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[December 18, 2020](#)

## **The "Agents of Global Capitalism" (Bandung Center for New Media Arts, Bandung, 2001-2006)**



“Pink and White Terrace” video work by New Zealand artist Nova Paul as part of the exhibition “Hetero Utopia: Mapping the Urban Terrain” at Soemardja Gallery, July 2006. Image courtesy of Bandung Center for New Media Arts.

## **A Conversation with Gustaff H. Iskandar, R.E. Hartanto, and T. Ismail Reza on Bandung Center for New Media Arts (Bandung, 2001-2006)**

The Bandung Center for New Media Arts (BCfNMA) was founded on December 25, 2001 by artists Gustaff H. Iskandar and R.E. Hartanto, graphic designer Reina Wulansari, and architect T. Ismail Reza. In 2003, BCfNMA began sharing a garage with Tobucil Bookshop which led to the launching of Common Room, before officially registering the Common Room Networks Foundation in 2006. In this conversation with three of BCfNMA’s founders, we discuss the value of collaborative practices, the early reception of new media art, and what it was like operating as a collective in post-New Order Indonesia.



“Urban Cartography Project” as part of “Hetero Utopia,” July 2006. Image courtesy of Bandung Center for New Media Arts.

## “DARK TIMES”

**R.E. Hartanto (RH):** As a little introduction, I entered art school in 1992 to study painting and I graduated in 1998. As soon as I graduated, I became involved in Galeri Soemardja, our campus gallery. Gustaff [GHI] and I had this young teacher, Mr. Asmudjo Irianto, who was in charge of the gallery.

I think it was in 1999 when this six-month-long collaborative project — which tried to explore the possibility of doing an online exhibition — between our campus, Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB), and Curtin University in Perth happened. I was one of the assistants who helped the older and less tech-savvy artists and that was an important point for me because that was my first contact with digital and web art.

Another important thing to bring up is that, after I graduated, I decided to try installation art and I ended up spending all my money because it's a very expensive and demanding kind of expression. Thinking of an alternative, I realized that digital art is actually quite cheap because all you need is a computer and maybe internet connection and from there you can make a lot of things. Soon after, I got accepted as a participant in a year-long residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. The residency can be extended for another year and everyone — including me — did that because everything was paid for. So, for two years at the Rijksakademie, I did digital art.

It was around this time, between 2001 and 2002, that the Bandung Center for New Media Arts (BCfNMA) was formed. Whenever I was in Bandung, I would always meet with Gustaff and Reza [TIR] to talk about the possibility of expressing our ideas using new media art, and we would continue to communicate via Yahoo! Messenger while I was away.

**Gustaff H. Iskandar (GHI):** I didn't have an internet connection at my place so I would go to an internet café to go online.

**T. Ismail Reza (TIR):** Those were dark times. I met Gustaff at the Bandung Art Event (BAE) in 2001. I was helping out with outdoor promotion and I was really looking forward to it because part of my studies then was on the importance of city events. I had a long discussion with Gustaff there and, one day, he asked me to be involved in BCfNMA.

**GHI:** When Tanto [RH] was still in Amsterdam, I think Reina [Wulansari] was also continuing her studies in Leiden. I think it was around 1999 to 2000 that we started to talk about forming an initiative in Bandung. The BAE was like a city event with many projects and exhibitions. I think Tanto, coincidentally, was in Bandung then and we spent a lot of time discussing. I think that's when the whole plan to set up BCfNMA began.

That was a very active and busy period for us. We had online meetings almost every week which we would record and transcribe. Tanto set up a mailing list where we would just share stories about recent developments in contemporary art in Bandung and Tanto would share about his experiences in the Netherlands or in Cameroon.

Also, while Tanto was doing projects in Amsterdam, Reza and I actively engaged and collaborated with different initiatives in Bandung and Jakarta like ruangrupa who were already quite active then.

**RH:** I remember, during my first year of residency in Amsterdam, I was quite busy making artwork, but in the following year, I became heavily engaged with this organizational work. By the end of the residency, when it was time for the open studio, I only showed my sketchbook containing my doodles because I didn't make any work. So it was quite busy, and we communicated very intensely despite all the limitations that we had during that time. Reina and I did our part in the Netherlands while Gustaff and Reza did theirs in Indonesia.

