Grand-children of the Volcano — Gather Around!

Mira Asriningtyas

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"Magic, then, in its perhaps most primordial sense, is the experience of existing in a world made up of multiple intelligences, the intuition that every form one perceives is an experiencing form, an entity with its own predictions and sensations, albeit sensations that are very different from our own" – David Abram [1]

When I was a child, there were some special nights when my parents would let me and my sisters stay awake past our bedtimes, to take us out for a stroll where we would visit relatives, eat out and then on the way home: the real treat— the distant spectacle of the incandescent lava. There were some favorite prime spots with which to watch this show: by the street, near the river, near the paddy fields, and on a hill. Flirting with its danger from a safe distance. But at that time, as a child, we did not worry about its danger. Our late father would say, that as long as the incandescent lava keeps on flowing, the volcano is not blocked, therefore, it is not dangerous. It was a naïve thing to say, but we believed him anyway. For us at that time, the excitement to see the slowly rolling incandescent lava was like that of watching a firework show. With glimmering eyes, we stared at the majestic beauty of the volcano. My younger sister would sit on my father's shoulder to get a better view and I would sit on top of the warm car hood. Our mother would keep reminding us not to point our fingers towards the volcano for it is considered impolite to do so. "Just like how it is impolite to point your finger at your grandparents'', she would say.

My first Mount Merapi eruption was on an ordinary day in 1994. I was still 8 years old. We were in class when the headmaster came and said to the teacher, calmly, but with authority: *"Simbah watuk, kabeh kon cepet langsung bali* (The Grandpa is coughing, everyone should now head straight back home)". The teacher did not want to cause chaos, so, nervously she said "Children, class dismissed. Everyone should now go home carefully, directly to your parents, as fast as you can". I walked home with four friends who lived nearby, with a lot of questions on my mind. We saw a tall dark plume of smoke rising from the volcano. By the street, there were a lot of people. The neighbors were gathering outside with concerned looks on their faces. I saw my aunt holding the hand of my 2-year-old sister, while carrying my newly born sister. I could not hold my questions in any longer. Who is 'Grandpa' that is coughing? What is that dark grey curly ash lingering above our village? Why the panic? What is going on?

1
David Abram, The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-human World (New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Penguin Random House LLC, 1996), 9-10



Photo. 26 : Eruption du 22/11/1994 à Kaliurang.
Ce cliché pris vers 11h30 montre la colline de Plawangan recouverte des cendres issues des nuée ardentes. *(Cliché : M. Marshall)*

Mt. Merapi eruption 1994 seen from Kaliurang (courtesy of BPPTKG, photo by M. Marshall)

My aunt, the storyteller that she is, sat us all down and told us in a hushed voice, "Let me tell you a family secret. It is time for you to keep it and hold it close to your heart for times like these. In the volcano, there is a kingdom where our ancestors live and work. We, the villagers, are the great-grandchildren of the volcano. We shall respect the volcano, and in return, we are protected. If our Grandpa 'coughs', a construction is taking place in the kingdom and we need to stay out of the way for a while". There was more to this story, more cautionary tales and customs that I would learn the rest of that day. But before that, her hushed voice was interrupted by several cars and ambulances rushing from the Northern side of the village carrying casualties. Apparently, instead of 'staying out of the way', some unassuming tourists decided to go higher to get a better and closer view of the pyroclastic cloud. That is when the wind blew towards them, carrying the *nuée ardente*[2] that the locals referred to as '*wedhus gembel*' (crimped-hair sheep). For the next week, the whole village was evacuated to a safer distance. The following weeks thereafter, our father and another man in the village were patrolling the night in *ronda* (night watch) groups, creating a community protection system with codes and the sounds of a slit-drum. As long as the slit-drum is not rung, the villagers can sleep soundly in the warmth of their homes.

