

COLLABORATIVE CULTURAL PRACTICES OF ACTIVIST NETWORKS IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA¹

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Festivals as galleries

This paper focuses on visual culture in the collaborative settings of contemporary Indonesian activism. Specifically, it points to three activist festivals in Java as sites of production and display: The Forest Art Festival, Festival Mata Air, and Ok.Video. These highly networked cultural events have emerged as part of a building momentum of local struggles for environmental and social health. As activist communities conceive, plan, and produce specific responses to crises, their cultural practices, including their visual languages, develop new relationships to local, national and global politics, providing a viable alternative to formalised channels of presenting politicised artwork.

This paper explores three examples of works made at such festivals, not only as innovative forms of art and activism, but as sites of friction between the very ideas of art and activism, what Anna Tsing describes as the ‘sticky engagements’ of interconnection (Tsing 2005, p. 6). By offering an opportunity for specific and detailed analysis, each of these works contributes to new understandings of the relationships between artists and communities and helps to demonstrate the

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significance of the festivals from which they are born: there is the temporary hangout zone created in a contentious collaboration between S. Tedi D. and local workers at the Forest Art Festival, a place for sitting; the flirtatious rubbish brooches offered to participants/consumers by Djuadi at Festival Mata Air, a commodity for wearing; and the voyeuristic story of play interrupting the daily grind of work by Radio Prambors at the Ok.Video Festival in Jakarta, a game for watching.

Sitting

Igloo Tropis, S. Teddy D.

Forest Art Festival, Randublatung, November 2005

bamboo, jati leaves, 4m x 1.5m

The original idea of the Forest Art Festival was to expose corruption in the local government by staging an event that drew people to a disputed piece of land on the edge of the town of Randublatung, in the heart of the timber belt of Central Java. The site had been ignored by government, reforested by activists, and then converted into a 'town forest', apparently to appease activist demands for transparency in the granting of foresting licences (Kisawa 2005). The Forest Art Festival was organised by a group called anakseribupulau, made up of about thirty young people *asli Randu*, (originally from Randublatung). The festival program itself was a somewhat uneasy combination of local traditional performance, spontaneous spoken word pieces, forest education workshops, and punk bands. Many artists came from the cities and produced site-specific work in collaboration with local residents. One example is by S. Teddy D.; *Igloo Tropis* (Tropical Igloo), a beautiful installation creating an enclosed space in the public park .

Igloo Tropis had a low entrance with a corridor and a round 'room,' the ceiling just high enough for most festival participants to stand. It was erected at the main site of the festival and was then used throughout the event as a social centre and place to escape the rain. Made of layered *jati* (teak) leaves, rather than ice, the work has obvious irony in its title. While Tedi points to Kurt Schwitters and Andy Goldsworthy as influences, the form of this work demonstrates its site-specificity making it more than a simple derivation. In Javanese architecture, doorways are made low so upon entering and exiting, users are forced to dip their heads as a sign of respect. The

entrance of the igloo is a low tunnel, also forcing a bowed entrance, referencing the convention of etiquette and also ridiculing it as it became a space for young people to hang out and drink, protected from the judgement or law enforcement of the society outside, simultaneously delineating social inclusion and exclusion. Activated by its audience sitting inside it, *Igloo Tropis* takes place in real time and depend on the presence of the participants. Leaving no physical traces except photographic documentation, this project also depends on participants in order to live on as a collective memory ‘with the people who took part, and the ones to whom the stories are told.’ (Larson 2006, p. 183). The installation lasted about three weeks after the festival and then, according to local residents, was burnt down.

Although designed by Tedi, a well-known Yogyakarta-based artist, the sculpture was built by a team of local unemployed men contracted by the artist on arrival to Randublatung. The cooperative production of *Igloo Tropis* is hardly extraordinary. Most contemporary artwork all over the world is made collectively, even if authorship rests with the individual artist (Bishop 2006, p.11). What is interesting in the case of *Igloo Tropis* is the friction that existed between the artist and the community artisans and by extension, the community for whom it was apparently designed. According to the contractors, there was an unclear (and apparently unspoken) payment agreement, including an assumption made by the artist that part of the labour was voluntary in the name of ‘art’.² Tedi claims that this artwork was made *for* the community of Randublatung. The local contractors assured me that the ‘community’ that used it in the end was the transient community of activists who gathered from all over Indonesia (and the world) to take part in the event. The permanent community of Randublatung is thus a necessary part of the artist’s production processes, but secondary to his artistic aims, a collaborative process Anna Tsing might describe as ‘productive confusion’ (Tsing 2005, p. 247).