**Dominic Zinampan (DZ):** What was the climate in Bandung socially, culturally, and politically like back then?

**GHI:** A democratic transition was happening. There was political turmoil in 1998 and it continued up until 2001 so it was like a new cultural period; everybody had a new space to express newfound freedom and ideas as the cultural landscape was somehow becoming more open compared to during the New Order era. The internet was also

somewhat of a new thing for many people, not to mention the use of digital media for making artwork. The whole cultural landscape was very vibrant with these new and emerging creative practices.

One of our discussions at the BAE was about how, even though the atmosphere at the time was relatively more open and that there were all these new practices, the art scene was still relatively small — we still had the same list of artists, exhibitions, themes, and issues. That is why we developed the BCfNMA: we felt that we needed to open up our horizons and open up possibilities by collaborating with people from different backgrounds. That is how we started working together as BCfNMA and collaborating with Galeri Barak, Tobucil, and ruangrupa among others.



Exhibition view of “Hetero Utopia,” July 2006. Image courtesy of Bandung Center for New Media Arts.

## **COMMON ROOM**

**DZ:** Didn't BCfNMA share a space with Tobucil?

**RH:** Tobucil was another organization mainly focused on literacy. BCfNMA was based at Reina's house and Tobucil was quite near us. We got to know each other and they eventually moved in with us I think in 2003, around the time I came back from Amsterdam. During that time, we were able to do a lot of things because we had more

personnel and manpower, we shared the same interests, and we also felt enriched by their presence in our space.

**DZ:** That was around the time you guys launched Common Room, is that right? How did you distinguish BCfNMA and Common Room? Was Common Room a separate entity or was it like a collaborative project that fell under both BCfNMA and Tobucil?

**GHI:** I think it was like a merging of projects between BCfNMA and Tobucil. At the time, we felt that we needed a new way and strategy to engage people from different backgrounds and Common Room was like a neutral space where we could all work together.

**RH:** I think Tobucil takes an important role here because Tarlen [Handayani], the owner of Tobucil, was involved and her background and ideas were different from ours so she somehow enriched our perspective.

With the forming of Common Room, we realized that there were a lot of cultural organizations and talented people pursuing their interests and passions in Bandung. We thought that maybe we could make Common Room a hub where we could initiate and facilitate talks, discussions, and collaborative projects.

In this simple model, you can see how BCfNMA was divergent and medium-specific as it focused on utilizing technology and new media for artistic expression whereas Common Room was more convergent in its focus on the creative potential of Bandung.

**GHI:** I think that when we started collaborating with Tobucil, the intensity and scale of our activities increased somehow. At that time, the term Web 2.0 also somehow started to get popular. Users started adding, editing, contributing, and producing their own content. We started to shift from mailing lists to Multiply and there were a lot of interesting discussions happening there and on Friendster at the time. We used these sites, created new groups, and initiated discussions to channel information about new and emerging creative practices.

It was also around this time that we organized the exhibition "Shock and Wave" (2003), named after the military tactic of shock and awe. Tanto was the one who initiated that idea because there was a war in Iraq at the time. It was quite an interesting exhibition because Agung [Kurniawan], Isa Perkasa, and Tisna Sanjaya among others were there. I think that exhibition initiated the opening of Common Room.

**Merv Espina (ME):** How did those names — BCfNMA and Common Room — come about? Why does BCfNMA sound so official?

**RH:** We like official things. I think we also strategically and consciously used BCfNMA as our name because new media art was a new thing then and we wanted to claim our part in that. We were sort of saying, "Hey, we are here."

**GHI:** Yeah, and then we used the name Common Room because, at the time, “new media art” was still foreign to many. I remember there was even an article in *Pikiran Rakyat* saying that the new media artistic practice is an “agent of global capitalism.” So there was some kind of sentiment going around at the time that we were “agents of global capitalism” and that we were going to ruin the local art scene. It was very funny, but that happened.

Also, the idea of using Common Room as a name also came from Reina because when she was studying abroad, there was a room in her boarding house called “common room” where people would just hang out, so we felt that that name was more fluid and open.



The Third Asia-Europe Art Camp, August 2005. Image courtesy of Bandung Center for New Media Arts.