After this first experience of Mount Merapi's eruption, I learn that the volcano and everything around it are considered a living being—all the rocks, the gravel, the trees, the animals, the mountains, the rivers, the rain, the nature and other species have their spirits, intelligence, and power. People around the volcano believe they are sharing the living space with not only animals and plants but also with the ancestor spirits, deities, and supernatural beings and protectors of nature. Living side by side, it is important to respect and protect the visible and invisible, to keep balance and reciprocity, this ecological wisdom resulting in sacred areas[3] remaining pristine and protected. After that day, our bedtime stories ranged from Hans Christian Andersen and Enid Blyton to the oral fables of the mythical kingdom of Mount Merapi and the *Bahureksa* -

2
Nuee Ardente is a highly destructive, fast-moving, incandescent mass of gas-enveloped particles that is associated with certain types of volcanic eruptions (source: https://www.britannica.com/science/nuee-ardente)

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Areas that are considered 'sacred' and believed to be ruled by the Sovereign of Merapi are including the forest area such as "Hutan Bingungan" (forest of confusion), dangerous area on the volcano such as Pasar Bubrah (the spirit market), and water sources such as Umbul Lanang, Umbul Wadon, and Umbul Bebeng, among others.

the Sovereigns of Mount Merapi.

We would listen eagerly as our parents told the story of the animals that belong to the *Bahureksa,* who live on Mount Merapi — from the blinking fish, the soldier-protector frogs, to the animals that are considered more sacred than the other, such as the wild horses living at Hutan Patuk Alap-Alap and the white tiger living in Hutan Blumbang[4] (both *hutan*, or forests, located at the verge of myth and reality). In reality, a white tiger is not a common animal of Java island, but the White Tiger of Mount Merapi is believed to be a mythical being—an apparition of the protecting ancestor of the villagers beneath Merapi. Some people who have actually encountered the White Tiger said it gives warning to mountaineers and it is taboo to capture or kill them. When a mountaineer meets the White Tiger on the path they are walking on, the mountaineer needs to turn back to where they came from, change the route, or go back home altogether. Otherwise, there might be misfortune or danger lurking in front of them.

At the same time, other non-mythical animals that belong to the Sovereign of Mount Merapi play important roles as early warning systems for Mount Merapi's eruptions. When the eruption is near, the wild animals will come out of hiding and enter the villages. According to local belief, these animals are sent by the *Bahureksa* to give warning—telling people it is time to prepare and evacuate because an eruption is near. Unusual animal behavior as an early warning system, used to predict approaching disasters, is not specific to the slopes of Mount Merapi. Anecdotal evidence from around the world tells the story of animals fleeing from earthquakes, tsunamis, storms, and volcanic eruptions, even before natural disasters actually happen. Although some scientists remain skeptical about this, in general, animals have heightened instincts, feeling even the slightest change in their environment, with an ability to sense geophysical signals before humans. Unusual animal behavior as an early warning system is also among other local knowledge systems passed down between generations to read preliminary signs of an eruption. Though, after many years of experiencing an eruption cycle, the local people possess a certain tactile memory, such as feeling a certain heat and sudden rise of temperature, the rumbling sound of the stone rolling in the distance, or a certain prickle on the skin felt when a thin layer of ash begins to fall from the remain of the *nuée ardente*.

In the local Javanese knowledge system, there is a learning process known as '*niteni, niroake, nambahi*'[5]. Firstly, *niteni*, meaning to observe (applied as '*ilmu titen*', a traditional Javanese science based on the sensitivity to natural signs, characteristics, and repeated observation to read natural phenomena that precede disasters.) Secondly, *niroake*, meaning to mimic (the next step one needs to take to elicit change after observing). Thirdly, *nambahi*, meaning to add value (an effort to ensure timeliness and context in responding to natural events that have already been observed, understood, and controlled through the previous two steps). This knowledge is passed on through generations using folklore, bedtime stories, and anecdotes. These stories also share tales of the sacred forest and enchanted areas such as the river and the cliff where people are forbidden to cut the tree or the grass – for to remove anything from where it was, or to contaminate the forest in any way, remains forbidden. It makes me question whether myth, stories, and superstition was how people in the past translated 'logic' and 'knowledge' before such thinking came to be classed as 'universal', 'scientific' standardized terms?