From discussions I had with the contractors, their experience of art was in the traditional sphere. The value they saw in the Forest Art Festival was in the traditional performances, and in showing off the local talents to a regional audience, far removed

² *Seni kerakyatan* (People’s Art) was part of a wider nationalist and anti-imperialist cultural struggle that emerged with Indonesia’s declaration of independence in 1945. Its legacy is still used in debates over the ‘usefulness’ of art in Indonesia.

from the creation of ‘temporary autonomous zones’ (Bey 1985) or European social centres cited by the internationally versed activists. And while for Tedi the *jati* leaves used for the roof of the structure had symbolic and emotional meaning, the value of the leaves to the contractors was described in terms of price per kilo.³ It may be too generous to describe this interaction as more than an exploitation of labour (artist over artisan). However, these very negotiations, over what is local, what is community, and what is art, are at the essence of necessary activists engagements at events such as the Forest Art Festival. Anna Tsing uses the metaphor of friction to describe common ‘collaborative’ projects that need to allow parties to maintain different agendas.

Difference with a common cause: Perhaps this is more important than we ordinarily think ... I propose this kind of overlapping, linking difference as a model of the most culturally productive kinds of collaboration. This is not the most common connotation of collaboration; this is collaboration with a difference: collaboration with friction at its heart. (Tsing 2005, p. 246)

Wearing

Melati Sampah, Djuadi,

Festival Mata Air, Kalitaman, November 2007

folded plastic, safety pins, unlimited pieces, multiple designs, 10cm x 10cm

The work ‘*Melati Sampah*’ (Trash Jasmine) began during the opening parade of the second Festival Mata Air, a six-day art and music festival held in Kalitaman, in Salatiga, Central Java, well known for its accessible natural springs, which have experienced a dramatic decrease in water levels over the last decade. By the time the festival began, Djuadi, a nomadic artist originally from Randublatung, was not only an integral *penitia* (committee member) of *Tanam Untuk Kehidupan* or TUK, the organization that initiated the festival, but also an accepted member of the local community. He lived at Kalitaman in a tent for an entire month during the pre-production (the only artist or TUK member to do so, washing in the public bath, eating with the local *tukan ojek* (motorbike taxi drivers), and listening to stories of the

³ Usually collected and sold at the local market, *daun jati* are used for wrapping many things, from meat to metal nails.

kampung. In the lead up to the festival, Djuadi had also been working with neighbourhood children to make costumes from discarded materials.

On the day of the opening, after helping the children dress and prepare their instruments for the opening parade, Djuadi began collecting rubbish and pinning it to his clothing with safety pins until he was entirely covered with snack packets, cigarette boxes and *permen* (sweet hard candy) wrappers. Over the following six days of the festival, Djuadi developed the idea, folding the rubbish into beautiful flowers and pinning them to people he met in the street, carefully choosing colors and patterns appropriate to people's outfits. The jewelry is made from empty snack packaging, which is easy to clean, cut and fold, and of which there is no shortage on the streets of Indonesian cities, including *Indomie* (instant noodles), peanuts, and *krupuk* (crisp rice cakes).

In the West, this type of practice might be associated with contemporary trends in artistic production, namely 'relational art,' as coined by the French theorist Nicolas Bourriaud. *Melati Sampah* and *Igloo Tropis* can be viewed as a visual conversation typical of the 'intersubjective' encounters produced in relational art. It is through this conversation that meaning is generated collectively, greatly expanding the original space intended for the object, that of consumption and disposal. According to Bourriaud, artists such as Djuadi can play a role in resisting the commodification of everyday experience and relationships. This role is about reframing interactions so that communication occurs beyond the product-consumer and artist-audience relationships characteristic of every day life (Bourriaud 2002, p. 5). *Melati Sampah* asks people to reconsider their original action of disposal.

Claire Bishop elaborates further, describing relational art as 'what avant-garde we have today; artists using social situations to produce dematerialised, antimarket, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life.' (Bishop 2006, p. 38) In his book *One Place After Another*, Kwon also points out that the idea of a 'relational aesthetic' represents 'neither a new movement in the field nor a newly politicised aesthetic sensibility, but rather a moment of arrival in which a well-developed mode of practice that had been undervalued in mainstream art finally receives cultural acceptance (Kwon 2002, p. 107).'