“36 Frames Photography Project: Dago Street!” at the Architecture Gallery – ITB as part of “Hetero Utopia,” July 2006. Image courtesy of Bandung Center for New Media Arts.

## **WORK DYNAMIC**

**ME:** What was the work dynamic like between the four of you? How did it change when Tobucil came around and you started collaborating?

**GHI:** I remember that Reza was, for me, the one who always had this strong perspective that was more political and ideological. He shared many insights about space and politics from an architectural perspective.

**TIR:** It was mostly talk and no action.

**GHI:** Every time we had a discussion and Reza was coming around, I knew the discussion would be a bit serious. He was also the one who introduced us to some of the ideas of Henri Lefebvre. We would discuss things like urban space, the third space, dialogism, and so on. It was very interesting because, before, we only discussed aesthetic theories, but then Reza started to introduce us to these ideas regarding architecture and urban space.

**RH:** Yeah. Reza was the ideologist, Gustaff was like the CEO, and I handled logistics. It wasn't something new for me because, when I was in high school, I was always busy with school organizations as I enjoyed realizing projects. And then Reina was...

**GHI:** Our mother host.

**RH:** Yeah, Reina was our mother. And Tarlen?

**GHI:** Tarlen was the networker. She knew a lot of people and she engaged a lot of communities.

**RH:** Tarlen was also part of a journalist organization. More or less, that's how we played our parts during that time.

**Sau Bin Yap (SBY):** I think that's interesting because most of our research on BCfNMA doesn't talk too much about how what you were doing was informed by political views, cultural politics, and critical theory. It's interesting how Reza played a role in transposing and sharing this ideological and architectural thinking of space with you guys.

**TIR:** I think I brought up those theories because, during my postgraduate studies in urban design, everyone was just chewing up old and traditional theories. From my point of view at the time, it seemed like you could publish a thesis just by changing the title and location of a previous one. So, around the time of the 1998 political turmoil, my point of view was that we needed to have a new paradigm to see what the future would be like. That's why I tried to pick different resources and the ones I found most interesting were Lefebvre, Walter Benjamin, and Deleuze and Guattari and I tried to bring that to Tanto, Gustaff, and Reina. But don't get me wrong guys, I wasn't doing it ideologically — I just did it because I thought it was quite cool at the time.





BCfNMA's office, c. 2005. Image courtesy of Bandung Center for New Media Arts.



Tobucil, c. 2005. Image courtesy of Bandung Center for New Media Arts.

## MAPS AND MOSAICS

**DZ:** What do you consider are some of BCfNMA's most memorable projects?

**GHI:** I think the exhibition "Hetero Utopia: Mapping the Urban Terrain" (2006) was one of the most memorable.

**TIR:** That was organized in conjunction with "Artepolis: Creative Culture & the Making of Place."

**GHI:** At the time, Tanto, Reza, and Reina were running the exhibitions in Bandung while I was doing a project in Manchester for the Futuresonic Festival.

**TIR:** It was really hard for us to be in the same place at the same time doing the same project.

**GHI:** Yeah, that was a very busy time. I think maybe some of us got burned out after that because too many things happened.

**DZ:** What was the exhibition like?

**TIR:** As far as I can remember, “Artepolis” was created by the Department of Architecture at the ITB. I lobbied that they should involve BCfNMA and ITB’s art department by saying something like, “Come on, guys, you are so old fashioned and you don’t know anything about exhibitions. You should talk to my friends, BCfNMA. They know everything about exhibitions and cities.”

So, there was a part focused on architecture and urbanism that was exhibited at the Architecture Gallery and then another part that had videos and performances was set up at Soemardja Gallery. We exhibited two things at the Architecture Gallery, one of which was the “36 Frames Photography Project.”

**GHI:** It was like a public participatory artistic project. We had an open call for anyone who was interested and the requirement was very simple: they must work with one roll of film — which consists of 36 frames — and then we develop and put up everything. In the end, we saw some kind of mosaic of images representing daily life in Bandung.

**TIR:** The other one was the “Urban Cartography Project” which was this huge map of Bandung and then we handed out post-it notes so the viewers could just pick some places and write something like, “This is the place where I asked this girl whom I’m in love with.”

