflection that emerges is when a decentralised model like this commenced, perhaps the position, proportions, and prepositions [11] of work as well as the title of artistic director may not be essential.

Lastly, one question arises, "why not DSK also the artistic director or artistic director is DSK?". In this case it's DSK works more than its title, and in practice, the ranks of DSK coordinate a lot in areas that stop at the managerial realm. This case happened in many ways, DSK as curator, manager, and speaker. The artistic director is important in an event like the Biennale, but then there are many things that determine the achievement of the artistic director, namely the person, the discourse, and of course the area. From this statement, one concept that could be concluded was maybe we don't need an artistic director and leave it entirely to DSK. Where the nine DSK could give artistic direction directly to the artists, assisting on managerial tasks of each and every one event that were registered in the ninth BJT. This initial project of DSK was deemed pretty radical because not everyone (even the DSK) was on board with the idea. The artists and

collectives that were involved in BJT were more comfortable to consult their programs with DSK rather than the directors.

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, DSK was a radical yet necessary for BJT if its focus was for decentralisation. DSK could complete managerial, professional, and artistic tasks for each of the programs in their assigned areas. However, ideally this DSK model should be improved with better working boundaries and job description. A group of selected people managing and directing artistically another group of artists, programmers, or collectives for one huge chain event is not an ideal labour, especially in the art scene. Yet, the DSK proved to be quite inclusive, because a direct communication showed better connection between the participating artists, programmers, or collectives even in the discourse. This also concludes that more artistic brains proved to be rather useful to accommodate bigger decentralised events like the Biennale (in this case the ninth BJT) in 2021.

This paper is not a final statement, on the contrary, there are progressions that can be made to study this specific curatorial model. The DSK model was inclusive but chaotic, massive but disorderly, autonomous, and decentralised but enigmatic. Therefore, a further study about collective curatorship may improve this discourse significantly.

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