However in her article ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’ (2004), Bishop goes on to question the nature of such relationships pointing out that they are ‘not intrinsically democratic, as Bourriaud suggests.’ From the example provided by the production of *Igloo Tropis* we can see that this is most definitely true. Assumptions made about the nature of collaboration, based on the theory of relational aesthetics can be short sighted. While Tedi’s working relationship with the community could be viewed as harnessing social interactions beyond the gallery walls, we can question whether it was in ways that were mutually beneficial. The connotations are of the artist challenging the elitism of the art world armed with open and transparent practices that draw from direct collaboration with the community or audience. Further to naming something ‘relational,’ we must establish whether this mutuality goes beyond an illusion or allows the necessary productive friction Tsing describes (Tsing 2005).

In *Melati Sampah*, certain levels of meaning are also created through the relationship between words and images. Like *Igloo Tropis*, *Melati Sampah* is also a pun, relying on specific knowledge (cultural grammar) to decipher. There are over two hundred species of ‘*melati*’ or jasmine in Indonesia, with names such as *melati rajah* (king jasmine), *melati putih* (white jasmine), *melati hutan* (forest jasmine), *melati Italia* (Italian jasmine). Djuadi has quite simply added another species, juxtaposing the natural and romantic with plastic, human-made, post consumer *sampah* or rubbish. The title of the artwork works on a more symbolic and specifically ‘Indonesian’ level. In Indonesia, *melati* has been adopted as an official National symbol, one of three flowers, because it is used by so many different ethnic groups on celebratory occasions such as marriage ceremonies. (ProFaunaIndonesia 2003) The irony here is that the rubbish employed in the work is also ‘universally’ Indonesian. So, along with the red and white flag, and the smell of kretek, *melati* is instantly recognizable, not only because the flower has genuine cultural significance, but because of ubiquitous national identity campaigns, from national education to television advertising, forcing the symbol into the imagined identity of being an ‘Indonesian citizen.’ With products like ‘Indomie’ (two-minute noodles) and ‘Nescafe 3 in 1’ (instant coffee, sugar and powdered milk in one packet) distributed all over the archipelago, accompanied by aggressive advertising campaigns, instant food has been manufactured as the ‘national

cuisine' in a comparable process. Along with the associated health problems and impact on local food producers, this trend has delivered the identities of such products into the 'national psyche, in turn ensuring that Djuadi's flowers are instantly recognisable not just for their form but the origin of their material.

But these apparent 'universals' are subverted. The corsage becomes an act of folding the superficiality and ephemerality of the cultural objects of contemporary capitalism and nation building in on itself. It does not depend on certain ideas for understanding; it can simply be worn. Through his work, Djuadi takes the idea of global standardisation and uniformity and twists it, creating only slightly varied pieces that then assume the character of the individual wearer. In bodily terms, the artwork negotiates its meaning with its wearer. 'Jewellery touches, gets lost, belongs, is made, gets destroyed, loses its value, weighs and breaks, as part of what it means as a material body. Jewellery is not a passive but an active agent of communication.' (Brown 1997, p. 16)

Melati Sampah works on the premise that art, like the festival of which it is part, can actually do something. Like *Igloo Tropis*, it relies entirely on audience. After a period of collecting and folding the flowers during the festival, people began bringing Djuadi the wrappers they had used themselves or picked up off the street. One of the goals of each of the artworks discussed here, and of the festivals overall is to re-discover that most basic connection between artist and audience in ways which aren't compromised by bureaucracy. The act of making jewelry may seem frivolous as a form of activism. But as Lars Bang Larsen argues in his writing on social aesthetics of Palle Nielsen's work *Festival 200*, 'Social processes should happen where people are, in direct relation to what they do. But since social reproduction is in dire straits, there is a strong need for the production of participation, and for accessible metaphors of freedom.' (Larson 2006, p. 176)

Watching

Bermain, Playing, ruangrupa and Prambors Radio,
OK Video Festival, Jakarta, 2007

Duration: 3 minutes, 14 seconds, Available at

<http://www.engagemedia.org/Members/okvideo/>

Bermain (Playing) was produced during the Ok.Video workshop in Jakarta in 2007, as part of a collaboration between ruangrupa, an artist run space in Jakarta, and the youth radio collective Prambors Radio.⁴ One of ruangrupa's main objectives is making art accessible to a broad Indonesian public by redefining its discourses. The group has many strategies but one of their most enduring has been the Ok.Video Festival, established in 2003. At that time, ruangrupa identified the increasing use of audio-visual technology as a potential starting point for what they called 'critical collective learning'.⁵ More diverse sectors of Indonesian society, from fine arts students in the cities to wedding planners in villages, were beginning to gain access to audio visual technology as digital video cameras became cheaper, self-built computers and pirated software enabled DIY edit suites, and wide networks for VCD distribution developed. Ruangrupa designed a festival framework that could bring together the different ways people were producing and viewing video content (Jayasrana 2008).