**GHI:** It was very funny, we even had a spot of drug dealers on that map. I think we can say that that project was like the integration of BCfNMA and Tobucil because, before that, Tobucil had done a similar project but focused on the literary community. Before “Hetero Utopia,” we had already expanded this idea — by mapping new and emerging creative communities in Bandung — at the CP Biennale in [2005].

**ME:** How did you fund these projects of various scales?

**GHI:** Most of our projects came from our own pockets because, at that time, we were having a very hard time finding support from both the government and foreign funding agencies.

The first funding support that we had was actually a micro-fund from Hivos back in 2005, but it was only to support the third Asia-Europe Art Camp. The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) also supported us and gave us some money to do some projects and we also received funding from Arts Network Asia (ANA) back in 2008.

Finally, in 2010, Hivos gave us structural funds, so it wasn’t for specific projects but to help us run for several years. There were also some projects from the government, either from the West Java Agency for Research and Development, the BAPPEDA, or the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy.

In the end, most of our projects and activities were still funded with our own pocket money which — I have to admit — became one of the biggest challenges and burdens in the end.

**RH:** It was basically volunteer work. We worked because we liked being together, the ideas, and the energy. We were happy... but we were poor.

**GHI:** And also drunk.

**RH:** It was a happy time.

**SBY:** Around 2005 onwards was also when I think a lot of international agencies such as ASEF and the British Council started working in Bandung, right? You also mentioned this earlier network around the late '90s. How did these international collaborations change around the late '00s?

**GHI:** In 2004, we took part in the [International] Symposium for Electronic Arts (ISEA) in Helsinki. This was after Tanto had a residency program with the Australian Network for Art and Technology (ANAT) and one of the curators there was working with ISEA so we got invited. From there, we started to collaborate with some friends at ASEF and then in 2005, we proposed to host the third Asia-Europe Art Camp. I think after that, our network started to develop.

As we started to actively engage with the international art scene, I realized that we were starting to lose our connection with the local context and that we weren't interacting much with the local art scene. That's partly why we did the "Urban Cartography Project." After that, a lot of people started to pay attention to what was happening in the local DIY scene. Even our city government started to develop a specific policy on creative economy and then, around 2008 to 2010, it reached the national level when the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) government initiated the Ministry for Tourism and Creative Economy. Personally, I realized that these emerging practices that we once thought were cool started to lose their coolness when the government started to pay attention and allocate some money to we don't really know where.





People working at or with BCfNMA. In the photo are Tarlen Handayani of Tobucil, Gustaff H. Iskandar, Reina Wulansari, and R.E. Hartanto, c. 2005. Image courtesy of Bandung Center for New Media Arts.



Working studio, c. 2005. Image courtesy of Bandung Center for New Media Arts.

## **GOING LEGAL**

**ME:** Did BCfNMA actually end? Or did it just transform? What was the decision like? It's quite noticeable that Reza and Tanto left.

**GHI:** I think in 2006, when we started to collaborate with ASEF, we somehow started to realize that, to work with some funding agencies or even to accept some donors, we needed to have a legal entity. We agreed to send an application for Common Room to become a nonprofit organization or a foundation. Tanto, you were the director of Common Room, right?

**RH:** Yeah, I was appointed. Tobucil was also involved but only in person.

**GHI:** Tarlen was a bit reluctant to be a part of the organization because I think she didn't really believe in official or formal institutions or something like that.

I think 2006 to 2008 was like a culmination because we had a bit of funding so the activities became more intense, the scale started to grow, and we also started collaborating with different international agencies. But still, money was a problem.

Also, I was already married to Reina and I was just about to have my first daughter, so I became busy with my own family. Tanto was also deciding on how he would continue his career as a painter and I think Reza also started to run an architectural agency in Bandung. So, 2006 to 2007 was like a transition period where we started getting busy doing our own things. We never openly say that BCfNMA shut down, but it is more like it dissolved into our individual practices.

Since we already registered Common Room as a legal entity, I thought it needed to continue because it wasn't only me, Tanto, Reza, and Reina, but there was also a board of advisors. When Tanto and Reza decided to pursue their careers, the advisors told me that Common Room had to continue its mission so I decided to continue and somehow, it's still running today. Also, Reza invited Ridwan Kamil — who is now in our government — to be one of our advisors. I'm still quite surprised because he picked up this idea to set up a new creative movement in Bandung and he became a city mayor because of that.