4
Lucas Sasongko, Manusia Jawa dan Gunung Merapi: Persepsi dan Kepercayaan (Yogyakarta: Gajah Mada University Press, 1991), 64

5
3N (Niteni, Niroake, Nambahi) is a local Javanese knowledge transmission system. This learning system is famously used by Indonesian activist Ki Hadjar Dewantara or Raden Mas Soewardi Soerjaningrat though no direct written reference by Soerjaningrat can be found. | Sumiyati, and Sri Adi Widodo. Pengaruh Konsep 3N "Niteni, Nirokke, Nambahi" Terhadap Prestasi Belajar Matematika Ditinjau dari Keaktifan Siswa Kelas X SMK. PDF. Yogyakarta: UST, 2018. https://jurnal.ustjogja.ac.id/index.php/etnomatnesia/article/view/2414

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From my childhood, I learned that tales of Mount Merapi are told and spoken as sayings (ie. Grandpa is having a party) and symbols. Cautionary tales are told as stories and parables filled with annotated values and knowledge that is sublime and sometimes abstract. The master of that language was Mas Penewu Suraksohargo, better known as Mbah Maridjan ("Grandfather Maridjan"), who was an in-betweeners[6] - the spiritual gatekeeper of Mount Merapi. He was appointed guardian of Mount Merapi in 1982 after the passing of his father, also named Suraksohargo (the "guardian of the mountain"). When he was not making one of his heartwarming jokes, he spoke in complex codes that sounded both simple and philosophical. His eyes glimmered with wit and his face filled with a warm smile. He was born and spent his whole life in Kinahrejo—a small area in Kaliadem village just 4.7 km away from the crater of Mount Merapi.

I first met Mbah Maridjan in 2004 together with a group of local environmentalists. At that time, on the way to Kinahrejo, there was an actual gate, the same one now used by tourists, with a fee, to enter the area. Entering the gate would feel like entering a sacred village from a different time. As the vehicle brought you all the way up, the street became narrow and the trees high, limiting one's peripheral vision while focusing on our forward path as the hustle bustle of the city fell behind. Gone was the bombardment of advertising, the air pollution, and the trace of city life. The experience was immersive and it felt as if we were embraced by a higher power that was both nurturing and protecting. Mbah Maridjan lived at the end of that street.

He lived a humble life mirrored by the villagers in his care. His principle as the guardian of not only Mount Merapi, but that of 'nature', was that you do not sell anything in Kinahrejo— not for tourism, nor for the natural resource extraction industry. I remember it to be the embodiment of the classic Javanese saying *"Adoh ratu cedhak watu"* ('Far from the King, closer to the stone') giving visual to the geographical distance between the center of governance (the Kingdom) and the mountain, where people learn from life and nature (thus with a better understanding of the interdependence between human and non-human rather than prioritizing statistic, government policy, or technological mediations of reality). Mbah Maridjan believed that humans have freedom to express their difference in opinion, based on their acquired and personal knowledge. He believed that no knowledge is more superior than another. Rather, each one adds to the value of the other. One of his famous sayings was "I am just a foolish man, for a foolish man would be happy with what he got, a smart man would want more. And as an uneducated villager, I try to slowly *ngombe roso* (sharpen my sensitivity), *ngombe pangerten* (sharpen my understanding), and *ngombe lelakon* (learn a way of life). Thus, I consciously try not to just live (merely breathing), but also have a meaningful life".[7]

Taking up the position of the fool, he is uncorrupted and true to his belief that nature will provide and keep you safe for as long as you protect it. Mbah Maridjan himself was an avid environmentalist who protected the village from our current extractive sand mining industry—especially those who use big machines and government development projects that destructively jeopardize the local environment. His belief caused several frictions between him and the Indonesian government. The most famous disagreement was the one he had with the Sultan of

6
"In-betweeners are humans becoming media who bring the distance, non-human close. Inbetweeners provide forms of consistency and continuity among change." | Bobbette, Adam. "The Inbetweeners" WdW Review. April 2016. Accessed January 17, 2021. https://www.fkawdw.nl/en/review/desk/the_inbetweeners

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M.Baharuddin, "Manusia Sejati dalam Falsafah Mbah Maridjan dan Abdul Karim al-Jilli", Journal: Analisis, Vol.XIII, No.1, June 2013. p.228

Yogyakarta in 2006. Soon after disobeying the government's order to evacuate, when Mount Merapi's activity level was raised to its highest, he became a popular icon. He refused to leave the volcano because he believed it was his duty to guard its safety, and his trained instinct told him it was not yet time to evacuate. The Sultan of Yogyakarta was furious and went to the village to reason with him, but he stated that he would only obey the Sultan's decree as a King. Yogyakarta is a special region which acknowledges the Sultan of Yogyakarta as both the king and the governor. Mbah Maridjan considered the Sultan's order to evacuate as a word of a governor, but not the decree of a King.[8] A governor would rather listen to the scientific data, whereas the King would listen to the signs of nature.