The style of this video, and much Indonesian video art, comes from this immersion in rapidly developing technologies and their applications to popular culture. Particularly influential has been the marketing and distribution of 'low-fi' pornography. The residue of this style is evident in *Bermain* with its voyeuristic feel and disregard for technical fluency. The more deliberate aspect of the production is the digital storytelling methods, designed through workshops focusing, in this case, on the ever-important issue of space in Jakarta.

Bermain tells of the city and the limited public space existing in Jakarta. Shot in one take from the window of an office building, it records a group of six people (two adults and four children), possibly a family, spending time playing on a motorbike.

⁴ Since it was established in the 1970s, *Radio Prambors* has been a trendsetter for youth lifestyle and music in Jakarta, producing the famous 'Warkop Prambors' and 'Sersan Prambors' radio shows and the radio drama of 'Catatan Si Boy' (Boy's Notes) in the 1980s. In the early 1990s, the station lost some of its popularity as several of its stars moved to other companies. Since the late 1990s, however, the radio has enjoyed a new lease of life, largely because the programming now targets the 'indie' scene in Jakarta with initiatives such as the concert series 'Thursday Riot,' re-establishing itself as a form of alternative rather than mainstream media.

⁵ More notes on ruangrupa education and exhibition strategies can be found at <http://www.ruangrupa.org/>

Taking turns on the bike, three at a time, they circle an empty field, the others running behind, the bike going on and off a dirt track. The video is framed entirely within the field, until at its conclusion, the camera pans out, showing its context within an oppressive landscape of Jakarta skyscrapers.

Collaborations between ruangrupa and Prambors Radio produced seven video-works; all of them are about lives and activities within office buildings. *Menguntit* (Stalking) is about the apartment next to the office building; *Laler* (Flies) is an unexpected shot captured by the camera; *Lift* is about lifts in the building that houses the radio; *Sepak Saja* (Just Kick It) is a video of soccer broadcast, complete with the commentators; *31* is a video performance about the experience of using the stairs to the 31st floor; *Toilet Pria* (Men's Room) tells of what women do when they are in the men's room; and *Bermain* (Playing), discussed here, tells of the city and the limited public space existing in Jakarta. The videos, all raw and unrefined, resemble performative conversations, slices from personal exchanges in an anonymous city.

Filmed from an office building, the main activity of the subjects in *Bermain*, 'play' is set up in opposition to work. But it is this very opposition that is questioned in this video. We see the actors improvise, share, and learn the rules as they explore a space (the field) and a tool (the motorbike). Viewed in this way, play is both productive and inclusive. Cultural historian Johan Huizinga points out that play 'is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it' (Huizinga 1955, p. 13). While riding around a field may seem gratuitous, play can also offer a critique of work. While this family plays, this office worker films them, posing the question of whether the documentation of such a gratuitous activity is perhaps even more gratuitous than the activity itself.

But what we can understand from this video is actually more than this story of public/private space and work/play in the city. This video represents the coming together of different global forces and actors. Any way we end up watching it (most likely for most of us here, watching it on EngageMedia's video sharing site)⁶, we

⁶ This video, along with others from Ok.Video can be viewed at <http://www.engagemedia.org/> EngageMedia describes itself as 'a website for video about social justice and environmental issues in Australia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific.'

need to understand its production, display and distribution as a collective and networked process.

Conclusion

The three works described in this paper have been chosen for their usefulness as starting points of discussion. Of course, there are hundreds of artworks that could be used to these ends. The Ok.Video Festival, in 2007 alone, offered a selection of 119 short videos and The Forest Art Festival and Festival Mata Air hosted innumerable interesting collaborations and interventions. I do not mean to cite these as the best or most important outcomes of the festival scenarios, but to point them out as examples of the collaborative and site-specific nature of the work that emerges from the friction between activist and artistic intention.

These artworks illustrate of a type practice that is invisible both in international surveys of Indonesian art, and in mainstream media coverage of Indonesian activism. The fact that these practices exist, in the space between art-making and activism, shows how in some senses, the friction between artist and audience drive the collaborations. However this direct engagement of Indonesian artists with specific communities has not necessarily emerged in parallel with the recent surge of socially collaborative work in the international art scene. Nor have the activist practices developed as derivatives of global environmentalism. While it has been useful to employ some Western art theories here, for the artists in this study, collaboration with communities has been a tactic of resistance as well as a consideration of relational aesthetics. By viewing these practices only through either the lens of art theory or as a kind of 'universal' activist language, there is a lack of understanding of the reciprocal interventions of communities into activist culture.

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