**TIR:** At the time, I was always talking about architecture and urban design but I wasn't practicing it. The money problem was also quite huge for me. I had this offer to work as an urban designer in Jakarta and, at first, I thought I could still be active in BCfNMA but the workload was hell and that made my involvement less existent. At some point, I was in Bandung and I asked Ridwan Kamil if he would like to become a board member for Common Room Networks Foundation.

**SBY:** Maybe the conspiracy theory that new media art was part of the global capitalist agenda was right!

Just a comment, I don't mean this in a negative sense but the irony here is that BCfNMA sounds very formal like an art center and, in a sense, it's almost like a gesture, but then the way you operated was to do something very avant-garde. And then Common Room developed from that and, in trying to involve different communities, it almost took on a kind of institutionalized form or structure as a foundation.

**GHI:** Yeah, I think that's quite true. BCfNMA was never registered until we realized that, to work within the new situation in Bandung then, we needed to find a third space that was in between the formal and non-formal, the institutional and non-institutional, and other poles. The ideological aspect for this approach and strategy, these ideas of dialogism, actually came from Reza.

So, Common Room as a legal entity is very formal but, in practice, our projects and activities are basically, as Tanto mentioned, volunteer-based; it runs because we like it and we are passionate to be involved. It's also quite strange because although BCfNMA wasn't registered, we were still able to work with ASEF and ANA.

**SBY:** They never asked, "Is this actually a legal organization?"



**GHI:** Well, they asked us but the only thing we sent them was this letter from our legal advisor saying that the organization is in the process of formalization.

**TIR:** The letter just said, "They are legal, guys. Trust me on this."



The private house in a quiet residential area of Bandung where BCfNMA was located, c. 2005. Image courtesy of Bandung Center for New Media Arts.

### **LIKE A JAZZ COMBO**

**ME:** How have Tanto and Reza been involved over the years? Because legally, you are registered as co-founders.

**GHI:** We renew our license every five years so now we have more people from non-artistic backgrounds. Generally, we're more focused now on programs featuring art, culture, and technology as tools to empower people especially those in rural areas. Our interest at the moment is to work closely with indigenous communities with regards to the protection of tropical forests and recognizing their land rights. You can say that we shifted from urban to rural or that we are now in between urban and rural.

**ME:** Do you — Tanto and Reza — have any regrets? One, about leaving, and two, about stuff that you wish you could have done before?

**TIR:** I think change is needed for an organization like Common Room or BCfNMA. I liken it to a jazz combo; Miles Davis' jazz combos only lasted for some time before they were dismantled or replaced because new perspectives were needed each time. New paradigms and challenges will always emerge and we should deal with them. I am very grateful that I have provided some inspiration.

**RH:** I don't have any regrets because I think, in 2007, I needed to leave. I've been doing this for 22 years and there were two occasions when I felt that this was all too crazy and I wanted to do things other than be an artist. But, personally, not making or experiencing art makes me feel miserable. That's how I realized that this is perhaps my way of life. When it was time for me to leave, I actually felt that a big burden was lifted off my chest; I can focus on and continue my practice and that is what I have been doing since.

Regarding things I feel I should have done, I think I did everything. All of us gave it our all and we did all we could. When I left BCfNMA, Gustaff and Reina took care of it and it's still there; it still exists, it is still active and expanding. I think the organization is in good hands so I feel no regret. I'm happy to have been a part of it historically.

**ME:** What do you think was BCfNMA's impact or lasting influence, if any? Besides its influence on Common Room and Tobucil, how do you think it contributed to the Bandung scene or even the Indonesian or regional scene?

**RH:** Well, of course, historically, we were there during that moment and we co-created and collaborated with a lot of people and institutions. The thing about institutions in Indonesia is, usually, they don't last long. They usually come and go, but Tobucil and Common Room are still here. I think if we try to see — especially in academic terms — the historical connections or the development of new media art in Bandung so far, I think Bandung society will look into those two organizations. Of course I'm not in the position to say how Common Room and BCfNMA have grown so far and how far is its reach in society but I'm sure it has had an important contribution to the artistic and creative community in Bandung.