Mbah Maridjan's premonition proved him right. When the eruption finally happened, the damage was not significant. While everyone else was busy observing the volcano and turning their eyes to the Northern part of Yogyakarta, a 5.9 Richter Scale earthquake hit the Southern part of Jogjakarta, which took more than 3,000 lives in only 57 seconds. The people living beneath Mount Merapi were spared. Mbah Maridjan was then celebrated as the hero of the people, the dissident who dared to stand his ground against the government. Rumors of his power were widespread — how he can walk barefoot on hot ground burning with lava flow; how he can always find a missing person in the jungle of Mount Merapi; how he can suddenly transport himself from his house to the Sultan's palace 30 km away; how he can read the signs of nature more accurately than anyone else, and so on. Mountaineers, villagers, and people who personally know him excitedly shared their own anecdotal evidence of his power. Soon enough the media arrived, reducing him into an icon and a media sensation defined by a single moment of disobedience. This unwanted fame completely overlooking his deeply rooted knowledge and years of experiential wisdom. This spotlight was against his will. Soon after that, the gate to his village was guarded by the locals. No media, no fans, no opportunist seeking for his blessing, nor an unassuming stranger could meet him. He tried to hide from the spotlight but it kept coming back. Fame is a dangerous currency whose affect ate him up from the inside. The iconic warm smile and witty sparkle in his eyes went dim. Long before the massive Mount Merapi eruption in 2010 took his life away, his spirit was slowly fading away. His passing marked the end of an era. With him, gone is the sacred spirituality that used to enclave the village that sells nothing. Now, everything is for sale. Elizabeth Inandiak, a writer and a good friend of Mbah Maridjan, sympathized with his predicament. In her book, titled 'Babad Ngalor Ngidul'*9*, she wrote: "After being purified by ash, the land of Kinahrejo is littered with overflowing plastic waste, which suffocates the breath of the newly planted trees. (It was a) successive disaster. The former sacred village beneath Mount Merapi becomes a big market and the volcano becomes the main commodity"[10]

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"Every attempt to definitively say what language is is subject to a curious limitation. For the only medium with which we can define language is language itself. […] It may be best, then, to leave language undefined, and to thus acknowledge its open-endedness, its mysteriousness."[11]

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As a governor, the Sultan needed to follow the strict natural disaster mitigation plan of the Indonesian government as a follow up to the formal advice of the BPPTKG (Center for Investigation and Development of Geological Disaster Technology) after a significant rise of volcanic activity was detected. But in his role as a King and spiritual leader of Yogyakarta, he had an option to consult the higher power and read the signs of nature if he believed the scenario was heading toward a different direction. In such a case, as a King, he could give a different mandate or decree if necessary. In this case, not to risk putting the people in danger, the King decided to follow the advice of the Indonesian government and only give formal orders as the governor of Yogyakarta.

9
The title, 'Babad Ngalor Ngidul' can not simply be translated into "The Chronicle of North to South" for the term 'Ngalor-ngidul' is a Javanese word is now commonly used to give the meaning of speech that is not connected, awkward, a sign of insanity. However, in this Babad Ngalor-Ngidul, the author shows that ngalor-ngidul has a different meaning, namely an ancient intimate conversation between those in the north (lor) and those in the south (kidul). In the context of the Jogjakarta people who have lived in the embrace of the South Sea and Mount Merapi for generations, Ngalor-ngidul is nothing but a reciprocal relationship, interdependent between hot clouds in the north and the waves of the sea waves in the south.

10
Elizabeth D. Inandiak, Babad Ngalor Ngidul (Yogyakarta: KPG, 2016) [free translation]

11
David Abram, The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-human World (New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Penguin Random House LLC, 1996), 73.

As I am writing this in January 2021, the volcano is rumbling. The rising activity of Mount Merapi marks the end of our research trip and our walks under the volcano. The activity status of the volcano has been raised to level III out of IV on November 5, 2020. On November 23, there was news that a family of Javan leopard was already roaming the street of a nearby village[12], something that people believe indicates an eruption is near. The BPPTKG (Center for Investigation and Development of Geological Disaster Technology) clarified that people should remain calm and the presence of wild animals in the villages indicated nothing serious. They made a follow up statement saying that the footprints of the 'Javan leopard' might actually be just from a dog[13]. It was a false alarm.

On the other side of the village, people already start parking their cars heading South, ready to flee; old newspapers were crumpled up to block the airways of homes to minimize damage in the event the village got hit by ash rain; and at night, the men gathered around bonfires to watch over the villagers, sitting in view of the volcano should the scientific monitor fail. Even after several years of low activity, people recall daily mundane tasks that need to be done during every cycle of eruption in our village. What is different now is the sound and the livestream video. No more *walkie-talkie* and makeshift radio station, the way it used to be before 2010. People today follow every movement and every sound of the volcano through official and non-official YouTube channels, which stream live CCTV from many different angles[14], accessible from all over the world. There are thousands of people watching such livestream every night and day during this time, and the live chat function is especially busy, commenting on every movement of the volcano while analyzing it like a celebrity hot gossip column.



Mt.Merapi live streaming in a villager's living room - photo by Granita Elsara

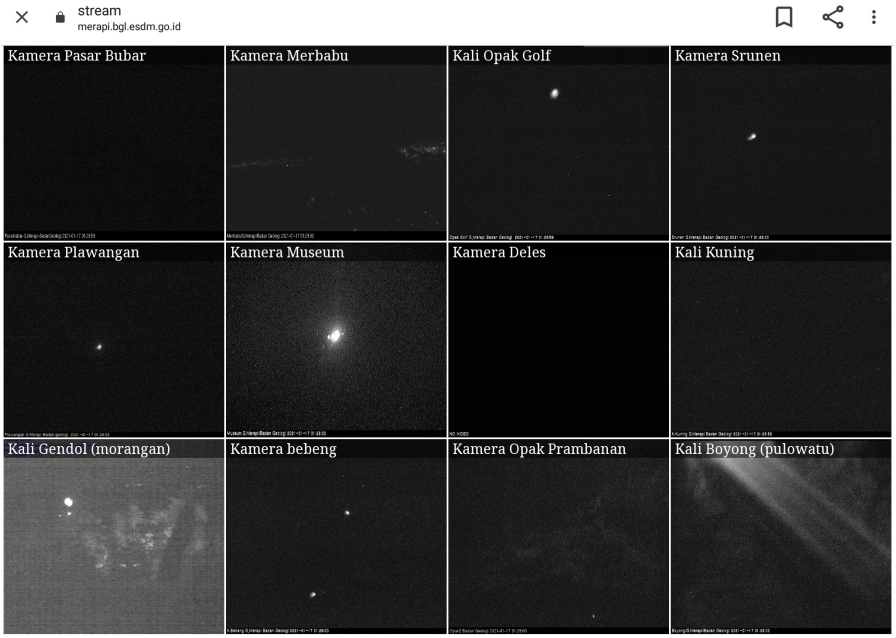
I wonder what our Grandpa the volcano would think of his notoriety. It was, once upon a time, considered banal and disrespectful to stare or point directly toward the volcano. There were also times when some sacred areas deliberately remained a mystery. Now, even the view of the Pasar Bubrah (the ghost market) is streamed live 24 hours, seven days a week, where scientists, with their fancy devices in helicopters, reporting results in almost-daily ZOOM seminars that the public can follow through the official BPPTKG YouTube channel. The links to these web seminars are also shared with the villagers' WhatsApp group, who are

12
Arief, Teuku Muhammad Valdy. "Jejak Satwa Diduga Macan Tutul Ditemukan Di Jalur Evakuasi Gunung Merapi." KOMPAS.com. November 23, 2020. Accessed December 14, 2020.