**TIR:** From my end, it's worth noting that "Artepolis" is still going on. Personally, the most impactful edition was the first one, not because we were involved in it, but because it was an architecture event that had an exhibition whose curation was quite different from the usual architecture exhibition in Indonesia, and — I'm sorry to say — I still don't see any improvement in the architecture field since. In a way, I'm quite grateful that I was a part of that, so thank you Gustaff, Reina, and Tanto.

**GHI:** I think BCfNMA and Common Room taught me not only how to run an organization, but also how to actively engage in certain issues and activities. For example, I never would have imagined that we would one day do projects in Addis Ababa or Kenya or collaborate with an indigenous community to set up a local internet infrastructure that is run, built, and developed by the local community.

If you look at the archival materials of the South-South Media Lab Collaboration (SSMLab) project, it's quite interesting how people applied these creative approaches towards the internet. Digital media has been expanding but at the same time, there's still a huge gap between what's happening in the arts scene and the new media scene. They're kind of different worlds and the people who strongly engage with the internet and digital media don't directly engage with the art or cultural scene and vice versa.

But, somehow, there are some intersections. Artists that primarily engage with the internet and digital media are now starting to explore and work in different directions not directly connected with the contemporary art world — directions that are more into activism, advocacies, or the struggle for democracy. We are still facing the same challenges that we had back in '98. So, yeah, both BCfNMA and Tobucil had a very important and significant influence on what Common Room is becoming now.

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The online interview took place on 25 October 2020. This interview was edited for length and clarity.

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**Gustaff H. Iskandar** was born in 1974 and graduated from the Department of Fine Arts, Faculty of Art & Design, Institut Teknologi Bandung (FSRD – ITB) in 1999. After finishing his studies, he became active in the arts management field, in addition to writing and participating in various art projects and exhibitions. He co-founded the Bandung Center for New Media Arts in 2001, where he engaged in research and development of media arts and multidisciplinary artistic practice in Bandung, Indonesia. The organization later changed to a non-profit organization known as Common Room Networks Foundation (Common Room) in 2006, and became an open platform for arts, culture, and ICT/Media in 2009. From its inception, Common Room has been committed to maintaining a space for freedom of expression and civic empowerment and to nurturing an urban-rural collaboration platform in the local and global context. He currently lives and works in Bandung, and also runs a small farm in Sukabumi.

**R.E. Hartanto** was born in Bandung in 1973. He graduated with a degree in Painting Studio from the Faculty of Art and Design - Institut Teknologi Bandung (FSRD – ITB) in 1998 and pursued further studies at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam from 2001 to 2002. Since 1998, Tanto has been creating works, participating in group and solo exhibitions, organizing workshops and art projects, as well as participating in residency programs on various occasions. Apart from creating works, Tanto also teaches courses and writes for his art blog.

**T. Ismail Reza** graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Architecture Engineering from the Universitas Katolik Parahyangan (UNPAR) in 1997 and a Master's in Urban Design from the Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB) in 2000. He has gained experience in both international and local consultant firms, has been responsible for projects in Indonesia and overseas, and is a Senior Urban Designer and Urban Design Director at Urbane Indonesia. Previously, he co-founded the Bandung Center for New Media Arts and was a writer for the Jakartabeat website.

**More info:**

Marie Le Sourd. "[Bandung Center for New Media Arts: Local Commitment and International Collaboration.](#)" (Nov 2005)

"[Common Room Networks Foundation/ Bandung Centre for New Media Arts.](#)" (5 July 2011)

Idhar Resmadi. "[Post New-Order: Common Room and Alternative Spaces as an Art Practice in Bandung.](#)" (9 Nov 2015)

[Bandung Art Event 2001](#)

[CP BIENNALE 2005: Urban/Culture](#)

"[Hetero Utopia: Mapping the Urban Terrain.](#)" (19 Jan 2007)

"[Flashback: The Third Asia-Europe Art Camp 2005.](#)" (20 Jan 2007)

Gustaff Harriman Iskandar. "[Critical Reflection & Speculative Review on Art, Culture, ICT/Media in Bandung - Indonesia.](#)" (22 Feb 2010)

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