13
Aprian, Dony. "Penjelasan TNGM Soal Jejak Diduga Macan Tutul Di Jalur Evakuasi Gunung Merapi Halaman All." KOMPAS.com. November 24, 2020. Accessed December 14, 2020.

14
The most popular unofficial YouTube live streaming link: https://youtu.be/wElf8MZgxY4 is even more popular than the official BPPTKG YouTube live stream. Most of the channels refer to the official BPPTKG camera and seismograph. Link to watch the official surveillance camera of Mt.Merapi is: https://merapi.bgl.esdm.go.id/viewer_images/index.php

avid followers. The conversations during *ronda* (night watch) now consist of scientific terms like the changing morphology and deformation of the landscape while dream interpretations of the in-betweeners are replaced with chatter about scientific analysis of possible avalanche, different types of earthquakes, also length and direction of the eruption. It is as if the volcano seems fully decipherable and transparent, even if unpredictable. Such cold and clinical discussion also makes Mount Merapi feel distant and detached from life.



'Titik api diam' seen through BPPTKG multiple live stream cameras at night

On January 4, 2021, the "titik api diam"[15] (still point of the lava flame), at the peak crater wall of Mount Merapi is visible, suggesting that we are now entering a new eruption phase. Only when the incandescent lava began to flow down the South-West side of Mount Merapi did we realize how much we had missed our childhood memories of such spectacular night shows! As a living being, this volcano's eruption pattern and streamline of lava flow is continuously changing. As a result, the night show of incandescent lava seen from Kaliurang stopped around 2001. After 20 years, it is now back! It excites us — the grandchildren of Mount Merapi — and instead of digitally watching a live stream on our phones or TVs, we once again go out at night for the spectacle and the memory of our childhood. We once again gather around the fire with piping hot tea and noodle soup, telling stories of the deities and the many sovereigns of this mountain. Slowly, the feeling of proximity and tactile understanding that used to make us feel safe is back. Once again, the volcano feels familiar instead of frightening.

15
'Titik api diam' does not have a direct translation. It is a flame or shimmering red glow which emerges from the lava dome. The phenomena is common to volcanoes that have domes because the eruption process involves lava breaking through the dome. In the case of Merapi, the process can often be seen from a great distance.



The incandescent lava seen from a public square in Kaliurang - photo by Bernhard Awuy, 2021

Author's Bio

Mira Asriningtyas (b.1986) works as an independent curator and writer. She completed De Appel Curatorial Program in 2017 at De Appel Art Center - Amsterdam and RAW Academie 6: CURA in 2019 at RAW Material Company - Dakar. The idea of learning back from magic, ghosts, and polycentric knowledge rooted in local context as an attempt to decolonize the knowledge system, promote ecological sustainability, and further investigate the remaining trace of colonialism have been central to her current research practice. Her writings have been published in books, online publication, exhibition catalog, monograph, and magazine from Indonesia, The Netherlands, Italy, Belgium, and Australia.

In her curatorial practice, she is especially interested in working on site-specific multidisciplinary projects within the practice of everyday life as a means to address socio-political issues and history. Some of her projects are "Poetry of Space" (Jakarta & Yogyakarta, 2014); "Fine (Art) Dining" (Lir Space – Yogyakarta, 2016); "Goodluck, See You After The Revolution" (UVA – Amsterdam, 2017) ; "Why is Everybody Being So Nice?" (De Appel Art Center _ Amsterdam, 2017); "Why is Everybody Being So Nice: The Power Nap" (Stedelijk Museum – Amsterdam, 2017); "Coming Soon" (exhibition at the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo - Turin and publication by NERO - Rome, 2018), "Curated by LIR" seven solo exhibition series spread out throughout the year of 2018 - 2020 (KKF - Yogyakarta); and The Transient Museum of a Thousand Conversation (ISCP – New York, 2020) among others. She is a co-founder of LIR Space, an art space in Yogyakarta that turned into a curator collective (LIR) in 2019. In 2017, they initiated a biennial site-specific project titled "900mdpl" in Kaliurang, an aging resort village under an active volcano Mt.Merapi in order to preserve the collective memories of the people. The project brings together local and international artists for a research residency and create a socially-engaged archive of the space and the 3rd edition (2021) is coming up.

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